To Be Human

by LadyKF

Summary

The world seems black and white at a glance, but the truth is never so easy. Where one draws the line between human and monster is a lot less clear when motive and deed don’t match, and a change in form is only proof of something that has been there all along. (Angel's Wings rewrite, Crisis Core fix-it.)
In 2011, I started a piece called Angel's Wings that considered a canon divergence situation where Angeal was revived in Modeoheim and continued living. Due to my own self confidence issues around 2012, I quit writing it. However, I had planned since the beginning to finish the story I wanted to tell and did promise to do so; I try to never break my promises, so three years later and one whirlwind NaNoWriMo here we are.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue: Let's Be Monsters Together

Chapter Summary

Angeal hadn’t planned to leave ShinRa, but he couldn’t just leave Genesis behind when he needed him. Then things got complicated and he couldn’t go back even if he’d wanted to.

“You came.”

Angeal straightened, turning quickly even though he would have known that voice anywhere. “Genesis…”

His childhood friend was staring at him with wild, over bright blue eyes. They gleamed feverishly, and considering the faint flush to his skin, Angeal thought maybe he was. He was definitely unwell, looking at him from just a pace away, something almost fragile about him as he wet his lips with a quick swipe of his tongue and stared like Angeal was the one who’d up and vanished.

“You came,” he repeated it again, softer, and closed his eyes with a gentle smile. “I knew you would. You’ve always… every time I’ve needed you, you have been there, Angeal. You’ve always found your way to me, when I needed you most.”

“You need to stop the whole part about being too stubborn to call me.” Angeal blurted, feeling distinctly off balance by his breathless tone. Still, he put his sword away and walked towards him. “What is it? You just left, without a word. I can tell something’s wrong, Genesis. Tell me. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m dying.” The words were rushed, the way Genesis tended to when he knew he had to say something he didn’t want to. “Hollander calls it degradation. There were things… things done, before I was ever born. My strength, my magic… reasons why they outclass the others. I was the first well before I was a First, and it’s going to be the death of me unless he can find a cure. But he doesn’t have the funds; ShinRa would sooner kill us both than be exposed for what they’ve done. The rot runs deep, their rot is killing me, my body…”

“Gen.” Angeal put a hand on his shoulder, breath catching at the feverish heat he could feel even through his coat. Actually dying or not, his friend was definitely ill. “Slow down. You’re going too fast.”

“I don’t have time to slow down, Angeal, did you not hear me? I am dying, and even before my last breath I will be long gone if we don’t find a cure.” He snapped, trembling beneath his touch. “I’m dying, Angeal, and I will not even have the death of a hero, but a monster.”

“You’re not a monster, Gen -”

“I am!”

“- you’re hurting and sick and need to come home,” he continued on, ignoring his interruption. Genesis was fevered and distraught, it was clear he wasn’t thinking straight. They could make a case for that. “Come home. You’re still listed as missing in action, we can take you home, work
“Have the monster return to the den to lick its wounds?” Genesis laughed, the sound harsh and more than a little hysterical as he pulled away, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably. “No. No, I am well past the point of no return, my dearest friend. I know what they’ve done, but I don’t know enough yet. I don’t know how to cure it, but Hollander… he’s helping. He’s keeping me alive, the only reason I still live, bless and curse the man. He owes me that much for what he’s done.”

“Then Hollander can come too, and we’ll find a way to work with ShinRa - they have the best facilities and equipment on the Planet, Gen, if you’re dying then they are your only hope.” Angeal reasoned, watching emotions play over his face with growing unease. “Come home, Genesis. We’ll make it work. There’s never been anything the three of us couldn’t defeat together.”

The redhead was suddenly so still Angeal thought someone had cast Stop on him. But no, he could hear a low, feral growl rumble through his friend, watched a ring of green edge his irises as mako surged violently with emotion. “Sephiroth. ShinRa’s pet general doesn’t know how to disobey - they’d order my death and he’d put his sword to my throat, apologizing perhaps if he felt pity!”

Angeal flinched a little. “That’s not true, Genesis, he’s our friend-”

“He’s your friend, as much as he understands the concept.” Genesis spat. “I am nothing in his eyes but a stone to whet his blade on. He’s never taken me seriously, why would he try to understand my pain now? Why would he believe my word over the company, over all he’s ever known?”

“You’re not giving him enough credit-”

“Well that fits since he’s the only one who ever gets any credit, whether he deserves it or not!” He snarled. “I may be a monster but I’m not going to go ask the perfect monster for help he won’t give. Mercy is a concept he only knows academically, and I’m not going to beg. Goddess, let me have what scraps of pride I can still claim!”

“Alright, alright, just calm down.” Angeal soothed, watching him nervously. “You don’t have to talk to Sephiroth. He’s not with me, anyway, just Zack and Lazard. We’ll finish up here, catch the ride back-”

“You’re not listening!” Genesis snarled, voice rising sharply. “I can’t go back, Angeal. I can never go back.”

“You said that this is something ShinRa did to you,” he pointed out quietly, wary of his friend’s temper. “That means they’d have things on file. They have the resources. They’re your best chance, Gen.”

“They will kill me.” He rolled his shoulders again, hissing. “Finish what they’ve started. Why would they even try to salvage their failure? They have you, they have Sephiroth - I am expendable, Angeal, and have become a liability. A loose end they need to snip off to keep things tidy. And by the goddess, I will not walk to my death. They’ve taken too much from me already.”

“I won’t let them kill you,” Angeal insisted, reaching out again and catching his arm. “Don’t walk away from me, Genesis, please. I’m on your side. I’ve always been on your side.”

“You cannot be on my side and still trust them.” Genesis argued, pulling away again. When Angeal moved faster, a hand on each shoulder, he jerked back with more force and a sharp sound of pain. “Don’t. Goddess, Angeal, don’t.”

It only took a moment to put together the cause of his pain. “It hasn’t healed yet? Genesis, it’s been
“I’m dying.” He repeated, voice catching as if he wanted to cry, but he wouldn’t let himself. A trembling hand pressed hard over the old injury, clutching at it through waves of pain that left him pale but for the flush of fever. “My healing is spotty at best. My strength and magic take more out of me than they have in years. Hollander is giving me regular mako boosters, so I’ve only been ill the once so far, but… my body is at war with itself, Angeal, my very genetic code is unraveling as my cells destroy each other. There’s so much we never knew, never thought to question… do you really think we were just that special? The three of us, gods among men - or so they tried. But we’re not gods. We’re not heroes. We’re monsters, Angeal. And the fate of a monster is to die a horrible death.”

“You’re not a monster, and you’re not going to die.” Angeal insisted.

“Such is my nature, whether you approve or not.” Genesis sighed. “I should have been a hero, Angeal, this was not what I wanted. But it’s what I am.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Not liking the truth does not change it; the truth does not need someone to believe in it, it merely is.”

His hand spasmed around his shoulder, lines of pain clear around his eyes as he hissed. After a long moment, it seemed to pass and Genesis looked to him again, utterly exhausted. “I need another shot, it’s getting worse.”

“The helicopter isn’t far,” Angeal agreed, offering him a supporting embrace and smiling sadly as he leaned into it. How long had it been since Genesis had let himself be held? “Come on.”

“I can’t go back to ShinRa, Angeal.” Despite his feverish heat, Genesis shivered abruptly, pressing closer. “I can’t. They’ll kill me. Come back with me, Hollander can explain everything. I’ll show you what I’ve gathered together. I need you to trust me.”

“I trust you, but not with your own health.” And oh, they’d had that discussion far too many times. “Hollander can come too. We’ll make it work.”

“Oh you poor, optimistic fool.” Genesis sighed heavily. “I didn’t want you to find out this way, but you have to understand….”

“Gen?” Angeal let him pull away, but was ready to snatch him back in an instant. He watched him roll his injured shoulder again, wondering at the continued gesture, then saw him raise his left hand to his face. He held his breath, sensing a sudden gravity to the moment, and waited.

The dramatic gesture of throwing his arm out to the side was completely overshadowed by the rustle of feathers, a massive black wing seeming to appear out of nowhere. Glossy feathers floated in the air as the appendage flexed out, seeming larger than life for the sheer shock of its existence. When Genesis spoke again, his voice was soft and sad. “Do you see now? Do you begin to understand?”

“I…” Something spasmed in Angeal’s back, a sharp pain like a rib slipped out of place, and he hit the dirt on his hands and knees with a choked sound. Dimly, he heard Genesis saying his name but he couldn’t focus until the pain dulled to a dull ache along the right side of his spine. “Ngh… what…?”

“Oh Angeal,” Genesis knelt before him, gently stroking a hand over his cheek. “Angeal, I was the first. The first of three. There’s so much you need to know, my friend, of how they betrayed us from the very beginning, and I will tell you everything.”
Angeal leaned into the touch, feeling dizzy and sore. “What… what’s happening?”

“I was not the only one betrayed, my dearest friend.” His voice lost its harsh franticness as he continued to stroke his cheek and hair. “Come, we’ll be monsters together.”

It wouldn’t take long to realize that Genesis was losing more than his physical health, and Angeal would come to dread the days when fever burned through him for the madness that always came creeping along in its wake. He understood by then that he couldn’t leave his friend to this, but he kept trying to be the voice of reason.

Hollander told him things slowly, wary of his reactions to the ugly truths, but apparently less so than his concerns for what Genesis would do to him if he didn’t. The redhead breezed in and out like an oncoming storm, increasingly unstable.

Sometimes it seemed the only times his sanity was certain was when it was just the two of them, Angeal reminding him of all the good things that had happened in their lives, all the joy and reasons to fight on. Reasons he wasn’t a monster.

And then Angeal had wings of his own, and began to really understand how Genesis had come to speak of himself, and of the ones they’d always trusted. He saw the reports, but never got beyond seeing his mother’s name beside Hollander’s. By the time he reached Banora, Genesis had killed or kidnapped most of the inhabitants in a mindless rage… but his mother was untouched. Even in the depths of rage and madness, Genesis wouldn’t raise a hand to the woman who had been his mother in all but name, and Angeal never could have.

He was furious with her, could barely discuss what had happened before he had to get away from her sad eyes and guilty voice. Seeing Zack was a shock he wasn’t ready for, but he certainly wasn’t going to let him go up against Genesis, not when his friend was just barely back to coherency. Ever an actor, if you didn’t truly know Genesis, you might not realize how badly off he was; Zack clearly thought he was capable of much more reasoning than he could actually manage, able to be persuaded to see things in some other way.

But there was no reasoning with Genesis, not now. He was too far gone into his delusions, just enough truth to them to stick when he was stable - or as stable as he got these days. He appeared sane, if obsessed, and there was just no time to explain to Zack. Feeling guilty for having left him with no clues, Angeal went back to leave a message with his mother, sure that ShinRa would want a word with her.

Angry as he was, he wasn’t prepared for her to be dead. Suicide… he leaned against the wall, trying to come to terms with the fact that she’d killed herself in shame. When Zack came, he didn’t have time to say anything - the teen was on him with accusations that cut to the bone, hurting far more than the blow he let him land. Did he really think Angeal would have killed his own mother?

Such is the fate of a monster.

Maybe Genesis had a point, there was no going back now. He couldn’t live on that side anymore, with people who suspected and laid blame without ever hearing his side. No matter how much it hurt to turn his back, he did, and walked away. He’d find Genesis later, the redhead would be sure of it; even in the depths of insanity, Genesis always came back to him.

We’ll be monsters together.
Death Denied

Chapter Summary

Despite all Zack’s efforts, it looked like the mission to Modeoheim would be the mark of his ultimate failure. Genesis had thrown himself to his likely death, and Angeal seemed fixed on meeting his own. The young First was no match for his mentor’s determination.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to be.

Chapter Notes

For those who hadn't guessed, the first "chapter" was a prologue; the real story begins now, in Modeoheim, just as before. But things go just a bit differently.

Chapter 1 of To Be Human: On The Side can be read right after this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It shouldn’t have been an even fight. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Zack knew he hadn't gotten so good he should be able to match one of the legendary trio blow for blow, but he couldn't complain about something keeping him alive. As for Genesis… it was like watching him dying in slow motion every time they met. Red hair had dulled and darkened, streaked with an unhealthy gray, his skin taking on a sallow cast and his eyes… his eyes were overly bright, fever bright, with the fanatic gleam of one who wasn't quite right in the head.

Genesis Rhapsodos was falling apart, body and mind degrading, and all Zack could do was try desperately to reason with him, even as they fought. He tried not to think about how Hollander had said both he and Angeal were degrading, because that was just too much. It hurt, watching Genesis lose himself to illness, and he hadn't even known him before. To lose Angeal the same way….

A flash of magic roared by his ear -

'Zack, focus'

- and he jerked back, both at the echo of his mentor and the fact that he really needed to not get lost in his thoughts in the middle of a battle. That the fire hadn't hit him dead on was luck he couldn't afford to count on. No one was coming to save him, he had to finish this himself.

Briefly, he wondered if some part of Genesis, some sane part buried deep inside, understood who he was and what he was trying to do. Wondered if maybe it wasn’t luck that had him coming through these fights with nothing but bruises and shallow cuts to show for it. But he couldn't think on it, not when the older SOLDIER was launching across the floor with his wing spread wide and power burning in his blade. The exchange between them grew quick, desperate. Sword to sword. Fire to barrier. Snarls and growls and gasps-
And then a sweeping kick caught Genesis across the chest, sending him skidding back and dropping him to his knees with a wheezing gasp. Zack approached hesitantly, gripping his sword tighter as the swordmage forced himself upright, staggering a moment. But it was too much to maintain, and Genesis collapsed again with a low groan. He didn't seem ready to get back up, speaking breathlessly.

"Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul," he managed, breathing hard. There might have been sweat beading his brow, but Zack didn't dare get close enough to see yet. "Pride is lost. Wings stripped away, the end is nigh… such is the fate of a monster."

There weren't words for how sick Zack was of that word. "We're not monsters, you hear me? We're SOLDIER! Where's your honor? Your pride? You can't... you can't keep doing this, Genesis."

Genesis gave a huff of a laugh, lips twisted in a wry smirk as he forced himself up, panting softly at the exertion. "You are... most definitely... his puppy."

Zack felt himself flush, scowling, but now wasn't the time to argue that. "Genesis, you have to stop this. You're not... you're not a monster, you need to quit acting like it, before the company—"

"Kills me?" His laugh was more clear now as he edged away, limping slightly with that same little mocking quirk to his lips. "Even if the morrow is barren of promises, nothing will forestall my return."

A single beat of his wing had him airborne, enough for him to land on the railing, an arm spread out in a dramatic gesture that filled Zack with a sense of terrible foreboding. "If this world seeks my destruction... it goes with me."

Instinct proved right, and the dying SOLDIER was letting himself fall back before Zack could do more than reach out instinctively.

"GENESIS!"

Zack ran to the edge of the platform, gripping the railing and staring down into the dark drop below. He couldn't see the bottom, though there had to be one; it was so far… could even a SOLDIER First survive? Despite the admittedly really odd wing, Zack remained firm in the belief that Genesis was human. Insane, probably, but human.

Swallowing hard, the new First looked away and closed his eyes. There was a lot he didn't know, more than he liked to admit. ShinRa… ShinRa was losing his faith, fast, but he still believed it was the best place he could be to help people. And the only place he could be to help Angeal and Sephiroth. He'd wanted to help Genesis too, but….

He opened his eyes slowly, looking down into the yawning blackness again and shaking his head sadly. Even if Genesis survived, he was beyond Zack's reach now. But maybe he could still help Angeal. Maybe, maybe, this wouldn't be a complete loss. He didn't want to come back to Sephiroth empty handed again.

Feeling a swell of determination, Zack nodded firmly and turned to head back into the bitter chill. A quick glance showed Cloud and Tseng were gone, likely heading forward through the old rail tunnel to Modeoheim proper. There wasn't much left to look through, as far as he knew; just some abandoned buildings and an old bathhouse up ahead. If Angeal was still here, that was where he'd be. This time, he would reach his mentor, make him understand. He would.

He had to.
As the teenager made his way back into the snow, wind howling around him, he missed the soft footsteps behind him. Black boots came to a stop at the railing, gloved fingertips grazing the metal thoughtfully. It was indeed a long way to fall, but Zack would learn not to underestimate Genesis' will to live even now. Even in the face of his mind and body failing him more and more, enough of the fiery SOLDIER's stubborn core remained to fight for his life. For now, that would have to do.

Glowing eyes turned towards the exit, contemplating what lay ahead. Or rather, who. Because if Hollander was correct, if Angeal was also degrading, then his sanity was also in question no matter how sane he may have appeared. But his was a quieter madness, perhaps all the more dangerous for it. Though usually slow to violence, when Angeal did slip, the destruction he could cause….

No, never mind his own feelings on the matter, Zack could not be allowed to face Angeal alone. He was extremely talented, but no match for the years of experience and sheer strength of the rogue First. Angeal would control the fight, and he no longer trusted where the man might take it.

There was no sign of Angeal in the abandoned settlement. Boarded up houses and old crates reflected nothing but years of neglect - a lot of years, if Kusel's mail was right. And really, Zack needed to talk with his friend about his snooping problem before he ticked off the Turks or something. Tseng seemed nice enough, but seriously, the guy went through graves like another day at the office. And from how he talked about it, it might as well have been. That was not the kind of person you wanted to be on the bad side of.

Sighing quietly, Zack eyed the single place that looked like it might have seen use sometime in the last decade and admitted there was no avoiding it. The derelict bathhouse was the only remaining place Angeal could be, and hopefully where Tseng and Cloud had headed. If nothing else, it was out of the elements. Cold still, and had a notable monster problem, but nothing he couldn't handle. A bizarre bug could be taken down with a strong swat of his sword, a series of slices if they mobbed him in groups, and did nothing but waste his time.

Maybe that was why the griffin was a surprise, fierce and white winged with the mutations that had to have come from Angeal somehow. It took more effort to beat, and for a long moment after he stared at the strange mockery of Angeal's face where its own should have been. One of his monsters… Angeal had been there, at least. Whether he still was or not remained to be seen, but it was something like a good sign, right?

Zack's optimism flagged when he got up the stairs, finding Cloud red faced and sprawled on the ground. Blue eyes were blinking owlishly in the way people seemed to when they were trying to focus, but he was together enough to try and get upright when his name was called. "Nghh… Zack? We're alright. The Turk…"

Zack followed the line of sight from his friend's hand, frown deepening. "I'll check, just get your bearings. Tseng?"

Dark eyes found focus far quicker, Tseng ever a professional even slumped against the wall with an
arm bracing his abdomen. His first attempt at greeting him was rough and he dipped his head away with a politely restrained cough before trying again. "I'll be fine. You need to go on ahead and secure Hollander before he finds some way to escape again."

The First nodded, scowling at the thought; how the seemingly out of shape man could move so fast was mind boggling, and he certainly didn't want to give him any more advantage. He fished a restorative potion out of his pack, offering it. "Here, I figure you guys'll still be heading our way."

"I'm equipped," he was assured instead, the Turk gesturing for him to keep it. "You may need it, Zack. Angeal's waiting for you."

The implication that his mentor might force a fight on him was neither lost nor denied. No, after the first time Angeal had attacked him, even when he refused to fight, Zack wasn't going to put it past him. And if he'd done this… well, he wasn't going to ask. It wouldn't help.

He put the potion away, rising smoothly and looking ahead with a grim expression. "Alright. I'll see you two when you catch up."

He didn't want to face Angeal, not like this, but he wanted to face him with an audience even less. If he didn't feel pressured, didn't feel judged… maybe he could get him to come back. At least to Midgar. There had to be a way. There had to be something he could say, or do, or something to get Angeal to understand it didn't have to be this way. That this wasn't the solution, they needed to fight these battles together. And okay, maybe ShinRa was not the good place he'd thought it was, but they were SOLDIER and that had to mean something. He refused to think that the man who had drilled him on dreams and pride and honor could just walk away from all of it.

When Zack finally found Angeal, the man had his back to him. Still dressed in SOLDIER blacks, white wings out and Buster sword in hand. It wasn't the most encouraging picture, and for a moment despair warred with a burst of frustration. "Angeal."

The wings flicked a little, the only immediate acknowledgment. When Zack came around into his line of sight, Angeal finally spoke. "It should have been me, dealing with Genesis."

"And who do you think took care of that?" He hadn't meant to snap, but damn it, really? If his mentor was going to own up to that much, he could at least toss in an apology!

"Consider it preparation for your next fight, then."

Oh no.

Angeal turned to face him, raising the Buster sword to point directly at him.

No no no. "Have you lost it?"

He swung, damn it he swung, and Zack dodged out of the way, holding up a hand. "Stop it!"

"You have someone waiting don't you?"

I hope your friend's alright…

Zack grit his teeth and slowly took his sword off his back, eyes never leaving Angeal's. "Don't do this."

There was something in his eyes, something wrong. The wild way he was swinging his blade was nothing like the swordsman who had plucked Zack out of the ranks and taught him what it meant to
be SOLDIER. They were matching blows, hard enough to rattle Zack's bones, but he had his blade in both hands and Angeal only needed one, even now. Something about that… he was missing *something*, if he just had a moment to *think*… but then Angeal had his blade pinned, their points to the ground.

What would have happened next he was probably better off not knowing, their short battle interrupted by a familiar gravelly voice. "Very good, Angeal. It's time to exact vengeance for our family's suffering."

"*Family?*" Zack stared at Angeal, incredulous. Surely he didn't mean…?

"*No!*" Angeal ripped his sword away, sending the younger First spinning aside in an effort to keep his own. "*My father is dead!*"

Okay, there was definitely an issue here. Zack looked between the pair, Angeal's wild eyes and fierce glare, Hollander far too calm but a bit more cautious now. Coaxing. "Then do it for your mother."

"*My mother was so ashamed she took her own life.*" Angeal snarled, grief thick in his voice, and Zack choked back a sound of horror. He hadn't *known*… gods, and he'd just *assumed*…

"That's ridiculous - she should have been *proud*; she was the namesake of our experiment."

Hollander informed them, a little smile on his lips. "*Project G* - or rather, *Project Gillian.*"

Angeal was on him so fast his wings rustled, taking a handful of his shirt in one clenched fist and lifting him a little off the ground. The grief was darkened by anger, blue eyes gaining the faintest ring of green. "*Don't say her name.*"

Hollander rested a hand on Angeal's wrist, pushing until he was let down. "She was infused with Jenova cells, her genes mapped onto Genesis while he was a fetus. And yes, I admit, he failed. But you? You were her *son*, Angeal, from her womb - *you are perfect.*"

Angeal snarled again, shoving the man harshly and turning away from them both. "I am a perfect *monster*. My cells can absorb genetic traits, pass them along -"

"A two-way conduit, as we'd *hoped.*" Hollander added, heaving himself up. "Jenova's power is completely passed on."

Angeal gave him a look of disgust, not bothering to address him before turning to Zack again. There was loathing in his eyes, not just for Hollander, and a plea that he was afraid to understand. "Do you remember what I said? About our enemy?"

"All that creates suffering," he muttered, remembering all too clearly, and shook his head. "You're not one of them!"

Angeal gave him a pained look, backing away. "I'll show you."

Even as he turned to watch him, Hollander made a frantic sound. "Stop it, you don't *understand!* If you do this, you can't go back -"

Angeal lifted a hand, walking back further, and suddenly several of his monsters - *clones?* - were there, crouched and ready to spring.

"They're just *cells!*" Hollander lunged at him, but Zack was too busy readying his sword to fight off the creatures to pay attention, even when he heard the heavy thump that was undoubtedly his body
hitting the ground.

Then the creatures charged - past Zack - and he had a moment of terrible clarity. "ANGEAL!"

A flash of blue light cut across his vision, across the room, across the monsters, and they jerked to a halt, sliced cleanly in half before they could reach Angeal. For a moment, they all stared, uncomprehending, before a familiar baritone cut the silence just as sharply.

"Coward."

Chapter End Notes

The bit at the end should sound familiar to those of you who got it from the teaser on AW - but now there's nothing but new things ahead. Who has joined Zack? What lies ahead? Subscribe and keep an eye out to see.

As always, I'd love comments - questions included! Find me on Tumblr as KittenFair or WordMage if you need longer discussions.
Angeal caught in a quick breath, looking up to see narrowed green eyes glaring at him. "Sephiroth, I-"

"Put the sword away." His voice was cold, but not emotionless. Not this time, and not to Angeal; no, Sephiroth was livid, enough for the faintest flush to have started on his face despite how controlled he usually was.

It was actually a bit frightening, and he let the Buster's tip touch the ground obediently. "Seph-

"I said put it away." Sephiroth commanded, stalking towards Angeal until he was a bit in front of Zack. "I do not like having to repeat myself, Hewley."

Angeal flinched a little, putting the Buster back onto his harness without a second thought, years of training responding to the tone of authority. He almost went for it again when he heard the soft, deliberate click of a gun, but Sephiroth raised Masamune instead.

"Your target, fortunately, does not seem to have a terribly nervous bladder." Sephiroth observed mildly, pointing the blade at Hollander. "Go ahead and take him, Tseng. SOLDIER Hewley will be returning with me."

"Do I still hold rank?" Angeal blurted, seeing the same question reflect briefly in the Turk's dark eyes.

Sephirou offered him a mirthless half smile. "I don't think anyone here wants to deal with what would be happening if you weren't mine to deal with, SOLDIER."

"It would certainly be something a bit more challenging, particularly considering his listed status." Tseng murmured, coming around with his pistol drawn. He didn't lower it from Hollander until the trooper was at his side, rifle poised for a perfect headshot were the order given. Only then did he lower his own weapon and take a set of handcuffs from his jacket. "I'll apprehend the doctor. Am I to assume you'll be taking Hewley back to headquarters in your own time, Sephiroth?"
There was a flicker of a smile on the SOLDIER's lips, but it faded a little as he glanced at the doctor. "I saw the loss of your transport. It would be best to travel together, in this case. I'm sure our superiors will be notified and act accordingly."

"And will you be having me put in that call, General?" Tseng's tone was even, careful without sounding particularly concerned as he handcuffed the scientist securely. Hollander looked ready to say something, but the Turk merely smiled at him when his lips parted. "I suggest you stay silent while you have the luxury of choice. You'll be doing a great deal of talking when we return to Midgar whether you like it or not."

No one was too surprised that the man fell silent, lips pressed in a thin line of displeasure. Zack was honestly relieved, though he wasn't planning to say so. He was still angry with Angeal, but at least Sephiroth seemed to have gotten through to him. Or just stopped whatever he was planning, it didn't matter at this point. Every instinct insisted some sort of tragedy had been narrowly avoided with his appearance, and he was grateful, so grateful, not to be dealing with this alone anymore. Sephiroth wasn't the hero he'd once thought, he was more real than that, but in that moment he was his hero.

The Silver General stood tall, green eyes narrowed and hard as they moved back to Angeal a moment. "Lazard was made aware I was coming. But I'd like a word with your director, when you call him."

Tseng nodded, removing his PHS from an inner pocket and dialing in a number. It was strange moment almost surreal in its calm, the Turk seeming completely at ease in the ruined room with one of ShinRa's top scientists on the floor in handcuffs and one of the legendary trio pinned in place by the general's glare. The phone rang twice, then was answered by a man with a deep, gravely voice that Zack didn't recognize. From the seemingly automatic shift in Tseng's posture, though, he'd have made a bet on it being his director. "Sir, Doctor Hollander is in custody. General Sephiroth is here and would, I imagine, like to discuss Hewley."

There was a pause, and then the phone was being offered. Sephiroth took it lightly, voice soft but no less intense for it. "SOLDIER First Class Angeal Hewley can be removed from the killed in action list, as he'll be returning to Midgar with us very much alive. Were you inclined to meet us when we return, of course, the matter could be discussed in more detail, but I don't think it's in the best interests of the company to interfere with discipline within my department any more than within yours."

He was silent a moment, Masamune flicking back towards Angeal when it looked like the older man had something to say, far more effective than simply raising a hand. A small, grimly pleased smile curved his lips. "Of course, Director Faraman. We'll see you then."

Tseng accepted his phone back, interest clear but not speaking any of the questions he had. He listened to his director's instructions a moment, nodding slightly to himself. "Yes, sir. I'll be sure you're notified. Thank you."

"So. We're… going home?" Zack asked softly, looking to Sephiroth and trying not to hope, because it would just be too painful if-

"We are." He nodded, voice taking on a firm edge. "All of us."

Angeal frowned. "I never said I-

"I don't recall giving you a choice in the matter, SOLDIER." Sephiroth mused darkly, fixing him with a glare. "In fact, I'm fairly sure I deliberately didn't. So unless you want to see if you've actually
gotten stronger than me on your unsanctioned leave, I suggest you go along with it."

Angeal narrowed his eyes, voice low. "You'd fight me over this?"

"At this point, Angeal, I don't think there'd be much of a fight." The general noted darkly. "But you are welcome to try."

The Banoran stared at him a long moment, a muscle in his jaw ticking as he clenched it, before he let out a harsh breath. "All hail Sephiroth, huh?"

Sephiroth lowered his blade, stalking over to the older man in the sudden chill silence of the room, voice a low rumble. "I will do what I have to do, no matter how distasteful it may be, and I don't care who calls me demon or hero at the end of the day so long as I can look back over what I've done and say 'I did my best here. I did what I should have.' Which, I might add, is a lot more than you can say for yourself right now."

Angeal was silent, conflict clear in his eyes, and Sephiroth's expression slowly smoothed to his normal impassiveness - an expression Zack was beginning to realize was a show, or perhaps a defense. His tone was admirably level, but still with a clear note of authority. "We're going back to Midgar immediately. The helicopter isn't far."

It was a painfully tense ride back, mostly silent except for when Sephiroth and Tseng questioned Zack a little on what had happened with Genesis. The general's expression was cool again, a calm Zack no longer believed to be genuine - not after he'd seen him snap so furiously at Angeal. Somehow, he felt a little better for having seen that, for knowing that as horrible as his pain was, he wasn't alone in it.

He couldn't look at Angeal, looking away quickly even when they accidentally met eyes. It was just too painful. He couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if Sephiroth hadn't been there, hadn't stopped those strange creatures who bore the mark of Angeal's face from lunging at their creator. What was his goal there? Hollander had seemed to have some idea, but he didn't want to talk to him, either.

It was odd how he could feel so acutely aware of his age, and somehow so much older all at the same time. He didn't like it.

"Coming into Midgar airspace, sir." The words startled him out of his musings, hearing acknowledgment dimly even as he focused on bracing himself for whatever was waiting below. He was beginning to think things had gone too far for any good outcomes now, just lesser evils.

"Directors Deusericus and Faraman are confirmed on the roof." Tseng murmured, glancing at Sephiroth briefly. "I imagine they'll be wanting reports immediately, followed by interrogations."

"Hn." The general didn't seem terribly concerned, only rising once they had landed and gesturing to the Turk. "See the Doctor out. We'll follow shortly."

Tseng looked at him a long moment in silence before nodding, motioning to the single remaining trooper - Cloud - who urged the scientist up with a pointed movement of his rifle. Hollander wisely remained silent this time, going along in relative peace.
In the relative privacy of the helicopter, Sephiroth looked to Zack with a passable attempt at a smile. "I owe you an apology for having to do so much of this alone. You've done extremely well."

Zack blinked, startled, and managed a more genuine smile back. "Thanks, Sephiroth."

The general nodded in recognition, then turned his gaze to Angeal. "We are going to have a long, very overdue talk later. For now, you are mine to protect or punish as I see fit, and I strongly suggest you try to limit yourself to one moment of nearly fatal idiocy a year. In case you were wondering, you've already used up this one."

His terse words earned something approaching a tense smile from Angeal, even as obviously conflicted and confused as he still was. Something like hope tried to build in Zack's heart, but he ignored it. If it was true, it would come back later.

For now, there were two very powerful men waiting for them, and the three SOLDIERs made their way out with Sephiroth in the lead.

Director Lazard was a familiar face, so Zack took a moment to look over the older brunet at his side. His face had the lines of a life lived hard, a hint of gray in the little section of bangs that framed one side of his face, the other marked with an old scar stretching down his cheek to the strong line of his jaw. His dark suit was tailored precisely, fitting a leanly muscled frame that radiated danger. Clearly, he was the Turk Director that had been mentioned.

"Welcome back, SOLDIERs." Lazard greeted them with a small smile, though his eyes lingered on Angeal apprehensively a moment. "We'll be taking the initial discussion down to my office, joined by Director Faraman and Commander Tseng. The single remaining trooper to have witnessed the mission, Cloud Strife, will be joining us as well. If you'll all come along?"

"I assume, then, the doctor will also be coming." Sephiroth noted quietly, gesturing for Angeal and Zack to fall into step. Habit or training, the pair did, and if Angeal looked at Zack the younger First wasn't looking back to see it.

"Yes, Doctor Hollander will be joining us as well. As his direct superior, Professor Hojo will receive a copy of the notes made regarding him." Lazard explained. "But the Turks are handling that. SOLDIER is my primary area of concern, and we have plenty to discuss. With your return, there are some developments coming to light that will need thorough examination and adjusted for according to our findings. But that is something to speak of when we get into a more secure location."

Sephiroth hummed noncommittally, seemingly unconcerned though he was certainly turning it over in his mind. If nothing else, the trip back was quiet and, oddly, uninterrupted - the only people passed in the halls were a pair of Turks, until they got all the way to Lazard's office. Two SOLDIERs flanked the doors, a set of Seconds who saluted immediately. Zack was positive he recognized one, helmet or not, and felt a little smile tug at his mouth.

Boy would he ever have a story to tell Kusel. Of course, that meant getting through the briefing first.

"Deusericus," the Turk director's deep voice stopped the blond in place, though he only glanced back curiously to see what was needed. "Be sure these two come in. I think it's best we keep track of who has what information."

Arching a brow, he nodded slightly and gestured to his office. "James, Kythe, you're with us."

"Sir."
They filed into the office, Lazard heading for his desk while Veld took a moment to remove a small device from his inner pocket. Privately, Zack thought it looked a little like a dead man's switch, but if no one else seemed worried he had to trust that the Turk wouldn't blow himself up with them anyway. Besides, there was the whole 'SOLDIER is company property' thing, wasn't there? ShinRa was protective of their assets, if not their people.

Shaking off the grim line of thought, he glanced back to where Sephiroth had settled, leaning slightly against the long table by the wall. Deliberately, Zack realized, between Angeal and the door. Whatever came of this, regardless of how angry he was, it was clear the general had no intention of letting his friend go. The younger First was rather angry and conflicted himself, though, and decided he would much rather flank Sephiroth's other side.

Hollander was directed to a seat and kept handcuffed, surprisingly quiet after how much he'd talked in Modeoheim, dark eyes fixed with strange intensity on Lazard of all people. But the blond seemed of a mind to ignore it, getting his things together before looking to the other director. "Should I assume we can speak freely?"

"The only surveillance at the moment is Turk surveillance." Veld noted mildly. "It's as safe as you're going to get."

Lazard considered that in silence for a long moment, nodding. "Director Faraman and I have come to an understanding in light of similar interests. Namely, all of us coming out of this mess alive. To that end, I have a confession to make - I've funded Hollander's efforts."

Sephiroth tensed, and Zack felt like the breath had been driven from him. True, he hadn't really been friends with Lazard, but he'd thought he could trust him.

Trust, as it was turning out, was not as widely deserved as he'd thought. It was a rather painful realization.

"I will not excuse my behavior; I lashed out with all the sense of a wronged, angry child." Lazard acknowledged quietly. "I do not expect pardons or forgiveness, but I think we can all admit that we can't afford to be any more divided. Things have not turned out as I intended, which I should have expected after being director for the past eight years; Genesis isn't precisely known for predictability when he's in a mood, and he is, justifiably so."

There was a long silence before it was broken, surprisingly, by a quiet snarl from Hollander. "You fool."

"Yes," Lazard agreed simply.

"Talented one, though." Veld mused, not particularly surprised since they'd discussed this prior to the arrival of the others. "Busy as we've been with AVALANCHE, you've been busy with the war. It's impressive you've managed to escape detection so long."

Lazard smiled wryly at that. "Well, hopefully my knack for deception will come in handy in much more productive ways now. I can't say I'm a fan of the company, but SOLDIER deserves better. However, unless requested, I don't intend to resign my position."

Sephiroth met his gaze evenly, green eyes unblinking for a long moment of stony contemplation. "Trust, Director, was once described to me as a beautiful crystal vase - priceless, clear and beautiful. However, when broken, it shatters. And even though, at times, you can put it back together, it is never again the same. It is forever weaker, forever wearing the marks of the damages."
Zack was certain he didn't imagine Angeal's flinch, but no one brought it up as the general continued slowly.

"That said, while I am not certain I can trust you, I am certain at the moment that it is in our best interests to work together." He was quiet a moment, before adding with a deadly tone, "I advise you not to make an enemy of me, Lazard. You are not so dear to me as to be forgiven twice."

The blond bowed his head, expression grave. "Understood, General. Now that we have that matter in the open, I think we should discuss our goals. Beyond survival, I mean. To that end, my goals to see Genesis and Angeal to full recovery has not changed, and frankly I wouldn't be opposed to a company overhaul."

"I was under the impression that the boy killed him." Hollander drawled, dark eyes hard.

"Don't be ridiculous." Sephiroth chided softly. "He fell back over a railing with his wing spread. The odds of him failing to glide to safety are even lower than him having intended to take his own life. Genesis is far too stubborn to die, and even in his madness he wouldn't seek his own death, unlike some people."

Zack made a strangled sound and tried not to think about it, clasping his hands behind his back where they could grip each other tightly. He was speaking before he realized it was his own voice he was hearing. "'Nothing would forestall my return' - that's what he said, earlier. And that if the world tried to take him down, he'd take it with him. That doesn't sound like somebody who had any intention to die right then, so I have to agree there. I hadn't realized it at the time, since he's kinda dramatic all the time, but there's definitely a point there."

"Genesis has always been inclined towards dramatics," Sephiroth agreed. "As long as I've known him, certainly. And he's not so far gone that would have changed, clearly."

"In some ways, he's more himself." Angeal offered quietly. "The degradation… it destroyed his impulse control, for the most part. His inhibitions are almost nonexistent most days. He's a very raw, primal version of what he could have been. But because of that, he's not who he was - Gen's always walked a fine line with his temper and impulses, but his restraint was as much a part of him as his indulgences. Knowing when to hold back, and being able to… he's lost a lot of that."

"Does he have any moments of clarity anymore?" Sephiroth asked, glancing at him. "Does he understand, even for brief moments, what he's doing? What's happening?"

"Genuine full comprehension, clear headed, big-picture evaluation, is extremely rare. It happens, but you can't count on it. He's living in a world made of his delusions most of the time." The silveret nodded, expression grim. "I see."

"Hollander said you were both degrading," Zack said, finally bringing himself to look at Angeal. He didn't look pale and brittle like Genesis did, but the massive white wings folded against his side were damning proof he'd begun a physical change. But how far did it go?

Angeal huffed a bitter laugh, glancing at the doctor. "So much for perfection."

Hollander glared at him. "You may not be as bad off as Genesis, but your own mental state is less
than pristine. I would have said anything to pull you back from your suicidal intentions and have had no regrets then, either. Count yourself lucky your friends showed up in time to stop your madness from leading you to a very permanent end."

"Later we will discuss that, in depth." Sephiroth informed him tersely. "For now, it seems that our immediate goals are retrieving Genesis and finding a cure for both he and Angeal. May I assume everyone present is in agreement?"

"You have my full support, of course." Lazard assured him. "I'll handle the board and the president as it comes; for now, put Angeal under house arrest and we'll see what forces we can dedicate to searching for Genesis. I have a list of potential locations, and I imagine Hollander and Angeal are in possession of even more."

"Given the Turks were created to protect the interests of ShinRa, one might make an argument that it is our duty to assist." Tseng mused mildly.

Veld seemed a bit amused at that, inclining his head in acknowledgment. "The Turks are behind this effort. I'll discuss how we'll handle your deception with you later, Deusericus. Hollander and I have the dubious pleasure of a meeting with Professor Hojo later to handle his own prior defection. Given his lack of success curing the SOLDIERs so far, we may just need Hojo's collaboration."

Sephiroth scoffed at that, arching a brow. "You expect him to help? To be able to help, let alone willing?"

"He's made his disdain for Genesis and I pretty clear." Angeal agreed, running a hand back through his hair.

"Even Hojo has a price." Veld assured him. "The question is if it can be paid."

"Hojo wasn't involved in Project G, he isn't going to be able to help." Hollander growled. "Give me the resources to continue my work. I can save them, I'm the only one who can save them, and I will."

"Yeah, see, the problem is, it sounds an awful like this whole clusterfuck is your fault to begin with." Zack snapped, startling a laugh out of Sephiroth and a brief, shocked 'Zack!' out of Angeal, which he ignored. The man had lost the right to tell him what to do as soon as he'd abandoned him in Wutai. "And if you could have, you would have at least made some progress by now. Unless you just didn't want to. Can we maybe discuss that now? What the hell is going on, here? Genesis is literally going insane, what's your excuse?"

Apparently recovered from his brief burst of amusement, Sephiroth glanced at the doctor as well. "I'm also quite interested. Why defect? ShinRa has the best resources on the Planet. Is, in fact, where this… project… began, so by default has your supplies. Why leave? And why attack like this? Take so many of our men, rush off in the middle of a war? There's a missing piece. Genesis may have been lashing out, yes, but as Zack pointed out, you're sane. What made this sound like a good idea, doctor?"

Hollander stared back at him coldly. "Don't be naive, Sephiroth. The war was nearly done, Genesis and Angeal are dying, why would ShinRa fund any effort to save them? They have you, and Hojo to make more SOLDIERs if they do need them. These two are more a liability now, having mutated. For gods sake, they were listed as killed in action - good luck clearing that up, by the way."

"I would still like to know how you decided it is apparently better to make war with ShinRa instead of even slipping away into obscurity or joining forces with AVALANCHE," it was obvious Sephiroth didn't believe Hollander's reasoning and wasn't going to be distracted as he looked him
over thoughtfully. "Tell me, Hollander, were you jealous?"

The way the man jerked back a little was more telling than anything he could have said, and Sephiroth made a soft sound of disgust, shaking his head. After a moment, he looked to Lazard. "And you? Zack's right, we need to know the motivations going on here. I've had enough of being left in the dark by the people I should be able to rely on."

"Motion seconded and passed." Zack muttered sourly.

Lazard did manage a faintly amused smile at that, though he sobered quickly, removing his glasses and setting them on the desk. His eyes had a faint luminescence, almost a tint of mako, but more stunning than that was the effect when he carefully reordered his hair and offered a cool political smile. When it shifted into a more condescending one, the resemblances to the president and vice president were painfully clear. "Let's just say I foolishly let personal issues cloud my business sense."

"Bastard son, then?" Sephiroth ventured, eyeing him thoughtfully before looking to the Turks. "You knew, clearly."

"Of course we did. He was in double digits before the vice president was born; we've kept an eye on him, if at a distance." Veld pointed out quietly, giving the blond a measuring look. "Easily as troublesome as his brother and apparently just as politically dangerous as his sire."

"I appreciate you not assuming to call him my father." The words dripped with disdain, Lazard's eyes as hard and cold as his voice before he looked back to Sephiroth, softening a little. "Suffice to say, I have some lingering issues with my own genetics. But taking down the company, satisfying as it would be to crush the empire Rupert Shinra built himself, is not a wise endeavor without something ready to take its place. The economic collapse alone makes it too costly, and I was just too angry to properly assess that when I agreed to work with Hollander."

Sephiroth stared him down a long moment before nodding slightly. Emotional motives for all of them, then. Jealousy. Anger. Hatred. Fear. Nothing he hadn't seen before, but none of them had ever hit him so personally before. 'Close to home' was the phrase, wasn't it? It seemed to fit.

"So, I can assume if nothing else but in interest of living, you will not betray us again." Sephiroth observed quietly. "For now, that will be enough. But the question of the rest remains."

"So long as the goal remains the capture and restoration of Rhapsodos to health - and of course Hewley, though I trust you'll be keeping a close watch on him," Veld paused, waiting for his nod, then continued, "the Turks have no reason to be anything but cooperative. The war in Wutai may for the most part be over, but there are still terrorists to contend with, and ever growing monster populations. We don't need an army of clones led by a tactical genius who has gone mad tossed on top of the pile."

"Agreed." Lazard nodded firmly. "Now, I assume you plan to be handling Hollander, and talking to Hojo when necessary, Veld?"

"Hojo is going to be a joint effort." Veld glanced at Sephiroth. "You will be involved."

The only reaction Sephiroth bothered to give him for that declaration was a slow, incredulous arch of his brow. Veld mirrored the action, expression calm and sure. For a long moment there was something of a stare down, before the SOLDIER tilted his head and allowed for a bit of grudging curiosity. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because, General, you would rather deal with Hojo than risk losing any chances at helping your
friends."

This time, he earned a small, grim smile. "You make a valid point. I doubt the old man has much of any worth to offer, but we'll see."

"Hojo won't help you!" Hollander spat. "And he doesn't know how! I'm the only hope either of them has."

"I can't say 'if I were you' because I wouldn't have pulled this sort of stunt to begin with, but I highly suggest you shut up, doctor." Sephiroth narrowed his eyes at the man, a note of disdain in his voice. "And I also suggest you start thinking hard about how you're going to fix this mess. Because if Angeal and Genesis die, you will have a much bigger problem than you do now."

"I think that's clear, General." Veld agreed softly, a hand coming down on the doctor's shoulder and patting lightly. There was no mistaking the sudden air of barely-leashed tension there, but Hollander didn't move and Veld simply smiled. "We'll see he's taken to an appropriate confinement unit. Tseng or I will be in touch for how to handle Hojo, but I imagine the rest of you are ready to rest for a bit."

"It's a rest well earned, most definitely," Lazard agreed, nodding. "We'll be in touch, but for the immediate future SOLDIER First Class Angeal Hewley has had the 'killed in action' status changed to 'probationary leave' and will be under house arrest until further notice - particularly while I work out how, exactly, this is going to work on a department wide scale as well as the investigation I'm sure the board will demand."

Veld smirked faintly, nodding. "I'll leave you to it for now, then. We'll be in touch."

"Hey, what about Cloud?" Zack had hoped not to have to speak up, but he felt a strange sort of kinship with the quiet blond. And it would be so easy for one little trooper to get 'lost' in this whole mess, either by accident or by design, if someone deemed he'd seen too much for someone who was likely viewed as expendable. He was so achingly tired of that concept, and maybe that's what lent him strength to look expectantly at the two Turks. First at Tseng, but then at his boss, because he knew how that worked. Or was, for the moment. "Director?"

"Cloud Strife, infantry division - under Heidegger." The brunet mused. "Assigned to the Modeoheim mission as a part of a squad that is rather dismantled at the moment by the sudden lack of other members. Correct?"

Cloud nodded sharply, still standing at attention. "Sir."

"SOLDIER hopeful, taking classes when time permits to increase chances at passing the upcoming exam." Tseng offered quietly. "Good shot with a rifle, potential as a sniper, raw talent with a sword."

"Is that right?" Veld hummed, shrugging with a look to Lazard. "Ball is in your court, Deusericus. I have a doctor to escort to his new quarters and a great deal of paperwork waiting for me."

Lazard nodded, silent a moment. "Perhaps a less occupied escort wouldn't be misplaced, then?"

The two shared a look before the older man smirked, a faint little twist of his lips. "Sure."

Lazard smiled slightly, inclining his head towards the trooper. "Strife, I'll make sure Director Heidegger gets informed of your additional assignment. Please do continue seeing to the initial objective of the detainment of Doctor Hollander. SOLDIER Second Class Kythe will join you."
"Sir!" Cloud saluted, academy perfect, only marred by the rude sound of disgust from the doctor himself.

"You can't hope to gain anything from keeping me a prisoner." He insisted, surging to his feet. "Even if you succeed, you need me. I'm their only chance at survival - tell them, Angeal!"

Angeal stared at him a long moment before his wings rustled with a visible shudder, stretching out before he tucked it close to his body again. "I think you should focus on Genesis right now, Hollander. If you can't cure him, or if you won't, he'll come for you too. And I don't think I'd be so quick to stop him this time."

"You'd die -"

"But I'm not dead yet." He cut him off sharply, blue eyes hard. "I'm not dead, not yet. And living like I was didn't help. If I'm going to die then I'll die when death comes for me. In the mean time, I've got a lot of things left undone or broken. So you go on with the Turks, and you do your science. That's not my place. I've got my own messes to fix."

When Hollander would have spoken again, Veld clapped a gloved hand on his shoulder, firmly turning him towards the door. "Walk with me, doctor."

He was flanked by Tseng, the trio backed by the infantry and Second Class, the remaining SOLDIERs watching them go in silence.

When the door shut, their eyes swung back to the director, though Zack found he was looking to Sephiroth for some indication of what next after how everything had continued to go so wrong. The silence was stifling. "Well? What now?"

"Right now, I'm going to suggest that you and Sephiroth see that Angeal is relocated to his suite in the SOLDIER's apartments." Lazard admitted.

"Yeah, one issue - he has windows, and wings." Zack pointed out, arching a brow. "So unless you have some industrial strength window netting, I'm not sure how I feel about that."

There was a quiet cough from Sephiroth's direction that was just a little too well timed for Zack to believe it was genuine.

"I believe, perhaps, there would be a solution in sharing quarters." The general didn't seem inclined to address Angeal's open surprise, glancing at Zack instead. "Assuming one of us could be regularly present, perhaps using another trustworthy individual when we're required elsewhere in a capacity that he may not be advised to accompany us to."

Zack considered that, reading the question in the older man's eyes, if he could handle that, if he even wanted to. If the task was too much to ask, right on the heels of what had nearly happened in Modeoheim. "Just curious, what are our other options?"

"Imprisonment of some sort, essentially - closely monitored, isolated quarters. His rooms, as you pointed out, aren't truly secure." Sephiroth had clearly already given the matter thought. "I'm no more inclined to take the risk than you are."

"I'm going to guess giving you my word isn't going to work right now." Angeal murmured.

Zack looked to him sharply, biting back the immediate angry outbursts and managing a more level tone. "Angeal, I still care a lot about you. I still want to be friends, want to get that back some day. But right now? No, no it's not. I care about you, but I don't trust you - I can't trust you. So do us a
favor and *don't* try giving your word."

Angeal winced. "I deserved that."

"You did." Sephiroth agreed easily. "In fact, that was kind. Much kinder than I intend to be when we speak privately later. But that's not the point right now. Our immediate concern is deciding rooming arrangements, followed by returning to those rooms together or separately as decided to deal with the events of the day. Regardless of where you are settled, however, I fully intend to join you and discuss a few things. Zack is welcome but not required to come along."

"Thanks." The teen sighed, rubbing his face. But really, did he *want* to be alone right now? Really? Sephiroth may not have been the most upbeat company, but… they understood each other, in this. Sephiroth felt his pain, probably more in a way because it was a deeper betrayal. That wasn't something to take for granted. "Can I just get a shower first? I'm still freezing."

He missed the three sharp looks from the older men, slumping back against the table. Modeoheim *had* been frigid, but the chill hadn't really set in until he'd realized what had nearly happened. The words *suicidal intentions* were echoing in his mind and he couldn't get them to stop. It made him feel a little sick.

"I think that would be wise," Sephiroth decided, voice quiet. "Why don't you return to your quarters, shower, and gather some things. You know where mine are?"

Zack glanced up at him, surprised, but nodded. "Yeah…"

"Good. Meet me there when you're ready." The silveret straightened just a bit more, glancing to Angeal, then Lazard, and then the Second Class. "SOLDIER Second Class… Kunsel James? I would appreciate you accompanying Zack, at least until he joins me. For safety."

Zack opened his mouth, words staying on his tongue as he realized Sephiroth had given his best friend an 'assignment' to stay with him for… his well being? Did the general know they were friends? Either way… he was kind of touched. "Pretty sure Kunsel can manage me, Sephiroth. He's been doing it since we were cadets."

A small smile touched his lips, a quicksilver flash of relief in his eyes. "Excellent. I'll see you when you're ready, then. Angeal and I have plenty to discuss in the meantime."

Zack didn't fight a little smirk at the promise in his tone. Yeah, he just *bet* they had plenty to talk about. And Angeal had *earned* that. "Right. I'll give you a call before I come."

"Well, since you all have that worked out, and I have plenty of paperwork to get started on here, I think we're done." Lazard pointed out, glancing at them. "Angeal, if it's possible for you to hide your wings, it might make things a little easier while you move around the building. I'm sure you'll keep me up to date, Sephiroth, and you have my personal number in case of emergencies. I'll keep you all up to date as things are decided on my end. James, if the General sees fit to assign you as the additional guard, I'll sign off on the paperwork as soon as I get it, so move to your assignments as soon as they're confirmed."

He looked them over a long moment, voice softening. "It's good to have you all home, gentlemen. We'll work together to get Genesis back and restore our department as best we can. Dismissed."

Chapter End Notes
I'm planning to put out some headcanon stories here and on my Tumblr, so keep an eye out; it'll cover OCs, but also flesh out how I see the canon characters, and help introduce some people to ones like the Before Crisis Turks that may not be as well known.
Interlude: You're Not Alone

Chapter Summary

With so many things uncertain, at least Zack can still count on his best friend’s support.

A long, hot shower went a long way towards making Zack feel a bit more stable. He took time to work some tangles that the snow and wind had knotted into his hair, leaving it a little damp when he wandered back out into the rest of his apartment.

After the years where his little Second Class suite was ‘home,’ the bigger quarters of a First always felt empty and awkward. Having Kusl paddling in his kitchen with the scent of eggs and cheese in the air was a great relief. "Gonna feed me?"

"Somebody has to." His friend offered him a soft smile, leaning over to get a bagel as it popped up in the toaster, laying cheese over each side and stuffing eggs between before sliding it across the counter to him. "Eat. You want to talk about any of this?"

Zack took the bagel in hand, grimacing at the question. "Not until I get the food down. Let's not kill the rest of my appetite, okay?"

"Sure, no problem." The blond took a moment to make himself a more traditional bagel, smeared with peanut butter of all things, before he settled in to eat as well. It was silent, but a much easier silence than before. The two SOLDIERS had known each other since they were green little cadets, a too-clever Midgar native and a too-eager jungle boy out to make a name for themselves.

"D'you think heroes exist, Kuns?"

He considered his question seriously, making a thoughtful sound. "I think they do, in a way. But I don't think they're necessarily what people think of. Life is grittier than that. Heroes are real people, and real people have real problems and make real mistakes. Sometimes, really bad mistakes."

"Sometimes so bad people die, and entire towns burn," Zack muttered sourly.

"Hey, you said no talking about that stuff," Kusel reminded him. "I'll make you eat a spoon of peanut butter, mister."

"Harsh, Kuns, harsh." But Zack managed a little smirk at that. It was just… really good to see him again. The mails helped, but there was nothing like getting to just sit and talk with Kusel. "I don't want a glob of peanut butter glued to the roof of my mouth when I go to talk to Sephiroth."

"When we go," he corrected, "I'll be sure you don't. But it sounds like he could use some time to rip the Commander a new one, so why don't we take our time here? When was the last time you just sat and did something non-mission-related? Can you even tell me your last day off? You've been all over the place, even when you're in Midgar!"

"Yeah, well, since certain people got it in their heads to run off I'm kinda all but an actual officer right now," Zack pointed out. "At least if I do things, I know I can trust they were really done, and how. And there's always problems around here too, things nobody is doing anything about that need done."
"I hear you, I do," Kunsel promised, holding up a hand. "But rest is important. Seriously, you're only human. Get some rest when you can, okay? And don't squat yourself to death or anything."

Zack stared at him a long moment in silence before bursting into laughter. It was more stress release than actual amusement, but his friend was kind enough not to point it out. He just waited, a little knowing smile on his lips as Zack caught his breath and wiped his eyes with a final giggle. "This is why I like you best."

"Feelin' the love, Zack. Feelin' the love." He grinned, leaning over to bop him on the shoulder. "Good to see you, though, seriously. It's been a little too long, and feels even longer."

"And you're the one with the 'good sense of time' too!" Zack scoffed playfully. Still, he was right. He couldn't stop thinking how good it felt to see his best friend again, even better than he'd expected. "So, uh… you're sticking around for this, huh? You don't actually get to gossip about it."

"I can still send you mail filled with things you don't know and feel smart all day," Kunsel grinned. "That's good enough for now. But yeah, I think I'll be around as long as you and the general can have me. You shouldn't have to deal with this alone."

"Yeah…" he sighed quietly, giving him a soft smile. "Thanks, man. Sometimes… sometimes it felt like it. It's nice to know it was just a feeling."

"Yeah." The Second nodded, understanding all too well. "But I've got your back. Just like the old days, alright?"

"There's no one else I'd rather have there," the other SOLDIER assured him. "Nobody. You… I can trust you completely. Except in poker. You take all my money."

Kunsel smirked at that, blue eyes gleaming. "Hey, maybe if you ask nice, I'll give you lessons someday."

"And take all my money."

"You're a First, you can take it."

"If you take all of anyone's money, they're broke." Zack pointed out. "I don't like being broke. I don't need to be rich, but I don't want to be broke."

"You'd survive."

"Yeah, and I survived a helicopter crash, too, but I didn't want to be in a crash."

"Not the same, you can't compare that!"

"I just diiiiid," Zack huffed, finishing his bagel. "That was great, thanks. Last… two meals, at least… were rations. Not even the ones you heat up over a campfire, either."

"Nasty," he muttered, shudder not entirely faked. "Well, you survived that too. You're getting good at the whole not-dying thing."

"Someone has to be."

His friend's expression was so dark, Kunsel decided to risk saying the next words, voice soft and careful. "You're gonna have to talk to him about that, Zack."

Blue violet eyes flicked towards the front door, a hard little smile on the First's lips. "Somehow, I
have the feeling Sephiroth is going to cover that very thoroughly."

"Doesn't mean you shouldn't get a shot, too," the Second chuckled softly. "But yeah, better let them have a little one-on-one. I think they've got a lot to talk about."
Chapter Summary

Sephiroth and Angeal have a long overdue discussion, and there is a distinction made between right and okay.

It took Angeal a few moments to get his wings pulled back after Lazard dismissed them, leaving him rolling his shoulder with an uncomfortable expression as he followed Sephiroth back to the Firsts' quarters. "So. Zack got put in with the rest when he was promoted?"

"The rest… yes."

There was more meaning buried in his voice, but Angeal wasn't going to ask, not just yet. He had a feeling Sephiroth wouldn't be holding back his emotions anymore, not after what had nearly happened in Modeoheim.

'Coward.'

The sheer venom in his tone had taken Angeal's breath away; he'd given up any thought Sephiroth might show up long ago, even if he was ordered to, and had been completely blindsided by his sudden presence. Somehow, he'd also forgotten just how incredibly powerful the younger man was. Of course, that was what he'd been born and bred for, but still.

And how, exactly, was that conversation going to go? Should he even say? He didn't know much about the other half of the Jenova Project, hadn't wanted to know more after his mother had killed herself over her part in it, but it didn't take a genius to figure out what Hojo's Project S had led to.

Silver hair down to his thighs, mako eyes that glowed green when no other SOLDIERs did, elongated pupils and unnaturally pale skin… unnatural was the word that they'd used all along for Sephiroth, friend and foe alike, and how right they were. Not only unnatural, but inhuman.

Alien.

"Get out of your head before I pick you up and shake you," Sephiroth interrupted his thoughts, voice a mere breath but filled with promise to do exactly that. Somehow, Angeal didn't think he'd regret being given the chance to. There was an air of barely leashed… something… that would have led to violence if Genesis-

Angeal swallowed hard and closed his eyes, following Sephiroth down to his old apartment in pained silence. He was trying so hard not to think about him, about how Genesis would react… he didn't believe Genesis was dead, life wouldn't be so kind to his friend. He wouldn't let it, even if all that kept him alive was spite.

Some days, he thought it might be.

"I'll assume you don't actually have your key card at this point." Sephiroth typed in his override, the door to Angeal's room unlocking with a subtle click. "Get a full change of clothes and whatever else you need. At least for tonight you're staying with me."
Angeal sighed, slipping past him into his apartment and feeling oddly disconnected from it all, like it had been an entire lifetime ago that he'd lived there. That he'd been SOLDIER, a man who lived by a code of honor he had believed in all his life, only to find out that for so much of his life truth had been tangled with lies until they blended together. For a moment, the bitter fury returned and raged; he gripped the door frame he'd come to until it cracked and the waves of anger began to recede again. He felt over warm and so very, very tired of everything. This was not the life he had wanted.

'This is not what I wanted. But it's what I am.'

Gods, Genesis….

A strong hand settled on his wrist and he started violently at the touch, wings snapping back out and catching the invader in the chest as he turned on his heel. There was look of open shock was clear on Sephiroth's face like he'd never seen before, and it startled him out of the haze that had been sucking him in. "… sorry. I… it's best not to come too close without warning if I'm not paying attention these days. I don't handle surprises well."

"I see." A single white feather had caught in the crisscross of straps over the younger man's chest, and he plucked it free to be examined in silence.

Acutely uncomfortable, Angeal turned away and went to get some clothes. By default, he started for his uniforms, then pulled back and gathered some of his civvies. He had no right to that uniform, not now. Even if he was still human, he hadn't acted anything like a SOLDIER should. He was unworthy.

"For your convenience, I'll let you know I'm standing behind you," Sephiroth informed him, tone level. "And will continue to do so until you also grab a uniform."

"Sephiroth, don't."

"I didn't let you take the easy way out in Modeoheim, and I haven't changed my mind since," he said. "Take it."

"Seph, I don't deserve-"

"You don't deserve to get to take the easy way out - you are SOLDIER and you will be reminded every day until you remember how to act like one," Sephiroth said. "You will live whether you like it or not, whether or not you hate me every day for the rest of it. This is bigger than you, and it's about time you start acting like you understand that there's more being affected by your issues and actions than just you. Maybe some day you'll actually get it."

Angeal turned, looking at him a moment in silence. There was a spark in Sephiroth's eyes that he'd never seen off the battlefield, more life and emotion than he could remember seeing in a very long time. This was the man who easily took both he and Genesis down, two against one, and matched Genesis quip for quip even while matching them both blow for blow. This was the Silver General, the man that all of SOLDIER followed. That he'd come from Banora to fight under and vowed to follow.

He wet his lips, a strange feeling gripping his chest, making him breathless as he crept nearer to an edge he couldn't see beyond. "Is that… an order?"

A small smile curved the silver haired man's lips, a brow arched a little at the question. "Do I need to spell things out for you, SOLDIER?"

He felt his heart skip, breath coming short. "No, sir."
When they left for Sephiroth's apartment, he had his uniform as well as the sword care kit for the Buster and its stand to keep it safe.

Sephiroth sent Angeal for a shower after having ushered him to one of the guest rooms, his own suite easily the largest and most lavish of any of the SOLDIER suites. A gilded cage, for the most part, but he was so grateful now, because he had a room to keep Angeal, and a room to keep Zack and his friend, if they wanted to. He was glad he'd remembered the two of them correctly as friends, with such short time to think on it. To have a trusted friend at your side at the moment... that was a priceless luxury he would never again take for granted. General of what was arguably the strongest military force in the world, and he was brought low by his own friends leaving him behind. It was a kind of pain he was never trained to handle, but hell if he would let it beat him. He had, after all, brought Angeal back with Zack's help. And it seemed the young First was of a mind to help bring Genesis back as well, despite not having known him.

For all the things about Zack Fair that had irritated Sephiroth in the beginning, he had quickly proved himself a valuable ally. And while he wasn't a replacement for Angeal and Genesis - there would never be a replacement - perhaps it was time he seriously consider that Zack had earned his own place in Sephiroth's admittedly small group of people he called friends. He wasn't helping himself by refusing to let anyone close; wasn't keeping himself closed off from others one of the things that had led Genesis down this path? If he and Angeal had just come to him....

With another steadying breath he headed for the kitchen, needing to do something and sure that getting some food would be a good cause to spend his energy towards. 'What ifs' were a pointless exercise in pain that he couldn't afford right now. Things were grim, but more hopeful than they'd been even that morning. Angeal was here, in his very apartment, where he could feel him with the extra sense that had always let him find the other enhanced SOLDIERS. And he was apparently responding much more quickly to orders - making things cut and dried, taking his choices away... if that was what he needed right now, Sephiroth could do that. He was raised to take command, and he would do far harder things if he had to in order to rescue his friend from the dark pit of despair that he'd fallen off into.

It was so obvious, this close to him, that he was falling apart as well. Much, much more slowly than Genesis - wing manifestation aside, his body seemed fine, in fact - but his mind was no longer as focused as he'd known it to be. He'd seen Angeal snap out of sleep with more awareness than the older man had come out with from whatever daydream had taken him in earlier. He would have to mention that to Zack, later... compare notes, as well, because they had known two different sides of the same man and any advantage needed to be taken immediately.

There was also the matter of Lazard, but he had to assume the director was going to handle things straight from this point on. Strategically speaking, he had given up an advantage to absolutely no gain but to have come clean and start to rebuild the trust they hadn't known he'd abused already before they could discover his deception and reject him completely; Hollander had called him out as a fool for it, which Lazard had agreed to plainly, though in another context. Was his drastic betrayal truly all for the indignity of being the bastard son of Rupert Shinra? Somehow, the silver haired man doubted that there wasn't more to it than that, and had no doubt it would come to light in time. It seemed the past was something that haunted many, even parts they had no control over. In a way, Sephiroth supposed that his occasional envy of his friends may have been misplaced; it seemed he'd missed a great deal of angst in his upbringing as an orphan in ShinRa. Though, orphan was a questionable status when he was well aware that one parent was still...

No, that was another unnecessary path. Or perhaps not, considering Veld seemed to believe he was going to play some pivotal role in convincing Hojo to help. What he thought that petty little man
could do, Sephiroth wasn't sure. Hojo would never reach the levels of esteem or worth of esteem of the man he tried to replace, but he supposed that he was a step up from Hollander. And wasn't that pathetic?

His mind went back to having to ask Hojo to help, a favor, and he shuddered slightly at it. Ridiculous. How Veld expected it of him, to ask like he even believed Hojo could be of use -

'you would rather deal with Hojo than risk losing any chances at helping your friends'

- but the man made a very good point. For them, he would speak to Hojo. And perhaps the man didn't need to match Gast's brilliance, this once, if he could just untangle the mess Hollander had made. After all, he did maintain the SOLDIER program. He had personally handled Sephiroth's own medical care even when Gast was alive. So perhaps this once the man would be of use.

Wouldn't he be thrilled?

The hushed whisper of socks on tile told him Angeal was there even before he spoke. "You look like you've tasted something rotten."

"Thinking of Hojo," he noted dryly, not yet turning, "is never a tasteful experience."

He earned a quiet laugh for that, and it warmed him strangely to hear it. Such a natural sound, Sephiroth could pretend for a moment that nothing had changed. But that was foolishness. Things had changed, and that needed discussed. A quick glance at the stove - apparently, left on automatic his body had decided that pasta was the food of the evening - and he turned to face the older man.

For a moment, he simply looked at him, a little pink from the shower and changed to dark sleep pants and a hooded sweatshirt that he knew had SOLDIER scrolled across the back. His hair was damp still, clinging to skin that was paler than Sephiroth remembered, and he looked tired. Maybe… older, as well.

"I don't think you've stared at me like this since I showed you who I was taking on to mentor," Angeal murmured, though there was a guarded hesitance to his eyes now. Wary in a way he hadn't been since before they were friends. "Thinking I'm crazy this time, too?"

"No." The response was immediate, Sephiroth didn't even have to think about that. He felt the swift heat of anger returning and didn't fight it this time. He had every right to be angry. "You don't have that excuse, Angeal. You're still sane. Just stupid."

Angeal winced a little. "We're going to have this discussion now, aren't we? This is where you lay out exactly how stupid I've been."

"Stupid and selfish." Green eyes narrowed a little, but he didn't let his anger control the exchange. He didn't want Angeal to have any doubts that he meant every word, that he was absolutely serious, and to be taken seriously. "You left in the middle of your student's evaluation - abandoned him in a war zone where he could have died or been irreparably injured. Did you know I saved him from an Ifrit summon?"

Angeal wet his lips, clearly stricken by the thought. "He'd handled the fort well. And I hadn't planned to leave, it just-"

"He was fifteen, Angeal! There is absolutely no reason that you can give to make your actions acceptable, and I am sick of excuses. You're a better man than this." Sephiroth cut him off, voice raising slightly and clearly shocking him. Or perhaps that was just the shame that colored his cheeks. "Do you know what he said to me? He said that he knew you, that you would never betray us. And I
wanted so badly to believe him. Time and again, he held out faith that you would come back, that you could be reasoned with. That if he could just talk to you, you'd come to your senses and come home. And I hoped, naively, that he was right. I sent him to Banora, hoping that he could reach you when you wouldn't so much as answer my calls."

"That could have gotten him killed," Angeal noted quietly. "Genesis isn't sane, Sephiroth, and he has no attachment to Zack that would even leave hope of some part of him checking his attacks. You said there was a summon - there's only one person who could have done that."

Sephiroth felt the heat of his anger rise, licking at his self control like flames. "Do not make me out to be the villain here, Angeal. He was nothing but another SOLDIER to me. You... you had taken him into your life, into your home half the time, made him friend and family and you abandoned him. And that's not even touching what happened today. Don't think I don't know exactly where that fight was headed."

Angeal blanched, but didn't move. "Sephiroth-"

"If you wanted to die so badly, you could at least have had the dignity to kill yourself," he growled, voice low and dark. "How dare you try to force his hand? Force him to put you out of your misery? You would have destroyed him."

"He's stronger than that." Angeal whispered.

"He shouldn't have to be!" Sephiroth snarled, a hand slamming down on the counter with the barely leashed want to tear into his friend for his idiocy. "You have no right to do that to him. For gods sake, Angeal, he tried to save Genesis - how could you ever think he would ever give up on you? He loves you."

"Well he shouldn't." Ah, there it was. Anger, a spark of life that Sephiroth had begun to fear was gone. "I'm not that man anymore, Sephiroth. I'm not even human."

"Don't be stupid, of course you are," he scoffed, though he shouldn't have been surprised when Angeal ripped off his sweatshirt, wings coming back with a loud rustle and shedding a few feathers on the floor. "Mutated then. But human."

"This is not human." His wings spread wide to an impressive span, quivering with the tension gripping his frame. "Humans don't have wings. Angels, demons, and monsters have wings. And I was never an angel."

Sephiroth felt his hands clench and consciously relaxed them. "I told you I was sick of excuses, Angeal."

"This isn't an excuse, it's fact - goddess, it's right in front of you!" He shook his wings out in emphasis. "You're not blind, Sephiroth. You have to see the truth for what it is!"

"You're not a monster, you're just scared," he snapped, taking a step forward and stopping when Angeal took one back. He softened his voice a little, though his conviction still ran strong. "You're not a monster, Angeal. You're just terrified that you could be."

Angeal opened his mouth a moment, then closed it when he couldn't seem to find words. He swallowed hard, blue eyes closing, and his wings cupped back in. It reminded Sephiroth of an injured bird trying to minimize its pain, to protect itself. How fitting.

"You're terrified," he repeated softly.
"...yes," Angeal admitted, shoulders slumping with the confession as if it exhausted him.

"Honesty at last. Now we're getting somewhere." Sephiroth closed his eyes, pushing away his anger, letting go his need to punish in a slow breath. Now wasn't the time. "I'd arrived in time to hear Hollander speaking to you and Zack. I'm... sorry about your mother."

"My own mother couldn't live with this." His wings rustled a little, self loathing thick in his voice.

"If she was ashamed, Angeal, it would have been for what she did to you. Not of you."

"You don't know that."

"I think I do," he disagreed quietly. "The only thing that changed, Angeal, is that you know. Your past, what was done before you were even born, was always... this. This is only news to you. She has always known, and loved you all the same."

Angeal made a tight sound, eyes squeezed tight, and turned away. "Don't. Don't try to make this okay."

"But it is."

"It is not okay. I was... we were experiments, Sephiroth, our own parents-"

"It's not right," he agreed, tone soft but unyielding. "But it is what it is, and what it has always been, even before you knew. You are still the same man I have always known, though I have to say this is a new level of willful stupidity. I very much look forward to you regaining your senses."

Angeal looked at him sharply, words strangled into an odd sound in his throat. "It's not that easy."

"I never said it was easy." Sephiroth leaned back against the counter, refusing to be the one to look away. "When have our lives ever been easy? But some things are worth the effort. The question is if you're brave enough to try. Whether or not you are genetically purely human, whatever was done to you before your birth, is irrelevant in this moment, Angeal. Whatever you want to call yourself, you are a sentient being capable of thought and of determining right and wrong. The question is not what you were born as, the question is who you are now. Nothing they did makes you a monster, only your own actions can lead to that. If you want so badly to be more than that, then get your act together. You have people ready to help you, if you'll just let us."

The older man stared at him like he'd never seen him before, eyes a little wide and so very unsure. "Why..."

"When I was younger - younger than Zack, even, more boy than man - a very kind hearted man told me that friends helped each other, even out of stupid messes they shouldn't have been in to begin with," Sephiroth recalled softly, lips curving in a faint, wistful smile. "Of course, then his friend promptly informed me that I was the most idiotic genius he's ever met and if I ever scared him like then again, he'd kill me himself. We ended up getting along rather well, though friendship... the thought of trusting my wellbeing to anyone but myself... was frankly far more intimidating than being alone against the Wutai forces. It was, in fact, one of the most strange, uncomfortable, and honestly frightening experiences of my young life."

Angeal gaped a moment before catching himself. "It scared you?"

"Terrified me," he confirmed. "I was, after all, letting relative strangers close enough that they could hurt me, badly. For someone raised to be ever mindful of the concept that he would be a target and would be attacked, willingly letting someone inside my guard was foreign and threatening."
"I'd never thought of it like that," he admitted softly, blue eyes thoughtful, then darkening a bit. "And you were hurt. Your fears proved true."

"Yes, well. Friends fight," Sephiroth pointed out, lips twitching slightly. "And we've never done anything small scale before."

Angeal watched him pensively. "Are we your friends, still? Even after all this?"

The younger SOLDIER considered that, as he had been thinking about it so very often over the past months alone. "I think it wouldn't hurt so much if you didn't still matter to me. You no longer have my trust, and I am so very angry with you, there are not words… but I came for you, Angeal. And I'm not ready to let you go yet."

That made him chuckle softly. "I get the distinct impression no one will sway you otherwise."

"No," he agreed quietly. "Whatever else you are, Angeal, you are my friend. There is not much in this world I call mine, not much I care to, not many people I care for. But you and Genesis, even as hard as he can be to get along with, are my friends. And I will not let you go so easily. One day, I think you'll come to appreciate that."

"I do now," Angeal assured him. "I'm not sure you're not wasting your time, but I do appreciate it."

"It is my time, and my right to decide what is worth spending it on."

"And you think this - we're - worth it, huh?" He couldn't help but be touched.

"Obviously so." Sephiroth arched a brow. "Make no mistake, I'm going to throttle you both for this when you're well enough to survive it. And if, when you're both in your right mind, you wish to end our friendship for valid reasons… I'll stand aside. But for the moment, no. No one, certainly not the two of you, will be convincing me that you're not worth every moment and effort I can spend to bring you back home."

Angeal stared at him a moment, overwhelmed, and it was just... too much to think about. So instead, he focused on the first part. "You're going to throttle us?"

"Worse than I ever have before," Sephiroth assured him darkly. "You have no idea how angry I am with you both. I have never been as angry in my life as I am right now."

There was a gleam in his eyes that made the older SOLDIER distinctly uncomfortable, and he nodded in uneasy acknowledgment. Sephiroth was definitely serious about this. It was flattering, in a somewhat terrifying way. "Duly noted."

It was something of a relief to hear the door chime and save him from any elaboration.
Methods of Persuasion

Chapter Summary

Plans need made. Fortunately, SOLDIERs are tacticians, and Zack makes a very good point.

The chime of the bell brought an end to discussion, and Zack and Kuskel into the general’s apartment, the younger men looking a bit more relaxed. Angeal thought it was the first time he’d seen Kuskel without his helmet in… a very long time, even before he’d left.

“So, I’m going to guess you’re staying here, and also adapting the native distaste for shirts,” Zack observed, arching a brow at him. “Or does it just ruffle the feathers the wrong way to go through clothes?”

“It’s not comfortable, no,” he agreed, careful of the subject and watching the teen’s eyes intently. The blue was much more prominent over violet now that he’d been enhanced to First, the darker color lingering around the edges, but they were still as readable as ever. And even now, with a clearer mind than he’d had for quite a while, he saw no sign that the wings bothered him. Unbelievable.

“I don’t object to shirts, I object to shirts under my harness, chafing at my skin and overheating me in battle,” Sephiroth clarified, though he sounded just a bit amused by the topic. “I run hot, hotter than anyone but possibly Genesis, though I always attributed that to his affinity for fire.”

“Elemental alignment can do that?” Kunsel glanced at him, never one to pass up the chance to gather new information.

“It affects some things; magic is not, and has never been, my specialty,” Sephiroth said. “You might consider me a middle zone between Angeal and Genesis, strength and speed, might and magic.”

“Just enough of both to outclass us both,” Angeal noted, though there was no envy there. Not knowing why. But he wasn’t sure if he should say. It would come out, had to, but he wasn’t sure how Sephiroth would take it. It was… different… to suddenly find yourself in the same position. He understood Genesis’ panic and self loathing all too well.

Sephiroth shrugged, unconcerned. “My skill set is what it is, and the result of my entire life being dedicated to making it so. That’s not the point of this discussion, which is about elemental alignment. Genesis would be able to explain it better.”

“Well, when he’s fixed, we’ll ask,” Zack suggested. “Plans on that, by the way?”

“We didn’t get that far.” From the little smirk on his lips, Angeal bet that Zack had a very good idea of what they’d been discussing instead. And he definitely approved.

Kunsel spoke up before he could decide whether or not to comment. “I think the first thing to do would be to map out all of his and Hollander’s bases that you know of, Command… er, what rank do you have now?”

“Just go with Angeal,” he advised, a bit amused that he even thought to ask. “We’ll work out the
Kunsel was silent a moment, then nodded. “Right. Okay, Angeal if you can note down everything you can remember about the operations that had been set up - base locations, numbers and types of forces, available equipment and defenses, all the usual things and anything more you can think of - that would be a great start. Also, plans. Because he’s going to need Hollander back, right?”

“He seemed to think there was an option he could look into on his own,” Zack remembered, thoughtful. “So he might go after that, first. I’m going to assume he has some clues, but Hollander didn’t seem to think he’d find them. Didn’t seem to think Hojo knew, either, and he said that like is was some really significant thing. I’m guessing it was because he’s the head of the science department.”

“Something to ask about, at least,” Sephiroth mused. “While Hojo may be lacking a great deal in creativity, he excels at taking the ideas of others and advancing them. And Professor Gast gave him a very thorough base to work off of.”

“So it’s a legitimate possibility, then,” Kunsel said. “Can I get some paper to note all this down on? And maybe a map?”

“Certainly, one moment.” Sephiroth nodded, turning to head back to the small room he’d set aside for a home office. “Your file doesn’t do your talent for organizing and gathering information justice, James.”

“Kunsel, please, sir. I can’t call him Angeal and go by rank or my last name.” The blond offered a small, wry smile. “And it’s not exactly something that is considered super important for a SOLDIER. Less than the fact that I’ll never make First.”

“Can’t take the jump in the Mako boosters,” Zack elaborated, seeing the confusion. “He’s a great SOLDIER, it’s just down to medical mumbo jumbo issues. I keep telling him he should shoot for an officer position, but Kuns likes working off the sidelines.”

“You get more information when people don’t know you’re looking for it,” he defended.

“He has a point,” Angeal accepted the map, colored tacks, and pens with a smile. Of course Sephiroth would remember what he liked to use for planning. He was beginning to get the impression his friend paid a lot more attention to them than they’d ever given him credit for. “Let’s move this to the table, get it laid out. Kunsel, did you want to make the notes on paper then?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind.” He offered a smile to Sephiroth when presented with a pad and pencil. “Thanks, sir.”

“Perhaps, if we’re all to be on first-name basis, Sephiroth would be the better choice of address?” he asked, watching the flicker of surprise in his expression. But there was a smile just as quickly after, the Second nodding.

“Yeah, sure.” Kunsel smiled warmly, making a few quick headings on the paper. “Okay, lets get this going. I see you’ve made some marks there, Angeal - are those color coded?”

“I’m marking down locations that have been or may be in use. The yellow are ones I’ve actually been in,” he confirmed. “The blue are ones I’ve seen proof of existence. The black are ones I’ve only heard mention of. I’ll elaborate more from there, I just want to get these down.”

“Sure, that’s fine, I just need to know to transcribe it.”
“I’m gonna guess the two of us are the strategically creative action division,” Zack decided, glancing at Sephiroth as he paced around the table.

“‘Strategically creative action division,’ Zack?” He hadn’t heard that one before.

“Sure. You can’t do this by-the-book, Genesis knows all those tricks too - he’s SOLDIER, no matter what he thinks right now, so you can’t use tactics he’ll know. Plus, everything I’ve heard says he’s pretty brilliant in his right mind especially - so if we want to capture him and bring him back, we need to be clever about it.”

“Zack’s always better on the creative side anyway,” Kunsel agreed, working to make notes. “Made us a really good match as cadets.”

“Angeal mentioned the two of you were an impressive pair, at the time,” Sephiroth mused, ignoring the openly startled look from the others; no doubt, the three of them had very different reasons for it. But it was true, he distinctly recalled the conversation. “You do play your skills quietly though, Kunsel.”

“Yeah, guess I’m an odd SOLDIER,” he admitted. “Lean more towards stealth and information gathering.”

“He’s just too nice to be a Turk is the thing,” Zack explained, offering a cheeky grin at his friend’s eye roll. “What? They have guys with all sorts of weapon specialties; liking stabby things wouldn’t knock you out of the running. And you’d rock a suit.”

“Whatever. Focus now, please?”

“Forgot to mention he’s bossy,” Zack added, coming to peer over his friend’s shoulder. “So, what’ve you got? Other than lots of symbols - you haven’t really been around a whole lot of those bases, huh?”

“I mostly stuck with Genesis,” Angeal explained quietly. “He’s the only reason I left to begin with. When I saw him in Wutai, I had wanted to take him back with us, tried to talk him into it even, but something… I don’t know what happened. He triggered something in me, I think. I felt… strange. Disoriented, and things hurt - my back, mostly. Eventually my own wings came out, but that was a while later.”

“So you think Genesis managed to trigger your own mutation in some way,” Sephiroth observed, thoughtful. “If that’s so, the next question is what set him off. Obviously, this is something you both had potential for, which may have happened down the line anyway.”

“But there was a trigger point already.” Zack picked up the train of thought, bouncing on his heels a little. “Relatively, I mean. Sometime before we went to Fort Tamblin… maybe when he got hurt? Sephiroth said it didn’t heal, which sounds like the same sort of thing as degradation in general. Same line of thought, I mean.”

“That was back in August,” Sephiroth murmured, ignoring Angeal’s look of surprise for the moment. “An extraordinary time for a SOLDIER to have an injury go unhealed, even if it was healing at nonenhanced rates.”

“Well it could be even more directly related to the wings. It’s not like I’ve patted anyone with them down, but there’s got to be another set of muscles there for it to work at all - and yes, Zack, for now we’re ignoring the fact that he flies with one,” Kunsel smirked a little at his friend’s huff, “so, if calling his wing out pulls on the area, he could keep re-injuring himself, I’d think.”
Zack made a pained sound, shuddering. “That’s terrible, man. I mean, my ‘getting to know you’ process with him has been pretty rocky, but I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.”

“You’re also a very nice young man without much spite to speak of.” Angeal pointed out. “Not that I wish anything bad on Genesis, but I can say there aren’t some people I’d have wished that on over the years.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not half the nice guy you made yourself out to be either,” Zack pointed out dryly. “Or maybe it’s a maturity issue. I haven’t figured it out yet.”

Sephiroth snorted softly, lips twitching, and wondered if it would be better to let it all play out. He certainly wanted to but that didn’t mean much for the moment.

Kunsel beat him to the punch, tapping his notepad against the table. “Back on target, guys, hash it out on your own time.”

“Slave driver.” Zack bumped boots with him, lightly knocking his toe at his friend’s heel, but he relaxed again. “Okay, so what are we really looking for right now? It seems like we need to have separate forces for this. Yes, he needs cured - Angeal too - but it doesn’t do any good if he’s not here. So both tasks are vital.”

“He’s pretty convinced ShinRa would rather kill him.” Angeal put in quietly, remembering him saying as much more than once.

“Maybe they would, but if Sephiroth won’t do it, Lazard is against it, and the Turks are against it… who do they think they have left to send who can?” Kunsel pointed out. “You can want something really, really bad, but that’s not enough to have it happen. They need a force able to do that, and if SOLDIER and the Turks won’t go along with it, their chances have dropped drastically even without considering whatever else Genesis has on his side.”

“Are we sure the Turks would stand officially on our side, though?” Angeal wondered. “Just because they’re not opposed doesn’t mean they’re for our plans.”

“It’s in the best interests of the company not to have however much of the rest of SOLDIER we can walk off with leave, so I’m going to say yes they’ll listen.” The Second smirked, glancing up at the three Firsts. “Not that any of you said as much, but I don’t think it’s a bluff they’d dare call.”

“See, this is why we don’t play poker together anymore,” Zack informed him, ruffling at his hair until he was shoved off and grinning a little. “You’re evil, man. Evil.”

“We don’t play poker together because you don’t have a poker face and won’t wear a helmet,” He corrected.

“It’s not nice on the hair, man.” Zack looked at Sephiroth thoughtfully. “Did they make you wear a helmet?”

“They tried.” Sephiroth smiled faintly at the memory; grim as things were, he appreciated the lighter atmosphere when it could have easily been painfully tense. Perhaps especially so. “It didn’t work.”

“Yeah, about that… you get to turn down missions, right?” Zack turned to face him, the thoughtfulness slowly gaining the additional gleam of ‘I have a plan’ that could either be a good thing or a spectacular failure. “I mean seriously, they let you turn down missions.”

“They couldn’t exactly force Sephiroth,” Kunsel pointed out.
“No, no, see that’s it - can they force you to do things?” Zack’s eyes narrowed, lit with sudden insight. “They can dock pay, maybe, but they can’t like… do anything really significant. You’re Sephiroth. Hero to the people, biggest draw to why most people seem to want to join SOLDIER - don’t look at me like that, you don’t have to like it, it’s still true. They’re not going to fire you, they can’t afford to fire you. Or kill you, even if they could. So, how much are they going to push? How much can they? What do they do to you if you misbehave?”

Sephiroth arched a brow, feeling as if there was something crucial about to be revealed. “I can’t say I’ve really tested it. But I imagine there isn’t much. I don’t need their money. I don’t want the fame. Perhaps going after those that do mean something to me.”

“Right, but that’s just the thing - Kunsel talked about bluffs and control.” The younger SOLDIER paced, hands moving as he talked. “Genesis and Angeal are your friends, even the Turks and Lazard acknowledged that, so they’re the crux here. The right thing to do, the honorable thing, would be for them to be taken back in and healed up anyway. I don’t know what sort of ranks or whatever would work out, you don’t wave off the levels of murder and destruction that went on, even ignoring the defection itself, but Genesis is medically insane. And as far as I can tell, ShinRa is to blame there.

“Of course, the company doesn’t seem particularly interested in what the right thing is, so you can’t count on that. But you know what you can count on?” Zack smiled, a grim sort of expression that was harder for what he’d been forced to go through. “They’re really fond of living, and living well. People with a lot of things have a lot of things to lose.”


“Nuh-uh, that’s how you got me to pull my blade in Modeoheim, you do not have the moral high ground here, Angeal,” Zack informed him, expression darkening. “Don’t even think to tell me about honor, about what’s right and wrong, because your credibility there is zero, and I’m not sure if I can actually kick your ass but you can bet I will try my very best if you get me started again.”

“While that was a thoroughly deserved and well worded tangent,” Sephiroth noted mildly, stepping forward to interrupt Zack’s line of sight. “You were heading towards a particular point, were you not? You have my attention.”

Zack let out a long, slow breath, closing his eyes. It took a moment, but he got his temper back to heel and offered the other man a grateful smile for the quiet support. “Right, well Kunsel was talking about bluffs. That’s a lot like this situation, only I think we have to be ready for this to devolve into a game of chicken. Basic rule of weapon use - you don’t take it out if you’re not ready to use it. Translated, don’t make a threat you’re not ready and willing to carry through; but, on the flip side, be mindful that they might know the same rule, they might not, and it’s up in the air how they’ll play. You can’t trust other people to do the right thing, or we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Agreed.” Sephiroth turned the words over in his head, reorganizing it into a strategy he understood. “So, the idea is to be persuasive, either through positive or negative means of persuasion. If required to threaten, be sure to make no threat that is not, in fact, a valid one capable of being carried out, in case our bluff is called. At the same time, be mindful that others will have thought of the same thing?”

“That’s about the size of it,” Zack agreed, nodding. “Threats and bribery - welcome to ShinRa.”

“ShinRa politics, yes,” he admitted. “I never had the patience to play them before, but perhaps it was truly a matter of motivation. You were discussing my position in connection to this, though, what they would do - or try - with me? I would appreciate if you would elaborate.”
“Right, sorry, I get a little distracted sometimes,” he admitted, a hand raking back through his hair, the dark locks already starting to stand up in their usual spikes. “Okay, so obviously Genesis in particular has done a lot of things he’s going to have to answer for, the last thing I’m suggesting is letting him off the hook entirely. But he’s clinically insane, which is apparently the company’s fault, literally brought it on themselves, yadda yadda you know the drill. I’m not up on all the legal mumbo jumbo, but I’m pretty sure you can make a legit case for some level of pardon without anyone thinking it was strange. But all that comes after getting him back here, and getting him help. Without, you know, people trying to kill him.”

“That would definitely complicate things,” Sephiroth agreed, watching him resume pacing. Staying still was clearly not something Zack Fair excelled in, despite plenty of other talents. “I take it you have something in mind for how to acquire their cooperation?”

“Well, if we can make allies like it seems we did with the director and the Turks, that would be the best thing.” Zack admitted. “Then we know they’re at least on our side as long as our goals and their goals don’t conflict, and that’s another person not to worry about. That would be the absolute best thing. But, that’s not really how life seems to be going, so we also have to consider what happens if people don’t want to play along. Now, I always pictured that if the President and the Board of Directors don’t go along with something, a big ‘no’ is passed down and that’s that. You do what they say, or you’re punished. Because they hold the power. Right?”

“That’s a bit simplified, but the gist of it, yes,” Sephiroth confirmed. “Like any other chain of command. You do as you are told, or you are punished accordingly to ensure compliance.”

The younger First nodded, clapping his hands together. “Right. Only they made one really glaring tactical error here, as far as I can see. Do they have a way to punish you? Do they have a way to force you to comply?”

Sephiroth blinked at him, considering that. Lazard certainly hadn’t, but… “Restrictions could be placed.”

“And if you ignored those?” He pressed. “You are the general. All of SOLDIER looks to you, most of the army for that matter, and ShinRa owes a huge chunk of their popularity to the hero they made you out to be. So if you don’t play along, what is the worst thing they can actually do to you, Sephiroth? What could they possibly threaten to get you to stand down, if they want to kill your best friends? What would make you let them?”

It wasn’t the silence that deafened one, he found, but the roaring in his ears as he finally understood Zack’s point. “Nothing. They have nothing to threaten me with, if they take away the ones I care for. I’d have nothing left to lose.”

Zack offered him a hard smile. “I think we’ve found our starting point, then.”
Suited to Shadow

Chapter Summary

The legacy of the Department of Administrative Research is far older than SOLDIER, and its director is ready to reach down to their roots to make sure they stay standing no matter what goes down.

Chapter Notes

Didn't think I was going to leave out the Turks, did you? Of course not. There's a great big cast for this fic. List at the end notes to help you keep track of Turk names/codenames!

Chapter 2 of To Be Human: On The Side takes place directly after this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tseng was a silent shadow at his mentor's side when they left Hollander's cell under guard of the SOLDIER Lazard had offered. Of course, the fact that Rude had decided to amble by with Reno - who wanted a word with the trooper - was a complete coincidence.

If anyone asked, anyway.

Not that anyone would have, with the serious look the director had on his face. While reasonably good natured, Veld took his work seriously and didn't tend to go around the office looking particularly cheery as one might judge it. But at the moment, there was a definite air of business around the man as he headed for his office. He paused a moment in front of his door, half turning to address his second in command. "See who's in office for the next hour or so, and send word out for check ins wherever possible. I want a word with whoever you can get in here."

"Of course, sir." Tseng inclined his head politely, waiting a beat to be sure he was finished before heading back to his desk to start gathering the information that was required.

The Turks were undeniably a special ops unit, with a wide array of specialties covering an ever wider range of assignments. Relatively, they were a small force, even smaller than SOLDIER, but they were no less effective for it. Off the top of his head, Veld could easily name fourteen operatives that had been recruited during his tenure as director of the department that he truly trusted to handle themselves with skill and intelligence as fit their station and loyalty as fit their department. Be it acting on his orders or by their own sound judgment in the field, as a group or as solo agents, he felt confident enough in their work that there was no need to constantly supervise; if Tseng could get the bulk of them in, he'd be happy.

There were even more rookies waiting to be let in, made official, but none of them would suit now. No, in fact... it might be time he called on some others. There were still those around that had been his peers back in the day when he was an active operative in the field himself - a harder breed of Turk, back before Turk was even the term used for them; they were more than able to take discreet
positions of command to make sure the newbies were sorted out while he handled this, to know they'd have his back if he needed it. Not that most were easy finds, or that he wanted to drag them back in. But you never really 'quit' the Turks, and they'd understand.

Veld slipped into his office, door closed quietly before he settled at his desk and put a call into the Junon Academy, direct line coded in and waiting patiently a moment for her to answer. "Ms. Torvik."

"Mr. Faraman," there was always some amusement in the accented purr of her voice. "You're very formal today. I sense a favor to be asked, yes?"

"Never said you were anything but quick." He chuckled softly, hand absently tapping at the handle of his coffee mug. "I need you to keep a closer watch on the kids. The wind is shifting, and until I know which way it's coming I want a guard up."

There was silence a moment, then a thoughtful sound. "You see trouble for the department, do you? I will do as you ask, and you will keep me informed, Director. These things must go both ways for us."

Veld bowed his head, smiling grimly. As good - vital, really - as it was to be unchallenged by the vast majority of the department, it was a guilty relief to have a spare few who remembered when he was the rookie and weren't afraid to remind him. They were on his side, even when that meant kicking his backside while they watched it. "I'll do all I can, Anya."

"Then it will be so." She was nothing if not decisive, and the years had only driven that deeper. "You mean to speak to more than me, surely."

"I've got a ghost or two to dig up, yeah." Dark eyes trailed to the file on his desk, Valentine's quick script written down the side in rapidly made notes beneath their former director's precise handwriting. "Never hurts to be prepared."

"No, it never does," she agreed. "You will watch yourself while I watch the little ones. I will make them strong, you be sure they have a place to go when I have finished."

"That's my goal." He sighed, chuckling when he heard a snap-bang on her end. "You've got work. I'll be in touch."

"You see that you are. You have a phone, you know to use it more than Cer did." Anya chuckled softly. "Not that it takes much effort. You will do well; you learned from the best."

He closed his eyes a moment, reminding himself that his PHS was not built to handle the kind of pressure his metal prosthetic could exert, and relaxed. He'd learned from the best of their era, but they needed better still to keep up. "I'll be in touch. Take care."

She murmured some affectionate well wishes, never spoken in anything but the harsher tongues that ran the length of the villages along the Nibel mountain range. Sometimes he wondered if they knew there were more than two vowels to use, and just how they managed all the consonants. But she made it work. She made a lot work, and there was no one he'd rather have sifting through the academy to send him the best to fill their ranks.

Setting the phone down, he opened the file to consider the two pictures within. It had been a very long time indeed since he'd spoken with either man; Dominic had retired back when it was still a viable option, when the company was young, back before the disappearances started as the company systematically cleaned house during its reinvention. Calling him back in… that might wait. But
maybe the next time he had someone out west they could deliver a message, at least. As for the other… Vic Rowan had well and truly earned his code name. Not long after Valentine was reported killed in the line of duty, the younger man had stalked off and vanished off the system entirely, no more than a wraith.

There had been quite the fuss over it and the security breech it represented, though less than there might have been without the disappearance of Lucrecia Crescent and the triumphant return of Hojo to Midgar with little Sephiroth. Gast had declared Hojo's efforts a success, and that had been deemed more important than the disappearance of one hot headed member of their little department. There was no proof he was around, even now, but Veld hadn't made director by ignoring loose ends, and his gut said Wraith was still lingering - watching, likely.

Until proven otherwise, he would still be considered a potential resource. If nothing else, something that deserved to be looked into again for the sake of knowing.

And on that note, the last of them - listed with the barest details and no picture. She'd hated them with a passion, as he recalled. Never felt comfortable with her own reflection, but she'd also been a bit… different, over all. And that seemed like it might just be a good thing right now.

The problem there would be getting a letter delivered, but there were always ways. And it would be worth the effort, in the end. Even just for the peace of mind to know there was something of a safety net; it soothed a part of him that had been getting more and more anxious as issues piled on.

AVALANCHE. The mass desertion in SOLDIER. The forced submission of Wutai. Hewley and Hollander's return. Deusericus' admission of treason. Sephiroth's apparent awareness that his strength could have uses beyond the traditional battlefield.

One thing after another, and he wasn't willing to bet it would all resolve in anything even remotely tidy. In fact, if none of it blew up in a spectacular display of violence with long reaching consequences of an ill nature, he would be shocked.

No, better to be prepared.

In the silence of his office with too much weighing on his mind, Veld shifted in his chair and unlocked a side drawer in his desk. Hefting out the file box inside, he set it down and worked the top off to get at the pages within. Most notably, a sheaf of laminated papers. They would have been yellowed with age by now or at least a rather brittle white if he hadn't, and he'd have lost the advice that had been written across them. Blue pen, the old handwriting still achingly familiar in the odd elegance of someone who had learned their characters in Wutai before their father managed to get back around to teaching him eastern standard. Then again, Grimoire's handwriting was pretty terrible most of the time, so maybe it was Valentine's mother who'd taught him both.

"You'd love this, Vin," Veld murmured, the presence of his mentor one that was never far from his mind even after he disappeared into Nibelheim. "You always loved a good conspiracy. Pity we let it get this far."

Sighing quietly, he took two files out, setting both on the desk and putting the box back in its drawer. He had a bit of time and far too many things he needed to consider. With Hewley back, things were going to start moving fast and he had to be ready. While he wasn't sure he trusted him, or Deusericus for that matter, the fact was that the best chances for survival at this point was to pave a clear path between Sephiroth's band of SOLDIERs and recovery, and keep everyone else out of the way. There was no war to distract them now, and he wasn't such a fool to think any of them would be called to heel much longer. The chains had broken when Rhapsodos had left, another link snapping with Hewley, and even with his return - perhaps especially because of his return - Sephiroth had
surely either realized that there was nothing that could hold him back, or he was soon to see the truth for what it was. SOLDIERs weren't afraid to die, and there was nothing that any of them could do to strike fear into him. Not, at least, without the survival of Hewley and Rhapsodos.

As Fair had all too aptly called it, this whole thing was a clusterfuck the likes of which they hadn't seen since he'd taken over as director. And however things went down, Veld wanted to end up the best he could to pick himself back up, dust off, and carry on. What that meant at this point… that was going to be something to see.

A few hours later saw Veld looking over the group that had been gathered to his briefing room. It wasn't the big affair that Lazard had, given it was only for the Turks and he generally kept meetings small. These, though, were some of his best. And his best for this, in particular. "Alright, you'll all see a briefing packet set for you, so give it a quick look. Take notes, hard copy, you can digitize later. Don't fuss at me."

There was a moment where the only sound was the hushed rasp of papers as the others looked through the quick summaries. A few quiet hums and thoughtful murmurs were followed by the scratch of pens or pencils in the margins, and he gave them time to look it over. Always best to make sure they took time when they had it - who knew when that would be next? "Obviously, this is a game changer. I know we're still busy with AVALANCHE in particular, but ignoring this would blow up in our faces. Right now, we're going to do some change ups in assignments. Check page five, view your positions."

Veld didn't pace, but he certainly wanted to. Charles did, though he'd never been one to stand still long anyway, crossing paths with Freya as she was already walking the width of the room with a bounce that made her ponytail sway.

"So, I'm still scout crew for AVALANCHE, huh? Nice. They've got some interesting things, gotta say." Her eyes were lit at the thought of the challenge. "Looks like you're gonna be busy, Sammy."

The martial artist gave her a quiet huff of agreement for that, looking over his own listed assignments. It was a lot, true, but the former detective excelled at information gathering. Veld had no doubt he'd do them well running intelligence analysis for a while.

"Can we discuss why I'm getting saddled with Charlie and the SOLDIERs?" Emma asked crisply, clearly wary of the assignment. "Cissnei I understand, she knows Fair. Calling in Balto, and using Yuda I understand. But I wonder about sending someone who likes to smack people with nunchucks towards a group of men who just got back from the Wutai War. Not to mention I'm one of our ranged experts with the most history running our Junon branch."

"I set you on it because you've got a military background that will give you an in with SOLDIER, make you fit easier into their structural mindset," Veld explained patiently, not surprised at the question. "And yes, Cissnei is there for familiarity, likewise for Balto though it's a more calculated risk that he's able to opt out of."

"No, I think Zack's matured to where it's a safe risk to take, sir," Katana said, smiling faintly. "It'll be nice to see him again. He was just a little brat last time I saw him."

"Sounds like not much changed, yo." Reno smirked at him. "You're kin, yeah?"

"Back on our respective mothers sides, yes. Most of Gongaga is somewhere along the line." He hummed thoughtfully, glancing over the rim of his glasses. "Am I to even try having him use my codename?"
"You can." Veld shrugged. "It's not as big a deal, given his name is fully known, and that ties back to the same people."

"Point made. I'll discuss it with him."

"He knows Tseng, Reno, and Rude by name." Cissnei pointed out. "Not last names, but still. Some of us are better known. I'm going to guess you and I are particularly on Zack duty."

"Especially as he's involved with Aerith, yes," Veld confirmed. "You'll be back to keeping an eye on her more often, Tseng, because I have no doubt things are going to heat up there."

"Yes sir," he murmured, dark eyes fixed on his own paper as he made notes. "I assume I'll continue to be a go-between for the departments as well due to rank?"

"You can work with Charles on Lazard." Veld smiled faintly, eyes gleaming. "One misleading little blond menace for another."

The comment earned a bright laugh and a wicked little grin from the man in question. "Oh orders understood sir. I will happily be underestimated by SOLDIER's devious director."

Several eyes flicked to the grinning young man as he promptly gave his sweetest smile, looking everything like a fresh faced kid with his fluffy hair and big blue eyes. It was a perfect ruse, right up until he bashed someone's head in with one of his nunchucks in the time it took the person he was guarding to turn around. Even then, some people didn't seem able to fully grasp the danger he was underneath his bubbly personality.

It was a very nice advantage to have.

"Nunchaku primary and the Commander secondary on Lazard, Shuriken and Katana on Fair specifically with additional attention to SOLDIER extended." Yuda considered the assignments in comparison to her own. "I'm assigned to Hewley because he leans towards hand-to-hand combat I assume."

"And you're from a small community, but from a very different region; it gives you common grounds, but not common enough to be uncomfortable," Veld confirmed, looking towards another set. "Wess, Rod, you're still Slum crawling - I want whatever information you can squeeze from your old contacts."

"Got it, bossman."

"Sure, boss."

"Mina." Veld glanced at the young woman, meeting her eyes evenly. "You're the primary switch off with Tseng on Gainsborough."

The assignment earned a small smile, since the two females got along well despite their differences in nature - part of why he'd chosen her, in fact. "Sure. Will you be setting up a bigger rotation or is that our primary assignment?"

"I have a couple things in mind. First, though, we're going to see if Rude can't do me a favor back in Costa." Veld removed an envelope, holding it out for the man in question to take. "I need you to try and get Legend back here. Think you can handle that?"

Even in-office, Rude wore his shades. But a small smile touched his lips anyway as he read the instructions and tucked the envelope inside his own jacket. "Sure, Director. Do I have a day there?"
"A day there, two for travel if necessary, but be as quick as you can." Veld instructed.

"I'll let you know."

That was all of this set but one, and Veld looked over to Rude's side, meeting the faintly glowing eyes of the kid he could see one day becoming third in command. "Reno, you're with me for now, and then you're Sam's legs. Got it?"

Both brows arched, a slow smirk spreading over his face. "You got it, boss."

"Great. Questions?" A collection of headshakes. "On your jobs then. Further instructions will be relayed via encoded messages. Sam, you switch out immediately, Rude you finish up as quick as you can and get to Costa. The rest of you finish up your current work, SOLDIER assigns return to me for check in when you're ready. Reno, you're with me; we've got some things to do."

"Comin' boss."

Chapter End Notes

Before Crisis Turks, in order of appearance:

Charles (Nunchaku)
Freya (Shotgun)
"Sam" (Martial Arts M)
Emma (Gun)
Cissnei (Shuriken)
Balto (Katana)
Yuda (Martial Arts F)
Wess (Two Gun)
Rod (Rod)
Mina (Knife)
Old Rivals

Chapter Summary

Even geniuses can be played, and Veld learned the game from the best.

Chapter Notes

I'm still stunned by how much I enjoy writing Hojo now that I'm no longer just dismissing him as a pure evil monster.

He's also scarier this way.

Professor Hojo did everything in his own time. Given the current near-immunity he had in ShinRa, the level of influence in the president's plans, he was generally free to do as he pleased so long as he continued to produce results.

However, the same intelligence and cunning that got him to that point did concede that it was wisest not to test Veld Faraman's patience too far. Time had not been kind to the younger man, life had taken much from him, but he was a force to be reckoned with well before you factored in his position. It was an unnecessary conflict to court.

Besides, seeing Hollander in Turk custody was surely going to be priceless.

The man himself was doubtlessly in a secure cell, but for now he was met with Veld and one of his underlings, a wiry thing with red hair so garishly bright that it was surely dyed. Dismissing him at a glance, he offered the younger director a thin smile. "What's this I hear about you having found our missing doctor, hm?"

"I'll trust you read the report." Veld didn't seem in the mood for banter, but then, with the return of one of Hollander's failures as well… perhaps he had reason. Hojo wasn't particularly pleased about that himself, if only because of how it affected Sephiroth. "We intend to keep him for questioning, but I figured you'd want a word with him."

"Oh is that all?" Hojo tsked softly, hands resting comfortably in his pockets. "Well why not. I'm here anyway."

Veld gave him a look he didn't bother to think on, leading him down to the solitary containment rooms maintained by the Department of Administrative Research. There was a SOLDIER guard, some Second who was of no apparent importance, and a trooper.

Hojo smirked, following the Turk in and grinning outright at the sight of the missing doctor. Seated on a mussed cot, Hollander looked exhausted, frustrated, and anything but happy to see him. "Well well, Hollander, I must say your unplanned sabbatical doesn't seem to have done you one whit of good. Such a shame. Perhaps if you'd aired your difficulties sooner I could have helped you."
"Like you helped Gast, I'm sure." He sneered, rising and coming over to match glares. They'd been peers once.

Well, no. They'd been coworkers of roughly the same rank working on sister projects under the same greater work that Gast Faremis was heading at the time. Hollander had never been his equal, as this mess was most definitely proving. But that wasn't at all what the man had said, was it?

"The late Professor made his own choice to resist arrest and the return to ShinRa to face punishment for his crimes against the company; that was most definitely not my fault." Hojo reminded him mildly. "And you did come back, I see. Perhaps things will work out better for you, if you continue to be so cooperative. I've heard the Turks are quite thorough in their work. So as long as you've done nothing untowards, I would imagine you'll be fine. Now, what this whole thing with your boys will spell for your career, well, I don't know if that's even my choice. Really, I think you've taken the ability to help in any way right out of my hands."

"The Turks never seemed inclined to ask your help with investigating anyone under you before, did they?" He asked, mild tone belied by his burning glare.

Oh. That was rather low. Hojo smiled icily, mindful of Veld's presence at his side. "Well now, I don't know. This new administration… times change, you know. I'm not sure they're well versed in your particular breed of… science. But I'm quite certain Director Faraman has both the patience and resourcefulness to make you make sense eventually."

"That may actually be something the three of us discuss, since you brought it up." Veld interrupted, deep voice breaking the pointed silence. There was a gleam in his eyes that said he hadn't missed any of the undertones, but there was nothing he could do, as evidenced by his silence on the matter.

Hojo gave him an amused look. "You want to have a discussion about science. With Hollander and I."

"No. I want to discuss the boys with you two." He corrected, dark eyes narrowed. "Before we lose all three."

Hojo blinked, considering his words, and turned to face the Turk fully. "There is nothing wrong with Sephiroth. He is not going to degrade. Hollander's little freaks may well die, but Sephiroth-"

"Sephiroth cares," Veld interrupted, "about those little freaks. And there are ways to lose a person other than death. So I really suggest you find some time to have this discussion, Hojo. Because the matter won't go away just because you ignore it, or because you don't understand it."

There was a moment of silent examination before Hojo scoffed at him. "Sephiroth is stronger than that. Don't waste my time with this nonsense again, Veld, I'm a busy man."

Hojo turned away, ready to banish it all from his mind, though that was spoiled by the harsh laughter behind him. Hollander sounded bitterly triumphant.

"I told them! I told you, and you thought he would help? Don't hold your breath, Veld, Hojo does nothing that doesn't help himself in some way. If he ever had a heart, he buried it with her." His laughter faded to dark chuckles. "No, I'm the only hope you have. That any of them have. Even his precious Sephiroth thought as much."

Hojo stopped, certain he hadn't heard that right. No, the boy disdained them all but Gast, which was so very ironic given the man literally left him behind without so much as a goodbye. Hojo himself had been the only one truly dedicated to him, the only one truly on his side even now.
Let Hollander have his delusions of adequacy. The truth was harsh, but at least Hojo was man enough to face it. It didn't matter what the boys thought, anyway; children seldom knew as well as they thought they did, and time would tell them the truth.

Rhapsodos and Hewley were going to die, and Sephiroth was going to live. He would live, and go on to the greatness he was destined for without their burden, as he should have all along.

Not deigning to say anything, the Professor merely smiled and slipped out from the cell. He certainly knew his way out.

Veld watched the door shut, arching a brow at Hollander. "Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your assistance."

Hollander startled, staring at him. "What…?"

Reno started laughing, a wide grin matched with the knowing gleam in his eyes. "You just said Sephiroth thinks you're better, yo. You think he's gonna let that slide? Hell no, man's got too much pride."

"Hollander, whether or not the good professor has a heart that does more than circulate blood is irrelevant so long as he cooperates, and everyone - even Hojo - has a soft point." Veld smiled serenely. "And you unerringly jabbed at his, in the way only a fellow scientist could manage. So you see, while he may not have given into it yet, Hojo will help. Not because he cares about what you think, or what I think, or what happens to Angeal or Genesis. No, nothing like that. Hojo does nothing for the good of others. There is only one person that has that distinction still."

It was obvious when realization struck, leaving him looking pale and angry. "Sephiroth."

"Yes, Sephiroth. So again, thank you very much, Doctor Hollander, for your assistance." Veld gave him a darkly satisfied smile. "I'll be back to discuss things with you later, when you've had time to better comprehend just how vital it is that you actually do your job right this time."

"Yeah, you're not the only trick 'bo that knows that jig anymore, Doc." Reno snickered, watching him while Veld turned and headed out the door. "You think real hard, yo. Your 'boys' ain't the only ones whose lives are lookin' kinda shaky right now."

"Reno."

"Comin' bossman." The Turk winked, slipping out around the door and listening to it click. His eyes continued to gleam with amusement, but his goading grin settled to a calmer smirk. "Played 'em like fiddles, boss."

"I've been in this game a very long time, red." Veld reminded him, smiling fondly. "But you did an excellent job yourself. Get the feed copy to my office, take care of the default."

"Yes sir."

Veld watched him go, a little smile on his lips, and glanced back to the SOLDIER standing guard. "Second Class Kythe, right?"

"Yes sir."

He nodded. "One of Fair's friends?"
"Yes sir."

Veld hummed thoughtfully, turning to face him and the trooper, who'd finally put his helmet back on. Probably wise, if you were wanting to keep your head down. "And you're Strife?"

"Yes sir."

No lip from these two, certainly. But they also weren't his department, which meant the best bet would be to have them separate to speak with. Which worked well, since he wanted a word with the trooper first. "Strife, when Reno gets back, I'd like you to go ahead and give your report of what happened in Modeoheim to cross reference with my commander, since you were with him. Two eyes are better than one, especially if either has a concussion."

"Is he -" the teenager caught himself, and Veld waited patiently. After a moment, when he wasn't scolded, he continued quietly, "is he okay?"

"Tseng will be fine." Gods knew, his second had been put through worse than a swat from a First who only wanted him out of the way. "Good of you to ask after him. Did a medic look you over yet?"

He knew one hadn't, and also knew from a look at his profile that Strife had a habit of keeping quiet about being bullied. What were the odds he even thought to bother?

"Ah, not since the initial look over on pickup, sir, no." Strife confirmed.

"I'll mention it to Reno." Veld assured him quietly. "I'll also be in contact with both of your directors. Your assistance is appreciated."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

He nodded at the pair, and headed back for his office, lifting his eyes briefly to where he knew the camera was with a small smile.

Not bad. Not good, but this wasn't so bad just yet. It was definitely something he could work with, and that counted for a lot.
Interlude: The Value of Trust

Chapter Summary

Friendship and trust are valuable and rare, to be cherished when you find them, even if you find them in unexpected places.

The day had been long before the SOLDIERs ever got to Sephiroth's apartment, three of the four coming in from Modeoheim which would have been a tiring flight and environment just to walk around in. Even showers and quickly taken meals could only do so much, and after several hours of discussion they called it a night.

Zack ended up deciding to stay with Sephiroth and Angeal, still unconvinced he could trust the older man not to leave. So Kunsel ended up rooming with him in one of the guest rooms of the general's suite, because he certainly wasn't going to leave Zack like this. He didn't know all the details, but he knew enough. Besides, the two had shared quarters before, and a single bed was hardly something to fuss over - it was a bed, and sometimes they hadn't had that much together on missions.

Neither of them slept particularly well, their conditioning to catch sleep whenever and wherever they could failing with the enormity of the situation for Zack, and the hyper awareness of his friend's movements for Kunsel. Being hyper aware of the genuinely hyper teen never boded well for the ability to sleep, but he was worried about what nightmares might make a grab for his friend. If something did, however, it didn't stir him enough to wake either. And night of bad sleep or no, come morning they still got up, got redressed, and went out to face the day together.

Sephiroth was up already, settled in the kitchen area with what looked to be some reports. Green eyes glanced up at them over the papers he had in hand, a small smile on his lips matching their warmth for welcome. "I'd offer you the shower, but I imagine you haven't decided where to stay fixed yet."

"Might as well stay here." Zack shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck. "Where is he?"

"Sleeping - overdue, in my personal opinion." Sephiroth didn't need him to clarify on who and made no pretenses, eyes flicking back towards the room he'd given Angeal while he sipped at his coffee a moment. "He hasn't truly rested in quite some time."

"Yeah, he had that pinched look he gets, didn't he?" Zack agreed, sighing. "He didn't try and go anywhere, though?"

"He hasn't left the room since he went in and closed the door last night," Sephiroth confirmed. "I went by earlier, and his breathing is deep enough to suggest he is still maintaining a restful stage of sleep."

"Well that's a good sign," Kunsel said. "He's not in the best shape, and some rest can only help. Which reminds me - I obviously missed out on a lot. I know a lot has to be classified, and I'm sure you two can work that out later. But for now, what is my assignment here? What can I do to make sure this mess starts straightening out, or at least not getting worse?"

Sephiroth watched him a moment, considering it. "I will leave it to Zack's discretion as for how
much to share with you, given he knows you personally. As for my own standing on the matter of assignments, I believe it is wise to keep an eye on our director and on Angeal. You do not have clearance to serve as a check for Lazard's power - I, however, do. Both Zack and I stand at a point to check Angeal as needed, to which end I'm going to suggest you start carrying status inflicting materia, Zack; casting sleep might be just as effective as using your blade, and with less dire results."

"Right, I've got one I'll get," he promised. "And good point about the director. Seems trust… doesn't work like I thought."

"Trust seems best given as slowly as possible, as earned, though given fully until the individual is proven no longer worthy of what's been earned," Sephiroth said quietly. "Levels of trust are much like levels of power. Not everyone can manage them correctly."

"Yeah, you're telling me."

Sephiroth recognized the pain and disappointment in the younger SOLDIER's voice, though Zack didn't sound as bitter as he himself felt. He found himself speaking before he'd consciously decided to. "I wouldn't worry too much, Zack. You're still First Class."

The look of surprise and gratitude was strangely warming, the wide grin that took over from his lips and made his eyes shine seeming so much more fitting than the somber expressions he'd had lately. "Yeah? Well thanks. No general I'd rather follow than you, either."

Sephiroth smiled, nodding in acknowledgment to the further meaning, then glancing at the Second still with them. Kunsel clearly didn't have any expectations, so much as looking… pleased, for his friend. Would that attitude would start being more common. "I suppose you're just going to end up with authority above your listed rank, Kunsel. Somehow, I get the impression you'll manage."

Kunsel nodded to him with a faint smile. "I'm sure you'll assess me and judge fairly. In the mean time, I need caffeine and food, and to know what I'm doing today. Not necessarily in that order, but it would be nice."

"There's coffee in the pot and mugs beside it," he offered, mildly amused. "I'll see about food."

"You don't do rations for breakfast, right?" Zack looked at him, a little concerned. "Because I have eggs down at my place, and it is not that far."

"The mess in the Tower proper isn't too far to avoid rations for breakfast," Kunsel retorted, slipping around to get some coffee.

"I do not eat rations for breakfast," Sephiroth promised, not sure if he was amused or disturbed at the thought. "I wasn't familiar with that particular rumor."

"Huh? Nah, I don't listen to rumors much. I leave that to Kunsel." Zack shrugged, sidling a little closer. "Got anything for me to do?"

"You keep track of the rumor mill, then?" It took a moment to decide on something for Zack to do - he recognized that need to take action in the younger man, no surprise given how active he was - and beckoned him over to be given a carton of eggs and a large bowl. "Whisk."

Zack brightened to be given something to do, and set about filling the bowl. "All… eighteen?"

"Please."

"You want your coffee topped off, Sephiroth?" Kunsel set a mug in Zack's reach, then pointed to the
general's own mug. "It's still hot."

"Mm, no not just yet. But thank you." He gathered a wide array of vegetables from the crisper, a knife taken from the block he had sitting out, and got to work. There was always some peace to be had with a blade in his hand, even a little knife. "Better to have a bit more actual food first."

"You mean coffee isn't a food group?" Zack gave him a wide-eyed look of surprise so obviously false it made him chuckle. "Gee, all this time I'd thought it was. You sure?"

"Brat," Kunsel accused fondly. "Listen to the boss. We do not need you on a caffeine high."

"Hey, now, we're talking about his coffee, not me and mine." Zack huffed at him. "Be nice."

"Nice is a matter of perspective," Kunsel informed him. "Whisk the eggs, jungle boy."

"Hey, you leave Gongaga out of this, city bum!"

Sephiroth listened to the easy banter between the pair and felt himself smiling again. His chest ached at the thought of mornings long past with another pair much the same. Well, assuming one could rouse Genesis this early and have him anywhere near so civil, at least….

Soon, he promised himself. Soon, mere hours away, they would start making plans in detail to get the redhead back home. For now, there was surely no shame in taking comfort from the ease these two had between them. And he would not be such a fool to miss the worth of their including him in the moment.

Perhaps one day it would even be four or five around the kitchen in the early morning, interacting with gentle banter to the smells of coffee and bracing for the day ahead.
Despite troubles in the past, SOLDIER and Turks find themselves banding together. It’s a surprisingly useful combination.

Two blond men in suits walked into an elevator, both blue eyed and lean, and Lazard spent a moment waiting for the punchline.

"Director Deusericus, I'll be your assigned shadow for a while." The other man smiled far too sweetly to quite match the executive's mental profile for Turk, almost appearing boyish. "You can call me Charles. You'll find a note from my director in your mail, assuming you haven't already. To guess by the face you're pulling, I'd say you haven't."

Lazard let himself smile, the safest reaction in this case. "No, I can't say I'd gotten to it yet. Strange, since I went through my email not too long ago."

"Director Faraman has an actor's appreciation for timing," Charles noted mildly, smile never faltering. "I assume we're headed for your office?"

Well he could hardly say otherwise. "Was there any reason not to?"

"Not that I'm aware of, unless you skipped breakfast - you do eat breakfast, don't you Director? Most important meal of the day."

*How* was this man a Turk of the level Veld would send to watch him? Or maybe he wanted rid of him?

No, *that* was ridiculous. Just as Lazard himself had realized, Veld surely knew they needed all the help they could get. There had to be more to the man. That, or the senior executive had clearly done some digging where he wished the man hadn't, but there was no immediate reason to think so.

Belatedly remembering he'd been asked a question, Lazard gave him a faint smile. "I had breakfast, yes - plenty of protein, balanced evenly by carbohydrates."

"Marvelous, nice to see people who can take care of themselves - makes things easier if you only have to worry about people hurting the person you're guarding, and not them doing the job themselves, you understand." Charles clasped his hands loosely behind his back, humming tunelessly a moment. "My director would, by the by, rather like a word with you later. Perhaps you could even rally your little battalion and charge them down to see the good doctor, hm? Solitary is, by nature, quite lonely."

"How much of that was his request reworded, and how much was a discreet suggestion of your own?" Lazard wondered, doubting he'd get a straight answer.

"Does it really matter?" Blue eyes glanced towards him, faintly amused. "The meeting needs to happen and there's information to be shared. It would be advisable to have a couple key representatives of your men there as well."
"I see," he murmured, leaving the statement be as the elevator stopped short of his floor, letting in another man in a suit. Of course, clever though he was, Reeve Tuesti was no Turk. "Good morning, Reeve."

"Mm? Oh, good morning, Lazard." The engineer - he had trouble of thinking of the man as an actual executive, he was simply too nice - smiled warmly, nodding to them both though he didn't address the Turk. Charles favored him with that same bright smile anyway. "Another day at the office, hm? Plenty to do, I'm sure."

"Oh there's always something." His primary concern was making sure he had as many Firsts this morning as he'd had the day before, but with the appearance of this bubbly little messenger, he supposed a visit to the Department of Administrative Research was also going to be scheduled in… somewhere.

"Always something indeed," the brunet agreed, smiling ruefully. "I'll be in and out myself. Here's hoping we all have something to show for our work at the end of the day, hm?"

"My best wishes as well." Lazard nodded to him, appreciative of the hope. He wasn't counting on it, but it was a nice thought.

The ride was comfortably silent for a while before the elevator bobbed to a stop to let Reeve off, the man taking a moment to salute them with his coffee mug. "Have a good day!"

"You as well, Director Tuesti," Charles finally addressed him, the two exchanging warm smiles, before the two blonds were left alone again. As they neared the fifty first floor, the Turk spoke up again. "You know, a smile has to be the most perfect poker face."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Lazard glanced at him, a bit surprised.

The Turk smiled charmingly and shook his head. "Never mind. Off to business, hmm?"

Nodding slowly, the Director of SOLDIER couldn't help feeling he'd just missed something very important.

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In the end, it was only Sephiroth and Angeal who joined their director and his Turk shadow to meet with Veld. While Zack had been given the invitation, the teen bowed out and no one made any attempts to persuade him otherwise; given what he'd been through, it was understandable that he would want some time to go blow off steam. Which left the two Firsts following in relative silence, only answering specifically addressed questions beyond the initial pleasantries, each lost in their own thoughts.

It was something of an ingrained habit to be more aware when they reached the section of the floor dedicated the Department of Administrative Research that was specifically assigned to the Turks. It was beyond foolish to dismiss them because they were unenhanced; in Sephiroth's personal opinion, many of the more seasoned Turks were easily as dangerous as the ninja of Wutai.

Veld was there to meet them, looking over an unmarked file that he closed even as the door opened. Dark brown eyes did a quick scan, taking in who was - and wasn't - there before he nodded. "We'll take the discussion to my office."
Turning on his heel, he passed along the lines of work stations in silence, expecting to be followed. "Gun, Shuriken, Katana, Kicks - my office."

The four Turks came from various points in the room, leaving their current tasks to follow their director's orders. Veld didn't address anyone again until they were all gathered into his office. "As you all are aware, one of the better known official functions of this department is the function of bodyguards to persons of interest and rank within and occasionally in addition to the company. This will work well to our advantage, as well as the known secondary purpose of monitoring the behavior of individuals to protect company assets in a different way. Though my forces are understandably taxed due to certain current threats, the fact remains that the issues that have most recently arisen in regards to SOLDIER merit action.

"It's to that end that I have arranged for the operatives present to assist as they can. While I'm sure you will come to your own arrangements as to how these partnerships will best work out, I'll address the specialties of the operatives I've chosen." Veld turned, gesturing to his Turks as he spoke of them. "Gun is one of the best marksmen ever produced by the Junon Military Academy, including many of the current instructors. Beyond her capacity as ranged backup, I believe her military background will be of use in finding common ground to begin working together from. Kicks is one of our two specialists in martial arts, and given that Hewley is on record as often preferring hand-to-hand and other forms of unarmed combat, I think she may be of particular assistance on assessment grounds. Likewise, Katana excels with his chosen weapon and several sword forms that may make him a particularly good partner for some of the potential upcoming confrontations due to familiarity. He also has some additional advantages to be disclosed as they become relevant to the task. Similarly, Shuriken has familiarity with several SOLDIERs, has a good relationship with Zack Fair, and experience fighting Rhapsodos' clones."

When it was clear his pause was an expectant one, Sephiroth spoke. "While unexpected, I do see the advantages of these partnerships. May I assume the Turk that had been with the director this morning is assigned to his protection and observation?"

The man in question chuckled softly. "I am, yes, though Commander Tseng will have moments of filling the position as well, as our duties permit or necessity demands."

"Understandable. I'm sure he's quite busy," Sephiroth mused, curious look lingering on the blond a moment longer when his codename wasn't offered. "And what do we call you?"

"For now, I believe Charles will do fine." He smiled sweetly, but the SOLDIER merely arched a brow. The man was a Turk, and innocence didn't last in their ranks any longer than in SOLDIER - less, in some cases. "hint enough, if you're into irony. And I can't imagine you're not, General."

"It's less something I enjoy and more something I deal with for lack of any other available options," he pointed out dryly. Still, the hint was filed away for further contemplation. "You asked us down here for more than this, surely."

"I did, yes." Veld nodded, finally taking a seat at his desk. "I want to know if any decisions have been made about how you all plan to move forward. There are already rumors flying now that Hewley's been spotted on the heels of being declared killed in action, and the President is likely to want a report from your department even after the ones we filed. I wouldn't be surprised if a board review is called, depending on how the other department heads react - Heidegger in particular merits watching, given he'd jump at any chance to take over SOLDIER as well."

Sephiroth snorted softly. "Whatever issues we have with Director Lazard at the moment, he would not be an improvement. And I'm not entirely sure we'd go along with it, either."
The Turk Director hummed quietly, steepling his hands together and looking over his fingertips at the general. "And you believe you have a choice in that?"

Sephiroth arched a brow. "You believe they have a means to force me?"

There was a beat of silence at that rather unexpected comment, the gravity of it not lost on either director. But where Lazard closed his eyes, Veld met the SOLDIER's gaze evenly. "Is that where your plan is headed, General?"

He was treated to a small smile and a shrug. "It was an honest question, and I'm very interested in the answer. What is the company policy on dealing with an asset who has decided there are conditions to their continued compliance? Particularly if said asset is in danger of losing the only things that make them inclined to comply?"

Terminate them. The answer was default, only there was no terminating Sephiroth. And from the hard look in his eyes, it had finally occurred to him. ShinRa's deadliest weapon had realized how flimsy the leash holding him truly was, and was threatening to snap it.

Somehow, Veld had always known this day would come when Sephiroth tired of jumping every time he was told to. They may have tried to mould him, but their prize general was not a machine to be programed; he was a man with thoughts and emotions and opinions of his own. And apparently the potential loss of his two dearest friends had him of the opinion that ShinRa might not be worth the effort it was asking of him.

"I think, General, that if all this comes before the board, your words on the matter may just be the deciding factor," Veld observed quietly. "Given that it's my job to see that the company is protected and its best interests carried out, in this particular case I would say seeing that your requests for assistance in the recovery of SOLDIERS Hewley and Rhapsodos is of immediate concern. I would strongly suggest you and I make an appointment to have a word with the head of the Science Department, as well as Doctor Hollander."

"I can't say I'm any more confident of his ability to be of any use than when we last spoke but I wouldn't mind being wrong in this case," Sephiroth said. "See if he can be bothered then."

"I've found showing up unannounced does occasionally work," he quipped, shrugging. "Find when you're sure to be available and we'll make arrangements, but do it soon."

"As far as I'm concerned, straightening all this out is your immediate priority, Sephiroth," Lazard said quietly. "I'll keep you updated on the political waves we end up making and what may need done to manage the results, but for now I'd appreciate if you can just focus on Angeal and Genesis."

The general inclined his head slightly. "Perhaps I could make the call when our meeting here adjourns. The sooner the matter of Hojo's involvement is decided, the sooner we can make additional decisions on how to handle things from the medical standpoint."

"If nothing else, I would think we'll need one of them, just because they're the only ones who can make sense of what Hollander has already done to Genesis and me," Angeal pointed out, clearly uncomfortable with the subject but knowing it had to be discussed. Running from it wasn't going to do anything but eat up time they didn't have. "Even if we find Genesis, if we don't get a cure we'll lose him anyway."

"Agreed." Sephiroth nodded curtly, looking back to Veld. "Was there something further?"

"Just a reminder to my group that I still expect status reports even when they get to stay in
SOLDIER’s side of the playground,” he said, a hint of amusement twitching his lips towards a smile. "Anything from you, Lazard?"

"Only a request to give me a heads up where you can, if the President decides to send anyone after me or my men." The younger executive glanced at him. "Though I suppose that may be a conflict of interests. Obviously, it's not a decision I can make for you; we all have to decide where we stand, and how much we'll stand for."

"It may well be the most vital decision anyone makes today," Veld agreed gravely, still remembering Sephiroth's words from earlier - you believe they have a means to force me?

While he had evaded a direct answer at the time, never let it be said Veld Faraman was the sort of fool who didn't see the obvious; in all honesty, he doubted anything they might try against Sephiroth would succeed in the long run. If the silver general decided to turn against the company, it would be a bloodbath that they would never recover from, assuming it wasn't an absolute win for the younger man. He had seen the reports from Wutai - the man was rightly called demon by their entire nation and could have single handedly brought them to their knees.

ShinRa would not survive if their greatest weapon turned on them, so in the interests of preventing the immediate demise of the company it was clear to the Turk's director that he would need to be sure Sephiroth's requirements were met. One could make a valid argument that it was his job; after all, there would be no company if there wasn't enough of an attempt made to satisfy him. "I'll likely communicate with you via Tseng or Charles. Feel free to send questions through the same route."

"Understood." Lazard nodded. "Well, then, I think we all know our goals. Sephiroth, Angeal, keep me informed - preferably before Hojo contacts me."

"Of course, Director."

"And Charles will be shadowing me?" He glanced at Veld, wanting that a little more clear.

"Consider it mostly for your wellbeing," Veld advised. "And hope you never need to know why."

Lazard arched a brow at him. "Well that's ominous."

"That's life," he retorted. "Now, I'd like to work some things out with your SOLDIERs, assuming everyone else is clear on where we stand."

"We're good, director." Charles smiled brightly. "We'll see you later."

It was on the tip of his tongue to shout after him to behave, but he held it back; never undermine your operatives, particularly on the job. Charlie could handle himself and Deusericus. That was why he had that assignment.

"Sir, if you don't mind, I think it would be best if Shuriken and I seek out Zack Fair," Balto suggested mildly, an idea that he nodded consent to immediately; best to get the teen settled into the concept of his kin being a Turk as quickly and quietly as possible.

"You do that." Veld watched them slip out, then looked back to the SOLDIERs. "So, you're going to go along with talking to Hojo, then. No fuss?"

"As you pointed out, Director, dealing with Hojo is certainly not something I would put off at the risk of losing help for my friends," Sephiroth said. "He may not be the final piece we need, but if nothing else he's a step up from Hollander and in the right direction. Now, I suppose it will be most likely to get his cooperation by actually agreeing to meet him in his own place of choosing. If
experience is anything to go by, I would bet on the labs. You believe if I make the call he'll be more agreeable?"

"I don't think agreeable is the best word for Hojo even on good days," Veld mused dryly. "But I do think he will help, if approached the right way. The groundwork has already been laid."

"And are you planning on discussing that groundwork, or is it somehow irrelevant?" Sephiroth asked quietly.

"Hollander was unwittingly very helpful in wounding his ego," Veld explained, smiling thinly. "It's going to play to our advantage. Just be honest with him."

Those strange green eyes considered him a moment before Sephiroth chuckled softly. "Brutally honest?"

"If you like." He shrugged. "You've been around the man your whole life, Sephiroth. I imagine, if you tried, you could think of all sorts of buttons to push."

"Manipulation?" He heard Angeal huff softly, but didn't bother to address the man's rather fluid and tarnished perception of what was honorable conduct and when it was or was not necessary. No, he was a bit more taken with the idea Veld was presenting. It wasn't unlike what Zack had mentioned before, but unlike Zack, the man before him was an expert in such matters. "Not my usual technique, but I wouldn't be adverse to learning a new skill."

"You're better at it than you give yourself credit for," Veld assured him dryly. "But I've got a few things we can cover."

"Well then," the SOLDIER settled back into one of the seats. "Please go on. You have my attention."
What You Started

Chapter Summary

Hojo and Hollander are called on to deal with the consequences of the project they’d begun decades ago.

Skeptical as he still was, Sephiroth did admit that there was no harm in approaching Hojo. They didn't have such clearly laid plans that there were any other actions for him to take, and even the chance that the current head of the science department could be helpful was one he wouldn't dismiss. Not with Angeal and Genesis' lives on the line.

So he sat down with Veld, allowing the Turk to make a one-way tap to the line he was using so he could keep record of the conversation. The phone rang several times, but he had no doubt Hojo would answer him. Perhaps not immediately, were he occupied and truly unable to be disturbed, but he would answer if only because Sephiroth never called without absolute necessity.

As it was, Hojo answered. He sounded somewhat guarded, no doubt because of the conversation Veld had disclosed to him earlier. "Sephiroth. I hadn't anticipated you would call me so soon."

"But you had assumed I would." Presumptuous, but not incorrect in this case.

"I liked to think you would not put pride above good sense," the scientist corrected. "I spoke with Hollander and am well aware that you have a strict time limit to work within. Trusting him entirely would be a gamble that I had hoped you would not be such a fool as to make. Or, rather, back to the matter of pride. But you seem to place your friends above the perceived cost."

"A novel concept, I realize," he said, irritated by the tone the old man was taking. It wasn't anything new, Hojo was always condescending whether or not he had any right to be. Such was the man's ego - or rather, the airs he put on to protect it. "Let's not beat around the bush. Are you able to help or not?"

Across the table, he saw Veld smirk before the director looked down to his clasped hands in a poor effort to be polite about it. Clearly he approved that Sephiroth had taken his insights to heart.

There was a telling beat of silence before the professor spoke again, his superior airs replaced by an icy tenseness. "Whatever you may believe, Sephiroth, I am the only person with the experience to even attempt the task. Perhaps, had you boys brought the matter to my attention first - to anyone other than that idiot who had caused their problems to begin with through his own incompetence - you would not be so short on time. As it is, I am your only hope at all to find a cure. If indeed either of them can be salvaged; I won't know until I see how thoroughly Hollander has managed to mess them up. "

Sephiroth took a slow breath in, closing his eyes and letting it out silently. He managed to keep his tone even, unaffected and not revealing any of his emotions. "Then I suppose I've asked the wrong question. Will you help, Professor?"

Again, a moment of silence on the professor's end. Perhaps asking outright had honestly surprised the man; it certainly wasn’t a common occurrence. But he gathered himself quickly to reply. "Well
I'm certainly not going to leave you dependent on Hollander. He may make a decent subordinate, but he's proven himself unable to manage anything independently on a large scale. If you're so determined to try and fix your broken friends that you would ask me, then yes, I will help."

The SOLDIER smiled wryly. "Your generosity knows no bounds. Send me a list of times we might be able to meet, then, and we'll discuss this further."

"I need access to Hollander's work, first." Hojo informed him. "Obviously he didn't do things right, so I need to find out exactly where he went wrong. Examining his failures would also be helpful, since I've heard you've managed to get one of them back. You have plans to capture and return the other one?"

"I'll see that the Turks know what you need." He took the insults in stride, though if the professor continued with them in Angeal's presence he might just have to say something about it. "We're working on finding Genesis and bringing him back, yes. It's predicted to be a bit harder than getting Angeal was."

The professor made a derisive sound. "He'll find you, if nothing else. The boy never could stand to be ignored, and he has every opportunity to make himself the center of attention now. The fact that it's negatively so doesn't seem to deter him in the slightest."

"He's not exactly in his right mind." 

"Ahh yes, degradation. Hollander had been warned, but the man thought he knew better." Hojo scoffed. "You can thank him for that. Gast had him send them both away, and I told him not to admit them to the program. But he had no intention of listening to me."

"Then I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time full of opportunity to say 'I told you so' while working this out," he noted evenly. "I'll inform the others you've agreed to assist. Send me a memo regarding what you need of us."

"Yes, you do that." Hojo's tone didn't soften so much as it was quieter. "But understand, I'm not doing it for them."

Sephiroth couldn't help but look back to Veld, meeting his dark eyes evenly. "No, I suppose you wouldn't. Altruism isn't in your nature."

"I'm fairly sure we have people for that, and I don't have time for it, nor the inclination," he said, rather dismissive of the very idea. "I have only had one priority over the years, Sephiroth, as you should know by now."

His hand tightened just a little on the phone. "I suppose your bizarre obsession might come in handy just this once."

"Don't be impudent," Hojo chided, "I'm doing you a favor. I'll send you notes shortly, and will expect information promptly, as well as times for when you can get your friend down to my lab for a preliminary examination."

"Very well." That wouldn't be something Angeal would enjoy any more than he would, but there was the small comfort that Hojo always sounded like the word friend tasted particularly unpleasant when he said it. "I'll also see Director Faraman gets in contact with you."

"Oh I'm quite sure Veld will manage that all on his own," he drawled, tone drier than summer in Costa del Sol. "You just let us old men manage each other. We have something of an understanding."
Sephiroth arched a brow at the aforementioned Turk, but got a perfect poker face back. Of course he did; it wasn't much of a surprise. "I realize it's going to take some doing, but try to be cooperative, Professor."

"You mistake my intolerance of idiocy with deliberate troublemaking," Hojo corrected him, "which is not at all the truth of the matter. You manage your men, and leave me to my tasks, Sephiroth. If you knew what I needed to do, you'd have been able to find some ordinary lab technician to follow your orders."

_Would that I could_, he thought, but he didn't say so aloud. Somehow, he had a feeling Hojo knew the thought would have crossed his mind anyway. "We'll be in touch."

He ended the call, arching a brow at Veld - more importantly, the older man's trembling shoulders. "Director, I'm almost wary of asking what is so incredibly amusing to you."

"Before your time, General." Veld smiled and the expression was more honest than Sephiroth had seen in a smile from him before, nostalgic and a little wistful. "But nicely handled. I know that wasn't your ideal situation, but I've always appreciated that you understand the difference between the ideal reality and the reality you're dealt."

"I see no point in deluding myself." Sephiroth shrugged; the want to believe in lies was something he'd not understood for the longest time, though it had become painfully clear since Genesis had left. Still, he would rather face the truth from the beginning. No matter how painful, it couldn't be worse than having comforting lies torn away. He liked to think he wouldn't have reacted as Angeal and Genesis had to their own revelations, but it was hard to say. "Regardless, it's done. You'll be able to supply the information he requires?"

"I'll iron that out," Veld assured him. "You've done the trickier part; he's invested now."

"Hn." Sephiroth shook his head, rising with a quiet rustle of leather. "We'll see, certainly. If he's wise he'll keep his word, but that's not a trait I've ever reliably attributed to him."

"We'll see," Veld agreed. "Hewley's down in the containment area, having a word with Hollander. Fair and James came in for it."

Sephiroth glanced at him thoughtfully. "Is the conversation being recorded?"

The Turk arched a brow at him. "Is that a serious question?"

That made him chuckle. "Fair enough. I'll wait for them… you've removed the tap, I should hope? The echo is… irritating."

"I did." Veld smiled faintly. "If you weren't so recognizable, you'd be good for spy work."

"Not quite my 'thing' but thank you for the compliment." He assumed that was one, anyway. Surely from a Turk it would be. Then again, they were different. "Keep me up to date. I'll be waiting."

"Of course, General. Have one of the others direct you to the cells, if you have difficulty."

He didn't want to do this. Angeal paced the hall for a while, trying to get himself together as his
emotions rocked dangerously between extremes, just providing more proof that he was getting unstable. There were answers he needed, ones he wasn't likely to get in as much detail as Hollander could offer. Assuming he'd be cooperative, at least.

Sephiroth was currently putting in a call to Hojo so he wasn't in a position to join him - and he didn't envy him *that* at all, though he was touched that his friend would make the effort for them, especially as badly as he and Genesis had hurt him with their betrayals. And Angeal could have waited, there wasn't any pressure on him. Not from anything but his own mind, clamoring with demands to get more detail out of the man he'd *trusted*…

Gods, what a mess. All of it.

"You sure you're ready for this, Angeal?" Zack was hurt and angry with him, justifiably so, but hadn't hesitated at all to come back for this, to *be there* for him when he made the confrontation. He'd acted like it was a foregone conclusion that he'd be there and maybe… maybe it was. Maybe it was just the fog that kept creeping over his senses that made it so hard to understand that he'd step up to the task without hesitation, just like Sephiroth was. It was just… just so hard to think sometimes. He was sure he hadn't always been like this. "'Geal?"

"I don't think I'm going to get more ready, Zack," he admitted. "I'd like to do this while I still have some restraint left."

"Yeah, well. We're here if that doesn't work." The younger SOLDIER offered him a small smile, nothing like the wide innocence of the ones he used to have almost by default. The bright spirit that had followed him around like a puppy had been darkened by this. Not quite tainted, but it had forced him to grow up past his sixteen years, faster than Angeal had hoped to see. With the war coming to a close, he'd thought maybe Zack could avoid the sharp drop into adulthood that he, Genesis and Sephiroth had fallen into.

Obviously, no such luck. The puppy was quickly growing into a wolf, and while he was a good tempered one, he had teeth and claws he'd use to defend himself if he had to.

"Angeal."

Angeal managed, just barely, not to do more than flinch at the touch to his arm. Zack flinched a little, too, but pressed on. "Don't get caught up in your head. Let's just get this done, okay?"

Angeal nodded firmly. "Okay."

When had Zack become the adult here? He grieved for it even as he admitted, if only to himself, that he needed it right now.

Just entering the room and *seeing* Hollander, he consciously drew strength from seeing his former student out of the corner of his eye. Kunsel was on his other side, and he knew the Turk Zack had brought was at the door behind him. They were all armed, and though he was not, he knew that if he lost control they'd need that advantage. "Doctor."

"Angeal." The scientist didn't rise from his cot, watching him with weary eyes. The brown irises seemed dulled, likely from exhaustion, the unusual pallor attributed to the same cause. "Here to ask questions, or exact your revenge?"

"Questions." *Revenge* echoed in his head, resonating unpleasantly. He shook it off with a shrug of his shoulder, feeling the phantom twitch of his wings. "I'm not sure where to start. No, maybe… you said you'd have told me anything to get me to calm down. There's been so much over the years, if
not outright lies, than lies by omission - misleading me, misleading all of us. How much of the 'truth' you've told Genesis and I were lies to soothe us? To maintain a front to keep him from killing you in his madness?"

Hollander offered him a tired smile, though it was somewhat admiring as well. "I'd wondered if you'd manage to ask. To know to ask. You've been slipping, slowly. As much as I hated to admit it, even you… you never should have degraded. I know the mistakes I made with Genesis, and they weren't there with you. I can only think that he managed to influence you somehow.

"While Genesis doesn't have the full powers you inherited from Jenova, the ability to be a two-way conduit for genetic conduction that would allow him to absorb the characteristics of others as you do… he can pass his own flawed genes on, hence his clones. And you have always had the potential to absorb them, even when you didn't know you could. You were automatically primed to be receptive, though I'd never quite anticipated you would use it instinctively in such a way." He sighed, raking a hand back through his hair. "It was only once you joined him that you began to show signs of instability."

Angeal swallowed against a sick feeling. "You think I've… what, absorbed his degradation? Those corrupt genetics, I mean?"

"That's all that I can think of that could have possibly occurred, yes." Hollander sighed. "So yes, Angeal. You are, against all odds, degrading."

The First nodded, clenching his fists a moment. "Is there a cure? This isn't just a disease, some other that's infected us. Our own bodies are tearing themselves apart on a genetic level."

The scientist was silent a long moment. "I refuse to say there isn't something that can be done. Whatever you believe my motives are, know that I will do everything I can to save you. Both of you."

The question, of course, was if that would even be enough. "But you don't know. This is… it's like cancer. An alien cancer."

"Alien, yes; cancer, no." Hollander sighed as Angeal began to pace, watching him in silence for a moment. "They're just cells, Angeal. You've had them all your life. If Genesis hadn't started degrading, you never would have known, and nothing would have changed."

"But things did change!" He insisted, shoulder rolling uncomfortably. It was hard to tell if the feeling was real, or just a phantom ache from knowing the wings were there. He wasn't sure how they manifested, and was even less sure he truly wanted to know. "It's all changed."

"All that's changed is your understanding of the situation." The older man disagreed firmly. "I knew. I knew the entire time. So did your mother. So did Genesis' parents, gods watch over them and gods forgive him for what he did to them in his mad confusion. But you're not that far gone yet, Angeal. You can still think clearly, if you would just fight for it."

Angeal held a hand up, the other one pressing to his temple. Thinking did get hard sometimes. He was recognizing that more now that he was around people who weren't in a worse state than he was. Around Genesis it was easy to believe he was thinking clearly, to forget how things seemed to blur and get lost sometimes. "Okay. Just… we'll come back to that. Do you have any idea where he'd be? Assuming I had died in Modeoheim, where would he go?"

Hollander snorted softly, but gave it some thought. "Somewhere warmer to recover from his own fight. Wutai or Banora, likely Wutai since it's closer. And there's much less a likelihood of running
into ShinRa forces over there, with the end of the war."

"Also going to be harder to get forces over there," he muttered, frowning. They couldn't very well tell Godo about Genesis. They couldn't really afford to tell anyone outside the company about Genesis, about… all of this mess.

"Will he come looking for you?" Zack spoke up, a surprise though he did have a very valid question, serious blue eyes fixed on Hollander. "He may think Angeal's dead, he may not. But you were always more likely to be taken prisoner than have someone literally gunning for you. Would Genesis try and get to you, or do you think he'll stick with what he was talking about? Getting those cells you didn't think he could find?"

Hollander considered it. "He won't find the J cells. I have some guesses as to where they are, and he's not going to find them. So he'll either need me, or another scientist who has enough of a similar background to catch his eye. And that is a very small pool to choose from indeed."

"A list of your peers in the field might be a good starting point of people to watch," Zack noted, glancing aside to Kunsel a moment before nodding back at Angeal.

"Even if he goes to Wutai first, he's still going to move from there eventually - he's going to have to." Angeal frowned, thinking on it. "There's still places in Banora… the ruins… he'd go. The cavern, probably."

"Cavern?"

"It's… there's a series of caves, has some old stuff in there. Gen knows them like the back of his hand, so I could picture him heading there," Angeal explained. "I've been through some of it myself, but the rest I've just heard about. There's monsters everywhere, but somehow he's always come out more or less alright even when we were kids."

"He had his theories." Hollander sighed. "It's a place to start looking, anyway. I don't advise you go gallivanting about until I've had a chance to really look you over, Angeal."

Angeal tensed, looking back to him warily. "And why is that?"

"Because I don't know how badly you're degrading yet, and it would be a very bad idea to get yourself injured with compromised healing," he pointed out darkly. "I know you seemed to fancy the idea of dying, but that is not a quick or painless death. You would suffer."

"I'm not… I'm not planning to die any time soon," Angeal informed him, straightening his posture with a tight smile. "Living is the better penance, isn't it?"

He didn't think he was imagining the flash of surprise and relief over Zack's face, but now wasn't the time to dig into how that made him feel.

Hollander didn't look terribly impressed. "See that you keep that in mind, then."

"Trying," he muttered, hating all of it. That so much was still a question, something he couldn't take care of himself. "Alright, what do you need to do to figure that out? A physical?"

"Blood tests. Tissue samples. Much more thorough than just a physical," Hollander corrected testily. "I'll need full access to my lab, minimum, and it will be more than one test over a series of days to begin to get a measure of where you stand."

Angeal made a face, but nodded slightly. "Alright. I have a feeling you have to work with the others
on that; I'm not in charge of what happens to you. I'm pretty sure I don't even get a say, actually."

"Just show up and cooperate," Hollander advised him sternly. "I'll have a word with Veld about the rest; I'm sure he plans to go over this discussion of ours in detail with me anyway. He's never been anything but thorough."

"Right, well I'm sure there'll be more. I just." He just couldn't think, and he wasn't sure how much he wanted to.

_Sephiroth was right, I am a coward._

"We should probably make sure Sephiroth hasn't killed any innocent pieces of furniture after having to talk with Professor Hojo," Kuskel noted, tone casual.

Angeal knew better, knew enough of the Second who had been - apparently still was - Zack's best friend, and knew he was being given an out. And bravery be damned, he took it. "I can't imagine that would go over well, no. We'll speak again later, Hollander."

"Just don't do anything foolish, Angeal," the doctor cautioned, watching them all with a small frown. "Don't do anything rash."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the older man that really, he was in no position to talk to him about making good life decisions. _He_ hadn't started this - that 'credit' lay at the feet of a handful of scientists and their assistants. But he was nowhere near steady enough to have _that_ discussion, so Angeal simply nodded and turned away, heading back into the hall.
A camera bug found in the observation room leaves the SOLDIERs and Turks ill at ease with the thought of having their movements discovered.

"Hello ladies, gentlemen, and assorted others of questionable stances, today we're going to be watching the rare First Class grudge match via the monitoring station here." Kunsel rapped his knuckles on the console, chuckling at the eye roll from his director. "Yes, sir?"

"I don't know what Zack put in your coffee, Kunsel, but I would appreciate if you didn't give in to any more impulses for drama."

"Well, someone has to fill in for Red," Cissnei pointed out mildly, peering into the chamber. Sephiroth, Angeal, Zack and Balto had ended up together, though the cousins - and she was still wondering how she'd never guessed - were mostly there for support. Zack for referee, as the only one who stood a chance against either of the legendary warriors, and Katana for being the Turk with the best precision with curative materia. "This isn't going to actually become a grudge match, is it?"

"As entertaining and completely justified as that would be, Sephiroth can be counted on for better restraint than that," Lazard assured her. He'd considered staying in-office to watch, but this had become too personal to be so distant anymore. Ever since he'd come clean and tossed his lot in with his men for real, the personal stake in the outcome had weighed heavily on his shoulders.

He'd said it once to Zack before, but the price of freedom was high. And he couldn't shake the feeling they were all going to have to pay it they wanted to break their individual chains. Not knowing the price that would be asked of him was an uncertainty he bore only because there simply was no other option.

One might say it was 'funny' how many things in his life ended up that way, but the blond wasn't very amused at the moment. He certainly wasn't afraid to die for his beliefs, but living for them was an entirely different level of difficulty. Then again, when had his life ever been easy?

"So what's the goal here, anyway?"

"At the moment, the goal is seeing where Angeal's abilities stand," Lazard explained. "While he is certainly not in the dire straits Genesis is in, there's proof that he's degrading as well. Even if it's a slower rate, we still need to figure out how much so, primarily so we can find out some way to map out what sorts of changes he's undergoing and predict future ones."

"And short of Genesis himself - who is not only not here, but also in worse condition - Sephiroth is the best person to assess Angeal's condition in regards to the physical aspects, at least through the eyes of a fighter," Kunsel said. "They've fought together and against each other for years. Zack trained with him, too, but I don't think he ever got to where Angeal didn't have to hold back in some way under his training."

"One could argue that the polish and final honing that's made Zack such an impressive First is because he finished learning opposite Angeal as an opponent and peer, instead of from him as a
student," Gun remarked, watching them square off. "I don't think I've ever actually seen him use that sword, despite carrying it everywhere. Did the general really have to insist?"

"Yep." Kunsel smirked. "Made it a straight-out order, even. It was a fun conversation."

"I'm not sure Angeal would have agreed."

"Angeal is, according to Zack, a stick in the mud," Kunsel said bluntly. "And I have to say that's not too off the mark. Besides, there's more to it than just a blade. It's a bit of a long story; the gist is that the man needs to use his damn blade for more than a fashion statement and last resort. And by last resort, I mean last. It's stupid to carry two swords, and only use the crap practice one when you have a beauty like his right there. The Buster Sword should never be a second choice of blade."

"It is a beauty," Yuda mused, coming to examine the view screen. "Blades aren't my specialty, but the metalwork on the hilt alone deserves appreciation. Katana was impressed by the craftsmanship of the entire piece."

"I'd gotten the impression that he has a pretty wide range of blade mastery." The SOLDIER considered it, glancing down at the Gongagan Turk down by Zack. "Interesting he ended up with you guys."

"Don't fish for clues from the Turks, Kunsel," Lazard chided.

"If they honestly can't outfox me, I consider the information well and truly earned," he disagreed. "It's a game, after a point."

"You SOLDIERs are all just big kids, aren't you?" Cissnei chuckled. "It's fine, Director. I like knowing there's an inquisitive mind under that helmet. Which you don't actually have to wear right now."

Kunsel was silent a moment, then took it off with a sheepish smile. "Habit, sorry. It's multipurpose headgear, though. Very useful."

"Mhm. Travel bowl, bowling ball, quick access bucket, tiny creature cage-"

"I'm not sure at this point if it's good or bad I have stories to match most of those," Lazard muttered, adjusting the recording parameters again. "They're starting."

"Let the games begin," Kunsel murmured. This wasn't something people got to watch, not even the rest of SOLDIER; barring a few exhibition matches where he knew they had drastically slowed themselves down and checked the strength of their blows for the sake of the audience, the legendary trio didn't spar where anyone could watch. And the fact that it was 'only' Sephiroth and Angeal didn't make it any less impressive. Even weakened as he was, Angeal was stronger than most Firsts could ever hope to be in their prime. Sephiroth was beyond phenomenal when he truly let go.

Actually, watching the two relax a bit more into the spar, their speed beginning to pick up and the clash of blades gaining enough force that their Turk-medic-on-call backed up a few paces behind Zack… that was still incredible. He'd known theoretically what they were capable of, but seeing was believing, as the phrase went.

Even seeing, it was hard to believe. Getting to, regardless of the bad circumstances, was a privilege and genuine pleasure.
Closing his eyes, he refocused on some of the other issues, namely how exactly they could track down Genesis. Especially when he had clones to throw them off his trail and what sounded like dozens of potential hiding spots that he could lay low at for extended periods of time. But his thoughts were interrupted, as closing his eyes only brought his other senses into focus and there was an unpleasantly high pitched chirping somewhere nearby.

Squinting, he peered around at the others, but no one else seemed to notice. Then again, with that particularly high pitch, maybe the unenhanced wouldn't hear anything. Which made him wonder just what it was making such a sound.

Scanning the room intently, he finally got up and started trying to track it by the sound. Given how irritating it was, his ears certainly noticed when he was getting closer-

"Bug," one of the Turks spoke up quickly, pointing near his boots with an expression of disgust.

Kunsel glanced down, surprised to see a roach of all things, and knelt to get it as the insect tried to scrabble away. Even on the way down to a crouch, it was quickly clear that the high pitched noise was coming from the bug. And when he grabbed it up in one gloved hand, he quickly realized that it wasn't at all what it looked like.

"Well now, what have we here?" He flicked at the front with his fingertip, noticing a small blue light blinking near its antennae.

"That's not a roach. What in the gods name is it?" Gun demanded, coming a little closer to get a better look and narrowing her eyes as what she'd thought was a roach blinked its light at her.

"I'm going to guess it's either a toy, or a really clever monitoring device," Kunsel admitted, flipping it onto its back in his palm and ignoring the vile smelling oily black liquid it started squirting everywhere. "Extremely clever; if you weren't paying attention you'd never realize it was a fake."

"What's a fake?" The door to the training room hissed open and closed, Zack stepping out to grab himself a water bottle. "They're mostly talking now, figured I could use some water… what did you find?"

"This little guy," Kunsel gestured to the squirming little thing in his hand, noting the blue light had gone out. "It's not what it looks like. There was a light on earlier, like a tiny bulb. I think maybe it was some sort of mini camera setup."

"I'm still not sure it's a fake," Zack admitted, squinting at it. "You're sure it's a fake? Seriously? Who makes creepy crawlie camera bugs, anyway?"

"Someone far, far too clever for our good," Lazard said, finally coming over to see what was going on and getting at his belt. "Here, wait."

Kunsel took the small knife when it was offered. "Thanks, Director. Now, let's get this little guy open…"

"It's starting to smoke, Kuns," Zack warned, coming closer to get a better view.

"It's frying itself from the inside," Kunsel muttered, wrenching the bottom open in time to see a spit of sparks, the insides melting together into a mass of ruined circuits. "I've got to be honest, this is a little out of my league. But yeah, this was definitely some sort of mechanical thing; I'm betting on a spying unit, even if only a prototype."
"So someone, somewhere, knows about... all this, whether or not that was their original goal," Zack guessed, scowling. "That's probably a really not-good thing for several reasons."

"The director is going to be livid," Cissnei predicted, coming around him to get a proper look at the smoldering remains on the SOLDIER's glove. "What a mess."

"Well, call him and let him know," Zack shrugged. "It's all we can do. I'll go break it to Sephiroth."

"You're sure you want to disturb the general right now?"

The First glanced back at her, arching a brow, and repeated himself slowly. "I will go break it to General I-do-not-like-being-uninformed Sephiroth."

"General Sephiroth really, really does not take well to being left in the dark about security breaches, which I'm pretty sure this is." Kunsel gestured for Zack to go, looking at his glove with distaste. "We need some sort of containment thing for this, guys. Any ideas?"

"I don't think we have anything sterile on hand..." Cissnei frowned. "Which risks some further contamination for something that's already partially self-destructed, crawled on the floor, and rolled around on your glove."

"I sent a note to Tseng, he'll see something is sent our way for it." Emma came around the console, glaring at the twitching device. "Evil."

"I'm honestly pretty impressed, myself," Kunsel admitted. "Do you seriously know what the odds were that it would be spotted for what it was? Did anyone else get tipped off? Anyone? Particularly people trained for this stuff?"

"We get the point, Kunsel; someone else should have noted we were literally bugged." Lazard sighed. "What makes it so special?"

"Absolutely nothing, outwardly." Kunsel shook his head. "That is what makes it so strange. The level of detail here, from its appearance down to the way it moved, even... whoever made it either has a thing for bugs, or is extremely detail oriented. Even more than me, because I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't come close enough to hear it."

"Hear it?"

"Enhanced senses include hearing," he explained. "The pitch it gave off was high, but not too high to detect - yet high enough to be really uncomfortable. That's how I knew it wasn't just a strange roach."

"So, someone with attention to detail but not enough exposure to enhanced individuals to make adjustments accordingly." Emma scowled. "That doesn't narrow it down much."

"It may remove AVALANCHE from the equation," Yuda pointed out. The martial artist had been more inclined to stay back and observe, but came over to see now. Flicking her hair back over her shoulder, she frowned at the blackened circuits that had been exposed. "They have their own enhanced operatives to test things on after all."

"So either we have a new player to contend with, or it's an inside job." Lazard sighed. "Great. That might be better, but I'm not counting on it."

"Well, no, probably shouldn't," Kunsel admitted. "But you can't ignore it. And the level of understanding not only the mechanics needed to make such a small device but one so convincingly
disguised, and get it up to this floor, does start narrowing things down."

"We need to consider their interest in this particular room," Sephiroth remarked, coming back with Zack and Angeal behind him. "If you were going to go through such effort, one would generally not spend it on getting a device to the training rooms. At least it's not a typical line of thought. There's nothing to be gained here for any certainty but a recording of SOLDIERs coming in and out of training matches. The likelihood of people being here, and having a discussion of any importance, is not high."

"So someone may have known about this," Kunsel concluded.

"Unlikely is not impossible," the First mused, expression thoughtful. "All things to consider, certainly."

"Yeah, well, if they have another one in the area and would like to 'fess up, that'd be great, because we're kinda busy right now," Zack said, making a gesture to the room at large as if the person were there to hear him.

"I'm not sure it works that way," Sephiroth said mildly, though his lips twitched towards a smile.

"Unlikely is not impossible," the teen quoted back at him. "Sure can't hurt at this point."

"I suppose you're right," he conceded, green eyes flicking back when the elevator down the hall brought a familiar lanky redhead up to them. And in his hands, an unopened sample case. "Bringing it back for inspection, then."

"Yep. Gonna take it back so me an' Rude can take a look, yo," Reno nodded, pulling on a pair of sterile gloves and opening the case. "Well, when he gets back from his trip. Shouldn't be too long. You mind lettin' the glove go, SOLDIER boy? Be nice t' get a look at all the stuff on it."

"Go ahead, it's wrecked for work, anyway." Kunsel eased it off, tucking it and the destroyed device into the case. "Hey Zack? You have a pen?"

"Kuns, when you're around I always have a pen," Zack promised, tone on the dry side of amused as he got a small notepad and a smaller pen out of his pocket. "Got a notebook today, too. Alllll for you, buddy."

"Thanks." Kunsel grinned, taking it from him and flicking it open. The pen went to the ungloved hand, writing quickly, and Sephiroth made a quiet sound.

"You're ambidextrous?"

The younger SOLDIER paused his writing briefly, glancing at him in surprise. "Yeah, actually I am."

"Your handwriting is different than I recalled from handwritten reports," he explained after a moment. "I assumed a change of hands was the cause."

Kunsel chuckled softly, nodding. "Exactly that, yeah."

"A man of many, many talents, our Kunsel." Zack grinned.

"We've all got talents, mine just happen to also be useful and worth note." He resumed filling the page with his own type of shorthand, a combination of characters, numbers and symbols that had evolved over the years to fit his own needs. It was handy for getting a lot of information down in a
small area, and had ended up as good security since it wasn't something easily decrypted just due to the nature of development.

"Whatcha makin' notes of?" Reno asked, curious now that he'd gotten the container secured and marked, sterile gloves peeled off and stuffed in a pocket.

"What I noticed about it," he explained, still writing once he flipped the sheet to get at the back. "Anything that comes to mind, anything that could be related that I might be able to puzzle through later. I'll make another set of notes later in an hour or so, without having looked at this, and then compare the two - see the differences, what stuck with me in particular, and make a final set. See what I can get out of it all."

Reno looked at him for a moment before shaking his head with a grin. "Boss is gonna _love_ you, kid. Hey, Zack, you mind if I borrow your buddy?"

"I kinda do, yeah," Zack admitted. "I'm very attached. And that sounds like you'd like to _keep_ him, and you _can't._"

"Hey, hey, don't start that. No." Kusel capped the pen, pointing it at Zack until he pouted at him, then pointing it at Reno. "I'd be happy to swap notes later. Maybe we can do a small group assessment thing? Zack and I are always a good team to put together - we work well off each other. So maybe the two of us, and whichever tier of boss you meant? Keeping both departments informed seems a good precedent for both sides to set, right?"

There was a long moment of silence before Reno held out a hand. "You've got yourself a deal, yo. This'll be _great._ Who knew SOLDIER was hidin' guys like you?"

"Not the Turks, apparently." Zack hummed, bouncing on his toes and snatching the pen out of the air when Kusel threw it at him, offering him a wide smile that was all teeth and satisfaction with himself. "Hey now, behave. I'm pretty sure I still outrank you."

"I'm not sure how applicable that is if I became liason between SOLDIER and the Department of Administrative Research," Kusel mused, taking the sheets he'd finished and tucking them away. "Pretty sure that's a shinier title than just _SOLDIER First Class._"

"Shiny doesn't always win!"

"I'm pretty sure shiny always wins," Kusel insisted. "It does with you."

"I have it on good authority that 'shiny' wins, and also happens to outrank the both of you."

There was a beat of silence as various people in the room realized just who had spoken. Sephiroth merely offered a small smile, a slow tilt of his head catching the light on his hair. It didn't take long for Zack to start snickering, or for Reno to burst out laughing.

"I'm guessing if I told anyone you called yourself _shiny_ I'd be laughed all the way to the psyche ward." Kusel sighed, smirking faintly at his general. He'd never seen the man quite so relaxed. Or no, that wasn't quite right. There was still definitely tension there, tension that _hadn't_ been there before Genesis had led the mass desertion, but there was something a bit lighter. Hope, maybe. With Angeal back, there was finally a tangible line of _hope_, and that made all the difference.

"Sometimes the craziest thing is, in fact, _the truth,_" the general pointed out mildly. "Are you attempting to adopt one of my SOLDIERs, Turk?"

"What? No! I mean, wait, can I? You up for adoption, Kusel?" Reno looked him over. "Aren't you
like, a legal adult? Or at least SOLDIER-therefore-adult?"

"He's not up for adoption." Zack huffed, shaking the pen at the Turk for emphasis.

"I'm really not, no." Kunesl chuckled. "But yeah, a liason position? I could do that. Keep everybody in the loop - communication solves a lot of problems."

"And lack of clear communication starts a lot." Cissnei ducked around Zack, taking the pen from him. "You're going to burst that all over your hand."

Zack blinked at her, belatedly closing his hand and dropping it to his side. "I was not! And I'm wearing gloves!"

She gave him a blatantly disbelieving look before turning her attention back to Reno. "You can't adopt him, Reno. SOLDIER is a bit shorthanded, for one, and for another the last person you brought in still isn't fully house trained."

"What?" Bright eyes rolled a bit as the redhead ran that through his head. "Hey now, I'm tellin' him you said that, yo! That's not right."

"He leaves the seat up," she reminded him darkly, turning to Kunsel. "We'll run it by Tseng when we see him later. It's a good idea to have a go-between on both sides."

"Sounds good. Pen, please?" He held a hand out. "It's mine."

"Zack had it," Cissnei observed.

"That makes it absolutely zero percent less mine," Kunsel said, wiggling his fingers. "Pen, please? He keeps it."

"Kunsel's a pen biter." Zack offered up the explanation a little too readily, as far as the man in question was concerned. "I've been the keeper of pens for years."

"Keeper of pens." Cissnei shook her head, handing it back to Zack. "Don't break it, then; it's not yours."

"Yes'm." Zack grinned, taking it back and putting it in his pocket. "It's a really nice pen, anyway; doesn't smear, very durable, fine point. I wasn't going to snap it."

"They don't usually get broken that way, when they do break," Kunsel promised. "He's a very good pen keeper."

"Impressive." She drawled. "Reno, let's go take a look at that bug, shall we? I'm sure Tseng's waiting for the preliminary report."

The redhead nodded, giving a mock salute to the others. "Catch you later or somethin' SOLDIERs."

"Or something." Cissnei agreed, following him out.

"So…did I really hear you say you wanted to adopt the Second just now?" Shuriken gave the older Turk an amused look. "Were you serious or just baiting Zack?"
"Baitin' Zack is a little too easy most days, and increasingly more deadly. Not that it stops me, exactly, 'm just sayin' I try t' pick an' choose my battles," Reno pointed out, looking at the little container. "'s just real impressive that he spotted it just like that though, y'know? For what it was, I mean. The guy's clever. If his file isn't flagged, I'm puttin' one in for that."

"For him being clever?"

"For Zack Fair's best friend havin' atypical intelligence leanin' of above SOLDIER averages, 'specially for his rank," he corrected dryly. "More than clever, yo - he's got a quick mind that he knows how t' use, an' he's a walkin' resource for Fair. If he wants t' be our resource too I'm all over that. Jungle boy has pull, more than he knows, so whoever tilts his scales - an' how - is particularly important right now."

She chuckled softly at that, nodding in agreement. "I think sometimes, Reno, I forget how smart you are."

Of course, those sly aqua eyes went wide and innocent in ways no Turk should be able to, the effect twisted more towards 'naughty child' than innocent when he grinned. "Don't know what you're talkin' 'bout, yo, I'm just a Slum kid they put in a suit. Desperate times an' all that, y'know?"

"You're not fooling anyone, Reno."

"You'd be real surprised, Cissy." The elevator bobbed to a halt, and of course Tseng was waiting for them with his eyes quickly focusing on the containment box in Reno's hands. "Got somethin' interestin' to look at, Commander. Really interesting. Figured I could make some notes before Rude gets in. An' d'you think can I get into Fair's buddy Kunsel's file? Wanna see what's in there, maybe add some notes for our use too."

Veld's second gave him a curious look but nodded. "It should be well within your clearance level. I'd be interested in getting a copy of whatever you felt worth note in need of being added immediately. I leave the investigation of the device you've found to you as well, and Rude should be back this afternoon; I imagine he'd appreciate something in his pet specialty to work on."

"Yeah, he always finds the fiddly bits of tech fun t' work with. He's cool that way." Reno smirked, shaking his head. "You'll get notes when I copy 'em to the director. You know if Rude's mission was a success? Pretty sure Legend has an impressive track record with innovative techie things. Especially ones that blow up, yeah? Could use another pair of eyes on it."

"I believe he was successful, yes. You'll have to take it up with the others as to how much time Legend may have to provide assistance, but I'm sure there are other analysts can be brought in if the department doesn't have someone already."

"I'll see who we have on call." Cissnei offered. "Have fun."

"Oh I will." Reno smirked, fingers tapping the case. "You can count on that, yo."
While Reeve considers what to do about the information he’s stumbled on, someone else is already getting in position to take advantage of the brewing changes in company politics.

Reeve Tuesti was many things, and often considered himself lucky - at least when it most counted. Overall, he had a strange relationship with luck, but things tended to end well for him. Which made the whole situation he'd stumbled upon all the more intriguing. Turks, SOLDIERs and executives, my oh my indeed. And from what he'd gathered, there was a lot more to be seen and heard. The return of one Angeal Hewley, SOLDIER First Class, appeared to be a bit of an unexpected game changer. And there was certainly going to be a meeting about that - he might even get to hear about it in person, depending on when it was brought up. It was almost a given Heidegger would demand that it was addressed, though likely less for concern for Hewley and more because he was still gunning for Deusericus' position.

Hollander was back, too, which meant some sort of reckoning might be had with the Science Department. That was three tangled up in this, then - the Department of SOLDIER, the Science Department, and the Department of Administrative Research's infamous Turk subsection... there was no way this wouldn't have a long reach of effects. The question, of course, was where he wanted to stand himself. There was a chance it wouldn't touch him at all - no one was terribly interested in him or what he was up to, so long as he kept the reactors running. The odds that it would even occur to any of them to ask his opinion were low leaning to none. No one even listened to him trying to do his job or even his efforts to help the people.

Reeve was actually rather sick of that.

It wasn't that he fancied himself some kind of hero, not at all, but there was so much good that could be done with even just a little more support. It would barely dent the budget of most other departments - the Science Department wouldn't even feel it! But no one listened, because no one seemed terribly concerned. And that wasn't likely to change.

Unless, of course, something suddenly made him valuable to others…

The young executive leaned back in his chair and replayed the feed from his secondary recording device that had gone online when the other self destructed. There was undeniable interest there, in what he could do. They saw a potential threat, but to be a threat you had to be visible, to measure - and for the first time since he'd proven himself able to one up all the old reactors, his designs were being really looked at seriously. Like they were impressive, like his skill had worth.

Years of being brushed off as the young genius who really had no worthwhile experience beyond maintaining the reactors and thus denied the voice he should have had as a member of the board… years being overlooked, considered unimportant unless they needed something from him… years underfunded and undermined, dismissed and ignored… it made even that one moment of unknowing recognition send his heart racing. If they knew who he was, would he be brushed off again, or would
they still consider him valuable? Would he finally be acknowledged for who he was, and taken seriously for what he was capable of? Just the thought….

Reeve slipped his hand into his pocket, playing with the pair of dice he kept there. It was so very, very tempting. He needed to give it more thought, weigh possibilities and consequences, and the very real disadvantage of the Turks discovering him as opposed to him coming to them first. Veld was a reasonable man, and never hasty. He seemed the sort to assess things before making a decision. If Reeve could make a good enough case….

*Decisions decisions.* He had a lot of thinking to do.

The company news wasn't particularly exciting, really. Not what made it onto paper at least. It was all the little things that didn't get written down that caught the attention of the truly canny.

Hollander's sudden reappearance and Hojo not having publicly reamed him for it, for example. Or the return of the First Class not so long after being declared *killed in action.* Wishful thinking, perhaps? That's what they got for sending his *friend* to do it. Then again, there were more than rumors that indicated a good chance the mighty Sephiroth had been the one to pull that little trick out. And wouldn't that just burn the president?

The thought of Sephiroth becoming something less than the obedient toy general the board thought they controlled like a shiny puppet was brilliant. Not something *he* would allow, no, but still. It was a brilliant turn of events and he planned to savor every moment. Had anyone asked, he could have told them it was the height of stupidity, using the man like they did. If nothing else, for heavens sake, keep his little friends around for leverage! If they let Hewley slip through their fingers, well, they'd earned the inevitable backlash in full.

It would certainly be something to see, and what a genuine *pleasure* to be back from Junon in time for it. Not that he was certain he wouldn't end up going right back, of course, but he could bide his time. President Shinra was an old fool, past his prime and well beyond anything resembling days of glory. He was corrupt and the company was stagnating under his ham-fisted rule. What they needed was someone young, full of vision as he'd once been; someone who didn't try to make all his problems go away by throwing money at them or outright killing people.

Someone like *him.*

Smiling faintly, he flicked a hand back through his hair and shook his head. His day would come, and soon. All the sooner if they didn't handle the situation with the SOLDIERs much more carefully, but even if they did… well, he had it on good authority that AVALANCHE was still a formidable threat ready to topple the current company heads.

Whatever the *cause* of it, a change was coming, and power would be changing hands to whoever had the strength and cunning to grab it.

Namely, *himself.*
Playing Politics

Chapter Summary

President Shinra can’t let the return of a man he’d had declared killed in action go unremarked on, and action needs taken in response to the unexpected shift in the SOLDIER department. While Sephiroth manages to gain SOLDIER time, the Turks are called on to deal with the continued issue of AVALANCHE.

Lazard wasn't surprised to be called before the board. Or rather, he wasn't surprised when Sephiroth, Zack and Angeal were called before the board and he was one of the executives who was required to speak on the matter. Veld was there as well, with Tseng, and while Hollander wasn't present, Hojo was. The scientist didn't look pleased to be there at all, and honestly looked like he was even a bit angry about it. No one spoke until the President settled.

Hands steepled in front of his face, Rupert Shinra looked somewhere between annoyed and disapproving, though he spoke with a level tone. "I appreciate the cooperation of everyone turning out for this last minute meeting. I hadn't anticipated it would be necessary, given Hewley and Rhapsodos had clearly been listed as killed in action, but here we are."

"Yes, well, it wouldn't be the first time the company's stance on whether or not certain assets were alive was iffy." Rufus' every gesture said he was supremely bored, but his eyes gleamed with interest as they looked Angeal over. "The question, of course, is how exactly to handle the fact that a large amount of people have seen truth to the lie."

"Indeed, which is what we're here to discuss," President Shinra agreed gravely. "Now, as I understand it Director Deusericus assigned First Class Zack Fair to the mission to track down Genesis Rhapsodos and Angeal Hewley. Who were, yes, declared killed in action preemptively, so I think you can see there is a small problem with one of them being here, very alive."

"You wanted me to kill them?" Zack blurted, blue eyes brightening, though he held himself still and silent at a gesture from Sephiroth. It was obvious that this news angered the teen, but for the moment he held his tongue.

Rupert Shinra looked at him silently for a long moment, then moved his gaze to Angeal. "You were a good man once, Hewley. But not only did you defect while we were still at war, you defected to the side of someone who was waging his own war against the company - if he's still alive, I assume Rhapsodos will still be doing his level best to ruin my company, and I don't think he cares who he catches in the crossfire. At this point, even if I could ignore your traitorous ways and the damages you'd done to ShinRa, there remains the fact that I've got reason to believe you're genetically unstable. You are, in short, a ticking time bomb and I'm not sure I want to take that security risk. You understand where I'm going, I'm sure; you look together enough to connect it all."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'm glad we understand each other." The President sighed quietly, shaking his head as he returned his attention to the seething teenager. "Fair, you're just a kid, and clearly you didn't understand the subtleties of your assignment. That alone would have allowed me to be lenient, but the fact is that Sephiroth was present, and he is the senior First Class out of the two of you - I'm not
surprised you deferred to his judgment. What I would like to hear, however, is what made him think it was alright to take over your mission and bring the target in alive. You could have taken Hewley down in his prime, Sephiroth; it would have been child's play for you in Modeoheim, but accounts say you went out of your way to ensure he returned alive. Explain yourself."

Sephiroth was silent a long moment, weighing his words carefully. "SOLDIER First Class Zack Fair is an extremely capable young man who deserves his rank. That is in no way in question. But just as you observed the disparity between my ability and that of Angeal Hewley, you have to acknowledge that even now, he is still one of the most powerful members of SOLDIER."

"Hewley is a dead man walking, not a SOLDIER," Heidegger corrected sourly. "The President made it clear, he was meant to be put down."

"I don't think you were at any point asked to give your opinion on my men, Heidegger," Lazard said, a brow arched. "I'm not entirely sure why you're here, in fact."

"Because there has to be someone in this military with their head on straight, and it's clearly not any of you boys."

"Older does not mean wiser," the blond noted quietly. "I strongly suggest you back down now."

"You could benefit from swallowing your pride and listening to someone with actual field experience, Deusericus," the older director met his stare evenly, not at all concerned with the anger simmering there.

"He only needs advice from one decorated veteran, Heidegger, and he happens to have one with him," Sephiroth spoke before his director could, taking a step forward in front of Zack and Angeal; he didn't like politics on good days - this was posturing he had no time for. "I believe President Shinra asked me a question before you interrupted, and would like to hear me finish."

"Goodness, Mr. President, even the trained muscle listens to you better than your executives," Rufus mused, just loud enough to be heard as he gave a side glance to his father. His expression was innocent enough, if you ignored the sly twinkle in his eyes that said the Vice President knew exactly what games were being played.

President Shinra did not, however, rise to the bait. Smiling tolerantly at his son, he made a gesture for the SOLDIER to continue. "Let's hear your thoughts, Sephiroth."

Sephiroth inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. "Genesis went mad. It is my understanding that this is something caused by a flaw in his genetics. This, in turn, is directly the fault of prenatal experimentation performed by one Doctor Lucas Hollander. He did these experiments not merely at the approval of this administration, but at the request. Therefore, Genesis' madness is quite literally the fault of this company."

There were murmurs around the table, some sour and darkened expressions from those who had already known the truth of the matter. Sephiroth held a hand up in a silent request not to be interrupted. "His actions are not the actions of a man in his right mind. And, as I said, the placement of blame could be argued; it certainly does not rest entirely on him. However, bringing these points up does not address the fact that over a third of our forces joined him. While some of these men may have been coerced, many of them followed because even as he began to slip into madness, Genesis Rhapsodos is one of the most compelling and charismatic leaders within SOLDIER. There have always been crude and derogatory comments of a wide range to attempt to discredit his person, yet none of this was enough to stop his influence, even now."
The silver haired man was silent a long moment before speaking again. "SOLDIER First Class Angeal Hewley can also be noted as a figure who has left a permanent mark on our forces. I have, more than once, heard him referred to as the heart of SOLDIER. Even now, there are those who look up to him. His own degraded state, much like that of Genesis, can also be traced directly back to genetic tampering at the order of this very company. Indeed, Mr. President, while the late Professor Gast spearheaded the project, you were the one who authorized and financed it. And, in turn, the massive human experimentation project that is SOLDIER itself.

"Regardless of whether the company wishes to allow for an admission of these facts, whether it will ever be owned up to in any official circumstances, is not my concern at this moment. Nor, I think, should my personal reasons for retrieving SOLDIER First Class Hewley be of any concern of the board. What I do believe should be addressed is the fact that it is strongly to the benefit of the company to retrieve, heal, and redeem these men." Green eyes swept the room, but it was once more the president that Sephiroth fixed his gaze on. "The war may be over, but I've heard no plans to stop the SOLDIER program. At the same time, you have to be aware that things are in a very vulnerable condition. People not just within the company, but beyond our walls, are beginning to question. Without the war to focus the civilian attentions on, I imagine there is an immediate concern for how to maintain control and influence. It is my suggestion that you start by bolstering the morale and confidence of SOLDIER by bringing back two of our finest."

There was absolute silence for a long moment, a wide variety of expressions to be seen across the room. More than one executive was clearly impressed by the unexpectedly eloquent speech, even if grudgingly so in some cases. The Vice President responded first, with a slow, exaggerated moment of applause. "I don't think I've ever heard you speak so much at one time without fighting involved. I believe I see how you managed to win your title after all, General Sephiroth… even the president will surely have to see the wisdom in your judgment here. It sounds like we have far more to gain than to lose."

The President made a noncommittal sound of acknowledgment, pale eyes scrutinizing the three Firsts a moment before he glanced at the Professor. "And what do you say to this, Hojo? You're the head of the science division and our expert here. Do you think they can be salvaged? That it's worth the effort?"

Hojo pursed his lips slightly, meeting Sephiroth's stare evenly for a long moment before replying. "I believe Sephiroth would know his department best. If he thinks they are so valuable, I would suggest taking him at his word. As for curing them, I will need full access to Hollander's work and time to look the pair over. This one, at least, can likely be brought back enough to be manageable. Whether Rhapsodos can even be captured before his body or mind are irreparably destroyed is not up to me. But if these SOLDIERs here plan to cooperate, I suppose it is at least worth a preliminary evaluation to decide. Saying 'no' without being certain is foolish."

President Shinra grunted softly, nodding. "Very well, then. Under the terms that you cooperate with the professor, I will allow for an assessment to be made. When it has been, I want the information presented again to me so I can make a final decision. I suggest, gentlemen, you choose how you spend your time wisely and take nothing for granted. The moment this becomes more burden than benefit, we're returning to the original judgment and I expect to be obeyed. Understood?"

"You've made your feelings and wishes clear, sir." Sephiroth murmured, inclining his head.

Hojo scoffed, rising. "Well if that has been settled, I clearly have a great deal of work to do. You'll have to excuse me, but there is quite a lot more at stake than whatever budget meeting will be going on after this."
"You're dismissed, Hojo, take the SOLDIERs with you."

Hojo led the silent trio to the hall, making a beeline for the elevator and waiting impatiently for everyone to come along. "That was a very impressive speech, Sephiroth. Your manipulation of the course of the conversation was highly impressive, save for the purpose you were doing it for."

"I notice you did agree to assist." The silver haired man glanced down at the Professor. "Are you rescinding your help, Hojo?"

"I said I didn't approve, not that I won't help," he corrected waspishly. "But I will need Hollander's work, and the cooperation of at least the two of you, so I advise you see that the two things are immediately procured. As I understand it, you've already spent a bit of time testing out where Hewley stands in his physical condition. I will want not only those feeds but to supervise some tests on my own - after I run a full scan of what sort of mess his genes are in."

It wasn't really a surprise to have Hojo talk about him like he wasn't there, and honestly Angeal felt a little better for being ignored. Right now, he was having trouble just processing the argument his… friend… had put forward in defense of both Genesis and Angeal himself, even after acknowledging everything they'd done. It was breathtakingly humbling. And that wasn't even getting into Zack's reactions to it all. Watching his expressions… that had been sobering. It made him feel slightly ill and profoundly ashamed of what he'd nearly done in Modeoheim. If Sephiroth hadn't been there….

"Angeal." Zack had, apparently, learned not to get his attention by touch anymore; it was a soft, firm tone that did it this time, and he refocused to find blue violet eyes staring at him intently. "Don't. Wherever your mind is trying to take you, just don't."

Angeal managed a small smile. "I'm right here, Zack. Not going anywhere."

He knew he didn't imagine the flash of pain in the younger man's eyes, but he didn't look away. "You'd better not."

"Touching." Hojo gave them both a look that said he was anything but impressed by their sentiment. "Try and stick to your word this time, Hewley. I can't help you if you don't cooperate with me and your case is hard enough. For now, I'm going to retrieve Hollander from confinement. I will contact Sephiroth with further details and requirements as soon as I can untangle enough of his shoddy work to tell you more."

Angeal nodded for lack of knowing what to really say. It seemed enough for the professor, who nodded curtly and got off when they reached the appropriate floor.

Left alone, the three SOLDIERs spent a moment in silence. "So, where are we going?"

"Home. To eat and discuss how that just went." Sephiroth glanced at Zack, voice softening slightly. "Unless you had prior engagements?"

Zack understood that he was being given a chance to bow out, go catch his breath after having realized that his mentor - former mentor - was never meant to make it back to ShinRa alive. It sounded like a very good idea. "You know, now that you mention it, I have someone I'm overdue to visit. You just… take notes. Or have Kunsel take notes, he's around. I'll be back later."
Sephiroth nodded, accepting his words without question, even when he hit the button for the main lobby. "We'll be in touch, then."

Zack nodded, raking a hand back through his hair. For once, he had a pretty good idea of what might make him feel a little better.

"Now, as to why everyone was present for that discussion." Rupert Shinra refocused on the board of directors, a faint frown on his lips. "We also need to discuss the matter of AVALANCHE. Veld, report."

The Director of the Department of Administrative Research nodded slightly, hands clasped loosely on the table. "As some of you may be aware, there was an attempt made on one of the reactors here in Midgar. The forces involved were well coordinated and well informed. Their efficiency is something of a concern, certainly, as it makes it clear that had our own people not been so well trained, they would have succeeded. My operatives have since launched an investigation into this terrorist organization, which calls themselves AVALANCHE as the President stated earlier. Their goal is to bring down ShinRa, regardless of who stands in their way."

"Given our forces are all spread a little thin, it might be wise to increase the security on the reactors themselves," Reeve noted quietly, tapping his pen against his hand. "There are seven more just in Midgar they could go after, and some of our others badly need maintenance; they're dangerously vulnerable targets right now."

"You've reported on that before, Tuesti, and I'll say again that the ones you've listed do well enough for the rural communities they serve. Right now, our funds and manpower are better served tracking down and eliminating these terrorists." The President waved at the brunet, dismissing his concerns. "Doing so may also serve to remind the public that they depend on us for more than mako energy. ShinRa is their sole protector against these rebels. I want to see them discredited and defeated. What's being done to that end, Director?"

"Currently, we're tracking their movements and trying to establish a better understanding of their history; their organization is too large and too organized to have sprung up over a short amount of time," Veld reported. "The thought is that there may be some disgruntled former employees amongst them responsible for their accurate intelligence on the layout and workings of the reactor itself, but no one has been tracked as of yet."

"We'll be sure to bulk up security accordingly around the city and keep an eye out for suspicious activity," Heidegger decided.

"If word is spreading on their activity, I suppose a boost in morale is even more important than Sephiroth had said," the Vice President observed mildly, glancing at his father. "Perhaps your intended visit to the Junon base is much better timed than I'd believed after all."

"I do know what I'm doing, Rufus," President Shinra pointed out. "I've been running this company much longer than you've been alive. But yes, the mission to Junon is even more important in light of all this, and I'll be moving to take my tour of the base later on this week as planned. I suggest all of you who have work and forces out there be ready to put on a good show, because the results will reflect directly back into your budgets. Also, I want Doctor Amber Rayleigh to be moved from her current research facilities back to Midgar. With her studies into the SOLDIER process, she may
prove a more agreeable assistant to Professor Hojo than Doctor Hollander. Until we know more of his motivations, I consider his loyalty to be in question. Heidegger, Veld, see that she's given a suitable escort; she'll be bringing sensitive information, and she's also a particularly vital resource in her own knowledge."

"Understood, President." Veld nodded slightly.

"I'll assign a detail to bring her in," Heidegger assured them, giving the head of the Turks a sardonic smile. "Since your forces are spread so thinly and Deusericus is a bit short handed, I've got plenty of good, loyal men to call on, myself. They'll be proud to have the honor of defending their president when you join us in Junon, sir."

"See that it's arranged, then." Rupert smirked a little, not at all oblivious to the looks passing between the two military heads; a little competition kept Deusericus and Heidegger sharp, in his opinion. "Scarlet has already informed me that the cannon will be ready for a full inspection, so it is just as important a stop as the academy on base. If there are other points of interest you believe worth my time, submit a written suggestion and I'll consider adding it to my itinerary. The cutoff date is this Wednesday, as I'll be traveling on Friday. The tour will be a week long, but I imagine you'll all manage headquarters even in my absence. If nothing else, it will give our young Vice President some much needed experience."

"You surely cannot fathom my excitement," the teenager drawled, looking supremely bored at the prospect. "If nothing else, maybe a fresh set of eyes will see some unique, more effective means of handling some of our current problems."

"Gya haa haa haa! Well, the boy will get a good firsthand view of how impressive the company truly is looking from the top, eh?" Heidegger smirked. "I'm sure you'll do just fine, Vice President. The Shinra family always ends up on top."

Rufus Shinra chuckled softly, flipping a hand back through his hair. "Oh I assure you, Heidegger, I am well aware of the value of my position and the future that awaits. I'll be sure to do the company proud while the president is away."

"You wouldn't be left in charge if I doubted it." The President noted dryly, lightly hitting the table with his hand. "Well then. You all have your orders. Back to work."
Aerith was more used to suddenly knowing things than she wished she was. The foresight was a blessing, but also a curse because she knew why. She'd been young when she escaped with her mother, but not so young she didn't remember her, or what she'd been taught. It wasn't quite enough, there was so much she didn't know, didn't understand, but she was learning still.

And she knew enough to understand the meaning of what she felt when he was coming back. Zack Fair was SOLDIER, he worked for ShinRa and was exactly the kind of person she probably should have been making a point to avoid. But she couldn't picture it, when she thought of him. Cliché as it sounded, Zack was different. More than that, when she heard the quiet footfalls behind her, heavy boots gentle on the old floor of the church, Zack needed her.

"Hey, Aerith. Sorry I didn't stop by sooner, things have been kind of a mess at work…." Zack offered a weak shadow of his normally vibrant smile, gloved hand rubbing the back of his neck. "I, uh… wanted to see you. If that's okay."

"Of course it is, silly." She rose, smoothing her dress and coming to stand in front of him. He looked tired. And sad. "You've had a hard time, haven't you?"

Zack managed a tight smile that looked like it hurt. Or maybe he was just hurting that deeply that it colored everything else. "Yeah, things have been a little rough."

Aerith made a quiet sound, coming over and taking his hand. She held it by the fingertips a moment, examining the glove he wore. It was well taken care of, but had definitely seen use. She tsked softly, giving a little tug. "Take them off?"

Zack blinked down at her, mako blue eyes reflecting confusion even while he indulged her. Taking them off, he watched her cradle one of his hands in hers while he tucked the gloves into his belt. Her touch was gentle, feeling over the calluses and tiny nicks left behind from training, and he felt himself relaxing at it. "If you're this gentle with everything, I think I get why the flowers are willing to grow down here."

That made her laugh softly, a musical little sound as they shared a smile. "You have the hands of a man who works. It's not the kind of work that I know, but… I think it's a good work, too. Important."

"Think so?" Zack curled his fingers around hers. "Sometimes I wonder if you weren't right to be scared of us."

"I'm not scared of you." Aerith lined their hands up, giggling at the difference in size. "You're so
much bigger than I am, stronger… you fight, and you do enjoy it, don't you? You're comfortable with your weapon, with what it can do. But, you use it for the right things. And that makes a difference."

"I'm not so sure I know what the 'right things' are now," he admitted quietly, lacing their fingers together. "I try, but… but that's not always enough. And if being wrong means people can die because of me, I'm not sure I want that power anymore."

"Being a fighter sounds like more of a burden than being a healer," she agreed, voice just as quiet. "But maybe it has its rewards, too. It means people can live because of you. That's your goal, right? To be the one who saves people. The hero."

"That's the thought, yeah. I'm just not so sure I'm doing a great job at it." He sighed, shaking his head. "I mean, I'd thought I was. I was just… I've tried, I've always tried to do the right thing. But good intentions aren't enough. Not when people can die."

Aerith was silent for a long moment, looking at their hands, then up at him. "Something shook you up, didn't it? You're questioning everything. Is this about your friend?"

Zack smiled mirthlessly. "Yeah, kinda. He came home, but he's… sick. Really sick, it might kill him. And I think he was just really tired of fighting. He's the one who taught me the most in SOLDIER; he was my hero. I know a lot of people look up to Sephiroth - okay, maybe not down here, don't make that face - but, on a bigger scale, especially in the company. Sephiroth is a big deal. But he always seemed sort of a distant ideal to me, up on a pedestal, while Angeal… Angeal was down to earth, someone who was there, and real and someone I really looked up to. And now everything he's taught me, everything he said was worth fighting for, he's just tossed aside like it means nothing."

He didn't realize he was shaking until Aerith's arms were around his waist, holding him together while everything was falling apart. Closing his eyes when he felt them burn, he took a deep breath and let the scent of flowers, damp earth and vanilla ground him. When she gave him a tug, he followed her without question and sank down onto one of the pews.

Aerith guided his head down, rubbing his back and saying nothing as he worked through his emotions. There were tears, which didn't surprise her as much as she wished it would. It was obvious he was hurting, from the moment he'd walked in she could tell; Zack was honest with his emotions, even his pain, but he clearly hadn't had a chance to deal with this. She was honored that he considered her a safe person to be so vulnerable with.

After a while, his breathing slowed from the quiet hitches and he gave a shuddery sigh. "… thanks, Aerith."

"I think that was overdue," she murmured, kissing his cheek. "Better?"

"Dunno, maybe?" He sighed, hugging her gently and pressing a kiss to her hair. "Still hurts."

"Of course it does," she said. "And it doesn't help that you don't know what to do. You can barely sit still most of the time - waiting is not one of the things you're good at, Zack."

Zack laughed, leaning back and wiping at his eyes. "No, no that's never been one of my strong points. It just feels like I should be doing something, you know? I mean, Angeal's my friend! And he's dying and that's not even touching some of the other… things… at work."

"Classified from my innocent civilian ears, I'm sure," she quipped, brushing tears off his cheeks. "It's okay to be upset, Zack. You're upset because you care - that's a good thing. The fact that you care so
much is what makes you a good person, even when you make mistakes or do something bad."

"Good people doing bad things for good reasons, huh?" He sighed tiredly. "And bad people who do
good things. It's confusing."

"Life isn't as black and white as a lot of people want to make it seem," Aerith agreed. "Maybe it
would be easier if it was, but I'm not sure if it would be better. There's no knowing either way."

"I guess there's not," Zack muttered, running a hand back through his hair. "And wishing isn't
enough either. Sometimes I worry there isn't going to be anything that is."

"I guess you have to ask 'enough for what' before you can answer that," she mused. "Start small,
doable things that you can build on."

"I'm not sure there's time for that."

"Well small is a step up from not at all," she said firmly. "Little isn't a bad thing. Even big trees start
from little bitty sprouts."

"You have a point." He sighed. "So. Start small - like what?"

"Well, you haven't told me everything," Aerith reminded him, "but from what I do know, what I can
tell… you need to make sure you're doing good things. Specifically good things."

"Alright, but like what?" He pressed. "Give me an example."

"Like when you helped me make a cart to sell flowers," she suggested. "It may have been just a little
thing to you, but the flowers make people happy. That's a big deal."

Zack smiled a little at that, eyes drifting over the patch in the broken section of the church floor.
"Yeah… okay, I get that. Make people happy, huh?"

"Well, if you want to be mister good deed SOLDIER First Class, you could always help clear out
some of the monster nests so things are safer down here," she added seriously. "Saving lives - that's
the hero sort of thing, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure heroes actually exist," he admitted, a little bitter. "But yeah, that's something I could
do… there's none out where you and your mom live, are there? You're safe?"

"Zack, I can handle myself enough," Aerith promised gently. "I can. But not everyone else can."

"So wait, you mean part of being a hero is saving other people's girlfriends? I didn't sign up for that!"
He gave her an exaggerated look of disbelief, and after a moment they both laughed. "Okay,
seriously though… I can do that. It'd be nice to feel useful, nothing complicated and tied up in
politics or anything."

"Then we'll plan that." She nodded firmly. "You can tell me in advance when you think you'll be
able to be down. I'll work up some lists of things you might be able to help with in particular. This
time, we'll start with filling Midgar with smiles."

By the time Zack left, he had a bit of a spring in his step again, clearly feeling more optimistic.
Aerith, on the other hand, had a determined fire burning in her eyes as she turned on her heel and went back into the church with long strides. "Who's watching me today?"

There was silence, and her green eyes narrowed. "I know you're there. You're always there. And I want to talk now."

After a moment more, Tseng came around to the front doors of the church, arching a brow at her. "Yes, Ms. Aerith?"

Aerith smiled a little, seeing it was him. "Come in, Tseng. I'm not going to bite."

"Forgive me if I'm a little wary that you suddenly want to talk," the Turk apologized. "Times are difficult all over."

"Did you hear what Zack said to me?" She asked, kneeling to tend her flowers as he settled nearby. "I overheard some of it, but I didn't make a specific point of listening in." He watched her work in silence, admiring the deft movement of her hands amidst the blossoms. "Was there something you had a question about, then?"

Aerith's hands stilled over the plants as she considered her words carefully. "I have a... feeling... that something changed. There was something that was expected, and it didn't happen. Things are in a state of flux, and it could be good, or it could be bad."

The Turk made a quiet sound of agreement. "Such is often the case. I imagine you're not going to give a verbal confirmation on the source of your feelings or who was expecting these things?"

The Cetra gave him a look. "You imagine correctly. And I think your presence here says you know already."

"Yet you won't confirm it," he pressed, smiling faintly. "There's nothing to confirm, Tseng." She went back to tending the flowers.

After a moment, Tseng decided it would be better to give in than try to wait the notoriously stubborn teenager out. "You wanted to have a discussion about the possible source of these feelings, Ms. Aerith? What I can tell you is very limited, particularly given the civilian status you seem set on maintaining. Unless you've suddenly changed your mind?"

Aerith smiled faintly, glancing at him. "Let's say I'm keeping my options open for now. I want to know about Zack's mentor, Angeal."

"I'll tell you what I can, but I doubt that will be enough to answer your questions."

"You don't know what questions I have, Tseng," she pointed out. "So. Is he going to die?"

"Everyone dies at some point."

"Tseng."

He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "It looks likely. There's a genetic defect that's made itself known in the past couple of years, and it's taking a toll on him."

Aerith made a quiet, thoughtful sound. "Likely, not definite."

"There's a chance it can be treated," he admitted. "Or so the professor believes."
She went still, tellingly so, staring unseeingly down at the flowers. "The professor… is this his doing, Tseng?"

"That is classified information, Ms. Aerith," he said. "I'm afraid you would have to be, at minimum, associated with the company before I could disclose the true nature of the ailment suffered by SOLDIER Angeal Hewley."

She made a dissatisfied sound, carefully taking up a couple weeds in the silence while she considered it. "Why do you call him that?"

"Pardon?"

"SOLDIER Angeal Hewley," she repeated. "Why did you call him that?"

"That's his rank."

"I was under the impression that SOLDIER was divided into at least three tiers," she spoke mildly, a sharp contrast to the shrewd observation. "Zack is SOLDIER First Class Zack Fair. Sephiroth is also a SOLDIER First Class. But you didn't give any rank to Angeal, only said he was SOLDIER, so I wondered what significance the lack of a specific rank means."

The day Zack Fair realized just how intelligent his sweet little lady friend was, Tseng had a feeling they were all going to be in a great deal of trouble. Not that the young SOLDIER wasn't perfectly intelligent in his own right, but he worked best with someone else to bounce ideas off of - his relationship with Kunsel James was the perfect example.

The thought of Aerith and Kunsel meeting sent a brief chill of foreboding down his spine that he generally associated with Rod and Reno spending a day on assignment together. Best not to buy trouble.

"I didn't find it particularly relevant to use his rank," he answered, because she was waiting still and it was true. "Had you heard of him before?"

"He was another First Class; there was a rumor that he'd been announced dead," she mused, glancing at him at last. "I have the feeling that was wishful thinking."

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to confirm or deny that, Ms. Aerith."

"You'll notice that was not an actual question," she said. "So. SOLDIER at-one-point First Class Angeal Hewley, mentor of one now-First-Class Zack Fair has a genetic defect that's showed up and threatening to kill him. Given you said the professor is the one handling his treatment, I'm going to say that's probably because it's in his particular range of specialties. And no, I wasn't asking you about any of that - I'm thinking out loud."

"Ah, my mistake; it's a luxury I've nearly forgotten."

The brunette hummed quietly, carefully tending her flower bed a bit more, letting it ground her. In the middle of Midgar, it was almost impossible to hear the Planet, and only when she could get down to the real dirt could she start to get any clarity from the feelings that danced on the edge of her senses. Sometimes she wondered how much better she would have been at it if her mother had more time to teach her, their seven years together hadn't been within the confines of ShinRa's labs.

Part of her thought she was insane to get involved with the company again in the slightest; that part tended to sound a lot like her adoptive mother. Elmyra would have been horrified to know she'd asked to speak with Tseng, but she didn't have any plans to tell her. Especially since the other
part, the part full of whispers and secrets and Other, said that it would be good to look into this. That there was a chance things might change from the path they had been heading down.

But she needed to know more, and not just from Tseng. "I suppose if I ask for much more detail, you're going to tell me more and more that these aren't things I'm cleared to know."

"That's quite likely, yes," Tseng agreed mildly.

"Alright." She nodded, sighing quietly. "Thank you, Tseng. For now, I guess that's all of my questions."

"Very well." He nodded, rising from the pew. "I'm sure you'll find a way to get in contact should you have more."

That made her chuckle a little. "Oh I'm sure I will. Take care, Tseng."

"You as well, Ms. Aerith."

"One of these days, I'm going to get you to call me just Aerith." She called after him, grinning at the little smile she caught curving his lips.

"I look forward to the day when that's appropriate." Mischief danced in dark eyes as he nodded politely, "Miss Aerith."

She let him have the last word, shaking her head. There was a lot to think about, and she wasn't completely sure how well she'd do getting answers from the Planet. But she had to try.

Chapter End Notes

So, I was thinking about making a side story setup, a "fic" that would just hold scenes you don't see that might be alluded to or are in the backstory for this. In the notes of each chapter, it would tell you how it would relate to this fic, so you could relate, or see warnings in case you fall behind here. Thoughts?
Too Human

Chapter Summary

After decades of working as separately as possible, Hojo and Hollander are forced to work together to try and gain control over the results of Project G, and address the legacy of the Jenova Project.

To say either Hojo or Hollander was happy to be working together would be a lie. They weren't making any pretenses of it, either, though there were no outright nasty words - or, if there had been, they'd passed before anyone else arrived. Whoever thought familiarity bred anything but contempt was an idiot; both men had known each other since they were younger than the pair that were coming to join them, and they still couldn't stand each other. Tolerating would be done only because of a bare level of professional courtesy.

That, and refusing to give either of the SOLDIERs reason to discredit them any further. That much they could agree on, at least. "Is this everything? You have no more information?"

"Well Gillian may have had some things in Banora, but that's not going to do us much good now is it?" Hollander pointed out darkly.

"I had nothing to do with making that call, and you know it," Hojo scoffed. "Don't be petty. You should have just stayed put to begin with, but that isn't the mistake we're here to discuss."

"I realize I'm asking quite a lot, but I would appreciate it if everyone was professional for this." The dark voice was most notably belonging neither to the scientists, nor the SOLDIERs who had just entered; the head of the Turks looked both sets over with an intense gaze. "I have the pleasure of being the man on call for the President today, so I would like everyone to act like adults. Fake it where necessary."

"That's not only unnecessary but insulting, Faraman," Hojo informed him. "If that's all you were here for, then you're not needed. We have quite a lot of work to do, and are extremely pressed for time. So if you'll excuse us...?"

"Just try not to kill each other."

"I'm sure you want that particular honor for yourself but we might have to fight for it," Hollander said dryly.

"Oh there's an entire line full of petty little people for you to join." Hojo went back to his workstation, making a shooing gesture. "Go on, then. Be a busy guard dog, Veld."

Settled behind Angeal, Zack glanced at Kuskel. "Do they seem particularly cheery today?"

"Downright festive," he muttered.

"Is there a reason all you people are in my space?" Hojo snapped, turning to glare at the two teenagers. "I don't recall asking for you."

"It wasn't your call," Sephiroth said. "Ignore them. You're good at that."
Hojo gave him an unamused look. "I am doing you a favor, Sephiroth; while I realize it's a bit much for you to be grateful, I suggest you don't hinder my progress. Unless, of course, this is just a gesture and you don't care if we succeed or not."

"You wouldn't understand my motivations even if I was inclined to try and explain them," the First said. "We are here, as requested. Now what do you need us for?"

"You are not immediately needed. Hewley, however, I have some tests for." Hojo gestured to the side impatiently. "Over by the table. I want to see the mutation first."

Angeal flinched a little, but started to make his way over.

"And leave that slab of metal you call a blade with Sephiroth, you won't need it yet."

That got him a dark look, but Angeal took the Buster sword off his back and handed it to Sephiroth with a small, tight smile. "Keep an eye on that?"

Sephiroth returned the smile faintly, taking the hilt in one hand. "Does it do tricks?"

Angeal blinked at him a moment, then chuckled. "You pick the damnedest times to work on your sense of humor."

"You can continue your bonding later, boys, we need to get a baseline." Hojo reminded them, coming back around with a tray. "Shall I assume one of you suits Veld left behind plans to take notes as well?"

"Report details are always filed as necessary, Professor Hojo," Tseng replied, smoothly sidestepping the issue.

"I'm sure they are," he muttered, clearly unimpressed. "Fine, let's get this over with. Begin log for the fifth day of July, of year zero-one. Project G reassessment: today's subject in-lab is one Angeal Hewley, Professor J. Hojo leading the reassessment, assistance and previous data supplied by Doctor L. Hollander. Note should be made that at this point that the other product of Project G is missing in action and in what appears to be an advanced state of degradation. Session will begin with a preliminary examination of the evident mutation as soon as the boy quits staring and brings it out to be looked at."

Angeal grimaced, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably. But there was no point avoiding the very reason they were there, so he took his shirt off and brought the two wings out in a loud rustle of feathers, several coming free and drifting towards the ground. He couldn't help but blush in shame when Hojo plucked one long white plume out of the air and held it up to the light.

"Well, if nothing else, that's fairly healthy," Hojo muttered, circling around to his side. "I appreciate the forethought to actually remove your shirt. It shows you've got a bit more sense returning - or close enough, at least. When did these manifest the first time that you recall?"

Angeal tried to watch him without moving, wings flicking back a little on instinct when the scientist went to touch. Receiving a chiding look, he forced himself to hold still. "They showed up probably within a week of when I left with Genesis."

Hojo waited a moment before narrowing his eyes. "And when was that? My job is not to keep track of your every move, Hewley; did you provide your superiors with such halfhearted reports of situations as well?"

"October of last year," Hollander informed him. "He's had a bit over half a year now."
"Better," Hojo muttered. "I'll want a copy of any more information that was documented on that mess you made on your way out."

"I'll forward a report." Sephiroth handed the Buster sword to Zack, coming further into the room. "I assume you've already looked over whatever other documentation Doctor Hollander has kept on Angeal over the years?"

"I've read through the most vital sections of the wreck, yes," Hojo confirmed. "That does not, however, make me an expert on his physical development, nor his current state. While I understand why Rhapsodos may have seemed the greater priority, particularly since Hollander seems quite interested in continuing to live, the end result is that there isn't much by the way of documentation of how your friend has fared since his defection."

"I'll tell you what I can. Details just get lost sometimes. It's hard to keep everything straight," Angeal admitted.

"A well-documented symptom of the degradation process, but it's all we have to work with." Hojo offered him a mirthless smile. "You're still an easier case than your little friend is going to be. Now, why don't you retell events as you remember them, starting with when you left Midgar for Wutai with your student there. Anyone who interrupts him will get to stand in the hall like the idiot child they probably are."

Perhaps wisely, no one commented.

Angeal took his time trying to bring everything into focus. Some of it was clearer than the rest, parts about the flight over with Zack and watching his trail of successes through Fort Tamblin. Pride shone in his tone, though he didn't look at any of them. He remembered the anti-SOLDIER monster, and the sudden attack by Genesis' clones - then seeing Genesis. He'd tried to persuade him to come back to Midgar, but the older Banoran had been feverish and likely delusional. Reasoning with him didn't work, and before it ever occurred to him to try any other way, Genesis had summoned his wing. Then things got harder to remember, other than the sudden dizziness bordering on vertigo and the pain in his back where he now knew his wings would come from.

"But they hadn't come at that moment?" Hojo pressed, making some notes in a thick spiral volume on the table before adding to a collection of observations on the laptop he had nearby. "Just the pain. And he hadn't touched you yet, either... hm hm hmmm... Interesting, certainly. Hollander had a theory that may actually be credible, if not quite in the way he'd thought. Continue your retelling."

Angeal nodded slightly. "There are a lot of things that I'm not sure I have the time quite right on. I didn't exactly check a calendar."

"The way a mind distorts things can be just as important to know as what it was distorted from," the Professor said. "Just continue. I'll determine what I can and cannot find useful myself. This whole thing is an exercise in salvaging useful information from a pile of worthless data to begin with, why should anyone expect your narrative to be different?"

"You're not exactly a positive person, are you?" Angeal asked.

"I find pessimism is, in fact, the name fools give realism," he said. "And for that matter, I likely spend significantly much less of my time disappointed by rightfully expecting everyone else to be less intelligent, competent, and useful than I would like them to be. The rare time I'm wrong is a delightful surprise to my advantage, and how can that be anything but a good thing? Now quit your fussing and continue."
The First bit back a strange urge to say 'yes sir' and privately admitted that if Hojo was the primary influence in Sephiroth's youth, his friend had actually turned out much more positive and extroverted than he'd realized. "As I'd been saying then, I have the impression it was within a week. I'm fairly sure I can account for three days, but there was a time period that Genesis said I'd slept through almost two days - I'm not sure how much I trust his grasp of time either, though."

"We'll get to discussing him later, go on," Hojo prompted, going back to his work station to place the feather on a tray. Moving around the side to wash his hands thoroughly, he gave the SOLDIER an irritated look. "Well?"

"Sorry." He sighed, closing his eyes and continuing with as much clarity as he could muster. Things blurred together, and sometimes it was hard to think, but some things stood out in agonizing detail. The first time he'd witnessed Genesis creating a clone personally was a horror he could never forget. Even seeing the mako tubes that had been set up later on by Hollander to produce more clones - ideally stable ones - didn't inspire the same level of primal fear and disgust.

"Of course you took the blasted tech on your way out and got it destroyed," Hojo muttered sourly, glaring back at the other scientist. "I have to risk optimism before I choke on your overwhelming incompetence, Hollander; did you have some purpose beyond spawning more failures?"

"There were experiments done on the clones in an effort to find a cure for Genesis," Hollander defended, scowling back. "Also the reason I needed the equipment, since I couldn't test on the people Genesis had changed personally."

"No, given the mix of their original genetics and the muddle of whatever the boy passed on, I imagine they were quite useless in short order," Hojo agreed, shaking his head. "Which does bring me to wondering how it came about that he ever learned of the ability. The manifestation of his wing was one thing, the mutation much more understandable with the increasing problems with his genetics; that would have happened well before he had any idea it could, and did, I imagine. But the clones, that is a different matter."

"I don't know what happens in his mind, Hojo; I didn't understand his thought processes even when he was sane," Hollander retorted, crossing his arms. "My best guess is that it was something of an instinct that reared up at some point. I'd seen the clones before I ever caught up with him in person."

"Instinct." The older man muttered the word with distaste, returning his gaze to Angeal. "And you? I've seen the pictures. You didn't touch any people, but there were creatures you passed your genes to."

Angeal nodded, looking away a moment. "I did. But I knew about the clones, had seen Genesis do it. I couldn't… I couldn't do it to another person, couldn't destroy them like that."

"But all is fair in the war of the beasts, is it?" Dark eyes were piercing and unforgiving, the reference to Loveless making Angeal visibly uncomfortable. It made Hojo smile to see it, a mirthless stretch of lips. "Of course it is. You're just enough of a monster to hate yourself, but too much of a man to commit to the cause you claim. Explain the process, then. We'll bring in a creature later to observe the action in detail later on."

Angeal paled, swallowing thickly, but tried to explain. Anything to figure all this out. Anything to stop this nightmare. "There's something… I'd never felt anything like it, but it was like the first time I held materia, that sudden knowing of possibility, of what power you could wield. I started with a guard hound, the first time we went back to Banora. I hadn't planned it, I'd been around Gen and he'd been having one of his bad days… I felt restless, off balance, and I went to see the hounds. But when I touched the first one, I just… I knew and the impulse won. I just…."
The fact that he was given time to gather his composure was due more to the fact that Hojo was busy typing than any sort of compassion for his anguish over the confession. The professor was sobered from his sneering contempt, watching him with something like resigned understanding. "As Hollander was so very proud of, you have the ability to both pass on genetic traits and absorb them just as the Calamity did. I can't say I'm terribly surprised you also inherited the urge to do so, though I suppose we should be grateful that you haven't seemed to have the same insatiable urge for destruction and domination."

"That… that was… expected?" He looked more than a little sickened by the thought. "Then, Genesis…"

"_Genesis_ is, as far as I can tell, more on a power trip that's mixing badly with his characteristic arrogance and tendency to lash out at any perceived wrong," Hojo corrected. "There's no sign of any aspirations to destroy the world as far as I've been told. Was I misinformed?"

"No, he didn't seem to want that." Angeal shook his head, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes.

"He wasn't opposed to doing it if he thought it was him or us," Zack put in quietly. "'If the world seeks my destruction, it goes with me' is a pretty clear concept."

"And could lay at any point between his infamous dramatics and the madness he's being taken by in the midst of his body's self-destruction," Hojo muttered, shaking his head. He looked the First over thoughtfully. "You fought him multiple times, didn't you? What were your observations then?"

Zack grimaced, thinking back. "Nothing too different than what's been said. He's losing it, looked pretty bad when I saw him last. His hair's almost all white, skin looks papery and kinda yellowed a little. He didn't sound like he was raving, exactly, but there was an edge there that was new. Plus the whole ready-to-kill-Hollander bit, that was new too."

"I can't fault the boy for that," the Professor muttered. "You witnessed the confrontation, then."

"I came in on it, yeah. He had the doctor at sword point, said he didn't need him anymore. They argued it, but he seemed to have something of an end goal." The teen glanced at the doctor in question. "You've got a thing for tempting death, don't you? I'm pretty sure he wasn't bluffing about at least knocking you around and you just kept talking."

Hojo snorted softly, shaking his head and going back to his notes. "Yes, we discussed that. The odds of Genesis getting his hands on any J cells are slim, but not ones I particularly want to play with."

"Would it cure him?" Angeal asked, not sure which outcome he was hoping for. "Or would it just make things worse?"

"Given his body is no longer able to cope with the J cells he already possesses, I wouldn't count on anything he'd try being to his benefit, no." The Professor picked up one of Hollander's reports and flipped through the papers to add a markup over the test results the doctor had run initially. "The problem he has to begin with is that they aren't fully integrated, and have finally become so active that they're destroying his normal human genetics instead of working in tandem. Given he doesn't have the ability that you do to copy genetic traits into himself, I can only assume he'd try some sort of infusion - and even assuming he had assistance of someone with some idea of how to perform the task, it wouldn't help. Strengthening the presence of a live virus isn't going to help your body fight it off."

"Can it be fought off?"
Hojo made a scoffing sort of sound, dark eyes staring in front of him at nothing that could be seen. "That's the question, isn't it? He's not going to win the battle going on in his genetic code on his own, certainly. He needs the help of a professional, and doesn't even have the idiot who got him into this mess now. If left to his own devices, it's merely a question of if his mind or body will be fully destroyed first, not if they will both deteriorate beyond repair - they will. They may have; how much of the man he once was can be salvaged is something I can't tell you unless you manage to bring him back."

He turned to give Angeal his attention once more, lips pressed in a thin line. "You're fortunate that your circumstances are not quite so dire, but it will be a long process back to any sort of normalcy. And there will be permanent marks left by what's happened. But you will survive, if you have the will to survive. As I understand it, that was quite questionable."

Angeal didn't look at him, didn't look at anyone. While part of him did still wish he'd succeeded, another part of him was horrified of what he'd nearly done in Modeoheim. If Sephiroth hadn't been there….

"Get out of your head, boy, regret has never helped anyone," Hojo snapped, having no tolerance for brooding. "What I may or may not be able to do for your friend remains to be seen. It's pointless to even think on it until he's been brought back alive. You, however, are here, and I have a very important question - are you going to waste my time, or are you going to suck it up and act like the SOLDIER you supposedly are?"

"I'm not exactly SOLDIER material at this point, even if the President did decide to allow me to be completely reinstated," Angeal pointed out softly, wings flexing out uncomfortably. "Even ignoring the fact that I deserted and actively fought against ShinRa, which are both acts that have been considered execution worthy in the past, my dishonorable behavior should have me discharged. And I know I'm not going to be let go, not knowing all I do. I don't belong here anymore. I'm not a SOLDIER, I'm more monster than human and I think we all know that there will be another order eventually to get rid of me. I'll cooperate, but you're wasting your own time. There's nothing you can do to suddenly make me anything but an abomination."

Hojo stared at him a long moment over the rims of his glasses. "How you ever made it to First Class, let alone cultivated a reputation for being level headed and intelligent is beyond my understanding. I admit, I didn't think you or Rhapsodos should have ever been allowed to enter the SOLDIER program. I still think it was a foolish mistake as this debacle proves, but the problem here is not that you are some sort of abomination. What's wrong with you, Hewley, is that you are entirely too human."

Angeal stared back in disbelief. "Too human? Have you even looked at-"

"I have been looking at the literal design of your being for days, Hewley, so kindly shut up and let the person who knows what they're talking about talk," he interrupted, glaring at him. "Your mother was injected with Jenova cells well before your conception, and you would have inherited them along with her own natural genes in a much more complete way than Rhapsodos had. They tied into your genome thoroughly enough that you could have been promoted through Second Class with no ill effects, but the higher doses of mako required to become a First Class SOLDIER were too stimulating; it immediately began to awaken those genes to higher activity, priming you to be responsive to Genesis' manipulations."

"I don't believe he did this to me on purpose," he insisted, though the arguments the professor made left him a bit wide eyed and shaken. He didn't dare look at Zack, and a quick look at Sephiroth's too still posture kept him from a second glance. "He's lost a lot of himself, but he wouldn't do that. Not to
"Why not? You're far more sane than he is and you turned on your so-called friends without hesitation." Hojo was merciless with his honesty. "Is he really the better man? Is there even such a thing? You're both human. The nature of humanity is to betray others to protect themselves, it has been since the beginning of its existence. I'm honestly not sure why you keep holding it up as something to aspire to."

What was he supposed to say to that? Angeal swallowed hard, but it didn't get rid of the tightness in his throat, and no amount of blinking rid his eyes of their burn.

Hojo shook his head with a dismissive sound, turning back to the computer. "What's the human genome but a long line of advantageous mutations that have been adapted over millennia? Not, mind you, that Hollander has provided you with anything of the sort. But it's the principle of the thing in that this is nothing new, and we would all benefit from you realizing that this really doesn't make you special. You're a grown man and a SOLDIER First Class; it's about time you get over your identity crisis and realize nothing has actually changed beyond you now knowing more of your genetic history. You're the same man you were before you clued into that fact, quit being such a child about it."

Angeal made a little strangled sound, shaking his head and shaking his wings out. He followed the path of a pair of stray feathers, noting numbly when Hojo took another in gloved fingertips to set aside. "But…"

"But nothing. I'm not going to put up with your excuses." Hojo crossed over to his side table, snapping his fingers. "Get a tech in here. We need to draw a few samples and get actual testing going since there's clearly not going to be any further narratives for now."

Hollander made a sound of acknowledgment and moved around to check who all was on shift to call in. While he loathed working under Hojo for his own reasons, he did admit that the man ran the department tightly with no tolerance for incompetence or insubordination. Maybe with more support at least Angeal could be saved.
The last thing they needed was another Jenova. So of course that would be the one thing Hollander very nearly succeeded in creating.

Sephiroth thought he waited with admirable patience to approach Hojo about a much more personal aspect of what had been said. Hollander was planning out some further tests while analysis was run on the samples the two scientists had taken, and none of the other SOLDIERs were close enough to concern the First with a possibility of being interrupted.

Though he was in the process of making another long line of notes in his typical spidery scrawl, Hojo spared him a brief glance. "Yes?"

"What do my mother's cells have to do with Project G?"

Hojo looked at him in clear confusion that was followed by something almost like offense. "Your mother had nothing to do with Project G, she was smarter than that."

Sephiroth frowned at him. "You specifically mentioned Jenova cells."

"Jenova?" Hojo had returned to his work but froze with his pen not quite touching the paper, his voice softening to a dangerous sort of quiet. "Who told you your mother was Jenova?"

There was something in that tone that struck a rare chord of warning when Sephiroth heard it, but he pressed on. "Professor Gast was the only one who would answer any questions about my mother. He said she died in childbirth, and her name was Jenova."

"Gast told you that thing was your mother?" Hojo turned fully to face him, pale skin flushing as his eyes shone with something that might have been fury. Sephiroth had never seen so much emotion flare up without restraint from the old man. "Your mother was a woman by the name of Lucrecia Crescent, a brilliant doctor from Junon who was extremely dedicated to her work, even when no one took her seriously. She died after you were born, yes, but she had been entirely behind our work."

"Your work," he repeated softly. Part of him wanted to ask, to press further, but he couldn't help but be fixated on the rare show of unfettered emotion. "If I didn't know better, Professor, I'd say you cared for her."

The professor's mouth snapped shut even as his glower gained intensity. He closed the distance between them in a few swift strides, their significant difference in height nothing but an apparent annoyance as he had to look up. "What my feelings for the woman were are irrelevant - all you need to know is that Jenova is most certainly not your mother. She could not be, and in fact despite holding a female form I dare say calling it a 'she' is just a habit adopted by the department due to the ridiculous inclination of humans to try and categorize all beings into binary sexes. Which is particularly ridiculous given that Jenova is not human and is, in fact, a shape shifting being from another planet. In fact, judging by her nature, I would say she has been to quite a few other planets."

Hojo's anger was fascinating, but no source of intimidation. It didn't phase Sephiroth any more than
his sudden forced calm fooled him. The mottled flush continued to climb his neck and his dark eyes glinted harshly behind his glasses. He'd never seen the man like this, and couldn't resist voicing an observation as it occurred to him. "I wonder, Professor, if this is why you are so fiercely opposed to my friendships? Just how much of my mother's son am I?"

Oh yes, he was *livid* despite his efforts not to be visibly so, voice hard and fierce. "You are entirely too much her son. You have her ridiculous hair and unfortunate inability to stay reasonably distant from the pretty faced failures you work with. That nature won over nurture in that case was something I always regretted. What, exactly, has that friendship gained you? You were abandoned and betrayed, and even if Hewley accepts my help and you manage to drag that redheaded fool back, they will leave you again. If nothing else, their inferior genetics will doom them to a far shorter lifespan. You would have been better off to let them go and count yourself better for it."

Hn. There were things to consider there, certainly, but Sephiroth had learned enough for the moment. He shook his head, dismissing the old man's critiques. "I have learned there are things with values your sciences will not measure, Professor. I don't expect you to understand."

Hojo made a disgusted sound. "Your sentiment will do nothing but hold you back, Sephiroth. You are so far above them it's ridiculous to continue to stoop to their level and slow to their pace. Hopefully in time you will see sense and grow out of these childish attachments."

Sephiroth didn't deign to address that comment, uninterested in Hojo's lofty aims for him. He was not a child but a man in his own right, and he had his own goals that he did not need the professor's permission to pursue. Those days were long gone and would not be coming back ever again.

For once, though, he would admit *part* of their conversation would be kept in mind to mull over. He would research this Lucrecia Crescent later, see what could be found. Hojo was far too affected to believe it was entirely a fabrication; the man loathed such displays of emotion, it had to have been something too strongly felt to hide. That alone was worth considering. But for now, there were more pressing matters than his own background. "How soon do you anticipate results on the tests you're running?"

"The ones we're running from his samples won't produce any results until some time tomorrow, and more time than that will be needed for a thorough investigation to be made," Hojo seemed to compose himself with the change in topic, adjusting his glasses slightly. "The information we will gain from the next series of more active testing will have much quicker evaluation periods."

Sephiroth nodded slightly. "Then I suppose we should get to that."

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Hojo wanted everyone but the most necessary people out for the physical tests, glowering at the Turks and younger set of SOLDIERS. Eventually they settled on Tseng and Sephiroth remaining, largely because neither man would be moved by anything but absolute force - and that simply wasn't going to work with Sephiroth.

Privately, Angeal felt guiltily relieved to see Zack go. He didn't want his former student to see what was coming with the next batch of tests. It didn't help that Hojo was clearly in a sour mood after coming back with Sephiroth.
"Given we're on a very tight schedule, it's important to get what tests we can done in the most efficient series possible. As it's going to take at least twenty hours for even the very best of our equipment to provide enough information to reliably make decisions off of, we need to move on to gathering what other data we can," Hojo said, though who he was addressing was unclear. Angeal was guessing on Sephiroth, however; his friend was certainly paying careful attention. "I've called for two hounds. Hollander, show the boy down to the testing cell. Sephiroth, Turk, you will be joining me from a higher vantage point."

Angeal tensed, because there were only two reasons he could think of for Hojo to call for hounds - specifically, if he was hearing them correctly, guard hounds. They were the first creature he had ever made into clones. And it was not something he wanted the others to see. At least Zack had been sent away; nothing would make Sephiroth leave.

"I would prefer to join Angeal." Speak of the devil and the man gets more stubborn. If Sephiroth noticed his upset at the mere thought, he was doing a wonderful job pretending otherwise. "Consider it insurance."

"Unless you think he truly can't handle himself, there's no need for that." The men looked at each other a long moment before Hojo made a disgusted sound and gathered his notebook and laptop. "Do as you will, just don't contaminate the data - that means staying outside the chamber."

"Hn." Sephiroth walked after the others, stopping several feet from the cell's round walls as Hollander led Angeal inside.

The winged SOLDIER could almost feel the intensity of that green eyed stare, but tried to focus on the instructions he was being given. The doctor left for a moment, then returned with a wheeled table that had a series of sensor pads and cleaning wipes. The scent of rubbing alcohol stung at his nostrils, making them flare a moment in distaste, but he held still while patches were wiped and the pads adhered to his skin. There was also a wrist cuff and a few small nodes put to his forehead and temples before being wired back to another device. "There. Can you still move as you need to?"

Angeal took a moment to stretch carefully, more than he thought he'd need to but wanting to be sure he would be able to move in other ways as well. "I think it's fine."

"Stay put, then, and we'll get the hounds in place." Hollander shuffled past him, pointedly ignoring Sephiroth on his way to the lower work station. "The baseline is the same."

"Slight adrenaline spike aside, yes. Nervous, boy?" Hojo had a definite talent for sounding condescending, though it was hard to tell if it was on purpose or just a natural skill. "Just don't kill yourself. I don't need the paperwork or the cleanup."

The head of the Science Department pressed a side button on the console he'd moved to, taking advantage of a slightly overhead view to consider the cell below. "Have the handler bring in the first of the hounds."

The handler was a young man, certainly no older than either of the SOLDIERs though he seemed much more comfortable than they were. The hound was muzzled and had a cone around its neck to keep it from getting at the monitors applied at various points. It glared at Angeal as it was brought to him, snarling softly. Maybe it was the wings, or maybe it just knew he was not what he appeared.

Maybe it knew how Angeal felt that brief impulse to take it, mould it and remake it as his… which was, in fact, what he'd been asked to do. It made him feel sick a moment and he closed his eyes, hands tightening to fists. Part of him wanted and he hated that he did. It wasn't right, wasn't human, wasn't him. He didn't want to do this.
The speaker turned on again, Hojo's thin voice carrying a note of authority that simply assumed obedience would follow. "Go about your usual process."

Your usual process.

Monster.

He didn't want to do this. Hollander knew, Hojo he didn't care about, but Sephiroth-

"You might as well get it over with." The younger man's words startled him, but were the push he needed. Under watchful green eyes, Angeal straightened and advanced on the hound.

Hojo watched the monitoring array, the tracked changes of statistics jumping in dreadfully familiar patterns. There was one thing Hollander had managed, then; he really had found a way to pass the Calamity's ability to pass on and presumably absorb traits to the boy.

That idiot.

There was a reason Hojo had not sought that ability for Sephiroth, and he shouldn't have had to spell it out. But it explained a great deal of the psychological issues he'd noted in Rhapsodos well before he'd defected, and a good portion of Hewley's problems now. To no surprise, so much of this mess could have been avoided if Hollander wasn't such a hack job. Or if he'd just left his failures in Banora where they could live out their insignificant lives none the wiser of how thoroughly he'd ruined them before they were even born. And he was supposed to fix this. Hah. He'd have said no immediately, it was pointless - so near to impossible that there was absolutely no way to justify the time and resources he'd have to pour into what might well fail anyway - except for one thing.

Dark eyes left the monitors but a moment, glancing at the single success of the Jenova Project, silvered and majestic and concerned for the failures. Hojo had hoped to eliminate that weakness; human attachment had no place in the life of one destined to rise above them all, but it seemed Lucrecia was going to have the final word there too. Damn her, and damn the boy for not understanding how hard he was trying to spare him the inevitable pain and betrayal it would bring him to let anyone that close. No good came of such things.

But no, Sephiroth wasn't truly a boy; he was old enough to make his own decisions and it had been a very long time indeed since he'd cared to listen to what his single consistent caretaker and guardian had to say. That he was making an exception on a hope that he could do something spoke volumes of his desperation. And it was for that reason and that reason only that Hojo would do his best to salvage Hollander's failures.

Glancing back to the monitors, he felt the faintest chill to witness the horrible success in that one thing that only a fool would have truly tried for - Hewley had thoroughly imprinted his genes onto the hound, but it wasn't at all the same sort of cloning that Rhapsodos did. Hojo highly suspected that the troublesome redhead was making an effort to completely copy himself, to have his entire genetic profile take over the original genes of his target and create a false twin. He might have even been succeeding for the most part, but the degradation was too damaging to both himself and his clones to allow for complete success. It was reminiscent of some of the behavior Ifalna had reported of the Calamity, during its invasion. This, though, was a different breed of horror.

Though he clearly didn't have any understanding of the science behind it, the fact remained that
Hewley was instinctively picking and choosing parts of his own genome to pass on to his target. In less than five minutes, without any comprehension of the significance of what he was doing, the SOLDIER went through some primal process of DNA sequencing, isolating and cloning the chosen genes, passing it to his target and forcing an accelerated rate of reproduction to produce his own breed of clone.

It was incredible, and if he ever truly grasped the details of the process - was able to refine the skill - Angeal Hewley may well have proven himself Jenova's heir.

Sephiroth be damned, he needs put down.

Only he couldn't, so the potential threat needed to be nullified, obviously more involved than just killing him - the likely success of that was questionable as well, considering his relations to Jenova. Just how far did the resemblances go? Just what was Hewley's relation to his monstrous clones? Just to manage his degradation was going to take a great deal of study and experimentation before he could even try it on the man himself, ideally over an equally great deal of time to be sure of the long term effects, but he knew he was on borrowed time from the get go. And that was to say nothing of Rhapsodos.

The rogue SOLDIER's massive well of magic was suddenly sickening in its possible consequences.

They need put down like the rabid creatures they are.

That was the rational thing to do, the responsible thing to do. The death toll that would rise until Rhapsodos was captured, so much more complicated than taking a kill shot from a distance, would be staggering. Logically he should be put down, even if just because he was a menace to society.

Unfortunately for 'society' Hojo was not particularly concerned with it. His gaze rose unerringly to look at the too-stiff form of his greatest work, the true success of the Jenova Project and so much more. Not a recreation of the Calamity, but something superior. Something that would rise above humanity, above the memory of the Ancients, above the creature that had nearly destroyed them, ascending beyond all existence to be a god in his own right… one day. But Sephiroth, while not a boy any longer, was still so very young. And unfortunately attached to Hollander's boys, enough that he'd asked for help. Asked him, when it had been years since he'd shown any sign of believing Hojo capable of anything.

The sting of it was soothed because it was pointless to dwell on, but all of it came rushing back now. Sephiroth had come to him to fix this mess, looking to him for a miracle. And if it could be done, Hojo would give it to him.

Humanity was killing itself off anyway.
AVALANCHE's benefactor was not widely known even amongst the terrorist organization. Which was likely a good thing, because the young man sitting in front of his balcony in Midgar could have been in a great deal of trouble.

Sipping his wine, the teenager smiled at his reflection and mused that really, people were going about this ruling the world thing all wrong with so much straightforwardness. A little sneaking and a lot of fear did just fine. And manipulation was so much more efficient than negotiating and making compromises. He wasn't at all fond of compromise.

ShinRa was known as a power company, and also the greatest military force on the planet. The fact that no one was acknowledging outright that it had all but become an empire hidden in the trappings of a business was ridiculous. Still, the president could do as he liked as long as he continued to advance. When the time came, his right hand would happily step up to take what was rightfully his, and the prince would truly become a king.

And when he was king, the world would bow before him. There would simply be no other choice. Not with the carefully arranged conflicts that he'd worked into place. Let the board assume he had his position merely as a gesture to recognize his blood tie, or that it was some sort of training - anything but the young heir actually being a competent, efficient young man who was learning very quickly from the successes and failures of those who came before him. There were some benefits to being underestimated for a little while yet. It meant that, despite never being without a Turk escort, even they didn't look too closely.

Brat prince, he'd heard someone say. It grated, but he grit his teeth behind a charming smile and reminded himself that his day was coming. Carefully written notes, passing as indulgence of a promising academic he'd met during his stay in Junon, were never seen for what they were. There was a certain automatic blind spot, in fact, due to the arrogant and shallow persona he'd cultivated. Well, the "arrogance" was his due, but that was neither here nor there. At nineteen, Rupert Shinra had already taken steps to reinvent Shinra Manufacturing as ShinRa Electric. Why anyone expected his heir to be any less ambitious was beyond Rufus' understanding. But it was so very helpful.

When AVALANCHE devastated his father's empire, Rufus would be ready to sweep in and remake it, stronger than it had ever been. That was the way of the Shinra family, after all - the son always greater than the father. Of course, his father hadn't all but handed a group of ecoterrorists the keys to the kingdom, as it were, let alone provided opportunity for an assassination. Perhaps if Rupert had been more parent and less president, Rufus would feel guilty.

Or not.

The young Vice President absently swirled the remains of his drink, a small smile on his lips. It would be interesting to see how well AVALANCHE used the knowledge and funds he'd given
them. Regardless of who "won" he would end up the victor all the same.

The note was simple, sent via a secure line as their sponsor preferred it. Fuhito wasn't concerned with the secrecy, as he certainly maintained his own. The money and the tip offs kept coming, Shears and Elfé remained reliable heads for AVALANCHE, and he continued ever closer to his goal with none of them any wiser. And this… this would most definitely bring them all much closer.

"Junon… a long time base of the ShinRa, even before they created their infamous cannon." Fuhito regarded the list of information he'd received thoughtfully, considering the potential uses. "Miss Elfé, we need to make our next move there. My intelligence says that there will be a woman leaving with a small security detail bringing along some important information regarding the SOLDIER program that would be of use. Moreover, the President will be there doing an inspection tour of the base, and much more vulnerable than in Midgar."

Elfé glanced up from where she'd been checking over her blade, making a quiet sound of acknowledgment. "That seems our best chance to make a difference, then. I'll gather the others and work on a strategy with Shears."

"Please do." The environmentalist inclined his head with a small smile, rising and walking around the table. "I believe I will have a word with the Ravens. They'll look forward to the challenge, I'm quite sure."

Elfé looked to him a moment in silence, rising as well with a nod. "As you will. Everyone will be glad to be able to make another strike against ShinRa's tyranny and callousness towards the people and our planet."

"Indeed, it's long overdue they truly have a challenger on their hands capable of making the needs of the Planet heard," he agreed mildly. "Long overdue indeed. Wutai was unable to stand against them, of course, but they certainly gave us an advantage for having worn their forces down. And then the rumored internal difficulties… fufufu… we'll make good use of our opportunities. ShinRa's end draws near."

"As it should be," she murmured, dark eyes lit with purpose. "Down with the ShinRa!"

He returned her salute, watching her go with long, determined strides. A very talented young lady, Elfé was. Very passionate, in her own disconnected way. He had been so very fortunate to discover her wandering the Nibel region all alone, all the moreso that his former mentor was able to help with her recovery when he brought her back to Cosmo Canyon.

To this day, Fuhito recalled the moment when he truly understood what a gift the girl was, with no family or organizational ties in her memory, only AVALANCHE to hold her heart and loyalty. As good as raised by their former leader, she'd stumbled into the role of leadership on his death almost naturally. And she had him at her side, appreciative of his vision even though she couldn't truly understand the scope of it.

But that was alright. Elfé commanded the respect and adoration of their forces, men and women who would follow her to their death as needed. And she listened to him, well before they'd picked up that brute Shears. He did have a lot of effectively violent associates who were very useful in dealing widespread damage all at the same time, and were likely to prove even more useful with
some… enhancements.

His Ravens weren't quite to the standard of SOLDIER, of course, but he didn't have the same resources the good professor did. It was Fuhito's hope that he would get a chance to speak with the older Wutain, to actively learn from him. He'd admired Hojo's work since his own days at the university, and more than once had wished that the then-doctor had been his professor instead of Gast. But then, he might not have met Bugenhagen if that were the case, and it was only through his mentor that he truly began to comprehend his purpose.

Man had long been killing the Planet, since the days of the Ancients. ShinRa was merely the worst of a long line of destructive corporations and greedy individuals. But their audacity to pump the very blood of the Planet and use it to power their excess… no, this could not be tolerated. Action needed to be taken, before mankind wounded the Planet beyond salvage, and he would not stand idle and merely hope. Even while he capitalized on the anti-ShinRa fervor of AVALANCHE, he was already making plans for the step beyond. ShinRa was just the first obstacle. With the reactors gone, and their SOLDIERs destroyed, many would begin to die off from simply being unable to survive without the crutch of the power they had stolen.

The rest… well, there were plans in place for that as well. One step at a time, however. Fuhito was a patient man, and it would pay off in the end.
Arrivals in Junon

Chapter Summary

It’s a busy day in Junon. Director Scarlet has her masterpiece primed to show off to the President, and people around the world will be tuning in to watch the event and hear his speech after.

Unfortunately, not everyone in attendance is there in support.

Chapter Notes

If anyone is particularly curious about Anya and isn't keeping an eye on my "Welcome to ShinRa" fic, it might be beneficial to give it a peek.

Also, Chapter 3 of To Be Human: On The Side takes place during this chapter and can be read before or after.

Originally Veld had intended to send Reno and Rude to oversee a couple rookies and a selection of guards to escort the President while he looked some things over in-office. As it was with things changing back at headquarters, however, he felt better keeping an eye on the President himself. And if he wasn't mistaken, the look he'd gotten from a few "civilians" suggested he'd made the right choice. Coming across the base to check in, he was met by a suited blonde who gave him a quick look of her own before regarding the president.

"It is an honor to see you again, Mr. President."

"You as well, Ms. Torvik." There was nothing else said as he continued on, even when she fell into step with Veld a beat behind him. There wasn't even a glance this time, but there was a slight easing in Veld's posture that spoke volumes of his mood. There was a lot to be said for old friends who were even older allies, but none of it needed said aloud.

"After we tour the base, I'd just as soon see my suite for a change while the cannon is checked over. I assume Scarlet's here?"

"She arrived ahead by three hours, as scheduled, to oversee the team in person and make her presentation to you before your announcement, sir," Veld reported. "Everything is proceeding according to your requests."

"Exactly what I like to hear." Rupert smiled almost serenely, if not for the hard set to his jaw. "This is why you're in charge, Veld. You're efficient, you take my orders and make them happen. I dare say you're the best thing to happen to the department."

You dare say so, yes. But now wasn't a time for anger. Anger distorted your view, anger made for sloppy mistakes and justifications time would shred like little more than paper. Veld had no time to be angry these days. "I always aim to work towards the advancement and security of the future of the
Out of the corner of his eye, Anya smirked a little, a quick and bittersweet thing. She knew in ways those they'd trained up were still learning, what was best for the future was not always what it seemed. "Perhaps later you will have time to come by, and I will show you some of the talents we have here. Impressive, if young. But that is how we all start, yes?"

"Young, ambitious, and if you're lucky, impressive, yes." Rupert chuckled a little, shaking his head. "Perhaps we will. I like to see what your eye for talent has picked out. You've not disappointed me yet, Ms. Torvik."

"You know the best when you are given it." She made a shrug something of an elegant gesture, meeting his eyes without hesitation when the President turned to face them both. "I'm sure you'll have the Director in touch. I will show you what talent is honed here in the academy."

"Haha, yes... yes it will be my pleasure." He nodded, waving a hand towards the academy near the base. "Veld will be in touch."

Veld inclined his head, silent understanding passing between the two old Turks with additional appreciation. Later they would speak. For now, this was enough. "Let's get a look at the base, then."

"Well now, isn't this interesting." Fuhito considered the military base ahead with mild interest, dark eyes temporarily hidden as the sunlight hit his glasses. "As our informant said, President Shinra is indeed here. And he'll be getting a look at that monstrous weapon they've developed very soon, before delivering a motivational speech."

"How far do we let them go?" Shears glanced at him, ready to move but managing to stay perched on the crate he'd settled on. Elfé was at his side, checking her blade, but she'd never been much for words. It suited them both fine that he would be the one to hash out the final details.

"Their forces need infiltrated immediately, starting with their army grunts and guards - the helmets make them especially easy to replace without detection, after all. From there, we will have to get eyes on the President, identify and assess his guard, and move in accordingly. However, that is merely one facet of the plan - we also need to have people ready to take ShinRa's Mako Cannon as well, to make our strike against Midgar and the heart of the company itself." A small smile graced the young man's lips at the thought. "With no base of operations and their leader out of commission if not dead, ShinRa will begin to self destruct. All that will remain is for us to sweep in and finish the job. At long last, its end is near."

"The ShinRa's tyranny ends today," Elfé spoke up at last, fixing her blade in place when she was finally satisfied with its condition. "Your third movement, Fuhito?"

"Ahhh yes; Doctor Rayleigh of the Mako Sciences Department of ShinRa will be passing through on the way to the Junon-Midgar rail. She will be bringing data files that contain extensive information on the SOLDIER program, and her own knowledge will be a vital complement. With this additional data, I will finally have the information to perfect the Ravens." His smile brightened a bit at the thought. "Only joining forces with Professor Hojo himself could take this to a higher level. Perhaps when he sees what I have done from studying his work, he will be inclined to assist. I can't imagine he feels any significant loyalty to the ShinRa; they could not possibly begin to understand..."
his vision and brilliance."

"You have forces assisted by your current Ravens assigned to bring her in?" Shears made a quiet sound at his nod; he didn't like Fuhito, wasn't even sure he trusted him these days. There was something… not quite right about his actions. Something that pricked his instincts and told him he needed to watch his back before ever trusting the man to do so. It didn't help to see the freakish beings he'd made, stripped of their humanity and becoming… Other. Powerful, sure, but at what price?

But for now, Elfé seemed to put faith in him. And he put faith in Elfé. There was nothing else to do.

"We move the men in then?"

Elfé nodded, a small smile touching her lips. "It's time."
Attack on Junon

Chapter Summary

It’s a mistake to think that age is enough to slow down a well seasoned Turk. When AVALANCHE attacks, both generations are ready to meet them head on.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 3 of To Be Human: On the Side takes place during this chapter. While not a required read to understand the fic, it may shed some valuable insight on events.

The tour of the base was uneventful, and for that alone Veld would have enjoyed it. These days, quiet was a good thing. Uneventful all the better, though also less likely. Rookies wanted excitement; he just wanted to make it through the day and everyone come home alive. The fantasies of a director, he supposed.

It was good to have Anya in step with him, though. Well overdue, even if he still felt like her deferring to him was more because she chose to than because of his position. But that was the way the older Turk was, and that understanding of each other was why they were both a little more relaxed, if only for a moment. She even had a faint little half smile as they made their way to the platform to get a good view of the cannon, meeting his eyes briefly.

Scarlet quickly took the lead, strides marked with the muted tap of her heels along the blacktop surface of the helipad leading up to it. There was clear and admittedly well-earned pride in the blonde's eyes as they took in the actuality of the design she had so large a hand in. It was easy for a lot of people to look at her in tight red dresses with plunging necklines and perfectly coiffed hair and forget that the woman was the head of the Weapons Development with multiple degrees to suit her field. Not only was Scarlet Delaney fierce, but she was fiercely intelligent, and woe to those who forgot it. "Ladies and gentleman, the pride of Junon - the Mako Cannon."

Giving Scarlet his absolute attention, however, was not one of Veld's concerns nor something she expected of him much as she’d have liked it. With his expression kept neutral and gaze attentive enough, however, it passed. He’d read through her work and the updates as they came, that much firepower a matter requiring his full attention at least once. It was estimated at full power and aimed correctly that the cannon could fire at other continents. While that was likely years away, if even achievable, the fact remained that it wasn't something he could afford to ignore. Not for the first time, it crossed his mind that ShinRa was dabbling with power it had no business with. He'd known ShinRa was no mere electric company even as a rookie himself, but this? This said bad idea down to his most primal instinct. No one needed this kind of firepower.

Especially not if it could, in theory, be taken from them.

At the President's other side, Anya was watching everything with a cooler expression than his own now, but that too was simply her. Stationed in Junon, his old friend was a well known figure by skill and seniority and would likely be recognizable as some figure of authority across the departments.
Everything about the way she carried herself demanded that sort of regard. Which she deserved, honestly, and it had been unfortunately long since they'd gotten to work together. He was stuck behind a desk too often these days.

The silence in his earpiece was suddenly interrupted, only long habit maintaining his mask of calm as he processed the string of staccato beeps - code, his mind immediately supplied, and not one any of the newer Turks recognized. A few glanced tellingly towards him, but he couldn't concern himself with that. The system was old - one that had been used by the Old Guard, the Turks before they called themselves Turks - and having it pipe in through their channel should have unnerved him. It didn't.

The message did.

*Army infiltrated. Snipers across. Exits taken* - a pause, habit they'd had to adapt, because there was usually a moment of debate between Vincent and Anya those days - *Three target President Cannon SOLDIER data. Comm security enhanced.*

Silence returned, but there was no time to dwell on the significance of the means of communication; the message took priority. Whatever problems Rupert Shinra caused his Turks - and there were many - there was no solid replacement at this time. An assassination would be nothing but harm, and the cannon could not be allowed to come under enemy control. As for the SOLDIER data, that had two possibilities; both the base itself and the doctor that was being escorted from Junon to Midgar were viable sources. Saying the army was infiltrated, however, meant that there was a question of which guards could be trusted. While he trusted the ones Anya had handpicked to join them on escort for the President, the ones providing security for the cannon itself were Heidegger's choosing and immediately suspect.

Anya shifted her weight to one leg, glancing at him with a slight incline of her head towards the cannon. "I will see these green pins ready to give a show, yes? You take your time."

The President glanced at her briefly, a brow arched but apparently not suspecting anything; she'd never been known as anything but sharp, from wit to tongue. "By all means. I'm sure Scarlet would like to have the way cleared too."

"Kya ha ha, oh *please* do," Scarlet shook her head, stepping out of the way to let the older blonde take the lift down. "Take a peek at what Heidegger sent, would you? I'd like a second opinion on competence."

She received something between a smile and a lazy sort of smirk, but then Anya was going down out of their sight. Veld forced his body to relax; tension would be no help, especially if he had to move fast. Instinct said he wasn't in *immediate* danger, but it was coming. Had to be. And he had to be ready.

Either oblivious or unconcerned about the shift in the behavior among the Turks, President Shinra spent a while listening to Scarlet before going to have a word with the press who had turned out - an impressive group, Veld had to admit. He recognized people from the central continent as well. Some he didn't, but they all had press passes, and were likely all signed in enough to track. That helped.

Of course, in the way these things tended to, it was just moments after that thought that the walkway
rocked with an explosion. Long practice had the Director placing the direction of the threat even as he ordered the team around him to make sure the area was secure. The regular security would handle the civilian crowd, he had to get Rupert and Scarlet out of such an easily targeted position.

"President, Director, we need to get out of here."

"I'm not going to be run off by these terrorists, Veld." The older man narrowed his eyes at the billow of smoke, scowling. "They're at the cannon?"

"It's being handled, sir," Veld said. "We literally have an entire military base to call to action. Right now, I need you to cooperate with me so I can get you both to safety."

Blue eyes were hard, and the stubborn set of Rupert's jaw didn't bode well. But the man wasn't an idiot, and nodded slightly. "We'll continue the broadcast inside."

"Of course, sir." They'd put it up for negotiation, at least - getting them inside was an improvement.

"Director, AVALANCHE operatives have blocked access from the port!"

Long habit kept Veld's curse behind his teeth, nothing more than a hard breath escaping as he nodded to the captain. "Make sure the information got back to control, find out who is available for a counter attack. You three, with m-

It was an old habit that saved him this time - saved the President, rather, as he shoved the man back and down, getting the podium between him and gunfire before getting his own out. The materia slotted into his prosthetic came to life, the gleam of a Wall tossed up hastily as he returned a shot to mark the sniper's position. That wouldn't be enough to keep them clear, but it would slow down the impact of any projectile and take the bulk of offensive magic. "Move."

This time there was no argument, Scarlet having gone as far as removing her heels to make a run for it when Rupert hauled her up with him.

"This way, ma'am, sirs!" A pair of sentries hurried up to the platform, flanking them to provide cover. As they reached the building, one touched Veld's arm. "Sir, you're needed out on command. We can take them from here."

"Don't tell me my job, kid."

The guard tightened his grip when he attempted to shake him off. "Sir, you are required-

There was too much strength in that hold for infantry. Veld turned on his heel, bringing his gun around to the three glowing 'eyes' of the trooper's helmet. He wasn't nearly as surprised as he wished he was to have it blocked immediately. The guard, however, managed a wheezing sound of shock when he was enlightened to the Turk's metal fist gloved in soft leather.

The scent of blood hit his nose a second later, followed by wet choking, and he watched Scarlet sidestep the other guard as he fell, bloodied dagger pointing at the one he'd knocked over. "AVALANCHE or traitors?"

Veld shook his head in dismissal. They didn't have time for that, still in sight if AVALANCHE got anyone on the platform. "We'll find out later. Head for the elevator."

"You're sure we're secure there?" Scarlet jolted at a loud gunshot, staring at Rupert instead of the mess he'd just made of the other infiltrator. "Well then."

"I made Veld the Director of the Turks for a reason, Scarlet," the President reminded her, checking
his pistol briefly. "Let's go."

At times it was dangerously easy to remember that Rupert had brought the company to where it was from a weapons manufacturing corporation. And then he did something like that.

It wasn't as if Veld's hands were clean enough to judge. He took point again, leading them further into the building and hopefully to safety.
Divide and Conquer

Chapter Summary

With all the tips from their anonymous sponsor, AVALANCHE is ready for an attack on several simultaneous fronts. While ShinRa is ready to defend on all sides, only the Turks have considered there could be a problem within the company.

After the mess in Modeoheim, Cloud wasn't particularly worried about the escort mission he'd been sent on with his new team. It felt... wrong, a little, to be out with a new group. But the captain was a lot nicer than his had been, and without speaking ill of the dead he could still honestly say they hadn't been friends anyway. At least this time there was no baggage, and he could fall into step with the comfort afforded by more experience.

And then a Turk showed up, bright eyed and long haired with a shotgun slung over her shoulder. That turned out to be her codename, in fact, which wasn't particularly inventive in Cloud's opinion. Not that he said as much, a bit more busy being torn between unease at her presence and annoyance that it apparently made the doctor relax. Sure, they weren't SOLDIER, but they were still soldiers and had all seen combat. One Turk wasn't that big a deal.

It didn't do any good to complain all the same, and he fell into step, loosely flanking the doctor with the Turk on point. She'd received short, crisp answers to any questions, though it was hard to tell if the others were insulted too or if they just didn't like Turks. Either was possible and perfectly reasonable in Cloud's opinion; Commander Tseng had seemed nice enough on the Modeoheim mission, but the trooper had yet to meet any other Turks like him. Personally, he'd have been fine never meeting another Turk, but that apparently wasn't his luck.

There was a sudden prickle along the back of his neck, one that years growing up in the mountains and foraging in the forests around it had sharply honed. Predator, it warned. Something was there, something stronger, and it meant harm. "Capt-"

No time for warnings. Two men came out, cutting in the middle of their path. They had the calm of those expecting an easy victory, and it made him bristle even more. What was it with people assuming troopers were pushovers?

The Turk offered them a wide smile, but the way she'd shifted her posture suggested she was expecting a fight. "Gentlemen, we've got a train to catch. I'm afraid you're going to have to move."

"We'll be happy to. Just hand over the woman and you can move right along."

"That wasn't a royal 'we' boys." Her voice hardened, a fluid sort of shrug bringing her weapon back around to the front. "Move."

"We weren't making a request." Both men were armed and brought their guns up and ready as well. "Hand her over or die."

"Oh my god." The doctor went pale, staring at the men in horror, but there was no time to coddle her through it.
"We hand her over and what, you're just letting us go?" Almost too fast to be seen, the shotgun was up, cocked, and one of the men was falling before the crack of the shot had even faded. "I doubt that."

Seeing the other man ready to shoot and having no idea if the Turk had modified her weapon at all - it looked like a hunting rifle, but there was no telling - Cloud got in a second head shot to eliminate the remaining threat. He felt a little sick, and a little proud at the sharp look he was given by the Turk. "You're faster than I expected."

"You too." He breathed, forcing himself to calm down. He was combat trained, damn it. Besides, the Turk had a point; there was no way those guys would have just let them walk. "Nice rifle."

That bright grin resurfaced and she nodded, patting it. "Yeah it is. C'mon boys, we better move. There's probably backup if that's who I thought it was."

"Right." The captain touched the doctor's arm, urging her forward. "We need to move, Doc."

"Right… right."

With the buzz of adrenaline, Cloud found himself focusing even more, noticing things he hadn't. Like the earpiece colored to match their Turk escort's skin, which she'd touched twice now under the guise of brushing at her hair. Clever. He wondered who was listening on the other side. Another Turk, most likely, but even knowing the Turks were aware was a comfort. Just in case things went bad.

"Oi! Doc ahead, one suit, three cannon fodder."

Cannon fodder? Temper surging, Cloud readied his gun again. "Why don't you let me get those and I'll catch up?"

"No can do, we've all got the same goal here, kid - gotta work together," Shotgun pointed out, growling softly when someone came from another direction. "Besides, it looks like we're flanked."

"Cut 'em down, we don't have time for this." The captain barked, opening fire.

They took a couple down, but more were coming. Not so fast they couldn't shoot them down, but it was beginning to look like that wasn't their goal. And Shotgun seemed to realize it at the same time. "They're trying make us miss the train - get her on it."

"But."

"Go!"

"You heard the lady." A final shot and the captain was urging them back around to get the shocked doctor moving again.

Not two steps later, one of them went down hard with a spray of things Cloud didn't look too closely at, shot through the head to a chant of 'Down with the ShinRa!'

Sounded like they were dealing with AVALANCHE; Cloud had heard stories, and wasn't too eager to meet them. But that wasn't a choice now, not with one of his team dead and more gunfire to be heard. One clipped Cloud's side, his mind distantly processing that his vest must have kept it from piercing him through but there would be spectacular bruising. The impact drove his breath out of him and he stumbled even though he managed to stay more or less on his feet. Getting his rifle up, he managed a shot that was a waste of ammo, barely catching the guy's arm. He kept moving, swinging
his weapon at the captain like a club and staggering him enough to nearly reach the doctor.

Two shots through his chest and the guy was down, making terrible sounds that Cloud forced himself to tune out. Shotgun closed the distance between them, looking over the captain as well.

"Status?"

"Non-fatal shot in the side." Cloud coughed tightly, getting a slow breath and swallowing hard. "Caught in my vest. I won't slow us down. We're too close to the train to stop."

The Turk frowned, looking ahead to the station. For a moment, she touched at her ear piece, then shook her head. "Detour around. There's other ways to catch the train."

"Sure, but can we get there in time?" Cloud frowned, still trying to even his breathing. "We've been slowed down, this is slowing us down."

"It'll wait," she insisted, completely confident. "Come on, this way."

She didn't wait for agreement, taking charge to physically get the doctor moving again, away from the main road. Surprisingly, it was Dr. Rayleigh who managed to speak up first. "At least tell us what we're doing!"

"They've obviously got our route marked out, and if we go through that big an open space they're free to come at us from all sides," she explained, still urging them on. "Even with the train held, we're down a guard and vulnerable. And since we're on defense, we have to fight off everything successfully the whole time - they only need to get lucky once. If there's a way to boost our chances - like this one - we'd be idiots not to take it. And my momma didn't raise a fool."

Even with his helmet, it was clear the captain didn't like the change, but as the outcome was the same and it was solid reasoning, she just got a curt nod of agreement. The trio flanked the doctor again, hurrying through the side streets with Shotgun leading once more. When she came to a sharp halt, bringing her weapon around, the two infantry readied theirs without question.

Unfortunately, the hulking man who stepped into the street blocked their bullets with the flat of his blade. Black fatigues weren't a good identifier, but it was an easy enough guess he was with AVALANCHE. "Put your weapons down and hand the woman over."

The Turk didn't even try to negotiate, but the bullets were deflected again with all the ease and finesse of a SOLDIER. Impressive, of course, but not something you ever wanted to see in an enemy. There was the sudden thick, static feeling of magic being used, a materia embedded in the hilt of the man's sword glowing bright before a robed figure came to his side. Cloud took in the wicked scythe along with the somewhat otherworldly appearance of the summon and whispered a prayer to Odin. It wasn't - couldn't really be - Hel's Hand, but whatever else the thing was, it was not to be taken lightly.

"Kill the summoner, take out the summon, right?" The captain's mutterings were likely more to himself, but Cloud shook his head.

"Depends on the summoning, but it's a place to start." Unfortunately, they both had two actual weapons - rifle and nightstick - neither of which was going to do anything against this guy. "Bullets won't do it."

"They would if we could get that off — whoa!"

A sudden crackle of lightning interrupted, the Turk lunging forward with a shorter range attack and catching the man off guard. Given the summon's nature, it didn't come to his aid and his sword
clattered to the ground as he grappled with her.

Cloud saw his chance, ducking down around the two and heaving the sword up. His blood thumped in his ears, everything else seeming to slow down for a moment as he swung it around, putting his body into one broad strike as he turned. Dimly, he heard a shrieking noise and a thick, damp sound.

A shout.

Gunshots.

For a moment, everything stopped, and he marveled at the gleam of light along the blade, wondering at the dim haze of blue. Everything was tinted blue, what was-

"— STRIFE!"

Cloud blinked, and the world was moving again, sight and sound back into the range of normal. He swallowed thickly, mouth dry and his body feeling like he'd just gone through his first day of boot camp again. "S-sir?"

"Shiva bless, he's together still?" That was the Turk, who was currently letting the doctor patch up her arm. She was watching him closely, but her relief was as clear on her face as it was in her voice. "You alright, kid?"

"I… yes?" The blue was gone. The summon was gone, and the summoner was on the ground with a slice clear across his back that Cloud didn't examine too closely. "We need to get on the train…"

His captain snorted, and a touch to his hair told him that his helmet had come off. "Oh… where's my helmet? Did something…?"

"Took it off of you, it's fine." The captain huffed, muttering under his breath.

Cloud wasn't sure what to make of it all, and it didn't help that he was so tired. All the adrenaline from earlier, all the anger and frustration and admittedly some fear, was just… gone. He felt hollow.

"What happened?"

"It looked like you hit a limit." Shotgun frowned. "I didn't think they'd taught cadets that."

"Cadets… oh, no I never… I wasn't actually in the academy," he admitted, able to feel some emotion after all, the bitter disappointment and some distant embarrassment. "I got some basic training and classes, and tried for the exams but…"

"You're not the first or last kid to fail the SOLDIER exam, there's less than a hundred still in the company now," the Turk informed him. "Before the war, there were even fewer. They lowered the bar some to keep the ranks flush."

"Oh." Somehow, he'd thought there were more than that. But his mind finally revisited the first thing she'd said. "A limit?"

"We can talk about it on the train," she gestured ahead. "Come on. They held it, we need to go."

"Why did they hold it?" Dr. Rayleigh frowned, tucking her hair back and turning to look at Cloud critically. "Can you walk?"

"Pretty sure." Cloud heaved himself upright, blinking owlishly a moment, but the world stayed put. He was weak, sure, but he could walk. "Yeah. Not sure how combat worthy I am, though."
"That's fine. We can call for reinforcements." They headed for the train, getting on and making their way to the secure, private car ShinRa had arranged.

The doctor insisted Cloud sit and be looked over, and he cooperated for lack of alternatives. When he didn't have to answer questions, he kept his eyes on the Turk, watching her pace as she tried her contacts. Apparently, an actual call didn't go through, so she tapped out a quick text. There was no missing the tension that stiffened her frame at the response she received.

Closing her PHS, Shotgun looked to them seriously. "We're going into Midgar. Another set of handpicked guards and operatives will meet us at the station."

The captain frowned. "I should be reporting to Colonel Heidegger."

"This is no longer Heidegger's operation. The army has been infiltrated and the Junon base is has been breached."

As a coastal city, Junon had the questionable benefit of an entire side on the waterfront; no one would be coming through there without a boat, which meant port access. And while it was not always patrolled with the strict efficiency it was assigned, no one was going to walk a couple dozen unregistered, armed fighters through without notice. Coming up from the village was a little more flexible, but only just. The most obvious route would be coming in through any of the gates or side streets, even sneaking in via the train. It was much easier to pull off any number of excuses. But if you were fast and coordinated enough, it was possible to weave through the ranks of students at the Junon Military Academy and cross through to easily access to the actual base.

With the intel provided by their sponsor and the constant drilling Shears himself oversaw, AVALANCHE was perfectly capable of doing exactly that. Slowly, they replaced key positions of ShinRa troopers with their own people, taking advantage of the fact that troopers were all dressed to blend together with no identifiers - it was ridiculously easy to make the substitutions. After some brief study ahead of time, their members were in and none the wiser, covering for much more specialized positions as snipers and hackers moved into their own positions.

A very small force was spared to go after the doctor they had learned would be traveling to Midgar under minimal guard. The knowledge and any potential hard copies of information she would have were too tempting not to make an effort to take. But the bulk of their people were divided for a simultaneous attack, attempting to capture the cannon and assassinate President Shinra. The snipers were foiled by the quick action of the Turk security team, but the number of replaced troopers at the cannon made it a potential steal. The level of threat that presented seemed to turn out the best the base and academy had to offer, but they had a far greater ratio of students to instructors, and that left the base itself largely in the hands of those students.

They were well trained, of course. ShinRa was very good at mass producing killers, after all. But real life experience always trumped book knowledge. And Shears had a solid dozen fighters with years of battle experience at his back. They cut a wide path through the base, wide open for further infiltration. It looked very likely that Fuhito would be following himself with his Ravens. Not too bright, but they took orders very well. Shears wasn't entirely sure what his goal was, he was a thinker and not a fighter, but his only concern right then was his own mission.

Everyone had their own parts to play, and they would chip away at the ShinRa until they collapsed
There was something very strange going on in the mainframe of the Junon base when Fuhito investigated it. Random sections seemed locked or faulty when pressed, some parts of the programs he had been expecting not registering as having ever existed. There was enough of a base that Fuhito was able to send instructions to Shears for what to do when he made his way into the actual heart of their operations, able to access the physical controls and manually put in the direct instructions. The former gangster was not particularly impressive intellectually, but he managed well enough with clear instructions. It was irritating not to do so himself, of course, but there was one definite upside. Fuhito found himself with direct access to the primary controls of communications on base, shutting them off and cutting off power to strategic points of the buildings. Flanked by his Ravens, the environmentalist made his way to the room that he had tracked the President himself to.

He took a moment to savor how very angry the old man was at having himself interrupted, red in the face and glowering at anyone who met his eyes. The suit with him that had managed his protection had the slightest signs of strain around his eyes, perhaps weariness from the assault, or even mere frustration. The thought that the leader of the Turks might be becoming a bit run down was an unexpected delight he very much appreciated. Tired men made mistakes, sometimes very costly ones. And no one who stepped up into his place could be so seasoned and efficient. Another weak link in ShinRa's armor.

Further accessing the systems, he turned the cameras on himself and took over the monitors to have a nice little talk. "You seem woefully unprepared to deal with these troubles, Mr. President."

"You," he rose from the chair he'd only just sat in, lips curled in a sneer and pointing at the screen. "Who are you? Tell me who dares to come into ShinRa's base and tries to take what's ours."

"You have a great deal of misconceptions about what is and is not yours, Mr. President," Fuhito noted mildly, not missing the sharp look the Turk was giving him. Memorizing every detail of his appearance, no doubt, though it would do him no good. "Don't fret so. Things will become clear soon, and become as they should be. Soon you will begin to understand the bigger picture. There will be no more conflict when we return to the Planet. Do not worry."

"You're insane," the blonde with him muttered it with a surprising amount of conviction. Perhaps it made her feel better to believe that.

No matter. The will of the Planet would be carried out. "You have a great purpose ahead of you, Mr. President. We will guide you. Fufufu… all will be well in time, don't worry. We have only the best of the Planet in mind."

Fuhito ended his visible feed, though he listened to them a little longer. The President blustered orders to call out their finest warrior, their great silver demon who had singlehandedly beaten an entire nation into submission. As he was closing the connection entirely, he caught note of them having trouble getting a response, blaming it on the downed communications.

With the rumors he'd been hearing, Fuhito wondered how much that truly had to do with the general's sudden lack of interest in rushing to the President's aid. Perhaps that too could be exploited. With some careful prodding, it truly did seem the company would quickly ruin itself.
Chapter Summary

One thing Genesis and Fuhito agreed on - the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Elfé stared at where the President had been ushered off for more time than she was certain of. The man with him, the brunet... she hadn't seen his face fully, but something in his profile made her heart lurch and her head ache. Perhaps that was why she had faltered, had not jumped that final distance down or struck out with blade or materia even when the two men they'd gotten into stolen ShinRa uniforms held them up. He was a clear target, the crisp black suit of a Turk against the glaring red of ShinRa's leader. But she couldn't...

"Elfé?" Shears made his way onto the rooftop, frowning at how still she held herself. "You feeling off again?"

The concern in his voice finally shook her from the spiral of confusing thoughts. "I'm fine. You were successful?"

"Yeah, slipped right through the academy and ripped the files with Fuhito's program. They shouldn't even know we took 'em." He perched on one of the crates, crossing his arms. "Which works best, because his Ravens didn't get the doctor even though they roughed up some troopers and a Turk. Not sure they got anything but we'll see."

"Not very promising," she murmured, moving to settle and clean her blade. It was nearly meditative at this point, a way to center herself and just breathe. She could already feel the ache between her eyes easing.

"Hn." Shears bounced his leg a little, something she'd have guessed even without being in her line of sight. "What about Fuhito?"

"Interrupted the President's attempt to continue his speech inside. Good distraction, came out unscathed." Largely to her credit, though not entirely. "Communicating with his Ravens now, I imagine. He's not far."

There was no more communication after that, but none was needed. There was a comfortable silence between the two warriors, borne of the mutual respect that had settled them early on. It was... nice. Not what Shears had expected when he joined up, vowing to follow the incredible fighter who'd taken out so many of his men without visible effort. These days, things seemed a little harder on Elfé, though she never said as much. But he would follow her even if she lost her awesome strength now; that wasn't what kept him at her side. Not anymore.

Fuhito returned after a time, quietly pleased with the small tablet he was consulting. He was particularly pleased with Shears' findings even though he wasn't overly inclined to say so. The
former gang leader served his purpose, and not much more. He was a good second to Elfé, at least, which freed the environmentalist to focus on more important things. Even these bare details on the SOLDIER process would be an enormous step forward in creating better fighters. Not necessarily with more autonomy, but that wasn't much of a concern at this point. On the contrary, it was quite useful not to be questioned.

Something dark moving on the edge of his vision made him look aside even as Elfé and Shears rose with weapons drawn. Red and black… and was that a wing? Recognition dawned and he turned fully. "Genesis Rhapsodos, former First Class SOLDIER. Not so dead after all."

"ShinRa has a way of declaring truth as a guise for saying they plan to make it so," Genesis said mildly, pacing forward. "I take exception to their methods. They take exception to my continued existence and defiance. Needless to say, this can only end in conflict as neither of us will accept compromise. It is too late for apologies no one means, too late to play nice when rivers of blood have run cold between us."

That earned a thoughtful hum, and a hesitance from the other warriors. Shears didn't lower his blade, but he was interested. "I've heard about your assault on the ShinRa, your clone armies. They haven't taken you down, but I'm sure they've tried."

"Oh they have, throwing the army, Turks and even SOLDIER at me en masse. To be fair, your organization has helped keep them running ragged, but yes, I've taken quite a bite out of their power base." The rogue SOLDIER smiled, blue eyes over-bright and gleaming. "We have, through no real concentrated effort, been quite helpful to one another. And I couldn't help but think, passing through here in time to watch your attack just now… how much more effective might we be, if we worked together?"

Fuhito took his time answering, considering the pale figure before him. His body seemed brittle, an air of sickness all too clear and painting an obvious picture with fever-bright eyes. But that didn't mean there was no use for him yet to be had before he returned to the Planet. "And how much of your army do you have, SOLDIER? To add to our forces."

"Oh please, call me Genesis." He shrugged at the question, walking around the edge of the rooftop. "A few dozen. It would be little effort to arrange for more, merely time - time we could use to plan, anyway."

"Ahh, is it truly so easy, making those copies?" That interested Fuhito. Quite a lot. "I'd like to examine your process. I've done some study of my own, after all. And we've made some recent acquisition of data from the SOLDIER program."

There was no mistaking the interest from Genesis at that statement, his sharp look surprisingly weighty. "I see. Perhaps I will be able to shed some light on your studies, then. The process leading to my birth was not the same, of course, but I intend to have a few words with Doctor Hollander when I return to Midgar regardless."

Fuhito's brows rose slowly, a faint smile curving his mouth. "Then you plan to infiltrate ShinRa Tower. And I imagine you just might succeed, with your intimate knowledge of its design."

"Oh I will," Genesis assured him without hesitation. "Why? Would you like a tour?"

"What I would like, actually, is to join you and have a word with Professor Hojo himself, if that can be arranged."

This time, there was a moment of silence on the former SOLDIER's part. The surprise was
that Elfé was the one to break it. "You need only guide, not protect. Shears or I will be present."

"Ms. Elfé, while appreciated I'm certain my Ravens will be able to manage such a mundane job while you maintain command of our primary forces," Fuhito disagreed.

"No. ShinRa Headquarters will have their best operatives." She shook her head. "You need better than that."

"Your Ravens don't have much by the way of brains, for all they take orders," Shears pointed out dryly. "Gonna need to think on the fly if it comes down to battling more than army or a couple Turks."

"You have reason to believe you can match the likes of a First Class blow for blow?" There was no mistaking the curiosity in the SOLDIER's eyes. "Now that's quite an ace card you've been hiding."

"I haven't been hiding," Elfé informed him. "I've defeated all they've sent after me. The fact that they haven't sent a First Class isn't my fault or concern."

"Touché, merely curious." He held his hands up to show no harm was meant. "So, Midgar and ShinRa Tower, pop in to say hello to the Science Department - possibly see a few old friends of mine. That's entirely doable. Shall we discuss particulars?"

Fuhito chuckled softly, turning off the tablet. "I think, Mr. Rhapsodos, I would very much like to 'discuss particulars' with you."

Shears huffed at them both, but when Elfé sheathed her sword that seemed the end of it for him. "Let's get out of here. They'll have sweeper teams crawling all over the place soon."
Regroup and Refocus

Chapter Summary

AVALANCHE couldn't have had so much success without help from inside the company. After making such a bold move as attacking a military base, it's clear they feel confident in their movements.

Trusted to watch over Midgar while Veld is away, both Tseng and Reno have a feeling things will only get worse if they can't pin the terrorists down in time.

Tseng looked at the report scrolling across his screen, lips a thin line of displeasure as he processed the facts, quickly putting together the immediate ramifications. It was no wonder the director had set up the arrangements, even over the phone which he never liked.

There was a moment of considering contacting the Director of SOLDIER, which he quickly amended to involve briefing the general as well. He was well aware of the dangers of failing to keep Sephiroth informed of any important company dealings at the moment, of the threat that loomed with the possibility that the SOLDIER would ever quit considering the Turks allies. Most simply put, they could not afford to lose him. There was nothing in place at the time to stop Sephiroth if he decided to turn on the company.

Tseng was not certain if that was fully grasped by everyone, but the Turks were a united force. They would hold, either under Veld's hand or his own. At the moment, he was being trusted to manage things in Midgar. That required an immediate regroup and emergency meeting. Given Reno was his own second, third in command under Veld's leadership, he was recalled under the understanding that he was needed immediately.

While the redhead was no more 'professionally' dressed than usual, there was no mistaking the seriousness in his quick stride and sharp gaze. Rude followed him at a gesture, standing closer to more traditional attention while his partner took a loose stand of his own that was not at all coincidentally reminiscent of his poise before going into a fight. What so many read as laziness, Tseng knew for the behavior of one ready to adapt to anything he was called on. And that was precisely why he was being called.

"There was an assassination attempt during the showing of the cannon in Junon, and AVALANCHE split their forces to make a simultaneous attempt at kidnapping Doctor Amber Rayleigh. The casualty list is not yet fully compiled, but at the moment Veld will be on guard and escort duty for the President. As per procedure, I will be handling matters here, essentially as acting director until he is able to return." A quick glance showed Reno had put together his own need to step up to visible second, a slight tilt of his head acknowledging it. Good. "Shotgun brought in Doctor Rayleigh with the remaining guard. She is currently in medical, and will be giving her report as soon as she's cleared; I imagine she'll be on office duty for the moment, at best, but possibly sent home for the day. One of the infantry, Cloud Strife, was also injured and will likely have medical leave before being officially returned to duty."

Reno arched a brow at that, shaking his head. "Fair know yet?"

"I intend to clear Balto to inform him while I speak with Deusericus and Sephiroth." There was
understanding and agreement in the pause, so he continued. "I want you to take Freya's report, as well as Strife's. If possible, draft SOLDIER James and go work with you and Sam. We need to put this information together and get a bigger picture. AVALANCHE is getting ambitious, and we can't be caught off guard again."

"Takin' a shot at the President with the Director there at the Junon Military Base is bold," Reno agreed. "If it hadn't been there, that woulda been nasty."

"There's also the chance that they were merely testing our response to such an attack, in preparation to make a much bolder move."

Another beat of silence, and the air itself seemed heavy with the tension of what was being implied. Reno's eyes narrowed a little, mind too quick not to follow, and too seasoned to dismiss the possibility. "They'll need more forces than we've seen to take HQ."

"Or just the right timing and aim." Rude finally spoke up, looking Tseng's way. "They've been too coordinated, too well timed with their attacks."

"Got a leak to track too." Reno made a disgusted sound, but he was already thinking on it. "I'll get started right off, boss. That it?"

"I'll forward you the other details," Tseng said. "Go. Keep me informed."

"You got it. C'mon, Rude, you can go fill Sammy in."

Reno met Kunsel at the elevator, exchanging nods before the Second fell into step at his side. "Glad you were serious about helpin' out around here."

"I like 'everybody wins' scenarios, Reno." The Second shrugged, lips twitching into a small smile. "So, what do we have going on now? I figure it's about what just went down in Junon."

The redhead eyed him a moment, even though he didn't stop walking. "Heard that through the grapevine already, huh?"

"I've got some good friends that came into port and were staying over for some extra security during the President's speech," Kunsel said. "They pass things along, especially with Zack up as a First now."

Reno considered that, and the long, long list of implications. "You got yourself a big network, don'tcha?"

"I think that's relative, honestly, but probably bigger than you anticipated." Kunsel shrugged again, smile still lingering. "I guess I just like knowing what's going on. I'd considered becoming a journalist or a detective if SOLDIER didn't pan out, took a lot of writing courses."

"Yeah? Well when things level out, you should consider applyin' for rank or somethin' 'cause that's a whole lotta talent t' waste, yo." Reno led them back to the main room, weaving between desks. "Speakin' of people who do info, this is-"
Kunsel?

Reno spent a long moment staring at the two of them before leaning against the older Turk's desk. "Okay, fess up. There's gotta be a story here."

"What? Oh." The former detective offered an almost sheepish smile. "Right, sorry. We knew each other... well, before we were ShinRa. Back when I was still with the force."

"Uh huh." Reno arched a brow at Kunsel. "You got a hidden rap sheet, SOLDIER boy?"

"Nope. Grade A informant." Kunsel grinned, taking his helmet off to get a proper look at him. "I have to say, the plain black suit *is* better on you. What do you go by these days?"

"Sam, actually." He waited a beat, then smirked. "I finished my martial arts training, soooo..."

Kunsel frowned, blue eyes narrowing a bit in thought. "... Sambo? Passable for 'Samuel' if you needed a quick cover."

"Sharp as a tack, this one." Maur grinned. "Good to see you. You're joining us?"

"For right now, to help go over scenarios - bring a different tactical perspective to the table." Kunsel set his helmet on the desk, looking the scattered papers over briefly. "Looks like you've got a lot of hard copy going on already, cool."

"Chief likes paper." Reno shrugged. "You need a pad or somethin'?"

"Not yet, I brought a pocket one." Kunsel got the small spiral pad out, pen clipped to it. "Do you have a map of what went down where in Junon? I brought some notes on things that have crossed through SOLDIER and might be relevant, and a couple comments Seb made about his watch."

"I didn't lay a map out just yet, but it's quick enough to do from the notes I've got."

"I can getcha a lay of the base." Reno shoved off the desk, heading back around to a wall of file cabinets. "What kind didja want?"

"Rough overlay of that whole end of the city would be great, but at least the cannon, port and base - I don't need deep detailing right now." Kunsel looked through the stack of note cards he was given for a long moment. "Is there one of these desks I can commandeer for this? I'm going to need some room."

"Yeah, sure... Sam, you think you could grab up your stuff an' take it to a bigger spot? We could snag one of the little exam rooms," Reno suggested, offering the maps to Kunsel and looking over the papers spread over the desk. "I could grab some of it up, if you'll come. 's closer to the copiers anyway."

"I guess I could do that, let me get it sorted to move - you two can go ahead."

"You got it." Reno patted his shoulder, hooking his fingers under the edge of Kunsel's helmet and flipping it up off the desk. "C'mon SOLDIER boy, let's get this goin' - I wanna see how that mind of yours takes this."

"Back at you." Kunsel offered a brief grin, following behind him. "Pretty bare bones maps, but it looks like everything is in place. Just at a glance, though. When were you last there?"

"Eh, around the port maybe... couple'a weeks ago?" Reno made a face, shrugging. "But I've run my
bird over it plenty, so I can tell you birds-eye what we'd be lookin' at. An' we can always get updates from the network."

Kunsel shook his head. "Network is running slow right now, I'd rather not bother if we don't have to."

"Yeah, I saw - executive director codes went active t' put things in a sorta 'safe mode' right now." Reno wasn't surprised about that, really - Veld was fast and thorough. Pretty impressive he'd gotten them off so quick during the attack, though, what with the President to mind. "He keeps his papers up to date, don't worry about it."

"There should be markers in the bottom left corners," Maur said, bringing his stack of notes in. "'Last updated' or something."

"Right… a couple months back, so we should be good. We're not looking at any areas that might have had work done." Kunsel considered the maps of the city, port and base as he got them all laid out on the bigger table. "We need tacks or something."

"What, you do that too?" Reno chuckled, getting into one of the drawers nearby and coming back with a selection of colored tacks, sticky notes, pens, highlighters, a couple pencils and a ball of cheap yarn. "Alright, let's get crackin' then. You write all small, Kunsel, so you're on sticky note duty - 's for events, times things happened, who was involved."

"Gotcha." He grabbed a pen and pad of sticky notes, watching Reno unwind some of the yarn. "And that?"

"To mark out patterns. Not all of us are the written-word type, y'know." Reno sorted out a set of tacks in rainbow order. "Either of you order events by time yet? We can get an idea of how AVALANCHE moved in."

"And where they would have had to cross through," Kunsel noted, frowning thoughtfully. "There's a few entrances to the city that only have minimal guard, but the lowest guard point for getting onto the base itself would be crossing the academy grounds or coming up from the village."

"Village does have a couple service elevators too," Reno said, folding the sticky notes into strips and tearing them off to start laying on the maps. "Here an' here, for conventional access from the village. This set of buildings here could work if you had enough parkour experience, or the right gear."

"So given they're a trained force, that shouldn't be ruled out." Kunsel made a couple marks, then went back to looking at the notes. "Alright, I'm going to mark up our action points while you tag the outside. We have the cannon, a couple points on base, and there was a fight near the train station where they had another branch trying to get at that doctor."

Maur stared at him for a moment, grinning. "You haven't changed."

"I got taller!"

"Still chasing down rumors and hoarding information like a squirrel with a bag of nuts." He reached over and ruffled Kunsel's hair, earning a protest. "If I didn't know you, I'd say you were dangerous."

Kunsel snorted, batting his hand away. "If I didn't know you, I'd say you meant that literally."

"Well I don't know about either of ya, but there are dead people, nearly our people, an' I wanna know how these goons got in an' made this happen." Reno looked between the two of them, tapping the maps. "Put those great minds t' work. We need answers."
Reno didn't like being the one to crack the whip, wasn't his style one bit, but the Director was stuck in Junon, Tseng was stepping up here, and that brought Reno up from shadowy third to a much more visible second in command. But like hell was he gonna let them down. Turks took care of their own, whatever that meant at the time, and AVALANCHE was a threat on too many fronts not to pull into tighter focus. Especially with them getting more ambitious.

He didn't like to think anyone would make an attack on headquarters, but he wasn't putting it past them now. Especially if they couldn't find the leak.
We're Friends, Right?

Chapter Summary

Cloud was surprised that Zack cared enough to come see him again, let alone bust him out of medical.

Zack wasn't letting any of his friends out of his sight.

Zack was surprised at Balto's message, quickly confirmed by Kuskel as his friend moved out to meet with Reno. It was easy enough to get himself access into the ward for the infantry and other unenhanced, given his own rank. Or maybe the Turks had a word with the staff; he wasn't too concerned right now. There was a blond laid up that he was in a rush to see, and something went tight in his chest at the surprise mixed in with Cloud's pleasure at seeing him. "Hey Spike, heard things got nasty."

"I got roughed up a little, but the Doctor is safe." Cloud made a startled sound, half protest, when Zack took his chart off the table. "I don't think you're allowed to-"

"Not worried," he murmured, frowning at the notes. "Held your own, looks like. I'd love to see the other guy."

"I'm pretty sure that's not going to work." Cloud frowned at him, nervous as he watched the SOLDIER pace, seeming to skim the whole thing. "Zack, don't. It's fine."

"It's really not. But that's the way things are these days." Zack looked up first, hearing footsteps well before Cloud did, and met the doctor's gaze straight on. "When is he being discharged?"

"Assuming clearance is provided and he'll have someone on hand for the next twenty four hours, he could be discharged within the next two." The doctor frowned, eyes drifting to the file in Zack's hand, but a shift of the younger man's posture seemed to cut off any protest he might have had. "He's going to be off any active duties for the next ten days, and a mandatory reevaluation at that point is required before he can resume placement on the mission roster. I can write up a list of activities he can and cannot participate in as well as the care he'll require."

Zack nodded firmly, tapping the folder. "I want a copy of this. If I have to message anyone for clearance, give me a list and I'll take care of that now. He'll be coming with me as soon as he's cleared, and I'll take it from there."

Cloud wanted to protest, but there was an air of authority his normally laid-back friend was suddenly giving off, and he couldn't quite manage the words. Instead, he just watched with wide eyes as the SOLDIER talked with the doctor and listened to him make arrangements. Zack took a moment to reassure him he'd be right back, and all he could do was nod and watch his back as he disappeared to go make a call.

When he'd met Zack Fair on that snowy trek to Modeoheim, he hadn't expected to make a real friend. Nothing long lasting, not when Zack was a SOLDIER First Class and he was just a trooper who hadn't even passed the exams to make Third. At most, he thought he might get some vague familiarity and a smile if they crossed paths. Not… whatever this was.
Not that he was complaining, Zack was a welcome abnormality. But he was nothing like anyone Cloud had ever met before. He had no idea what to do with Zack. For better or worse, he seemed to have some ideas of his own, though. It was worth seeing where it went, at least. That much he could tell.

Zack paced the hall, swift strides eating up the distance faster than the light bouncing gait he normally favored. PHS to his ear, he listened to it ring, counting them in his head before letting out a soft breath of relief when he was answered with Sephiroth's mild identifier. Briefly, he wondered if the man really had ever needed to say who he was. Sometime he'd ask. "The infantry who helped us out in Modeoheim, Cloud Strife? I'm bringing him back to my place."

There was a beat of silence as Sephiroth processed that. "It would be our Director you'd speak to, to arrange things with Heidegger."

"Officially, yes," he agreed. "And I'll call him next to jump through the red tape. But Lazard isn't the one who had my back, so he can wait."

There was a longer pause, and the distance that tended to creep into Sephiroth's tone gentled subtly. "I see. I'll be interested in meeting the trooper you're bringing in, then. Let me know if the Director has objections."

Zack sighed quietly, a small smile touching his lips at the understanding he'd been hoping for. "Sure thing. I'm springing him from medical; he was on duty during the dust up in Junon, but he'll recoup fast. No one seems too inclined to argue with me here."

"You can be very… persuasive… when you choose to be," the older SOLDIER noted, a hint of humor in his tone. "Send me a message when you've made it back to residential. If Strife is comfortable meeting with us, I'd like to discuss a few things with you."

*With us* meaning Angeal too, of course. It'd be polite to ask Cloud, at least, after he'd been presumably roughed up some by him. "Good call, I'll do that and let you know. Is there anything you need me to bring?"

"Nothing necessary, no. Your things, if you plan to stay over again, but I had a grocery order put in and we're fine on that front."

"When things settle down, you'll have to tell me who you get to order here," Zack said. "Seriously, I'd love to save that time for other things without having to rely on the mess."

Sephiroth's voice was a little quieter. "I'll make note for when they do, then."

"Just stick it on the list." Because things *would*, damn it.

Either his forced cheer or the confidence seemed to help, because Sephiroth's tone was back to normal. "I'll do that. Keep in touch."

"Will do."

Neither of them said goodbye. Just the idea of it was a bad place to let their minds linger.
Squaring his shoulders, Zack made his way back into the med ward, his smile warm for Cloud and edged with a fierce challenge that had the medics quick to cooperate. **Good.**

The blond watched him the whole time, blushing faintly but murmuring thanks when Zack helped him into the loose, generic midpoint between hospital scrubs and civvies. That would need replaced fast, but would do for now. They didn't really speak until Zack had nearly gotten them to the elevator.

"You don't have to do this, you know." Cloud looked anywhere but at him, clearly uncomfortable. "I know you're busy, with how your friends are and probably other SOLDIER missions right now, AVALANCHE showing up again and all. I heard they flew in some people caught in the blast at the cannon."

Zack wasn't sure if he was more appreciative of the younger teen's concern, or frustrated by his apparent misunderstanding. "I'm worried about my friends, yeah. There's a lot going down, the mess with SOLDIER and AVALANCHE. Why do you think I came down here, anyway? We're friends, right?"

Cloud managed a small, shy smile. "I guess. If you wanted to be, I mean."

"Thought we already were," he said, shrugging. "But we'll work that out. We've got time, as long as we stick together."

"I'd like that." There was a bit more confidence there. "I can't say I've gotten on real well with a lot of the guys in the barracks is all, so I guess I'm used to it."

Zack glanced at him, taking in his height, slighter build and admittedly 'prettier' looks on top of being from out in the boonies, learning to navigate city life, and seeming to be a bit of an introvert. "Yeah, I get that. But when you find someone you get along with, it's worth the effort. If you don't make it... I've seen things happen."

To be fair, there were a lot of complications that had been against Sephiroth, Angeal and Genesis staying friends, but he couldn't help but think clearer communication could have made such a difference. There was time to work on that with Angeal, at least. They had to think about finding Genesis now, with that much in progress.

"It's really hard, isn't it?" Cloud offered a rueful smile, seeing he'd managed to startle him a little. "The thing with the Commander. He's your friend too, right? He taught you."

"Yeah." It was hard to think of this Angeal as the same man sometimes. There were shadows in his eyes and an edge to him even when he was just sitting still that conflicted with everything he'd ever associated with him. The calm and confidence he'd leaned on for years was gone. But he wasn't totally gone, and damned if Zack was going to give up on him. Especially with help this time. "It's rough. You think you'd be okay around him? He's staying with Sephiroth and I am sometimes too. Making plans and stuff, trying to fix things."

Cloud's jaw clenched, but he tried to think it out objectively. "Well, if nothing else it'd be interesting. And I'm not eager to head back to the barracks. They're okay with it, though? I mean, I'm probably not cleared for hearing any of that."

"There's no protocol for stuff like this, Cloud," Zack pointed out. "Seriously, absolutely no precedence here. Sephiroth says it's okay, I did too, and that's majority rules as long as you're game."

Cloud snorted softly, giving him a disbelieving look. "Well alright then. Country boys have to stick
together, right?"

Zack grinned, feeling a little lighter for that round-about vote of confidence. "Absolutely. And hey, benefits they keep the Firsts here - no walking around base to get to my place or Sephiroth's. And private hot showers."

"That'd be nice," he agreed, sighing at the thought.

"It helps."

And right now, ShinRa needed every plus side it could get going for it, because all that had Zack staying put was the resources there to help his friends. From Sephiroth's expression lately, he didn't think he was alone either.
From an Outsider's Perspective

Chapter Summary

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study the Jenova Project, but the dream job is a nightmare inside.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amber Rayleigh wasn't sure what she'd been expecting to see, being brought in to assist the top scientists in the company, but somehow she thought it wasn't the two old men who clearly couldn't stand each other arguing over old spiral notebooks. Her guard cleared his throat, catching their attention though only one turned.

"What is it now?" He narrowed his eyes, looking at and just as quickly dismissing her guard before focusing on her. "You're the one that was called in from Junon?"

"Yes, Doctor." She placed him after a moment, Doctor Lucas Hollander. She hadn't been aware he'd returned to the company, but whatever his current state, he was clearly still involved with SOLDIER.

"I've been told you had a first hand experience with AVALANCHE's forces." Hojo turned on his stool, looking her over a moment. "You also have experience with SOLDIER, which is your reason for coming here. Tell me, how have their forces turned out?"

"I didn't see much," she admitted. "It was a brief encounter, and I'm not combat trained. There was no mako glow to be seen, but most of them had helmets. Primarily males, so they may be modeling after SOLDIER."

"Foolish," the Professor muttered, shaking his head. "I can't imagine what they think they'll accomplish. Even with the right tools, the right notes, and being practically walked through the process, it is apparently entirely possible to botch the entire thing. Which is why you are here, in fact."

Rayleigh frowned a little, uncertain if she understood correctly. Sure, she'd done extensive study on the SOLDIER program, and knew some of the early work, but she hadn't been involved. "I'm not sure I understand, Professor."

Hojo rolled his eyes, waving a hand at his fellow scientist. "I have neither the time nor the patience to continue translating idiot. You're to be the go-between for Hollander and I as we try and fix the mess he's made of things. I don't think I have to tell you that the information you'll be handling will be highly confidential. The sort you would likely be killed rather than allowed to expose. Far beyond what you've been studying."

"Back to the root of it all, instead of the later process for SOLDIER as a program," she guessed, nodding slightly. That was both intimidating and thrilling. Regardless of how badly Dr. Hollander had apparently 'messed up' the man had still done remarkable things in the fields of mako science and bio engineering, and it was a priceless learning opportunity to study his and presumably the Professor's greatest work. Hojo wasn't a very pleasant man, as she recalled, but that didn't lessen his
As it turned out, there were **massive** amounts of data to be processed, and it was more than a little daunting. Particularly when Hojo abruptly left the room, muttering with a clear note of irritation. While Rayleigh didn't catch the details, she picked up 'amateurs' and 'unprofessional hacks' - neither of which made her feel particularly comfortable with the work load.

"So, I gather he's not a people person."

She managed to startle something like a laugh out of Hollander. "Hojo? *Ha*, no. Very, very far from. If he was the last human alive, he'd probably be the happiest to ever live."

"Fewer idiots to manage sounds nearly blissful." The man in question returned, setting down a thick binder. "These are the bare bones notes you will need to reference while you assist me in wading through his mess."

"I see. Is there any quicker context I can have that would help?" It wasn't that she couldn't read through it, but Rayleigh had the impression they were a little short on time.

The department head had a way of looking at underlings as if they were both a massive disappointment and he should not have been surprised to find that the case. Sighing, he spent a moment staring at the ceiling before he spoke. "There was an extraordinary being uncovered by the late Professor Gast. His thought was to use its genetics, presumed due to age and form to be an Ancient, to create improved humans. Ones closer to our ancestors. The Jenova Project, named for the specimen, was split into two parts with the premise of doing so. Hollander sought to bring a child into the world with similar genes. I sought to do better.

"Go forward twenty some years later and the children he worked with are falling apart on a genetic level, and we're tasked with *fixing it*. While I would much rather wash my hands of the whole mess, that isn't an option. So we're working on a very short timetable, and I require competent assistance to take his gibberish and make sense of it so I can review it and try to unknot the mess." Dark eyes were hard and glinting with irritation as he looked at her. "*That* is your task. I hope you're as capable as your previous records suggest."

Given a more concrete idea of the situation, she nodded firmly. "Understood, Professor. I suppose time is of the essence then. These two... the commanders?"

"Of course. Hewley has returned, but getting a fix on the other is going to be more difficult. That, however, is not our task. Our work is to have treatment ready if they do bring him back in a salvageable state." It wasn't hard to figure out how Hojo felt about all that, but all that really mattered was that he wanted the job taken seriously anyway.

"So I'm on information processing and serving as a midpoint between you and Doctor Hollander?"

"It's in the best interests of the matter that we deal with each other as little as possible." The two men locked eyes a moment, and Hollander was the first to look away. Hojo's lip curled a little in disdain before he looked back to her. "So as far as wading through his things and summarizing them into a more manageable format, yes, that's your job at the moment. Start as soon as you can, and work as long as you can. This is quite literally a matter of life or death."
Rayleigh swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth. "Yes, Professor."

It didn't take long for Rayleigh to put together why Hojo and Hollander didn't get along. Even ignoring the rivalry that they must have had under the late Professor Gast Faremis, the fact was that they were alike in all the wrong ways, and different in every other.

It was obvious that Hojo had exacting standards not only for his work, but for how everything was organized and maintained. There was almost an obsessive level of order kept in his workspace, which did make him very efficient, but also made him more than a little irritated to have his careful organization disrupted. Hollander, on the other hand…

Well, the man wore open toe sandals in the lab. Rayleigh thought that spoke for itself.

He also seemed to have what some of her colleagues would have called a more 'organic' work system. Things were in constant motion according to whatever he was doing at the time. It had the benefit of adaptability for the moment, but was a long term hazard. Especially for anyone trying to step in; she wasn't sure how he and Hojo had managed to work together at all.

Having survived the anxiety-inducing mess that was a full course load at Junon University to get her doctorate, however, she was taking it in stride. She'd supervised undergrads with worse systems than his; it wasn't easy, but it was doable. The hours were more than she'd been having lately, but Rayleigh recognized this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to be let in on this project. It was just as awe-inspiring as she'd thought, no matter how dark and gritty the details.

And there were some very, very dark details. The Jenova Project saw the death of two scientists, one of whom had been the head of the department, and one of the highest ranking Turks of that era. She hadn't had the opportunity to study under him, but Gast Faremis was still considered a very big deal on campus. And it was very easy to see why as she worked through the binder of 'bare bones' notes Hojo had provided. Most of them were from the former department head himself. It included a very grim assessment of both branches of the project. Project G had produced the now-rogue SOLDIER Genesis Rhapsodos first, and he registered as 'normal' in the beginning - a disappointment presumably directly tied to only having J Cells second hand, samples taken from Hollander's assistant, Gillian Orgel. It was a surprise at first to realize that the project had, in fact, been named after her given she was only an assistant.

Then she got to Angeal, Gillian's son - and Hollander's, according to his records and despite his last name. It wasn't clear if he had been planned as the next subject, as far as the doctor was concerned, but it was clear that Gillian was no longer on board when it was her own child. While Angeal also registered as having some enhancements, it was not enough that he was given an immediate sponsorship. In fact, she saw in Gast's notes that later on he decided neither of the boys should be given further enhancement due to 'potential ill effect' of the way the by-then-standard SOLDIER treatments would interact with their initial prenatal enhancements. It was a decision Hojo hadn't repealed when he took over as Director, but his focus was fixed on Sephiroth.

Project S, the second and successful half of the Jenova Project, was lead by Professor Hojo and the late Dr. Lucrecia Crescent. While only Sephiroth's mother was noted as parent - something Rayleigh attributed to the fact that the treatments she had received prior to and during her pregnancy had a vital role in why the baby had been deemed a success - signs pointed to Hojo as being his father, not the least of which was his marriage to her at the time. Yet she also knew that Sephiroth was listed as one
of the orphans taken in and "raised by" the company.

Why?

And how much did he know?

The question ate at her more than she'd expected. While Rayleigh would call herself compassionate, she'd never had any of the stereotypical 'womanly' maternal instincts show up. But maybe that was it - this wasn't about any parental feeling, it was about human connection, and the fact that it had been deliberately taken from Sephiroth. He had no background to ground him, even with the man who was presumably his father right there.

Why?

And why, after this blowup with Genesis and Angeal, hadn't someone cleared things up? Two out of the three "products" of the Jenova Project had a breakdown over the revelation. It was only a matter of time until Sephiroth put it all together himself, why had no one thought to tell him first?

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to be running a FF7-themed fanworks exchange here on Ao3. Signups open Wednesday of this week (6/17/15) and the link to the exchange is here for details and sign-ups.

Remember, it won't open until the 17th, UTC-05:00. It stays open for 10 days, so I'll remind you again next week. ;)
Chapter Summary

He's just together enough to understand how much he's lost.

It was ironic that Genesis' worst days were the ones where he was the most lucid. To be aware of the bloody path he'd trailed around the globe, the massive death toll that made no exception between guilty and innocent. To look in the mirror and see his body failing before his eyes.

To be just sane enough to realize he was losing his mind.

It was nothing short of terrifying, and he wasn't sure that some part of him wasn't pathetically grateful those moments were coming with even longer stretches of madness in between. In the grip of madness, it seemed perfectly reasonable to aid AVALANCHE in their efforts to bring ShinRa down, the company that had ruined him before he'd ever been born. Logical to use them, to take a moment for mutual gain as long as their goals weren't opposing each other. He had intelligence, skills and strength they needed - and, for the moment, they were useful to him as well.

It was clear Fuhito wouldn't be any improvement on Hollander as soon as he saw his Ravens, however. They were puppets. Not, he admitted ruthlessly to himself, unlike his clones. But the first of his clones had come willingly, hadn't they? He seemed to remember that, but his mind wasn't his own these days.

Genesis closed his eyes, rubbing his face a moment to try and soothe the steady ache that had been pounding there since he'd crossed to the central continent from the north and made his way back around to Junon via Costa del Sol, then back to Midgar. Which was where they rested now, Fuhito running tests and muttering to himself as he experimented with the beings he was making - changing - into his Ravens. They'd been human, once, and perhaps that was one of the more frightening things. If Genesis was going to be frightened, at any rate; at the moment his emotions were numb, refusing to rouse for anything. Even thinking that he might be able to find Angeal at headquarters only made a vague stir. Maybe that was because he refused to acknowledge the constant question of why that was digging in deeper every time he thought of the younger man. Why did you go? Why did you leave me?

Part of him, that small sliver of fleeting sanity, questioned if he was just finally too much for his childhood friend. If maybe Angeal had enough of him, of his drama and his weakness and his problems. Even those broad shoulders could only bear so many burdens before straining with the weight, after all.

But we're the same, you and I. That was the thing, Angeal understood him - Angeal was like him. There was no place for either of them in this world of crisp, clean machines and wars fought under the name of politics with smiles full of knives and honeyed words of poison. There was no place for them anywhere on the Goddess' green Planet, monsters that they were. Abominations, hadn't Sephiroth himself said? And oh the irony there, my friends the fates are cruel. Sephiroth was not the hero the world made him to be. They were none of them heroes, boys with bloody hands who were finally just as ugly and twisted on the outside as their origins dictated.

Fuhito was fascinated with his wing, but something in his eyes had Genesis evading the full truth of
it, silver tongue toying with words until the terrorist couldn't possibly know what was being left out. Genesis had learned young that if you threw in enough drama, certain people would write you off and you could do as you pleased. He'd used it shamelessly to his advantage when he'd been in SOLDIER; even Angeal fell for it, increasingly often as the years went on. And with incomplete knowledge hacked from the computers in Junon giving the impression of full detail, it was so very easy to play into what Fuhito expected - feed his ego, play to his assumption that he was the superior intellect who understood it all, and the man ignored the little details that should have told him otherwise.

If Fuhito was being thorough, he would have realized not everything matched up. But no, he saw enough to believe he was right all along, and that was enough. It wasn't as if he cared what was happening to his own 'enhanced' soldiers; it was unlikely they were even planned to live long enough for long term effects to matter.

Monster.

The word brought a sardonic smirk to Genesis' lips, his eyes refocusing on the scientist. That was the truth of it, wasn't it? The Ravens were as monstrous as Genesis himself, certainly, but they weren't the only ones. While Genesis believed his own condition was brought about by Hollander's incompetence in tampering intended to be beneficial, Fuhito was a different man entirely. Fuhito was a destroyer, and he destroyed every last bit of agency and humanity in his Ravens before conditioning them for use and loosing them on his targets. He did it knowingly and willingly, and wasn't that monstrous in its own right?

Monsters making monsters.

No one so much as glanced his way when Genesis stood, laughing darkly to himself as he walked back towards the stairs and up to the rooftop. There were no stars to be seen in Midgar, just the dismal cover of pollution and the constant lighting from any number of places that never closed. It was all so fake, so pretentious, so very ShinRa. For a moment, he could feel magic swell in him with the heat of sudden rage, fire licking at his fingers with the intense desire to burn it all to the ground. To bring ruin to those that had ruined him.

Soon, he told himself. Soon, they would leave this place and flood the Plate. And in the midst of the chaos and destruction, Genesis would cut his way to the heart of the company, and find what they had done to Angeal. This was no place for him any more than for Genesis himself, he had surely seen that by now. He would come.

Genesis felt the flush of heat sweep over him, tiring almost to a dizzying intensity, fever returning as his senses were drowned by madness once again. Still, he held onto the one thing that never changed - he had to find Angeal. Things would be alright as long as they were together.
For now, AVALANCHE is the Turks' problem. A tight unit of SOLDIER pulls together with the help of army Specialist Cloud Strife to try and prepare to bring in the remaining rogue First Class.

Zack wanted to wait for Kunsel before going to meet up with Sephiroth and Angeal, but with no estimate of how long he'd be it was pointless. So instead, he took time to make sure Cloud got cleaned up a little better and into comfy clothes before heading down the hall to Sephiroth's suite. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm more okay getting this over with than going out of my mind dancing around the possibility," the blond muttered, sighing at the look his vague answer earned him. "Yes, Zack. I'm okay. Let's just do this."

Zack nodded, rapping his knuckles on the door. There was enough of a pause to assume the other Firsts were deeper in the apartment, but soon enough Sephiroth was there to let them in.

He didn't speak until the door was closed behind them. "I take it Kunsel is still working with the Turks?"

"Yeah, he's not sure how long that's gonna go on for, so we're here and he'll come when he can." Zack shrugged. "I have his notes and made a few of my own. I figure Cloud could tell you what he's told me so far, since he was involved with one of the attacks."

Sephiroth nodded slightly, looking the trooper over with a small frown. "I heard you sustained injuries from the fight?"

"Yes sir, but they saw fit to release me from medical."

The First arched a brow, a small smile on his lips. "Forgive me my concern, but Zack is known to be very persuasive. Sometimes more persuasive than the good sense of other people."

He got an answering smile out of Cloud, so Zack counted it a win and didn't protest. "Where's Angeal?"

"In the kitchen." Sephiroth gestured back in the correct direction, largely for Cloud's benefit. "Doing something with noodles."


"I didn't ask, beyond making sure he had everything he wanted." Sephiroth turned to lead them further in towards the sitting area. "He'll be out eventually."

"That's fine. What he doesn't hear, we can cover again." Zack took a seat on the couch, patting the one beside him to coax Cloud over. He'd keep an eye on him, of course, but keeping him engaged was just as helpful for that. Besides, working with Sephiroth had given him a little bit of an edge in this talking with introverts thing. "So, how much do you know about what went down in Junon?"
"Let's pretend I don't know anything," Sephiroth suggested, smiling a little at Zack's huff. "Humor me."

"Fiiiiine. You super intelligent people and your creative minds." Zack tsked in mock reproof, smiling at him. Always helped to foster a good mood, whatever had started it. "Here, wait a minute…"

He flipped the notes over so he had a few pages of blank space, setting them on the coffee table and shifting positions a few times before giving in and kneeling down by it. Out came a pencil and he started a loose sketch; long, sweeping lines were the ticket, because while he wasn't exactly an artist, he was a decent enough to be confident in getting his point across. "See, this is why you should doodle on paperwork, it's good practice in the event you don't have a map on hand. Granted, this isn't all to scale, but that's mostly because the cannon is really long."

"It's not a bad representation," Sephiroth said, leaning in to get a better look.

"If it's 'not bad' let's try good, because 'not bad' still has a negative background feel to it," Zack pointed out, wagging his pencil at him. "Got enough of that without us helping it along. Now, before I doodle up anything else, the pencil goes to you, Cloud. Show us what happened."

Cloud took the pencil with a little frown, but slowly relaxed into the familiarity of giving a report. "Right, so we met up with the doctor here for our pickup. It's also where the Turk met us, but we hadn't been told there would be a Turk escort."

"Someone dropped the ball," Zack noted. "Not betting against the Turks. Like 'em or not, they're on top of things."

"Let him finish, Zack. We'll add what we know at the end." Sephiroth gestured for Cloud to continue, listening and watching him map out the encounters along the way. It was interesting to hear it from his point of view, and particularly useful given there was no official report he'd had access to. "That's quite a lot of people they were willing to expend on a kidnapping to not send ones strong enough to be more sure of success."

"I don't think they expected a fight from us, sir," Cloud pointed out. "Just troopers - cannon fodder, they called us."

Sephiroth hummed softly, shaking his head. "Foolish. Enhanced you may not be, but that makes you no less a soldier, and no less a threat. Merely different."

Cloud gave him a skeptical look, but wasn't going to get into it. "The one that met us up here… he didn't have the mako glow, but he was fast like SOLDIERs are, blocking bullets with his blade. We had the disadvantage for range, but still."

"Agreed. It speaks of either assumed superiority - which you did indicate they possessed - or a dangerous lack of self-preservation instinct. Neither bodes well." Sephiroth frowned thoughtfully. "Similar behaviors have been noted with AVALANCHE operatives before, but this strength is new."

"Yeah, they had well trained forces, but not with the kind of raw power to match." Zack leaned back, staring at the ceiling a moment. "On a scale of blind follower to puppet, how bright would you say the guy was?"
Cloud blinked at him, startled. "What?"

"The guy was strong and fairly competent, but was obviously not the leader sort or even officer type," Zack pointed out. "So I'd slot him into one of three categories: blind follower, the sort who believes in the cause and doesn't do a whole lot of thinking, minion, who follows along because of the leaders more than the cause, or puppet, who may not really know about either and is just being used, generally considered expendable. Also known as pawns."

Cloud blanched at the descriptions. "Uh… follower or minion, I guess. He seemed to understand his mission, at least, and told us to drop our weapons and hand over the doctor. He also had some impressive summon magic and what was probably an expensive sword, which you wouldn't give just a grunt or a… a puppet."

"Okay yeah, good supplies are only dished out to people you'd figure would be around to make good use of them." Zack steepled his hands, resting his chin on them. "Didn't save him, but they couldn't have planned for your little trick. I didn't know you could do that."

Cloud blushed, looking away. "Neither did I."

"Zack said you reached a limit break?" Sephiroth considered that after his nod of confirmation. "That's impressive. You're from Nibelheim, correct?"

"Yeah, is that related?"

"It might be. Towns with reactors tend to have higher levels of mako in the soil, water, and even the air. To be born and raised there for your formative years, you likely already possess a low but not inconsiderable baseline of mako in your system." Sephiroth nodded to Zack. "Likewise for Zack. Considering your emotions were probably running high on top of adrenaline from battle, it's less surprising than one might initially think."

Zack blinked a few times, whistling softly. "Didn't think about that. Yeah, you could probably work with it from that angle and boost up some, Spike."

Cloud had a feeling he was going to spend a lot of time blushing when attention came around to him. "That's not… I already tried out for SOLDIER. I didn't make the cut."

"Less than twenty percent of first-time applicants do." Sephiroth smiled a little at his shock. "We're not the large force we seem to be believed to be. It's an expensive and intense procedure - there's extensive screening on multiple levels, beyond mere fighting skills. I'd say those are actually the last consideration, as they can be honed and you have to relearn everything with heightened strength and senses anyway."

"Oh." Somehow it was both a relief and a disappointment to know that there was greater odds he wouldn't make it than he would from the start.

"You also don't test well," Zack pointed out. "I mean, I don't either but that's just the written stuff, which they gave me a pass for since I aced the rest."

"You improved considerably on the 'written stuff' though." Angeal came in, meeting Cloud's eyes carefully. They held each other's gazes a moment, but whatever Cloud saw was enough to relax him, and for now that was enough for Angeal. "Looking at what happened in Junon?"

Cloud and Zack both glanced at Sephiroth as the default to reply. "We have to keep an eye on anything that might affect our plans. While AVALANCHE makes a good distraction, it's also a considerable danger that isn't worth having around just for that."
"You're going to try and get Commander Rhapsodos back, sirs?" Cloud looked between them, frowning a little. "I'd heard he was dead."

"You'd also heard I was dead," Angeal pointed out dryly. "ShinRa isn't always truthful so much as inclined to spin things when they think they can get away with it."

"Yeah, I'm noticing that." It wasn't a good feeling. Maybe not making SOLDIER wasn't really so bad; he was expendable to the army, sure, but they weren't trying to kill him. "You called AVALANCHE a 'distraction' sir?"

"Just Sephiroth, if you will. I'm not in your chain of command," Sephiroth reminded him, gesturing for Angeal to take one of the other chairs. "SOLDIER hasn't been assigned to take any action regarding AVALANCHE - so far it's an operation that the army and the Turks are taking on, with periodic SOLDIER assistance when they've already crossed paths. But yes, it's a distraction for them, and for the Board of Directors. I don't mean to downplay the seriousness of the situation, of course; a lot of good men and women have been lost to these terrorists, it's simply not our mission."

"And the fact of it is, the more attention AVALANCHE has, the less Genesis has, and the more wiggle room we have to get him back without interference." Zack took the pencil back, making a few notes as reminders of what Cloud had said. "It's important to know what's going on all the same, because it does effect us. If it gets bad enough, the President might send Sephiroth that way."

"He certainly might give the order," Sephiroth agreed. "Show us the rest of what happened."

Zack stared at him a moment before a small, hard smile flit over his lips. "Right. So, here we've got the cannon and this here is the base. Back this way is the Military Academy by Junon U, and then you go out here for the main walk and Upper Junon in general..."

By the time Kunsel made his way to Sephiroth's apartment, there were several maps stretched out, including the one that Zack and Cloud had made on the fly. Colored sticky notes had been folded into a variety of shapes and used to track movements of units, and Cloud had relaxed enough to argue with Zack. He was still a little iffy about the older Firsts, but he'd given into the request to use their names.

"Looks like you guys have made some progress. Maybe I should have brought you with me." Kunsel came over to look at the maps, impressed. "Alright, so this is the Junon thing that went down. Seb and Sai will be back tomorrow, so they can tell us some more first-hand things. This is your work… Cloud, right? Zack mentioned you."

Cloud blushed a little, grinning and taking the offered hand to shake. "Yeah. You're Kunsel, then?"

"Yep." The Second traced the path that had been mapped out with a fingertip, reading the notes. "Nice recall, this is about what we had, but your view on it all is fresher. You've got some good questions that didn't come up for us."

Cloud gave him a puzzled look, leaning in to see what he was pointing to. It didn't really help. "What parts?"

"Well, you noted at the start that you guys hadn't been told a Turk would be coming - that's a no-no that needs addressed. And then here, you mention this is a detour from the path you'd talked about
with your unit, but AVALANCHE still found you. And then down here, you have the time you got to the train. The train from Junon to Midgar should have been long gone by then."

"So why did it wait?" Cloud frowned, watching Kusel shaking his head.

"I didn't know it was even an issue, I'll have to ask. But the lack of shared intel - basic intel - is an issue. There's a dangerous lack of communication going on here." Kusel took a moment to copy down the questions and a few more details on his notepad. "So, what's the rest of the maps for? It looks like you've basically got three fourths of the Planet over there."

"Trying to work out where Genesis might be, or go." Zack gestured to Angeal and Sephiroth, letting them elaborate.

"Zack said he fell over the railing in Modeoheim, but since he did it willingly it's more likely it was a controlled fall," Angeal explained. "There's a lot of open space there, he'd have time to turn around for a safe landing in the snow."

"And I pointed out that snow can be really hard, and painful either way to land in," Cloud said. "Nibelheim native, I know this stuff. SOLDIERs can take a lot of abuse, but he's still going to hurt."

"So he'd need recovery time from the fall alone, and then there's the fact that we fought." Zack shook his head with a rueful smile. "He may not have been trying to kill me, but I sure felt that fight for a while."

"He kicks like a chocobo, if you get in range," Angeal said, smile a little softer. "But then, so do you."

"And all of that is in addition to degradation, so he will recover slowly and require more rest whether he likes it or not," Sephiroth said. "Which means he'll be seeking ways to save his energy for when he needs it. Assuming he's alone now without Hollander or Angeal, his resources are drastically cut. He's certainly creative enough to manage, but again, that takes more time. And Genesis is not a patient man."

"Yeah, I'd heard." Kusel walked around the maps, head tilting to read notes as he came to them. "So, you figure he'll be coming to Midgar?"

"He'll come for Hollander and Angeal, specifically," Sephiroth explained. "Who happen to be in Midgar."

"Right, got it. So you're mapping out the path he's most likely to take?" Kusel nodded slightly at the notes, kneeling to read the finer printed ones. "Whoever writes this small, this is very neat and also not the easiest to read."

"Perhaps not, but I didn't have to go get another note." Sephiroth shrugged, smiling faintly. "I was listing the ports he would most likely use to travel between Modeoheim and Midgar."

"Right… Bone Village does have a port for getting their equipment in and out. That's probably the quickest shot down to Costa del Sol, too, so I agree with that one. But you really think he'd be able to cut through to Junon without being spotted?" Kusel was a little skeptical on that one; Junon had a military base, people knew Genesis by sight there, some even by voice alone.

"Well if he tried this week with everybody flooding into the city for the President's speech, and then AVALANCHE attacking, I think he could be overlooked," Cloud said, gesturing to the marked up map of the Junon events. "It's like they said earlier, AVALANCHE makes a good distraction. I think he'd figure that out just as quickly as you guys did."
Kunsel winced. "Okay, point. That would put him on continent now, though. Could he have moved that fast?"

Zack arched a brow. "It's been over three months since that fight in Modeoheim; if Genesis hasn't made it here yet, we need to worry a lot more about where he thought was more important to go."

"I have to agree with Zack on that one," Angeal admitted. "Three months is more than enough time. He's at least on this continent right now - there's nowhere else that would be higher priority to him to go. Even if he thinks I'm dead, he'll come on hope of getting Hollander. Regardless of what he's said, he still needs him."

"So he was bluffing about killing him?" Zack wasn't sure whether that made him feel better or not. He was leaning towards not. "Alright, so he'll come where you guys are... do we want that to be Midgar? Because if he waltzes in here, AVALANCHE isn't going to be enough of a distraction anymore."

"We don't really have much choice, Zack." Angeal rolled his shoulder, offering him an apologetic sort of smile. It came out more as a cringe. "I have to be here for testing. And hopefully treatment, eventually."

"Unfortunately, for now it is our best chance," Sephiroth agreed, clearly not pleased to have to say so. "Hojo isn't much in the way of originality, but he manages to make progress once he has a solid base someone else has set up. I imagine that's why they were bringing in the doctor you escorted, Cloud."

"What, to help Hojo and Hollander?" Zack wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Can't say I envy her."

"Do we know anything about her?" While Angeal had what he thought was a healthy wariness of the whole Science Department, he also knew Hollander and Hojo were the closest things to experts in mako enhancements - the process as they knew it had been developed to this point by them. So for now, they were a necessary evil, and a known one. This other doctor he knew nothing about, and not knowing things had not turned out well for them so far.

"Her name is Amber Rayleigh, she at least has a doctorate, and she was stationed in Junon most recently." Kunsel shrugged. "I haven't found anything else, there's been an interruption between the Junon system and Midgar's mainframe. Probably a security measure, but it's inconvenient."

"We can ask Essai when he gets in; he's just getting off a posting in the Junon base so he might know," Zack said. "For now, I still think we should look for some way to try and encourage Genesis to come to a specific area so we can do damage control instead of getting blindsided."

"Planting rumors is helpful, but you'd have to really get them out there since we don't know where he is, and since the company is trying to keep Angeal being back relatively quiet right now, that limits us," Kunsel mused, thinking on it.

"What about the fan clubs?" Cloud managed not to fidget at having all their attention at once. "It's just a thought. They have a wide circulation, and it's not like the company seems to take them very seriously."

Angeal stared at him for a long moment. "I have a fan club?"

"Hoo boy, that's gonna be a long conversation." Zack chuckled, shaking his head. "Yeah, you do. The 'Keepers of Honor' which is... well, it fits. Ironic, but it fits. And they were kinda iffy on if they really believed you were dead to begin with, so that's not a bad place to start, actually."
"I thought we were trying to say 'good' instead of 'not bad' now?" Sephiroth was perfectly deadpan, but Zack had caught on to when he was being teased by the older First.

"Okay, okay, throw my own words at me why don'tcha?" Zack smirked, getting his PHS out. "Let me see if I made any notes… I don't know if I did, but they can't be that hard to get in touch with."

When a phone went off, it took Zack a moment of prodding his own before he recognized it wasn't his. By then, Sephiroth was already getting his out to check the message.

Angeal held his breath a moment, seeing his friend's expression go flat. "Hojo?"

"We're to meet them tomorrow morning." He closed the phone, but stared unseeingly at it a moment longer. "Both of us."

"And is that the vibe of them being used to you coming to supervise, or is it specifically saying both of us?" Somehow, Angeal knew the difference was important.

"Specifically both of us," Sephiroth clarified.

There was a long moment of silence as they all considered the message, and the change.

"I'm going with you." Zack's expression was serious, almost fiercely so. "We have to stick together."

After a moment of silence, Sephiroth nodded slightly. "The last thing we need is to give them any sign of division they could take advantage of."

"Well, Cloud and I will shamelessly take over your apartment and make more notes, Zack." Kunsel glanced at the trooper, grinning at his nod. "And maybe start looking into the fan clubs, because I know about how rumors run."

"Great, keep it all going." Zack nodded firmly. "We'll be in touch."

"But that's for tomorrow morning," Sephiroth pointed out. "For now, we have time."
Chapter Summary

After everything with Genesis and Angeal, Sephiroth supposed he should have suspected... but somehow the truth still caught him by surprise.

It wasn't even questioned that Zack and Sephiroth would come with Angeal for the review of previous tests on top of even more testing, but to have either of them asked for specifically by the scientists was a surprise. The three Firsts made their way down to the labs in silence, broken only by the background sounds of machines.

This time, Hojo and Hollander were joined by a young woman that matched Cloud's description of Dr. Rayleigh. The trio had a variety of expressions, Hollander looking grimly pleased, Rayleigh herself looking nervous, and Hojo seeming irritated.

Sephiroth did note that one out of the three was fairly normal. "You look like you have news."

"Old news, of questionable relevance." Hojo made an impatient gesture for them to sit, looking at Zack for a moment before sighing loudly. Apparently, today he didn't feel like arguing about it. "You're more or less familiar with Project G. It has been brought to my attention that being introduced to that information in another environment may have helped keep certain parties from running off in a blind panic instead of thinking rationally."

Angeal snorted, crossing his arms. He wondered if it was Hollander who admitted to that, or if Rayleigh had pointed it out. "You've called us down here for a history lesson?"

"A much more extensive one, yes, now be quiet and let me talk," Hojo snapped. After a moment of glaring at the three SOLDIERS, he continued. "In 1965, Professor Gast Faremis became head of the fledgling department of Mako Science and Research. In 1970 he discovered a being believed to be a Cetra and he had it unearthed and brought down to one of the research facilities. He named it Jenova, and named the research project after it, hence Project J or Project Jenova.

"Someone, likely Gast, decided it would be advantageous to see if study of Jenova's cells could lead to awakening any dormant abilities left over from our Cetran ancestors. There was enough progress that testing began on a variety of subjects, creating the earliest incarnations of what would one day be SOLDIER." Hojo made a vague gesture at Zack. "Hollander and I were in charge of the two halves of the Jenova Project. The premise Gast presented us with was using cell samples and DNA from Jenova before birth to enhance favorable qualities and ideally reach the original goal of enhancement. We each had an array of assistants, his most notable being Gillian Orgel, whom he named his project after. She submitted to procedures, and then had her cells mapped onto a child. He registered as normal and thus a failure, and the child in her womb registered the same - if you haven't guessed from the faces your friend is making, that would be him. The other, of course, is Genesis."

Sephiroth rested a hand on Angeal's knee a moment, startling the growing anger away long enough for his friend to get back in control. After a moment, Sephiroth inclined his head. "You've said time and again what you think of Hollander's work, Hojo. Why are we going over this now?"

"Because he never told you about his part in this." Hollander spoke before Hojo, grim smile still in
Project S, led by Hojo and Dr. Crescent, named for the child it produced - you, Sephiroth."

There was a long moment of silence, broken by a very quiet, very emphatic, "Fuck."

Sephiroth startled as his brain had screeched to a halt in trying to process what he was being told, looking back over his shoulder at Zack. "Pardon?"

"Just…" The teenager gestured at the scientists. "Clusterfuck. The whole thing is a clusterfuck of epic proportions. How did you think that would help?"

"Your opinion was neither requested nor wanted, SOLDIER," Hojo reminded him. "Much like your presence."

"Yeah well we can agree to mutually not like each other okay? Okay, great." Zack shook his head again, muttering.

Sephiroth was fairly sure it was 'clusterfuck' again, and somehow that seemed… fitting. "So. Jenova was thought to be a Cetra when Gast found her-"

"It," Hojo corrected. "It took a female form, yes, but Gast's wife referred to it as an it. It was not a Cetra, and It is certainly not human."

"What is Jenova, then?" Sephiroth asked, trying to have reason win out over the knee jerk reaction his emotions were trying to have.

"An alien - one could argue for a sentient virus, parasite, or shape shifter depending on perspective."

"It," Hojo stared at him, dark eyes narrowed. "Most certainly not your mother."

"And the woman you spoke of as my mother, Lucrecia. Why haven't I heard of her before?"

"You never asked." Hojo shook his head, exasperated. "She's gone, Sephiroth. You had no chance to know her, what was the point? What are you expecting from me? It's history, it doesn't matter. You are the same person now as you were walking through that door. The only difference is that you now know what was used to enhance you. And I hope you are intelligent enough to understand, as your friends failed to, that this different knowledge does not make you a different person."

Sephiroth considered that, not sure what he felt. Not exactly surprised, not after all this with Angeal and Genesis. The fact that Gast had lied to him, lied about that… "Did Professor Gast not get along with her?"

Hojo exhaled in an audible hiss, perhaps less so to the unenhanced but it drew the attention of all three Firsts. Still, his eyes remained fixed on Sephiroth. "I have no idea why he felt compelled to lie to you. I suppose I should be grateful, since it seems to be clearing up your mistaken hero worship. The fact that he just walked off one day should have been the first clue, but apparently defections don't bother you."

There was something he knew how to react to. The slight to Genesis and Angeal, regardless of how hurt and angry he still was, was something safe to focus on. "I assume you asked for us both for another reason than this discussion?"

"Yes, and with that out of the way we can now do something useful," Hojo said, giving Rayleigh a dark look.
"It's related," she disagreed. "I've been going through Dr. Hollander's work, primarily making outlines and transcriptions to speed up the collaboration. It's clear they both had the same starting point, the same access to materials and equipment and research, but only Hojo was successful. So while we try to pinpoint where Hollander went wrong, there might be benefit in comparing the differences between the two of you."

Hojo snorted, clearly not in favor, but Sephiroth had a lot of practice ignoring him. He considered her words for a moment, frowning. "You think there might be a solution to be found in my genetic code?"

"I think it might point us in the direction of one, yes." She met and held his gaze, blue eyes earnest. "I know this is an uncomfortable situation, but unless something better presents itself, I think this is something to look into. It can't cause any harm, and it might help."

"A valid point," he agreed quietly. It was refreshing to see someone actively wanting to help, out of concern on top of professionalism. Odd, but refreshing. "What is it you require, Doctor?"

Hojo rolled his eyes, a surprisingly childish gesture that caught the First's eye for the sheer novelty of it. When their gazes met, the professor arched a brow. "If you're actually going to be cooperative for testing, I imagine you could breeze through the same array of tests Hewley went through. In fact, if you're going to keep bringing your tag along as well, why not have him tested?"

"Baseline non-project First Class," Rayleigh mused. "There might be something to learn in the comparison. Are you willing to assist SOLDIER…?"

"SOLDIER First Class Zack Fair," he introduced himself, standing loosely at attention out of habit. "Anything I can do to help them, you just let me know."

Angeal frowned. "Zack-"

"It will be my honor to do right by my friends," Zack continued evenly, seeing the tiny flinch as his words struck home. "Just say the word, Doctor."

Rayleigh missed the byplay, but took his offer seriously. "Right. Well, I could run your tests while the Professor runs First Class Sephiroth's?"

"You guys are the professionals here." He shrugged slightly. "Lead on."

Sephiroth held still and silent while Hojo applied the monitors to his chest, the process the same as the one Angeal had gone through - and Zack, by his own volunteering, was going through now to his left. He watched the younger First, vaguely aware that he was chatting up the new scientist, but he couldn't bring himself to focus on that. Not when he had so much else to think about, and was trying not to be overwhelmed by it.

"Project S, led by Hojo and Dr. Crescent, named for the child it produced - you, Sephiroth."

Hollander's words echoed in his ears, refusing to be shaken from his mind.

_The premise Gast presented us with was using cell samples and DNA from Jenova before birth …_
Sephiroth wondered, briefly, how much more disturbing the information was when Genesis received it, degrading and mutated?

"An alien - one could argue for a sentient virus, parasite, or shape shifter depending on perspective. Most certainly not your mother."

The First closed his eyes a moment, mentally flashing from the moment of irritation that had boiled down from Hojo's anger that he'd been told such a thing, back to when he'd been but a boy. He couldn't have been much more than a toddler, to compare the view he had looking up at Gast, the old scientist kneeling in front of him, telling him that his mother had loved him dearly and her name was —

Why would you LIE to me? What purpose did it serve?

"So, how did Professor Gast's wife know Jenova wasn't a Cetra?" Zack's question was an immediate distraction, and Sephiroth was pleased to take it.

"She knew because Ifalna herself was a Cetra, and they passed down oral history from when the creature arrived," Hojo explained. His gloved hands were cool against Sephiroth's skin, bringing back memories that hadn't crossed his mind in years.

"Ifalna..." the name also triggered a memory long forgotten, a soft voice and long brown hair. Sad green eyes, the color of the lush flora of Wutai's jungles though he hadn't known at the time. And a little girl, younger than he was with eyes older than they should have been. "She had a daughter...?"

Hojo snorted softly, giving him a look Sephiroth couldn't quite interpret. "Of course you'd remember that much. Perhaps if I'd mentioned she was Gast's you would have been useful keeping track of her. Or at least found her after they ran off, since the Turks can't seem to manage that much."

"Can't imagine why someone wouldn't want to stick around with you, Professor, you're such a friendly guy."

Either Hojo didn't hear Zack's mutterings, or didn't care; either was possible, knowing him. It did make him smile, just a little, and he heard a huff of amusement from Angeal. His friend's eyes were dark, and when he met them Sephiroth recognized the emotion there with a jolt: worry.

Are you worried about me, Angeal? Why... ah, it was what he'd just heard, wasn't it? Angeal knew how Genesis had reacted, knew how he himself had reacted. Did he fear Sephiroth would react the same? It seemed the logical conclusion. Fear was how Angeal had continually reacted to the knowledge of the Jenova Project. Before, Sephiroth had called him on it, tried to stop the destructive cycle with logic. And now the tables were turned.

All at once, several things slotted into place. While he still felt conflicted emotionally, logic spoke up firmly, his own words echoing back in his mind.

Nothing they did makes you a monster, only your actions can lead to that.

Sephiroth had meant every word when he had spoken to Angeal. It would be the height of hypocrisy to ignore that, to pretend it didn't apply to him as well.

The question is not what you were born as, the question is who you are now.

Calm settled over him with that single point clear in his mind. No matter how disturbing his history, this was only new knowledge to Sephiroth himself. No matter the upheaval it caused him emotionally, physically nothing had changed. Only his mindset - he was still, on the most
fundamental level, the same man he had walked in as.

He hadn't let anyone tell him who he was since he'd been a child. He refused to step back into such a destructive habit.

_Whether or not you are genetically purely human, whatever was done to you before your birth, is irrelevant at the moment._

Sephiroth gave Angeal a level look, confidence returned in the face of clearer thought, and smiled faintly at his mix of surprise and relief. So, he had read the older SOLDIER correctly. Good. Perhaps now he had an even stronger advantage for reasoning with him; he would take that as a hidden blessing.

A sudden disruption of the background noises drew his attention, and Sephiroth followed the sound to see the readings for Zack's heart rate had spiked. A few deep breaths, the strict self-control of a SOLDIER, and the young First had it back to an even level. But there was something that had changed in his mood, something had gone cold and angry.

Clearly, Sephiroth had missed something while he was lost in his thoughts. Berating himself silently, he vowed to ask him later. For now, he would keep a closer eye on the testing. There would be time to talk with Angeal later.
The Last Ancient

Chapter Summary

It was ironic, having been hidden in plain sight for years by the silence of those tasked to find her, that Aerith Gainsborough would come back on ShinRa's radar by choice.

As soon as they were released from the testing, Zack made a beeline from headquarters down to the church in Sector Five; it didn't matter that he went straight there, he knew the Turks knew exactly where Aerith was. They'd probably always known, and he had no idea what that meant, why they'd never made a move on it to capture her. They knew he knew where she was, and he was sure it had been reported that he knew her heritage now.

It didn't matter. He couldn't stay away, knowing what he did now.

Her name? Erin, Aeris something of that nature. It wasn't important.

Maybe it wasn't important to Hojo, hopefully it wasn't important to Hojo, but it made Zack's heart lurch before he got himself under control. He'd seen Sephiroth give him a quick look of concern and did appreciate that, but his urgency about needing to leave had stalled any questions. Sephiroth let him go with a nod, not understanding the reason but respecting that he had one.

It meant a lot. Even through the tangle of anger and worry and need to see her Zack could be grateful for that. Later, he'd tell him. For now…

For now he managed to slow from a run to a jog to a quick walk as the church came into view. He didn't see Turks, but he was sure they were near. A sweep with enhanced senses pinpointed someone off to the left and he bared his teeth briefly in a silent snarl of warning.

Somehow, Aerith must have known he was there. She had risen from her flowers, watching him in concerned silence and embracing him when he came to take her into his arms. There were no questions, though he felt her hand slip under the blade mounted on his back to rub small, soothing circles. It was his sharp inhale that finally made her speak. "Zack? What's wrong?"

"Do you know about the Turks?" The words were a little muffled into her hair, because Zack couldn't make himself let her go yet. He told himself it helped, hiding himself from lip readers and keeping his words between them. But he let her pull back to look at him, green eyes searching before she smiled, reaching up to stroke his cheek gently. There was something in her eyes that told him she had known all along. "Aerith…"

"I know," she said gently, placing her other hand on his chest. "It's okay."

"It's not okay, it is so not okay that they - they watch you, for him!"

"Zack." Her hand moved from his cheek to his lips, her expression still so very gentle. "They've known where I was from the start. For years. And I'm still here."

The SOLDIER took a shallow breath, then forced himself to take a deeper one, letting her words sink in.
The Turks knew. This wasn't news to him, but he had to stop and really think about it once Aerith said it out loud. The Turks had known for years and never brought her in. In fact, it sounded like they'd even kept the information from Hojo, despite the orders being his.

He wet his lips, then blushed as he felt her fingers still there, but Aerith only giggled as she moved her hand. He wasn't sure what to make of her tender smile, after all this. There was a depth of knowledge and understanding that he'd missed somehow, after all this time. "Aerith, I…"

"Shh, come sit with me." There was no way she could have forced him to move, even ignoring his enhancements, just for how little she was in comparison. But he went without any resistance or hesitation, only watching her uncertainly. He didn't know what to say, but fortunately, she did. "How did it come up?"

Zack took her hand as soon as she rested it on his leg, lacing their fingers together. "Hojo talked about Jenova. There were some things he cleared up. He… gods, I don't even know what I can tell you. I don't want to put you in any more danger, they've left you alone so far….""

Aerith sighed quietly, squeezing his hand. "They have, yes. But sometimes the risk is worth it. I want to know about your friend. Maybe… maybe I can help."

The offer was tempting enough that Zack went as far as opening his mouth to speak before sense caught up to him. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask me, silly. I offered," she said, giving him a patient smile. "And that's my right. I know what's at stake, Zack. I wasn't so young then not to remember some things; I'm not going into this blindly."

Zack was silent a moment before he managed a hesitant smile. "What happened to SOLDIERs being scary?"

Aerith chuckled, squeezing his hand. "I met one, and he was the sweetest thing."

He laughed quietly. "I dunno, I think you're the sweetest. Maybe second sweetest?"

"Sweetest guy," she compromised. "No arguing, I know these things."

"Alright Ms. Smarty," Zack swung their hands lightly, biting his lip a moment. "So, Hypothetically, if you were going to help… you'd probably have to come Plateside. The Turks would absolutely know and have to report it. You'd have to deal with the Science Department. I can't guarantee your safety, Aerith, as much as I want to, I can't promise—"

"I'm not asking you to do anything but let me try," she said, getting up. "Come here, let me show you something."

"Huh?"

"Back this way, by the altar." Aerith gestured ahead, leading him in a weaving path around the patch of dirt and flowers. She let go once they were in the back, kneeling to get a wooden staff. "This is mine."

Zack made a quiet sound, taking it gently when she handed it over and moving it through a few careful spins and strikes. "Not bad. I didn't know you had this."

"I usually only bring it when I'll be out towards dusk and nightfall," she explained. "You wouldn't have seen. But I know how to use it."
"Yeah?" Zack looked at her, frowning a little. "You've had experience, then."

"I haven't gone to war, or fought my way across the Planet on high priority missions, but I can defend myself. I'm decent with a staff, even better with materia - I saved up and bought one that actually does things." Aerith was hoping he'd smile at the mention, and sighed when he didn't. "Zack, I'm a young woman walking the Slums on my own; of course I've learned to defend myself. Besides, the staff is pretty."

"I just hate that you need it to even get around here - this isn't the backwoods, it's a big city!" Zack shook his head, handing the staff back and running his hands through his hair. It wasn't like it was going to stand up more. "Sorry, I know that doesn't help."

"No it doesn't, but I understand." She twirled the wooden staff slowly in her hands, watching it move before setting it down on its end. "So hypothetically, if I came with you, I'd need to pack bags because I'm pretty sure I can't wear anything you boys would have. And have a place to stay there, because that's a pretty long commute, and also because you'd want to keep an eye on me."

"Right… which would mean arranging for escorts, and some kind of security thing…" Zack rubbed his neck, pacing a small square. "Someone to guard you. Because while you might be fine against other civilians, there are plenty of dangerous people - not just SOLDIER. Honestly, I'm not even worried about SOLDIER. Turks, army… those worry me."

"Caution is definitely called for," Aerith agreed quietly, watching him pace. "Is Tseng in Midgar?"

"Tseng?" Zack looked at her, baffled, but nodded slowly. "Yeah, he is unless they just shipped him out. And I think I'd have heard about anything that would call for him to move out right now."

"Then we'll talk to him later. I've known him a while." She smiled, shaking her head. "Well, as much as anyone outside the Turks knows someone inside."

Zack snorted softly, nodding. "Yeah, I get that. Sometimes I think the suit smothers him and takes over, but don't tell him I said that."

Aerith giggled, shaking her head. "You're terrible."

"You don't sound like you mind that one bit," he noticed, grinning.

"It's part of your rogish charm," she teased, green eyes soft and fond. "So. Do you think you can let me help?"

Zack frowned, reaching to cup her cheek gently. "You really want to do this, huh?"

"I really do." She leaned into the touch. "And I really think I can help. I think maybe that's what the Planet has been trying to tell me, what I need to do."

"You talk to the Planet?" His gaze drifted to the flowers. "That's why they grow for you, isn't it? Despite the reactors killing everything else off."

"I think so," Aerith admitted. "There are some things I do - the plants, healing, knowing things - there's so much my mother wasn't able to teach me, there wasn't time, but some of it I know. And doing this feels right."

Zack stared at her a long moment in silence, sighing quietly. "Let me call a friend first, okay?"

The smile she gave him helped ease some of the tightness in his chest. "Go on, then."
He nodded, getting his PHS out and hitting one of the speed dials. A familiar baritone answered and he braced himself. "Sephiroth? I need your help."
Chapter Summary

SOLDIER was never a large force, and they're at the lowest number of operatives since the beginning of the program. But the ones that are left are ready to rally around each other, no matter what the rest of ShinRa has planned.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 4 of To Be Human: On The Side takes place directly after this chapter, covering the discussion between Sephiroth and Hojo.

Sephiroth wasn't entirely sure what to make of Zack's request. The fact that he had known Gast and Ifalna's daughter, the last known Ancient - though to be fair, Zack hadn't known that - was mind boggling. The thought that perhaps her inherited abilities might be able to help somewhat with the damages caused by the Jenova cells… he didn't want to get caught up in hope, but some of it lingered anyway.

He understood the need to keep her under guard, even beyond Zack's worries simply because she was a civilian, and once the younger First had suggested a group of trustworthy SOLDIERs, he called them together. Three of the Seconds were able to come immediately and all looked serious when he came into the room, doubtlessly having received a brief message from Zack themselves; they were already clearly committed.

"SOLDIERs, as you clearly know, Zack has asked a very important favor. I am here in the capacity as a senior First Class to tell you to consider this essentially an order; Ms. Gainsborough is now to be under SOLDIER protection. I will speak with Director Lazard and handle that end myself, but consider the matter already settled." He scanned the group, smiling grimly at their ready nods. "I appreciate your dedication and loyalty, particularly in this difficult time. As I understand it, two of you are just coming back from postings out of the city and have seen action, so arrangements will be made for you to get sufficient rest before taking a turn as escorts. When that time comes, I will see to it that you receive a more thorough briefing on the current affairs. Some information is highly classified, but I have reason to believe a perusal of your files will justify advancing your clearance in return for your help."

"Sir, whatever you're comfortable with is enough." One of the brunets - Sebastian Carne, he believed - spoke up, quiet but earnest. He still seemed a bit tired, but given he'd come in from a mission and walked right into the mess in Junon, Sephiroth found that perfectly reasonable. "Zack wouldn't ask this if it wasn't important."

"And you wouldn't back him up," Kunsel added. He in particular knew how much they had to deal with already, putting him in a unique position to understand. "I'll help with the first watch and go down to meet them."

Sephiroth nodded. "I don't want to draw attention to her arrival with my own presence, and have
some individuals to speak with first anyway, so that will work well. While I'm certain the Turks already have a measure of awareness of the general situation, I'll be making sure our position as a unified force is clear. I'll also handle updating the Professor.

Kunsel was already nodding, clearly putting enough of it together to understand the basic situation.

The other two exchanged a look, the second one speaking up. "Whatever's going down, sir, SOLDIER sticks together. I may not have the range of contacts Kunsel does, but everyone I've spoken with is behind you and the commander. Even the newbies without too much familiarity with him would do it for Zack, but most of the Seconds remember what kind of man Hewley was. Rhapsodos, too."

Sephiroth felt a surprising burst of warmth at the unexpected words, smiling a little at the clear support. He placed the man's name in another moment, Essai Monk, the one Kunsel in particular had wanted to ask about Junon. "Thank you. I realize the situation has been unfortunate, particularly with Genesis, so your words mean a great deal."

"With all due respect, there are clones of the guy, not even going into the thing with the wings and the reports of how sick Commander Rhapsodos looks," Sebastian said bluntly. "We may not know what's going on, but it's really obvious that wasn't an ordinary defection. Something is seriously wrong, and we're pretty sure the blame isn't entirely on either of them."

"Yeah, this has 'Science Department shit' written all over it." Essai winced as his own words registered, giving them an apologetic look. "Sorry, haven't had coffee in a few hours - wanted to try and sleep - so brain-to-mouth filter is compromised."

Sephiroth chuckled softly. "No need. That's… quite an apt description. And your words make sense, though I hadn't considered that end of the situation in-depth yet."

"There's also the point of all the people who left with Rhapsodos," Sebastian pointed out. "That was the entire squad of SOLDIER he was assigned to, and a couple others nearby. I'm pretty sure some army left too. Even with his strength, you can't strong arm that many, not without someone managing a distress call back to base or even HQ."

The First considered the implications of that, eyes widening minutely. "You believe they joined him willingly."

"I served under him more than once, sir; he's a bit of a diva with major temper issues and he's hell to train under, but Rhapsodos was also the best healer we had and took damn good care of us. There was a saying that no one got to kick our asses but him." Sebastian's smile was fond. "Maybe people who didn't work with him would be inclined to write him off, but once you'd been with him for a mission or two he had a way of inspiring loyalty and keeping it."

"Genesis was also particularly charismatic," Kunsel pointed out. "Very persuasive, not just in the rumored 'fear me' way either. But you've seen that."

"His successes were why Angeal and I were particularly in favor of him leading the greater forces while I made smaller sweeps, towards the end," Sephiroth said quietly, considering the new information. He knew Genesis as a friend, of course, and a peer. But he hadn't seen him through the eyes of the lower classes until now. It was enlightening. "I greatly appreciate your insights."

"If you're trying to bring Rhapsodos back into the fold, maybe some of us can spread it around our higher ranks first. You'll have more support than I think you're expecting." Sebastian's smile was encouraging. "We're an even smaller force than we were to start. It's kind of an unspoken rule that
we have to look out for each other even more than before, especially with not really knowing what's going on for the grand scale."

Sephiroth nodded, eyes straying to Kunsel immediately and feeling encouraged by his quick nod of agreement. "I'll take your advice under immediate consideration and keep you informed."

"Thanks."

"Nice to think we'll get more of the big picture," Essai said, yawning against his fist. "Nngh, sorry."

Sephiroth shook his head at the apology, more than able to sympathize; there was never enough time to rest lately. "I think we've covered enough of the basics. After I speak with Zack, I'll send you further notice on the situation and your part in it."

"Mission received and accepted," the weary brunet said. "I'm gonna go hit the showers while I can stand upright, and then get to bed."

"Try not to conk out and crack your head on the tiles," Sebastian teased, easily moving out of the way of a halfhearted swat. "We'll see you later, then."

"Take care, guys. And you get some rest too, Seb." Kunsel pointed at him, though his smile took any bite out of the firm words.

"Sir yes sir," he quipped, giving him a cheeky salute.

The pair left together, leaving Kunsel and Sephiroth alone. For a long moment there was silence before Kunsel spoke. "I'll talk with Zack about getting the word out, maybe see if Cloud knows anything about how the army feels. They're pretty divided in general when it comes to us, but any help is a plus right now. The more weight we can pull, the more weight we've got if the board gets fussy."

Sephiroth nodded slowly in agreement. "I regret I hadn't considered that sooner. It's dangerously easy to feel isolated, with the difference in my relationship with them both, compared to how the rest of SOLDIER have interacted."

Kunsel nodded, half turning to face him; even with the helmet on, he could still see the small smile touching his lips and hear it in his voice. "It's better to work together on it. This would be crazy to try and handle alone; that kind of pressure breaks people after too long. Even you need rest. Especially you right now, with Angeal to manage."

Sephiroth huffed a quiet laugh, inclining his head in mute agreement. "I would, if I had to. But it's nice to know I don't."

Their phones chimed in unison, and it was easy to guess who it was. "That would be Zack. We'd best move."

Kunsel nodded. "Good luck with the Turks, Sephiroth."

Sephiroth nodded, though he felt a small, grim smile curve his lips. "I imagine after this conversation, it will be a bit easier. But I appreciate the intent. I'll be in touch once I finish."

"Great. Pretty sure we're taking her up to Zack's room for the better security, but I'll let you know.
Perhaps it was due to his own information gathering that Tseng agreed so readily to meet with Sephiroth, despite the fact that with Veld stuck in Junon, the Second in Command of the Turks was doubtlessly even busier than before.

While he had a professionally neutral expression, Sephiroth quickly picked up a sense that the man was unquestionably on guard. Perhaps wisely so.

"Tseng."

"Sephiroth." He inclined his head back towards his office. "If you don't mind, I'd appreciate having this conversation in a more discrete location."

Sephiroth nodded in understanding "Certainly."

Tseng glanced aside at Reno, a silent exchange passing between the two Turks before he turned and led Sephiroth back to his office. He gestured for him to close the door, moving to get a mug from his desk. "I suppose I should have offered you coffee, but I have a feeling you would rather get to the point."

"I think that's wisest, as I'm sure your hands are quite full at the moment." Sephiroth took a seat with a whisper of leather, watching the other man a moment. "That isn't coffee."

"Ah, yes, your senses would tell you," Tseng mused quietly. "Tea, Yerba mate more specifically. I'm going to need enough caffeine I would rather not expose myself to the guarantee of shakes with that much coffee."

Sephiroth made a thoughtful sound, nodding slightly. "A wise decision. I take it Veld will be in Junon for some time yet."

Tseng didn't glance away from his drink as he took a sip and tended it a moment, tone even. "It's variable, depending on how quickly he can persuade the President to return."

Sephiroth considered offering his condolences, having experience on guard duty for the President himself, but let it lie after a moment's consideration. Instead of any further conversation, he waited for Tseng to finish in silence.

For some reason, he thought the fleeting smile that crossed the Turk's lips was related. After a moment, Tseng spoke.

"I imagine you're here to speak with me about Ms. Gainsborough."

Sephiroth nodded. "You would be correct. I'm sure by now you're aware of her relationship with Zack."

"I am, yes." He sipped at his tea, the gesture combining with his mild tone to create a deceptively unaffected appearance.

Sephiroth was nearly certain that was a ruse. After so long refusing to bring her in, years of effort on their part had potentially been undone in one moment; that couldn't have been so easy to take in stride. Whether or not that would make Tseng more receptive to his next words remained to be seen.

"You are also particularly aware of the situation in SOLDIER." He was given another nod of acknowledgment and waited in silence until Tseng met his eyes. Sephiroth held his gaze a moment
until he could feel tension rise in the room, quiet baritone cutting the silence all the more effectively. "Ms. Gainsborough is coming in to try and help Angeal, as well as Genesis should she be successful. I am aware that the Turks have known her location for years, yet not brought her in despite very clear orders. It is also our wish that she remains safe. I like to think we will continue to work as allies in this too."

Tseng took his time considering that, dark eyes staring back for a long moment before he blinked slowly and glanced down at his cup. "The Professor may take exception to that plan, Sephiroth."

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed slightly. "I will be speaking to the Professor regarding her voluntary assistance, and what that does and does not mean."

"And you think you'll sway him?" The Turk sounded genuinely curious.

Sephiroth offered him a small, mirthless smile. "It seems my requests have unexpected weight with Hojo. Should a request not be enough, however, I'm certain I can find more persuasive means."

Tseng's answering smile was grim, acknowledging the unsaid. "You're very serious about what you've said before, what steps you would take for those you care for. There are those who may attempt to call your bluff."

The SOLDIER didn't try to resist a quiet chuckle, finding the concept oddly amusing. "Do you believe I'm bluffing, Tseng?"

Tseng shook his head slightly, glancing up at him. "You've already defied explicit orders on multiple occasions, as well as deliberately interfering with the mission of another First Class to be sure things went the way you wanted. I don't believe you are bluffing, or threatening at this point."

Sephiroth arched a brow, interested in the choice of words. "And what do you think I'm doing?"

"You are a very straightforward man, Sephiroth. You've never been one for posturing, and only reluctantly gone along with the requests from Public Relations - and there too you draw a line," Tseng said. "All you're doing now is stating your intent, let it be perceived and interpreted as others may; simple fact, with little concern if you're taken seriously. You fully believe, if it comes to it, you will not only stand by your words but be able to carry them through."

"Hn." Sephiroth regarded him a long moment. "And how is your department inclined to handle that information?"

Tseng mirrored his earlier gesture, arching a brow even as he shrugged. "Above all, it can be said that the Turks exist to protect the interests of the company. I think it's very clear that it is the best interest of the company to cooperate with you."

Satisfied, Sephiroth rose from his seat. "I'm glad we're still on the same page, Tseng. I would much rather be allies."

The soft sound from the other man was quiet possibly a laugh. "I assure you, we agree. I'll see about sending you an operative to accompany your guard for Ms. Gainsborough. Some dangers are far more suited for us to handle."

Sephiroth nodded. "My thanks."

Tseng watched Sephiroth go before settling in at his computer. Veld was going to need updated on this development immediately.
Chapter Summary

It was strange, but after everything that had happened, she wasn't the one who was scared.

Zack took his time escorting Aerith from the train, pausing to let her marvel at the sky. It made his throat go tight to think that Midgar's gloomy version was the first she could remember seeing, but her awe still made him smile a little. "Not so scary?"

Aerith finally looked back to him, offering a warm smile. "Not with you."

That finally coaxed out a grin, Zack slipping an arm around her for a gentle squeeze. "I'll do everything I can to keep you safe. Even if I can't be there, I've got some friends together-"

"Zack," she interrupted, leaning against him a little. "Don't fuss. I'll be alright."

He wanted to argue that, to remind her of just how dangerous all of this was, but there was a familiar figure in purple coming their way. For now, it could wait. "Hey, Kusel!"

His friend waved, coming to a stop on Zack's side, giving Aerith a bubble of personal space to adjust to him. "SOLDIER Second Class Kusel James. Pleased to finally meet you in person."

Aerith kept her same little smile, a brow arching. "Me too… how do you see out of that?"

Kusel laughed. "Lots of dedicated practice. Some people don't wear them - it's a choice of if you'd rather the wider range of sight and risk no head protection or not."

"Or to be sneaky and unnoticed or not," Zack added pointedly.

"Me being sneaky and unnoticed has been in our favor more than once, mister." Kusel pointed a finger at him, grinning. "Anyway, are we heading for HQ now? Sai and Seb are getting some very needed rest, and Sephiroth's having a little talk with some other people, but I'm pretty sure Cloud's still up at your place."

Zack nodded, relieved to have the update and grateful that Kusel kept it sounding so casual. He hugged Aerith again and tried to remind himself that no matter how little and delicate she felt against him, his girlfriend had a will of steel and was a lot stronger than he'd expected. "Yeah, I think we're ready. Aer?"

Aerith lifted her chin, green eyes tracking unerringly to the building looming in the distance. "Lead on, boys."

Somehow, Aerith had expected to be more afraid.
She could feel the building, aware of it in a way that she'd always been able to dismiss as background noise before. Or no, considering the two SOLDIERs with her, she had to admit that they were what she felt. Something in the treatment that made SOLDIERs resonated with her, bumping against her senses uncomfortably. It was like seeing some creature in the wild, the acute awareness that it was deadly and able to exert lethal force the moment it decided to, without warning. There was a natural wariness, but the same sense she'd developed to tell her that the beasts were not always a danger to her stayed with her now. There was absolutely danger here, thrumming within every SOLDIER they passed, even the ones in the pale blue uniforms who had to be the lower levels. But it wasn't immediate danger, and with a First Class keeping an arm around her, it was as good as having the protection of one of the alpha predators.

Aerith was certain Zack wouldn't take any comfort from the comparison, might even be hurt, and kept it to herself. Just knowing was enough for her.

"It's so big. You're going to have to tell me more, you know," she pointed out, leaning a bit more against Zack in the elevator and feeling a tiny bit of tension leech out of his frame. It was a start.

"Kunsel can make you an infographic or something I'm sure. Or a chart maybe."

"Oh sure, have me do it." Despite the words, Kunsel clearly didn't begrudge him. They were both well aware it was a task far better suited to him anyway. "You'll get to meet some people you've probably heard about soon anyway."

"Face to face, even?"

Kunsel laughed. "Face to face, even. I'll take the helmet off when we get to Zack's - I like having it on when I'm out in uniform. It doesn't feel quite right otherwise."

"Yeah, the last thing anyone needs is to be off balance," Zack agreed, trying to dial down his senses. He hadn't felt this on edge in a while, and given the stuff they'd been through recently, that said a lot.

"It's going to be fine," Aerith said, turning to face him. "Zack? Look at me."

"Yeah?" Something about those eyes could keep Zack's attention far longer than they should have, especially with the little smile on her lips. "What?"

"It's going to be fine." Aerith touched a hand to his chest, letting it rest over his heart. It was probably her imagination that she could feel his heart pounding, but she could tell he was nervous. "Don't worry so much, okay?"

"There's not an on-off switch for that, sorry." He placed a hand over hers, sighing quietly. "I'm working on it. That's the best I can do right now."

"That's all I'd ever ask," she said, tone gentle. She'd come because she wanted to help Zack's friends - the Planet wanted it too, but she did even more - and she knew that would help. But somehow Aerith hadn't realized how much he still just needed someone to be there and remind him he was strong.

Zack sighed again, closing his eyes. "How do you always know what to say?"

"I don't," she admitted. "I'm just honest, and I care. And I think that's probably what you need right now."

Zack made a quiet sound, holding her a little closer. She was probably right, after everything that had happened. It was more than refreshing, it was a relief. "Thank you."
Aerith set her bag down and hugged him until the elevator bobbed to a stop with a quiet chime. "Our stop?"

"Yep." Kunsel took her bag, shaking his head when she went to protest. "It's the least I can do. You're already making a difference."

She smiled a little at that, nodding and staying close to Zack as they stepped out. The feelings that had been around all the SOLDIERs they passed were much stronger, one like a beacon down the hall. It felt wrong, and she had a terrible feeling that was Zack's mentor. She would see in time, but for now there were other things. Like the apartment she was being led to, Zack swiping his card so the door would open for them.

Her first thought was that the place smelled like Zack; it was clean and fresh with an undertone of spice and wild that made her think he'd been running around where plants could grow without her coaxing. She could see a living space, and what was probably a kitchen off to the left given the little nook by it for eating. There were other rooms further in that she would guess as bedrooms and a bathroom, probably, but it was hard to tell.

"Well, let me show you where I've got you set up... actually, let me introduce you to Cloud first, if he's awake...." Zack kissed her cheek and took a moment to get his boots off, heading further in with an absent gesture. "You can explore or sit or whatever. Be right back."

Kunsel snorted softly, amused, and took his helmet off. "He's got way too much to handle right now."

"At least he's not hovering?" She glanced at the blond, giggling as he tried to finger comb his hair out.

Kunsel arched a brow at her, amused. "That bad, huh?"

"No no! Just... I think I know why Zack doesn't wear his is all," she said, and her impish grin made him grin back.

"Are you two being horrible together?" The man in question came back, looking pleased even though his words could be taken as an accusation; it was clear he was happy they were getting along well already. "That just figures. You telling her stories about me, Kuns?"

"Not yet," Kunsel said. "I'll get there. Is Cloud alright?"

"Yeah, he's up - just moving slow. He went through a lot." Zack frowned, looking back a moment before physically shaking himself as if he could shrug the worry off. "Anyway, let me get you settled, Aerith. It's right back here, I made sure the sheets are fresh and all that."

It was easy for her to figure out where she was being put, looking in on the bedroom done up in greens and blues, empty hooks up on the wall for a harness to hang and a sword to rest, and a duffle bag tucked against a low set of lockers as if the owner had to be ready to leave at any moment. Knowing even as little as she did, Aerith was sure that was a correct guess. Even without those hints, though, it was clearer to her than maybe anyone else; his scent was even stronger, a lingering imprint of energy that SOLDIERs probably took for granted.

She was already shaking her head, frowning. "I'm not booting you out of your bed, Zack."

"Of course you're not, I'm giving it to you," Zack said, not at all seeming surprised by her protest. "I can sleep just fine on the couch, it has a pull-out bed. And no, I'm not putting my girlfriend on the couch. I may be a country bumpkin, but my ma raised me well enough to know better
than that. She'd tan my hide if I let you, even; you don't want her to tan my hide, do you? She'd have to come all the way from Gongaga and then she'd have to wait with the receptionist and come all the way up here and-

"Zack Fair you stop that," she chided, giggling despite her attempts to be firm with him. She knew for a fact that Zack was using the long string of increasingly fast babble to persuade her and wondered how and when he'd learned to use his abundance of energy to get people to give in to what he wanted just to make him stop. "I am not kicking you out of your bed."

There was a flicker of surprise that his tactic didn't work on her, and she was torn between being smug and sad that he had reason to be so sure it would. He recovered quickly all the same. "Aerith, I promise you, it's not a problem. I've slept on a whole lot worse than a pull-out bed. It's even nicer than what I slept on as a cadet."

"But not nice enough to put me on?" She pressed. "And is it even long enough? You're tall."

"Not that tall, you're just… little." Zack's smile gentled, something warm and soft in his expression. "I'd feel better with you here. Please."

He just had to say 'please' like that, and look so incredibly relieved and grateful when she nodded. Aerith had a sudden feeling that there was more to this than just making sure she had a nice place to sleep. "Okay, if you insist."

"Thanks."

"Thanks." Zack stepped closer, kissing her forehead on impulse and steering her in with a gentle touch to the small of her back. "It's got an attached bathroom, too, which is nice. They like to bribe their Firsts to behave in Midgar or something."

"Maybe they should have tried baked goods," she mused, peeking around as encouraged. "It is very nice, though. Thank you."

"More than welcome," he assured her softly. "There's locks on both doors. I don't think you'll ever need them, but…"

There was understanding in Kunsel's eyes a moment before it dawned on Aerith; he was putting himself between her and the front door - between her and anyone who might come for her. Touched and a bit sad he was still so worried, she moved over to hug him without another word, resting her head on his chest and rubbing little circles on his back until she felt strong arms slip around her. He held her close like something precious, as tight as he dared yet still just a fraction of the strength she knew he had. If it came down to it, she had no doubt he'd bring full force to bear to protect her, and everyone else he held dear.

"Why don't you introduce me to your friend, hm? I should get to know all my guards."

Zack laughed softly, squeezing her and leaning back to look at her for a long moment. She wasn't sure what he was searching for, but he must have found it because he relaxed considerably more.

"Yeah, come on. Cloud's here for right now, and I'll call Sephiroth to see what's up on his end before we go anywhere."
As busy as Tseng was as Acting-Director in Veld's absence, he *made* time to meet with Aerith and Zack. The fact that he called ahead and did so on the First's terms, in his quarters, said a lot about how sincerely he meant his cooperation to be and likely had a great deal to do with why the Gongagan had a more neutral air.

The fact that he'd brought Cissnei was also likely in his favor, though the younger Turk didn't speak at first beyond a small smile and a wave.

"I can't say I would have ever chosen to create this situation myself, but had I known indulging your healer's tendencies would persuade you to return we might have had better protocols in place by now," he said mildly, smiling a little when Aerith arched a brow at him with a rather unimpressed look. He'd known her long enough to detect a glimmer of amusement, however. Reaching into his pocket, he removed a small device no bigger than a pen, rolling it across the coffee table to Kunsel and waiting for the Second to examine it. His instinct paid off when mako eyes darted his way in surprise.

"A signal scrambler?" He looked it over carefully again, tracing nearly invisible seams in the casing with the same attention to detail that had made him so valuable in helping them map out some of the problems lately. It was obvious he'd put together the purpose of the gift, and just as clear that he was rightly suspicious. "To disable any monitoring devices."

Tseng nodded, settling back in the chair he'd been offered. "Veld's suggestion. While I can't verify for certain just what finding out about this situation did to his blood pressure, I very seriously doubt it was kind."

Aerith giggled, shaking her head. "He's not here, is he?"

"No, or he'd have found a way to meet you personally." Tseng chose his words with care. "I believe Sephiroth said it best, that it would be far better we be allies. Indeed, one could say that it's our job to maintain good relations for the sake of the company. That said, there is more to ShinRa than SOLDIER and Turks."

It went without saying that some of the other parties were very powerful with dangerously wide spheres of influence, and both of their departments might well find themselves in difficult situations soon. But they'd known that from the moment Sephiroth had overridden the President's order and forced Angeal to return. This really wasn't that big of a step forward right now, with AVALANCHE and Genesis still at large.

Zack was watching him with a small frown, normally expressive eyes unreadable for once as Kunsel handed him the slim device. "What's the range of this thing?"

"Thirty foot radius," Cissnei reported. "Of course if you use it, even if people don't know what was blacked out, there's still a blank space that says something happened then."
"Which will make people more inclined to look for other hints, right." Zack looked at it a moment longer before looking at her. "Goes through all materials? What could short it out?"

"You could break it easy enough, it's not meant to hold against SOLDIER strength," she said. "But against unenhanced, it's fairly durable. You're not going to break it with a drop out of your pocket, even down a couple stories. It's waterproof, fireproof up until some particularly high temperatures that probably would destroy any monitoring devices anyway. Watch the thunder, though."

"Right. So a step or so below a SOLDIER-issue PHS, but around the range of the laptops they have for us," he said.

"Not that anyone here would ever cast magic around delicate computers," Kunsel drawled, giving his friend a look that broke a little of the tension with the quick smile it earned. "How long does it last, assuming it's charged up?"

"That particular model defaults to ten minutes coverage before switching off." Which was certainly a step beyond what would normally be shared outside the department, far beyond anything normally handed out without strict limit on how long the outside party was allowed to keep it. But he couldn't argue with Veld in this case even if he was inclined to, and the gesture seemed appreciated. He'd definitely meant what he'd said about wanting to remain allies with SOLDIER.

"Ten minutes, no audio or visual monitoring within a thirty foot radius," Zack repeated thoughtfully, looking it over. "Switch activation here?"

"Mmmhm. A little blue light will come on right above." Cissnei didn't move from her spot by Tseng, but Zack found it on his own anyway. "I'm going to stay on as your primary Turk attache. We figure women would be best… there's places you boys shouldn't be going, after all."

Zack snorted softly, glancing at Aerith. "You okay with that?"

"She has a good point," Aerith said, green eyes gleaming with amusement. "There are places I don't really want you, Zack."

"Alright, I get that." Zack smiled ruefully. "Let's keep the reasons your ma wants to kill me to a minimum."

"She's not allowed to kill you," she said firmly. "But yes, let's not make a reason to fuss. A Turk shadow isn't new, after all."

Tseng was far too practiced dealing with darker looks from more intimidating people than Zack Fair to even bat an eye at the look the reminder got him. "I'm glad that's settled, then. Obviously I'm not going to be able to be here as often as I would have were the Director not tied up in Junon, but we'll be in touch."

"Of course." Aerith offered him a small but genuine smile. "I assume you're keeping an eye on my mother?"

He arched a brow at the presumption, but couldn't argue it. "Measures have been taken to keep an eye on her, yes."

"Thank you." She'd hoped, but it was still nice to hear.

Tseng nodded, weighing his words. He'd always been fond of Aerith, and the situation didn't sit well with him. But he did have to admit that in this one instance, SOLDIER might have the advantage to protect her. After all, they had considerably less to lose.
"Contact me if you need my assistance sooner." Tseng rose, nodding to the SOLDIERs and briefly resting a hand on Cissnei's shoulder. She smiled sweetly, but there was steel to match any SOLDIER's blade in her eyes, which was what he needed to turn to leave with good conscience.

"Tseng?"

He glanced back at Aerith, curious to have her call out to him of all people. "Yes?"

She looked at him for a long moment, green eyes more intense than he honestly felt comfortable with. There was a knowing there that always put him on edge, even though she was legitimately a sweet young lady. "Thank you."

The unexpected words made him smile a little, feeling strangely lighter for them. "Of course. Be safe, Aerith."

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Zack wasn't sure how he felt about Tseng's visit, and had to stop himself from overthinking it. It helped when Cloud came out, tired but clearly wanting to be supportive. Maybe they hadn't known each other long enough that he should be so quick to trust, what with how things had gone with even Angeal who he'd known - thought he'd known well - for years. But there was something in those earnest blue eyes that told him it was okay.

Balancing being on guard and not winding himself up more than he had to was a lot harder than it should have been.

"Hey, Cloud! Good to see you're up and about. Let me introduce you - you probably saw Cissnei around, Tseng wanted a Turk up here to help." He kept the explanation light, but was pleased to see the thoughtful look Cloud gave her; the trooper didn't really have the clearance for this mess, but he was adjusting quickly. "And this is Aerith."

Cloud's smile turned a little shy as he nodded to her. "Hi. It's nice to meet you."

"You too. It's nice to get to meet all of Zack's friends."

"Well, you'll have to wait for a few of them," Zack said. "But Sephiroth should be up soon, and then we can go meet Angeal."

"He's staying alone in Sephiroth's quarters?" Cissnei didn't let anything but curiosity show in her voice, but Zack knew she had to be concerned. This was a first since they'd brought him home, after all.

"Yeah, he's getting some more rest before they have to go deal with the Science Department again." It wasn't a situation he felt very comfortable with yet, but he did know Angeal needed to catch up on rest as often as he could. Getting to see him without the charged atmosphere where he had to worry about it devolving into a violent confrontation at any moment had made it clear that Angeal really wasn't doing well.

"Will that be soon?" Aerith frowned. "I was hoping to meet them first."

"I think Sephiroth wanted you to be able to meet him today," Kunsel said. "It depends how late they keep him. He and Tseng obviously finished quickly, but the Professor will probably take longer."
"Hojo does seem more inclined to talk when it's Sephiroth," Cissnei agreed.

"Lucky him." Whatever else Zack had been going to say stopped when he saw Aerith look away, her eyes widening slightly. "Aerith?"

She didn't respond, staring off towards the front of the apartment, eyes tracking something they couldn't see until she was looking at the door.

A breath later, there was a familiar double knock.

"Well, I guess you'll get to meet Sephiroth after all…" Unsure what to make of her reaction - it had to be to Sephiroth, somehow - Zack got up slowly and went to let his friend in.
Chapter Summary

Over two thousand years had passed, but the Cetra and Jenova wouldn't let their war be forgotten.

It had been hard to hear the Planet the further they got away from the ground, Midgar's Plate only a surface under their feet where the Lifestream was a rare whisper as it was all pumped out into mako.

Hearing it all come rushing back, louder than she'd ever heard without actively listening when she was working her hands deep into the soil, took Aerith's breath away. It was dizzying in intensity, the conflicted feelings that weren't hers feeding into her as she tracked the powerful presence beyond the walls of Zack's apartment. This one was strong, stronger than Zack, stronger than the one at the end of the hall that had to be his mentor.

Sephiroth.

He had that same wrongness, but it was quieter; not active, just... there. Waiting.

Then the door opened, and she found herself staring into green eyes that the propaganda posters hadn't done justice to.

"Ms. Gainsborough?" His voice was quiet, cautious.

"Aerith," she corrected quietly, trying to ignore the rising clamor she couldn't understand.

"Aerith." Sephiroth accepted the correction, nodding slightly. "I'm glad to see you made it here safely."

"I have a very good guard," she pointed out, mouth dry.

"One of the best people you could have at your back, certainly." He looked away, a small smile curving his lips when he looked at Zack.

The break in eye-contact quieted the Planet's uproar to a dull roar she could focus beyond, catching her breath. "The best."

"Aww, you guys better watch it, that sort of stuff goes to a guy's head."

A quick look said Zack had seen her reaction and was baffled but not planning to call her out on it. At least not yet, for which she was grateful. Right now, Aerith wasn't sure what she'd tell him.

There was a little tension around Sephiroth's eyes now, and she wondered if maybe he'd felt it too.
He could feel her.

There was a place deep within him, where Sephiroth had always been able to feel Angeal and Genesis in a way he'd never understood and never bothered to question, and that same place resonated with her presence. But where there was a draw to the other SOLDIERs, he felt something else with her. Not repulsion, not quite, but a much more pronounced sense of Other. Knowing what he did now, he supposed that was a reasonable response.

"I spoke with Hojo," he said, choosing not to address it just yet.

Zack's attention fixed on him immediately. "And?"

"While I wouldn't suggest Aerith travel alone, I don't think Hojo himself will be a problem." Sephiroth watched the different ways that was taken, thoughtfulness, suspicion and wary relief.

"Who do you think will be a problem?" Kunsel asked.

Sephiroth appreciated the Second's eye for details. "He pointed out that the push for the order to bring her in, while sent to his supervision, came from the President himself."

"The Promised Land," Aerith murmured, shaking her head. "It's not something he can just find. It doesn't exist the way he wants it to. Even if I wanted to lead him there, I couldn't."

Zack took her hand, lacing their fingers together for a light squeeze. "So. Hojo's not an immediate problem, at least not of his own doing. What about Hollander? I'm pretty sure he'd still do anything to one-up Hojo."

"A reasonable assumption, and not one I'd readily disagree with," Sephiroth said. "He's under surveillance, but for now that's the best we can do."

"Under heavy surveillance." Cissnei shrugged as their attention switched to her. "As you've pointed out, we've 'failed' to locate Aerith all this time. The Turks have plenty to lose in this if the President catches on. Fortunately, he's occupied in Junon, and likely to be gone long enough for us to focus on getting things into order."

"I'd have warned you, but it was something of a snap decision," Aerith said. It wasn't really an apology; she had no regrets and they were on a strict time schedule, but she did feel bad for the pinch she'd put her suited guardians through. Zack's hand tightened around hers and she squeezed back.

"What plans do we have? I had wanted to meet you and Angeal before getting started on anything."

"Meeting Angeal will be fine. It's unlikely we'll be dealing with Hojo or anyone else until tomorrow at the earliest, anyway; he has to give it some thought." Sephiroth shrugged, uncerned. "He's not much for originality, but if you give him a platform he can build off of it."

"He's the best scientist we've got right now," Kunsel pointed out. "I mean, there's not a lot of options for this. There's ShinRa and AVALANCHE, as far as I know, and I wouldn't trust AVALANCHE."

There was an unspoken moment of I don't really trust ShinRa in the looks traded between Sephiroth and Zack, but no one said it. Zack sighed, shaking his head. "Okay, do you want to go ahead and see how Angeal is before we come over?"

Sephiroth inclined his head slightly, understanding there as well. "I'll check and keep you informed."

"Alright, that works. I've got my PHS." He pulled the phone from his pocket, waving it for
emphasis. "We'll be here."

Sephiroth made his way back to his apartment, refusing to react outwardly to his hyper awareness of the young lady he'd just met even as his mind tried to analyze it. Swiping his card, he waited impatiently for the quiet chime as the door opened and quickly stepped inside.

The air of barely-leashed tension pushed his own concerns away immediately. "Angeal?"

Coming further inside, Sephiroth's gut clenched at the sight of his friend on his knees in the living room. The older man's wings were stretched and slightly fluffed in a way that he distantly recognized as a threat display, but it was the pain written clearly over his face that took his immediate focus.

Stepping closer, he froze when Angeal's eyes snapped up to his, too wide and too wild, with a distinct ringing of green. Not the mako green that occasionally manifested in SOLDIERs pushed too far, however. This particular shade, Sephiroth knew all too well - he saw it in the mirror every morning.

"Angeal…"

"Stay back!" The demand was undermined by the strain in Angea's voice, the way his wings tried to stretch even further in an animal effort to back up his words.

Painfully aware that he was in far over his head, Sephiroth backed away several steps, PHS quickly in hand as he speed dialed Zack. There was no waiting for the younger First to even finish his greeting. "We have a problem."
Chapter Summary

Sometimes things are bad enough that all you can do is choose the lesser evil.

It was surreal to call Hojo for help, but they had no choice; beggars couldn't be choosers, and all they could be certain of was that the situation had to be handled with care.

Amazingly, the Professor came to them immediately, with curt instructions to watch but not touch the distressed SOLDIER unless absolutely necessary to keep him anyone from harm. Just who he might harm was left to interpretation, and the implications were as unsettling as they were reasonable.

Sephiroth couldn't remember the last time he was relieved to see the Professor, but he didn't dwell on it long. Letting Hojo in without a word on either of their parts, he hurried back to where Zack was standing guard over Angeal and took a similar stance to the other side.

Hojo stopped a few paces behind them, dark eyes narrowing as he took in the sight. "When did this start?"

"He was like this when I returned. If I had to guess, it was a reaction to Ms. Gainsborough's… presence." He didn't miss the sharp look from Zack, worry mixing with something that said details were quickly being connected. It was too easy to forget, with Zack's trouble focusing his abundant energy in any one place, that he was very intelligent; he wouldn't have made First Class on sheer talent with a blade alone.

"And I take it you had a reaction yourself?" Hojo glanced at him briefly, frowning at his nod. "Explain."

"I'm uncertain 'reaction' is the proper term, so much as a hyper awareness of her presence." An arched brow succeeded in getting elaboration. "I can feel her, as clearly as I've ever sensed Genesis or Angeal - but she is not the same, not even registering in the same way as other SOLDIERs."

"Of course not," he muttered, frown deepening. "We need to get him down to the labs. Your quarters aren't equipped to contain him if his control snaps, and he's already struggling."

Part of Sephiroth balked even as he nodded, unable to deny the logic. "It may help to move Ms. Gainsborough to another part of the building, at least until we can get him to the labs."

"Kunsel, Cissnei and Cloud can get her to the Turks," Zack decided, though he clearly didn't like it. "They'll keep an eye on her."

Sephiroth didn't like it either, but they had no choice. "Make the call. What were your plans to move him, Professor?"

Hojo's frown was somehow different this time, though he never took his eyes off Angeal. "Your strengths always bested him, even in his prime. If you can't reason with him, a Sleep spell ought to suffice."

Sephiroth nodded, strangely grateful that drugs had not been the default answer. "We'll see how he
reacts when she's farther away and go from there."

Hojo inclined his head in mute agreement, waiting in silence with no reaction to the call. Zack was tense, understandably so; it was a leap of faith, putting her in care of the Turks with only two of his fully trusted friends able to stand guard. If it came down to it, Sephiroth wasn't certain the Second and trooper would be able to stand against them in their own environment.

There was no time to dwell on it. Even before the quiet sound of a received text, he knew when she had moved away enough to settle his own senses, and watched Angeal slump forward with a mix of concern and relief. "Angeal?"

Angeal shook his head, possibly in response and possibly in an effort to shake whatever daze it was that had his eyes unfocused. He braced himself with both hands gripping at the carpet. Long white wings had gone limp, trembling faintly - a tell of his exhaustion as clear as his shallow breathing and the lines around his eyes.

Taking a cautious step forward, Sephiroth noted that he'd paled to an unhealthy shade, ashen undertones to his darker skin. A thin sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead, something he doubted anyone else would have seen yet, and all Sephiroth could think was he looked ill. Not so bad as Genesis, but far worse than before. The blue eyes that lifted to meet his were a little too bright, but the unsettling ringing of green was gone. "We need to get you to the labs."

It was a testament of how badly he felt that Angeal only nodded in agreement.

Hollander and Rayleigh were ready for them in the labs, both grim faced though Hollander especially so. There was something haggard about the man when he saw Angeal.

"Come sit, tell us what happened," Hollander instructed, guiding Angeal over to a broad sort of armless couch that certainly hadn't been there before. It did, however, let Angeal sit without worry for his wings.

"I'll get his vitals," Rayleigh offered quietly, presumably going to get the required equipment.

Sephiroth was torn for a moment between going to listen to whatever Angeal had to say, and finding out what Hojo was heading to his workstation for - allowing Hollander to take immediate supervision. The two men hadn't liked each other at any point in Sephiroth's memory, even as murky as the first few years were he was sure of that much, but Hojo also legitimately believed Hollander to be a far lesser scientist to the point of calling him a hack and impostor more than once. And unfortunately, he seemed quite right, hence this situation. So why now let Hollander take the lead?

In the end, he followed Hojo. "What are you looking for?"

"I'd pulled the files of the time period that Ifalna and her daughter had been here after you left to see what help she might be able to offer; she couldn't have been taught much, but it certainly seems her presence itself is enough to stir things up." Hojo frowned, staring into space a moment as his mind worked. Whatever thought he settled on, it made him go for one of his notebooks instead, flipping it open and taking a pencil in hand. "I'll need to speak with her once we get things under a measure of control here. I'm certain she must have had a reaction as well, though clearly not a debilitating one. And if yours changes, I trust you will do the intelligent thing and speak up for once. You are far over your head here, Sephiroth."
Sephiroth grit his teeth at the tone, but let his irritation out in the next breath. "I'm aware of that, Hojo. I called you, did I not?"

Hojo stopped writing a moment, the smile on his lips barely a turn at the corners. "So you did."
Strange Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

"Politics makes strange bedfellows" - and this was nothing so simple.

Chapter Notes

So guess who's having computer trouble? If you don't hear from me next weekend, that'll be why. Also, this is currently unbeta'd. *plans to clean it up a bit later*

It was decided that Zack would go with Hojo to see Aerith. As much as Sephiroth wanted to keep an eye on the Professor, the fact was that Angeal needed him, and the others did not.

Unsaid as well, if Angeal lost himself, only Sephiroth could stop him with anything less than fatal force.

That didn't make Zack feel tremendously better, but he escorted Hojo without a word of protest. He didn't like the scientist, he'd long since learned he wasn't just a weird old man and had list of issues he could rattle off, but the fact was that for now they really did need him. And Aerith had offered to come, even knowing what it meant, that she'd have to not only be around but work with him. Hopefully that would be enough.

It was a strange relief to find that Reno was there talking with Kunsel, the pair flanking the door to the room Aerith and Cissnei had settled in. The redhead nodded to him before briefly glancing at Hojo with a lazy smile that was still sharp enough to cut. "Let's go have a word, shall we?"

"I don't have time for posturing," Hojo informed him, walking past them only to pause a moment and look at Aerith; his eyes widened a touch when they locked with hers. After the silence had stretched almost painfully long, he spoke quietly. "You're fortunate the President pays no mind to anything that doesn't benefit him immediately."

Aerith blinked a few times, startled. "What are you talking about?"

"Anyone who met Ifalna would have known you on sight," he clarified, moving to the table to set his notebook and files down with a muted thump. "Both Angeal and Sephiroth reacted to your presence. I assume you also had a reaction."

"I… felt them, yes," she said slowly, thrown by the unexpected comparison. She frowned at his impatient gesture. "It's not like I had time to learn what any of that means!"

"There's no room for emotion in this mess, Ms. Faremis; just tell me what you do know, and let me make sense of it." Hojo's tone wasn't precisely gentle, but he wasn't as brash as he was with many others. "You provide the data, I analyze it and put it to use."

"We have to work together; I'm not going to just go along with anything you say because you're the
scientist.” Her frown deepened and she clenched her hands on her lap. "And it's Gainsborough."

Hojo rolled his eyes, unimpressed. "You came here yourself, girl, don't expect to have every little thing go your way. This is my job, relying on my expertise, and I'd sooner send you home than have you waste my time posturing when it is literally a matter of life and death that I find a cure in an increasingly short amount of time."

The reminder stung, and Aerith leaned back in her chair while she gathered her composure. Her voice was quieter when she spoke again. "What do you need to know?"

There wasn't even triumph in Hojo's smile, just the quiet satisfaction of someone who had made their point. "I need to know your reaction. Everything that you think might be relevant, everything that occurred as soon as you became aware of either Hewley or Sephiroth."

Aerith nodded, thinking back. "I've always been aware of the Reactors, of the mako in them, but it's in the background. SOLDIERs are more clear, like any living thing with enough mako I guess. But there was never anything like those two. There was so much power, but it's just… wrong."

"Wrong." Hojo fixed on the word, looking up from the notes he was taking. "Wrong how?"

Aerith bit her lip, startling a moment when she felt a warm hand on her shoulder - Zack, she would have known by scent and feel alone but looking up to see his reassuring smile helped. Taking a deep breath, she tried to put what she'd felt into words. "There's danger there. They have a presence, in a way that no one else has. And when I looked at Sephiroth, I could hear the Planet more clearly than I'd heard it anywhere but the church."

Hojo frowned, tapping his pencil lightly. "And what did it say?"

"Not words." She shook her head, moving her hands to the table. "It's rare I can make out words. But there are feelings. Panic. Worry. Danger - Sephiroth felt dangerous. I don't think the Planet wanted me near him, but it's not like I have a guidebook for this."

"While I imagine there must be individuals with some fractions of Cetra heritage around, your mother was assumed to be the last pure blooded one, giving you half." Hojo stared at her a moment, though it was hard to be sure she was what he really saw. "Dangerous is a very apt description by default, but I imagine you mean it quite differently than most would. And dangerous does not by default imply wrongness - I dare say you don't view Fair that way, do you?"

Aerith shook her head. "No, it's different. There's no one I've felt like Sephiroth and Angeal; I've never felt anything like that. It's not the same in the two of them, either. Angeal's is active, threatening an attack. Sephiroth… the potential was absolutely there, strong enough to be a danger. But I didn't feel like I was in immediate danger."

"An instinctive reaction to the Jenova cells, then," Hojo said. "Sephiroth is balanced, controlled. Hewley, however, is out of control. The conflict between his human genetics and the badly imprinted Jenova cells are what is at the very root of his degradation, in fact."

Aerith frowned. "How do you fight something that's a part of them?"

"That's the trick, isn't it?" Hojo mused, going back to his notes. "If a machine is inherently flawed, you either take it apart and put it back together, or you scrap it and start over. Not so easily done with a sentient being, however."

"I can only imagine," she said, watching him silently as he wrote, periodically flipping to marked sections of earlier notes presumably to cross reference. "Did Sephiroth say what he felt? I could tell
there was something, the way he looked at me."

"Less a reaction, more a 'hyper awareness' to use his words." Hojo didn't look up from his work, writing steadily. "Not unlike your own feeling, in the most simple way."

"But no danger from me?" Aerith frowned at his scoff. "Well doesn't that make a difference? If I was registering the Jenova cells as dangerous because I have Cetra blood, despite not even being alive during that fight, why didn't he register my heritage as dangerous? I'm no threat to him, but that's not what the reaction was about. It wasn't personal, it was instinctive."

Hojo quit writing, staring down though he wasn't seeing it. He turned her words over in his head, rearranging them in the context of what he'd studied in the past. "Can you still sense them?"

"Yes." She didn't even have to think about it. "It's harder now, but I still do. They're… lower in the building, right? In that direction."

Hojo tracked her gesture, nodding slowly. "But you've never felt them before now, despite you all being in Midgar."

"I would have remembered that," Aerith said.

"It's pretty clear that's mutual." The only time Zack had ever seen Sephiroth react so strongly to someone's presence was when they were around Angeal and Genesis. Which he guessed made sense, all things considered. "Have they ever done Slum missions, to be close enough that it should have made a difference?"

"It's extremely rare that Sephiroth would be assigned anything so trivial as that, but entirely possible Hewley and Rhapsodos would have been given that sort of training assignment as lower classes." Hojo considered the implications a moment, getting his PHS out and putting in a number by memory. Fortunately, it didn't ring long. "Hollander, have your records of Hewley and Rhapsodos' medical profiles since coming to work for the company pulled."

SOLDIER enhanced hearing caught the other scientist's words. "I'm in the middle of something, Hojo. You've never had trouble putting in your overrides to access my work before."

"I don't have time to waste wading through your mess. Have Rayleigh run your tests and do it yourself, the woman is plenty competent," Hojo said. "And make sure you're getting record of how active his Jenova cells are. I need the records of how that's played out, historically."

There was a long silence, presumably where Hollander was moving. His tone was less snappish this time. "This will take time to put together. I'll be in contact."

"See that you are. And have Sephiroth call me." Hojo hung up, going back to making quick notes while he waited. It didn't take long for Sephiroth to do as presumably requested. "Can you still sense the girl?"

There was a beat of silence. "Yes. Fainter, however. The equivalent of background noise, barely registering until I focus."

Hojo frowned. "And Hewley? How is his demeanor?"

"Exhausted. Restless." Another moment of silence. "Whenever he's at rest, he looks in the direction of the Turk offices. I don't believe he realizes he's doing it, however."

"Likely not," Hojo said. "It appears to be instinctive. If his reactions or your perceptions change,
contact me immediately."

"Are you expecting a change?"

"Expectations easily contaminate results. I try to avoid them." For a moment, it seemed he would say more, but decided not to. "Keep me up to date on anything that changes."

Sephiroth paused as well before giving his agreement and ending the conversation.

Hojo closed his PHS after a moment, the quiet click seeming louder in the complete silence. After a moment more, he glanced at Reno. "Is there any word on when the President is expected back?"

The Turk shook his head. "Not yet. The Director's workin' on it, but you know how the old man is."

"I do, yes." Hojo's lips quirked in a facsimile of a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Better to make use of his time away, I suppose. I wouldn't have wished the task on Faraman, but better him than me."

Reno snorted, amused. "Careful, Professor, you're startin' t' sound like every other workin' stiff in this place."

"If you ignore the fact that I'm irreplaceable, I suppose there is enough in common," he said dryly, taking time to add more notes to the ones he'd already amassed. "Well. We're due for some very interesting tests ahead. While Hollander gets those records to me, perhaps we'll test your perceptions, Ms. Faremis."

"It's **Gainsborough,**" she insisted, not sure why it bothered her so much.

"Mm, well. We'll be seeing how much of your parents you have in you yet." Hojo's smile was small, sharp and dangerous. "I do so appreciate the irony."

Before she could think of a response, Zack was speaking up behind her. "So, what's next? Hollander tends to take a while."

Hojo's expression soured. "Yes he does. In the mean time, I think it would be better to get some baseline tests done to get an idea of what Ms. Faremis is capable of, and likewise for yourself. As it's unwise to return to the labs at this time, however, I will meet you in the VR room once she is given more practical attire and equipment."

"To **fight**?" Zack asked, somewhere between incredulous and concerned.

"Would you rather she **not** know what to do in a hostile situation?" Hojo rose, gathering his notes. "There are additional tests as well. It would be foolish to assume she has the exact same capabilities as a full blooded Cetra, even if I was willing to make assumptions. There is only the barest margin for error, Fair, and I don't intend to waste it on things I could have checked beforehand."

"We'll make arrangements an' see they get there," Reno said. "You just get ready t' go, Professor. Like you said, we don't have a whole lotta time."

"See that you do, Turk."
"Turks, SOLDIER, scientists, random infantry an' a civvy who's half Ancient." Reno shook his head, smirking. "I've been a part of a lot of strange ops, but this one takes the cake for odd teams."

The small touch of humor helped break the tension that had settled on the group. Aerith reminded herself to breathe and that she'd agreed to this - had suggested this - and that no matter how much Hojo unsettled and irritated her, he really was the best bet. Strange allies indeed, working with this group.

Zack's hands were still on her shoulders, rubbing soothingly. "You did good. Just breathe."

Aerith nodded, closing her eyes a moment. "It's fine. I just forgot what he was like."

"Lucky you," Reno muttered. "I'd put you in a Turk suit, but I dunno how well you'd move around in that."

"I'm used to moving in a dress," Aerith said. "Moving in something else is going to throw me off anyway.""

"What about different shoes?" Cissnei suggested. "Closed toe, no heels. You can get used to the rest later, but for now that would at least protect your feet and give you better traction. You have a weapon, though you could use a bracer for more materia."

Aerith considered the suggestion before nodding slowly. "I think that's a good middle ground. I could do that, I wear boots when it gets cold anyway."

"Boots, then. Absolutely doable." Reno fished his PHS out of a pocket, flicking it open for a quick text. "We'll see about that. Bracers are easy enough, but somethin' that looks more like jewelry might be better. You'll wanna keep that braid, too - long hair loose in combat ain't fun. I figure Sephiroth manages it just cause he's so damn fast."

"We can get her a regular bangle now, to get going quickly," Zack said. "I have extra, and plenty of materia she can choose from."

"Alright." Reno toyed with his phone a minute before looking back to the First. "You oughta be equipped too, best stuff you can without lookin' out of place. Get army there kitted too; if he's gonna be in on this, he needs better than Heidegger budgets for his grunts. A little more specialized trainin' wouldn't hurt either."

"I can do that," Zack agreed, hating that Reno thought it was needed and knowing it could easily be. "Better safe than sorry."

"Better t' keep safe an' make anybody who messes with ya sorry," he corrected, smirking. "I'll take a look around. Might consider switchin' out with Knives, Cissnei - wouldn't hurt Aerith an' Cloudy there t' learn about small blades."

Cloud flushed and Aerith grimaced, but neither protested. Cissnei nodded her agreement. "I'll see if she's available, or on a job we can switch out on. It's a good idea."

Zack frowned, but had to admit they had a point; blades were useful, and small ones would not only suit Aerith and Cloud better for now, but would be easily concealed. "Okay, we'll go back up and get some of my equipment passed around while you get other things ready, then meet you at the VR room?"

"Probably the best plan, yeah." Reno offered a mock salute. "Luck to ya, Zack. Keep in touch."
He managed a small smile back. "Yeah, you too."

Strange group or not, at least they had their bases covered.
Interlude: On the Warpath

Chapter Summary

Give rebels a leader and you'll have a revolution on your hands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Our time has finally come." Elfé didn't raise her voice, but she didn't need to; even if the room hadn't been hushed, all of AVALANCHE was hanging on the words of their stoic leader. "Today, with the help of our allies, AVALANCHE will take a stand and launch a direct attack on the ShinRa. Each of your team leaders has been provided with maps, security codes, and information regarding the guards that will be on hand. SOLDIER ranks are thin, and the bulk of the Turks are tied up in Junon around the President, while the army struggles under incompetent leadership. Though we were unsuccessful in our assassination, our strike tonight on ShinRa Headquarters will eliminate their home base and severely cripple them.

"Fuhito has supplied more Ravens to help wipe out any SOLDIER operatives you may run into. Shears and I will take the main building ourselves, to deal with their Silver General and draw the focus of their most elite fighters. Fuhito hopes to talk their head scientist into joining our cause." She was silent a moment, looking over the crowd. "Some of us will not live through this attack, but know that your sacrifices will not be in vain. Tonight, we take a stand for the Planet. This is the beginning of the end of ShinRa's oppressive and destructive rule."

The masses cheered, stirred by her speech, and she offered a small smile before stepping back with a gesture to Shears.

The former gang leader stepped up, looking over the group with a grin. He'd run a band a hundred people strong, but this? AVALANCHE had just kept growing, even more rallying with their charismatic new ally. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the redhead perched on a crate by Fuhito, watching him with those bright SOLDIER eyes. The man smiled faintly and made a gesture to the group that was waiting on his word.

Shears straightened, clapping his hands. "Alright, coordination is the key when we start. First thing we have to do is cut their lines to Junon - we don't need their military breathing down our necks, and even if they can get them up and running it'll take a while and buy us time. We're gonna make a hell of an explosion for that, draw their eyes. Once we get some troops headed that way, we'll make a feint for Reactor Eight. That sector is heavily patrolled by the Turks, and also has one of the most used train stations. That train needs disabled as soon as you see that explosion go up. Divide their forces further.

"There's a lot of anti-ShinRa sentiment in the Slums, it'd be good to stir that up, too. Once things are good and stirred up, Genesis there is gonna unleash his forces and they'll close in on the ShinRa Tower. It'll be a hell of a distraction, letting Elfé and me head up there with Fuhito, Genesis, and a handful of Ravens. We'll draw the heavy fire and do as much damage along the way as we can. At that point, the team leaders will get the alert to go and do as much damage to whatever ShinRa properties they can - especially things they rely on for resources like transport and supplies. We will ruin them, just like they've ruined our Planet. But they won't be getting back up. This time, we're
going to *wreck* them!"

The cheering was even louder this time. Shears grinned at Elfé, already feeling the buzz of adrenaline without even starting.

Elfé smiled back, dark eyes lit and fierce. "Spread out, keep in contact. Tonight is our night."

Genesis watched AVALANCHE split into teams, heading off in various directions, and shook his head. "Impressive. Truly impressive."

Fuhito smiled serenely. "They are, yes. Your clones are ready?"

"Of course. Just waiting for my command." The rogue SOLDIER glanced at him. "Your Ravens?"

"Oh they're ready and eager," Fuhito assured him. "I very much believe this plan will be very successful in causing a great deal of damage to the ShinRa. They couldn't possibly anticipate an attack of this magnitude."

"They certainly wouldn't have imagined they would face us *both* at once," Genesis said. "A useful alliance indeed. What you do with Hojo is your business, of course, though I'd be careful. He's an egotistical narcissist, and I say that as someone who is very qualified to recognize those traits."

"You do the both of you a disservice, Genesis," Fuhito said. "You have proven worthy of your reputation, and there is no one capable of matching Professor Hojo's genius. What he has done in the fields of bioengineering and mako study are beyond the comprehension of all but the most well educated minds."

Genesis made a noncommittal sound, shrugging and hopping off the crate. "I suppose we should get ready as well. You trust your inside contact to accurately locate the scientists?"

"Of course. They've proven consistently reliable, and have a vested interest in our success," Fuhito said. "The intelligence will be reliable. From there, it will only be a matter of making our way to their locations, and from what you've said, the Professor will stand his ground without concern. Any guard he has, we will be able to manage."

"If he and Hollander are together, their guard will likely be more than the new First they had guarding him when I was last here," Genesis said thoughtfully. "Perhaps Sephiroth himself will meet us. It's been quite a while since we've crossed blades."

Elfé and Shears joined them, fully armed though her blade rested on her back similar to the way many SOLDIERs equipped themselves. "Sephiroth won't be enough. If he crosses us, he will be cut down like the rest."

A small part of Genesis tried to protest, but he firmly reminded himself that Sephiroth was practically the face of ShinRa, and no friend of his. It wasn't like he'd ever cared *before* Genesis had left, endlessly taunting him with his 'superiority' as a warrior, the *heroic* 'silver general' so beloved by the people. Perhaps Genesis would bring him down off that pedestal himself, and prove once and for all that Sephiroth was no hero.

Feeling a rush of heat, Genesis shifted a little with discomfort he didn't dare show, reminded of his
condition. *Hollander first.* "There's time for that, whether he comes or not. For now, I seek Hollander and will see that you reach Hojo. *The arrow has left the bow of the Goddess… it's time.*"

Chapter End Notes

Got the laptop fixed (or at least it seems so, so far!) but I've got some health things springing up. So that's a thing. *sigh* Life.
There wasn't time to take things slow.

It's been a long pause, lots of health issues I was struggling with, but I'm coming back with a LOT of new content for everybody! Absolutely a longfic, so settle back and get comfy.

Wearing boots with her sun dress felt strange to Aerith, but they were slim and comfortable and wouldn't be too hard to get used to. Having her staff in hand was comforting in itself, a reassuring weight that reminded her that she wasn't defenseless. And she was about to learn a lot more, even if that wasn't Hojo's goal. For now, she had a few new materia to go with her Restore, and a multipurpose tool courtesy of the Turks tucked into a secret section of one of her boots 'just in case' something happened. It included a knife, of course, but the lockpick and little can opener caught her attention first.

At one side, she had Zack talking to Cloud, the blond seeming much more animated in a smaller group. On the other was Mina, though she was out of her suit for once. Well, somewhat; Aerith was certain that the nicely tailored white shirt was from her uniform. She suspected that the uniforms were a different kind of reassurance, a silent reminder of their position, skills and responsibility alike. The same would probably go with weapons, and it was so odd to think that she understood them on that same level now.

Then the elevator was bobbing to a stop at floor forty-nine, and Zack took a step ahead as a natural lead. "Ladies and gentleman, the hub of SOLDIER activities. Next stop, our premiere virtual reality room."

"Do you think Hojo's going to run some sims then?" Kunes asked, having been silent as he brought up the back. "That could go badly."

"It could, but I think we'll be alright." Zack shrugged, a carelessness in the gesture that didn't match the seriousness in his eyes. "He has nothing to gain and everything to lose by screwing us over."

"Yeah, the General wouldn't take that too well," Kunes agreed. "Still planning to keep an eye on him."

"Never said a thing otherwise," Zack said, waving to a pair of Seconds as they passed them and swiping his key card at the door to the training room. "In we go. This is the monitoring room, that one there is where you actually go in for training. Let's see what the Professor has in mind, shall we?"

"Sure, why not?"
Not that there was a choice at this point. Aerith had thought there would be more choices after the first one; clearly, she was very mistaken.

It helped a little that Hojo didn't seem to be enjoying the process at all, either. He was frowning at his phone when they came in, though he snapped it shut as the door was hissing open and stuck it in the pocket of his lab coat. His frown only deepened as he looked her over for a long moment. The silence stretched beyond awkward to painful. "Clearly obstinacy runs in the family."

"I'm used to moving in a dress. Would you rather I set us back trying to learn in clothes I'm not used to?" Aerith saw Zack startle a little at the bite in her tone, and felt some surprise herself. But she wasn't going to take it back, especially since all it seemed to do was amuse the Professor.

"It seems you do have a bit of fire in you, hmm?" Hojo chuckled, a thin smile on his lips. "You might just do after all. What equipment do you have? A staff isn't enough."

"A Restore in my staff, Esuna, Barrier, Earth and Ice in my bracer." And her mother's heirloom tucked into a special slot she'd added to the ribbon Zack had given her, but that was her secret.

Hojo made a thoughtful sound, amusement seeming to linger though he didn't bother to explain, looking to Zack instead. "I assume you have a much more complete arsenal, SOLDIER?"

Zack's smile was edged. "I'm ready to take on any enemy that comes my way."

"Of course you are." Hojo couldn't have been more patronizing without patting Zack on the head. Instead, he gestured to the training room. "Get a helmet on both of you and go in. We don't have time for any more posturing or arguments."

Hojo found it interesting, in a way, how the past seemed determined to come back around these days, the follies of their youth and the mistakes of those long laid to rest resurfacing in this twisted mess. And of course, regardless of the fact that he was to blame for the least of it, Hojo was tasked with fixing it all.

The Professor shook his head, pulling up a stool and watching the boy that had somehow become a First Class SOLDIER as he carefully set up the equipment for Gast's daughter. She reminded him a little of the former head of the department, idealist that she was, but it was increasingly clear that she was very much Ifalna's daughter as well. It was in those wide green eyes that saw so much more than they should, even if she didn't understand it all, and even more strongly in the spirit that she was starting to show. He'd been concerned at first that Gast's softness would have ruined her, but there was hope yet if he could get her to shake off the instinct to conform to human standards. That was only half her heritage, and a poor one at that.

The SOLDIER rested a hand on her shoulder a moment before glancing back his way. "We're ready, Professor. What are you sending first?"

What indeed? Ideally he'd have tested her outside, but there was no security there, and they didn't have time to rig proper equipment. "You will fight a Replicon. You are not permitted to heal yourself in any fashion - that is up to her."

And there it was, a quick look of nervousness from the girl, lips parting in what would no doubt be protest.

He had no time for that. "Is that beyond your ability?"

She straightened, lifting her chin in a gesture that mirrored her mother's defiance down to the narrowing of her eyes. "I can do it."
"Begin combat," Hojo said, typing in the commands to start the simulation and bringing up the monitor where he could watch the feed and their statistics in real time.

It had been a while since he'd had opportunity to test the SOLDIER's statistics, but it was enough to know that he had been promoted to First Class and Sephiroth had been confident in sending him after Hollander's failures. The Replicon he sent out should be well within his ability, but also very likely to get several good hits in as well. The question, of course, was how well the girl would manage.

She startled badly when the Replicon appeared, taking a half step back even as Fair stepped in front of her. It seemed nearly reflexive, which would bode well in a real situation. He pulled his sword and took to battle immediately, surprisingly light on his feet with much less wasted movement than the last time Hojo had been able to observe him. It certainly seemed that Sephiroth's confidence in the boy had not been misplaced. In fact, it looked like a greater challenge was going to be needed.

Hojo raised the parameters for the simulation and settled to watch.

"Mission level 22 initiated."

Aerith's eyes widened at the automated announcement. "Zack…?"

"Looks like that wasn't enough of a challenge." He spun his sword, stretching and bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Don't worry too much, just breathe and be ready. Prevention and defense trump trying to fix things after they happen, though."

"Oh." She touched her bracer, reaching for the materia and feeling it warm under her fingers. A protective bubble rippled over them both, and Zack gave her a quick grin before three more Replicons appeared. "Be careful!"

"That's what I've got you for."

Aerith bit her lip, watching him charge at the monsters. She'd seen more fighting than she'd wanted in the Slums, but this was different. This was Zack. And she knew Hojo was going to push him until she had to do something. It would be pointless not to, she knew that, but she didn't want to see him hurt.

He was so fast, cutting through them with the ease of long practice, not even breathing hard. In a way, it was as scary as she once thought. But it was Zack, even if she'd never seen him like this, and there was something breathtaking about the grace he moved with.

Then he staggered with a pained sound that he couldn't quite keep back, a thin line cutting along his arm, blossoming with blood. All she could do was stare, everything else becoming distant and slow as she really looked at him. Small marks were there, welts where she was sure other people would have been wounded, and it had to hurt, didn't it?

Her heart pounded until it was all she could hear, watching more monsters spawn - different ones now, ones she didn't recognize but they moved so fast, converging on Zack. There were too many of them to evade every attack, and she felt it when her barrier shattered.

Zack's eyes widened a little, but he didn't stop.
She wanted him to stop. Wanted all of it to stop, but she couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but stare.

"Aerith?"

His voice sounded so far away, pain written across his face in an attempt at a smile that came out as a grimace.

Her hands tingled with power, instincts she hadn't known she had kicking in, and she reached for it. Healing magic flowed through her, responding to the plea, and wisps of green raced to Zack's aid. When they hit him, she saw his eyes flare brighter before he lashed out with a series of blade strikes.

As the monsters fell, air came rushing back into her lungs and she darted across the room. "Zack! I'm so sorry I just…"

"Froze, I know." He hugged her tight, seeming to understand what she needed. "I'm okay. You got me."

"You're okay," she breathed, listening to his heartbeat and feeling herself calm. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, you're new to this," Zack said. "We're okay. Let's see what the Professor found out."

"Not nearly enough." Hojo's voice cut in, presumably over some sort of speaker system. "Clearly she needs more motivation to get off more than one spell. Try this."

There was no chance to protest as a massive beast took form, a sleek violet pelt over pure muscle, wicked horns and a spiked tail ready to gut the unwary. "What is that?"

Zack let out a long breath and took his battle stance. "That is a behemoth. I've fought them before, but I'd really, really appreciate that Wall staying up. I'm going to go after it, and when I have it distracted, you get back out of the way again; I don't want you hurt."

Aerith nodded shakily, watching him go after it. This time, she was ready. Her heart was pounding, but her world narrowed down to Zack and she gripped her staff tight. The first spells were small, taking care of little wounds as they came up. It helped, to see she was able to make a difference. This was doable. Scary, but absolutely doable.

And then it turned, and saw her.
Chapter Summary

Some secrets were too dangerous to be kept.

Rufus watched the clock, listening to the quiet ticking with a small smile as his phone rang in time with the hourly chime. Fuhito was nothing if not punctual, though he waited until the second ring to answer. He couldn't very well let the man think he had nothing to do but wait for him to call. 

"Hello."

"Hello Vice President. You should know that everything is running on schedule, and our forces are moving into position." Fuhito said. "Our ally has also provided the promised additional fighters. All that remains is for you to tell me the current location of the Doctor and Professor, for our infiltration. Additional notations on security measures would be a kindness."

Rufus moved to his laptop and accessed the program he'd altered to tap into the security feeds, taking a moment to confirm the information he'd gathered already. "Hollander is currently in his lab. There are two guards on call, and the security system we'd discussed, as well as Angeal Hewley. Sephiroth is also present but I imagine he'll be called to deal with the main attack. Hojo is on the SOLDIER floor with two SOLDIERs and a plain clothed Turk, but there are other SOLDIERs around as well. I imagine their Director will be nearby as well, though at the moment he's a few floors up in his office. Most of the SOLDIERs are likely to be called to duty to deal with the situation on the Plate, so depending on your timing you may run into them on your way up."

"It is a benefit to having our new comrade to draw their fire, with how seriously they take his threat but I am certain we will make our way to the scientists with minimal difficulty," Fuhito said mildly. "Your information has been invaluable in addition to our own; we will be able to make for a much more efficient strike. The damages from this attack will be crippling."

"Oh I'm sure you're all set to have a wonderful time," Rufus agreed. "Pity you have to take out communications. I'd have loved to see the old man's face when he finds out about this."

"He is very expressive in his anger, true, but we cannot afford the interference of whatever forces the military base in Junon could offer. This attack is for Midgar, and the heart of ShinRa," Fuhito said. "AVALLANCHE is ready at last to strike out in the name of the Planet, and we will not fail. Do stay safe, Mr. Shinra; it would be terrible if something were to happen to you before our victory."

Rufus smiled wryly, not believing for one moment that he would be missed by the terrorists. Fuhito cared for nothing more than his cause - that was what made him such a useful tool. But he'd learned the art of drawing people to him with honeyed insincerity at the knee of the master, one of the few truly beneficial lessons his father had passed on. "I appreciate your concern, of course, but I'm sure a few Turks will be assigned to my protection. I'll be in a nice secure spot to watch the fireworks."

"Well then, enjoy. I will be in touch."

The line went dead and Rufus smiled, exiting out of the security feeds with the ease of long practice
and adjusting the monitoring devices that his father no doubt had ordered the Turks to place in his
suite. That much, of course, they were used to him messing with now and then; as busy as they'd
been with external threats, and as little attention as his father paid him, it was easy to have learned far
more than he was credited with. But the neglect that had once been a cause for anger and pain was
simply amusing now; let them underestimate him. He would show them all in the end, the last man
standing after AVALANCHE had its way.

Pity they would have to be eliminated as well, but he knew far better than to trust them to do
anything but chase their own goals. That was just the way of it, really; everyone was out for
themselves, and only the best would make it to the end. That, too, was a lesson his father had taught
him - if you wanted to be a winner, you couldn't stop to help those lagging behind. ShinRa was built
on the backs of the broken, after all, and he was just fine with that.

Smiling in anticipation, Rufus went to pour himself a drink, startling briefly when he saw some sort
of beetle crawling off in the kitchen. He'd have to have someone check for pests later, clearly.

I should have stopped after the first time.

Reeve rubbed his face with a groan, a hand lingering over his mouth as he stared numbly at the video
feed, now nothing more than watching the vents as his spy bug crept back to the drop-off point
where it would be gathered up later. He knew he should have quit sending them out after stumbling
on the meeting on the SOLDIER floor, but he never could resist a mystery.

And now he was in far, far over his head. He couldn't ignore this, it was literally a matter of life and
death. There was going to be an attack. If nothing else, Hollander and Hojo were targets for… what?
Kidnapping? Assassination? Then there was the "infiltration" and the "situation on the Plate" and
while Reeve wasn't certain what that meant, it couldn't be anything good. There was going to be an
attack, presumably in the very near future.

He had to do something, tell someone. Something anonymous, perhaps? A note to the Turks,
maybe… Tseng was a very reasonable man. Or to SOLDIER's newest First, Zack Fair; he had
something of a reputation of being eager to help anyone, and being very open-minded. Or even
Lazard. If he had to, he did have blackmail on the man that would help protect himself if things went
south.

Swallowing against the creeping feeling of unease, Reeve rose to move back to his workroom. He
paused at the door for a long moment, staring at the small figure resting on the table. This wasn't how
he'd imagined introducing his little friend to the world, not at all, but… lives were on the line. Reeve
wasn't a hero, but he had a sense of responsibility; if nothing else, too many innocent people were in
danger here, inevitable collateral in a fight they would never see coming. He had to do something to
minimize the damage.

Every step felt like it took too long until he was stopping just in front of the table. Reaching out, he
settled his palm on velveted fur, thumb brushing gently along the edge of one ear. "Wake up now.
I'm going to need your help."

Dark eyes opened, blinking almost sleepily as Cait Sith came online. "Well 'ello there, Reeve. What's
going' on now?"

Reeve couldn't help a small smile at the cheerful voice, even as worried as he was about the
upcoming events. "There's going to be an attack on Midgar; I don't have all the details but I'll make
sure you get everything I know. Right now, I need you to get a warning out to the Turks. Hopefully you'll get there before they shut off communications."

"Cut out communications? Ye canna make a failsafe ta kick it back on after a bit?" Cait hopped down, stretching and doing a few test bounces. "I could carry some components if ye need me ta put 'em in."

Reeve debated it a moment, drumming his fingers on the table. "I'll see what I can do from here. You need to get going, I don't know how much time we have. I'll send you as much information as I can."

"Alrighty! I'll be watchin' out for ye." Cait nodded, taking off.

Reeve closed his eyes and prayed to anyone who was listening that his little animatronic friend would make it in time.
Aerith had told Zack the truth when she said she'd fought before. It had never been at this level, but she had fought before. Enough that when the Behemoth charged her, her mindset switched between healer and fighter without prompting. There was no meeting this head on, she didn't have SOLDIER strength, but she did have magic and she could feel the tingle of it down to her fingertips, just waiting to be directed. A barrier gleamed as it appeared over her in a protective bubble, and one of the materia in her bracer just begged to be used. She reached for it, magic flowing through her and out as she pointed her staff in a wide sweeping gesture. The ground in front of the behemoth rolled, rising up like a wave instead of the simulated ground, breaking into a jagged barrier of its own at the peak of it and forcing a stop to the behemoth's charge.

The monster roared, outraged, and made an effort to lunge over the barrier. Zack caught up to it by then, sword flashing down.

"Mission level 25 initiated."

The behemoth glowed, tail moving with a speed it shouldn't have been able to at its size, and managed to graze Zack's arm. Even that made for shallow cuts that quickly welled with blood, but the SOLDIER refused to stop; he just switched his sword to his left hand and spun back around to attack again.

Aerith reached for her Restore, cool and green as it flowed from her fingertips to wrap around the wounds, sinking in with a faint glitter and leaving behind the fading pink of healed skin. Another Wall went up over Zack, but she didn't risk another Earth spell, not wanting him to lose footing. That wasn't her only option, though, and she reached for the even colder magic resting in her bracer. Ice came to her call, a spear shooting out and flying at the monster with deadly force. It struck true, the force staggering the behemoth enough for Zack to finish it. They both stayed on guard a moment longer, waiting, before Zack glanced back to the others.

"Is there more or are we taking a break?" He asked.

"Well take a pause while we discuss the results. Come back." Hojo beckoned to them, eyes fixed on the screen in front of him.

Aerith let Zack get the helmet off her, smoothing her hair down with a small smile. "You're okay?"

"Thanks to you." He kissed her forehead, sliding an arm around her waist as they made their way back. "I haven't seen an Earth spell quite like that. Ice either."

"Materia contains the memory of the Cetra. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Ms. Faremis is naturally more attuned and capable of getting more out of them than even SOLDIERs." Hojo considered the
results on his screen with a frown. "The output of healing energy was particularly impressive, though a great deal of it was lost to lack of direction. That's going to need fixed if you hope to be effective, particularly on something so severe as degradation."

"You never really explained what degradation is to me," Aerith said. "You said it was a conflict between the Jenova cells and their human cells, and that it only happened to Genesis and Angeal. But what is it doing to them?"

"Mental and physical instability - they are quite literally self-destructing on a cellular level," Hojo said. "When the Jenova Project began, there were two secondary experiments that quickly came to the forefront. Project G was headed by Hollander and his assistant, and Project S was handled by myself and Dr. Crescent. Gast laid the groundwork with his own experiments, of course, so it's safe to say that Hollander and I did start with the same foundation. From there, however he and I were on our own with only periodic examination by Gast. He had his own projects as well, I'm sure, but in the meantime Hollander and I were developing separate processes. The official goal, of course, was to endeavor to gift the abilities of the Cetra to a human - or awaken them, depending on your point of view. Perhaps that would have been successful, were Jenova a Cetra."

"Why did they want that?" Aerith asked, frowning. "I can't picture that as a humanitarian effort from ShinRa."

"You'd have been surprised by things back then," Hojo said, a fleeting smile touching his lips. "They were different. But no, Rupert wanted to find the Promised Land. In fact, that's why he wanted your mother and you."

Aerith's hands tightened on her staff. "I can't do that. It's not a place I can just lead you to. Even I know that much."

"Of course not, but humoring him is highly effective in getting funds and time to do as I please, so if he wants to believe that I'm not going to stop him." There was a sort of dark humor in Hojo's smile. "It's a business. We all have our own goals."

She frowned deeply, but didn't say anything else.

Hojo continued in her silence. "Hollander's project was a failure, clearly so. Genesis base lined as normal, and there was nothing spectacular about Angeal either. Gast told him it was over, and my successes with Sephiroth were what led me to my position as head of the department after he died."

"After you killed him," Aerith muttered, glaring at Hojo when he only arched a brow with a small smile. "I was seven, Professor. My mother didn't have time to teach me much, but I know what happened."

"You killed your boss?" Zack stared at the scientist in disbelief. "And you're the boss now. That's so messed up."

"He chose death over cooperation, I gave him the option." Hojo shook his head, giving Aerith an amused look. "Are you really so indignant over a man you never knew? You act as if I tortured you and your mother, which is a lie. You may not have liked it, but you were treated better than the average prisoners in ShinRa."

"We were still prisoners, and I was just a baby for the start of it! You kept us for seven years, nearly half my life," Aerith said, part of her horrified by the outburst she couldn't seem to stop, even while the rest felt relieved to finally say it. "My mother was killed trying to get me to safety and the Turks have dogged my steps ever since."
"And yet here you are, of your own accord," Hojo noted, seemingly unaffected. "To help me."

"To help them." She scowled. "They're victims too. They didn't deserve this."

"You are conveniently ignoring the fact that I didn't start this, and the one of the three of them I am actually responsible for is perfectly healthy and sane," Hojo said. "If you want to waste time raging at someone, maybe you should be cursing your own father. Or does death absolve all sins? I was never too inclined to pay attention to religious tales."

"My father-"

"Your father was the one who started this, Ms. Faremis," Hojo interrupted. "Gast discovered, unearthed, and even named the Calamity 'Jenova' - thinking her an Ancient and not knowing the truth of it until your mother set him straight, by which point the Jenova Project was already under way. Indeed, by this point there were three children born to it. And when he was set straight, do you know what your father did?"

"I don't-"

"He ran." Hojo didn't stop to let her speak, continuing to lay out the past in cold detail. "He had doubts, you see; he decided we might be doing the wrong thing. So he took your mother and ran up to Icicle, leaving me with Hollander, Sephiroth, and the loose ends of two bawling babes in Banora. His crisis of conscience had him abandon everything - the project he'd begun, his peers, the children involved, the entire department that had been looking to him - everything was left to wherever fate would take it, because your father wasn't man enough to confront his perceived mistakes."

Aerith made a tight sound in her throat, refusing to look away from him, but she didn't know what to say. She'd never thought of all the people her father had left behind, or that there could have been any other alternative. Was there something he could have done, other than take her mother and run?

Hojo watched her in silence for a moment before continuing quietly. "Make no mistake, Gast Faremis was a brilliant man, but he was also a coward who couldn't face his own mistakes and wouldn't fight for his beliefs. Say what you like of me, I truly could not care less about your opinion, but remember this: I stayed. I have spent every day of my life since he ran off cleaning things up and bringing them into some semblance of order, running SOLDIER for the president and seeing that Sephiroth reaches his full potential. I am, in fact, even now spending my time trying to fix the mess Hollander had made without Gast here to reign in his idiocy. Whatever failings I have, cowardice and indecision are not amongst them. I see my plans through, I stand by my decisions, and I fight for what I believe is right. You do not have to like me or my methods, or what I stand for, Ms. Faremis, but if you still hold your father up as a vastly greater man then you are a willfully blind fool I have no time for."

There was a long, charged moment where they stared at each other, before Kunsel cleared his throat loudly. "Alright, we're getting off track. She asked about what it's doing. You said they're falling apart. Does anyone have any idea how she can help that? And is there any current fix being proposed?"

"Given this was not only not my idea but sprung on me fairly recently, no I do not yet know how best to use her talents," Hojo gestured at the statistics on the computer. "At this point, I barely know what she can do, let alone what she might be capable of with proper instruction. Which also touches on the issue of us not exactly having anyone available to teach her Cetra abilities because she's the last of them, and a shadow at that."

"I'm right here, stop talking like I'm not," Aerith said, irritated by the Professor's continued dismissal.
"Did you have something useful to add to the situation, or do we need to have a heart to heart about how I've wronged you?" Hojo asked, swiveling his stool to look at her again. "Because I have neither time nor patience to coddle you. You are free to despise me, Ms. Faremis, but you need to remember that you are here to help me, and if you get in my way instead then I have no use for you. I'm not going to let people I am tasked to save die because you can't focus."

Aerith sucked in a breath, biting her lip. She hadn't meant to say any of this, and he had a point. It was just harder to stay calm with him right there, memories she hadn't thought about in years constantly coming back to mind. But this was bigger than either of them. She had a purpose. And she knew she could help, just not how. Yet. "Did my mother ever say anything about the fight between the Cetra and the Calamity? They won, but... how?"

"A valid question at last," Hojo said dryly. "That, unfortunately, is hard to say. They sealed It away in the ice, but presumably there was some altercation beforehand, on top of whatever others were infected by Jenova. Of course given that induced hypothermia and cryopreservation are, in fact, viable practices for keeping someone alive in hopes of receiving delicate treatment in a more controlled environment I would like to take a moment to appreciate the irony of that tactic."

"Alright, yeah, that could have been bad," Zack agreed, running a hand through his hair. "But if those are actual processes now, could it be a stopgap measure for us? I mean, hypothermia slows everything down... could it slow the degradation process, just to buy us some time?"

"Operating on the presumption that Hewley is healthy enough to survive, I suppose that merits a glance if we're down to the wire. But given the nature of his problem, that may do more harm than good," Hojo said. "Before the unexpected arrival of Ms. Faremis, I was leaning increasingly towards gene therapy, which would have been an ideal solution if this were merely a straightforward genetic disorder. Of course, the fact that Jenova cells are involved completely skews the situation."

"Okay, I'll ask the big question here then," Kunsel said. "Is Jenova alive? Do we have the equivalent of a cryogenic freeze going on there, and if so, where is it being kept?"

"Jenova's body is currently in Nibelheim, and alive is debatable depending on your definition. And, of course, the understanding of the Calamity itself." Hojo glanced at Cloud when he clapped a hand over his mouth, looking openly horrified. "Is there a problem?"

"He's from Nibelheim," Zack explained, putting a hand on Cloud's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "Breathe, Cloud. Where is it, Professor? As far as I've heard, Nibelheim isn't all that big."

Hojo watched Cloud a moment longer before looking to Zack. "There is a containment chamber in the Reactor. As the very first of the Reactors, however, it was built differently and runs without need of a staff. There's no reason to think it's been disturbed."

"But we're not talking about outside forces here, are we?" Zack pressed. "If Jenova is alive, I'd be a lot more concerned about it coming out then something coming in."

"So we're back to the 'alive or not' question," Kunsel said. "You said it depended on the definition and understanding of the Calamity. What do you mean?"

Hojo sighed, but answered the question. "Jenova came to this planet when the Cetra were still the dominant civilization and the first humans a minority. At first, it was welcomed, likely because the Cetra were also a nomadic race, but that changed when the Cetra realized Jenova was infecting their people. Apparently, it was capable of taking forms that were deceptively close to the Cetra; Ifalna seemed to suggest it had taken specific forms, which was likely why it was close enough to a human form to be mistaken for a Cetra by Gast when he found it. Except, of course, for the fact that it wasn't
just frozen - it was *imprisoned* in the ice."

"My mother warned you about Jenova?" Aerith said. "And you didn't stop the project?"

"Would you have preferred I had killed the children?" Hojo asked. "Because at the time, that was exactly what they were. Children. And there was no brain activity in Jenova, nothing that indicated life as it's understood in the reference of humanity."

"And outside reference of humanity?" Kunsel asked. That wording had an almost audible 'but' tacked on, and he had a feeling it wasn't going to be good.

"On a cellular level, Jenova's body was alive. Sluggish, of course, but the body was preserved. Jenova's organs no longer function, It doesn't breathe, there's no brain activity, as an *individual*, it qualifies as dead. But the tissue samples were healthy. The cells continued to regenerate, and it was clear there was *something* spreading through the body that was active," Hojo said. "The Jenova virus, as it's come to light since then."

There was a long moment of silence as the others let that sink in, before Zack spoke up. "The other day you called Jenova a 'sentient virus' - how sentient are we talking? If the virus is still active, that *does* count as Jenova being alive on the base level, right?"

"Alive enough to make Angeal react to me as a threat," Aerith said, frowning. "That was it, wasn't it? That's why we're reacting to each other, because his cells are more active?"

"That's what I'm having Hollander look into," Hojo said. "I don't like assumptions, but it's certainly possible. You're still aware of them?"

"Yes. They're..." Aerith trailed off, tilting her head and looking at the other wall with a frown. "Something's coming. I can feel two more, coming this way."

"*Two* more? There's only Genesis, isn't there?" Zack frowned uneasily. "What's it feel like? Anybody else got something?"

"... I can *hear* something," Kunsel realized, looking up towards the ceiling with a frown, eyes tracking along an invisible path. "I think we've got company."

"Let me." Mina flicked a switchblade open, looking along the same lines and heading for a vent.

"Oi, lassie, don't go usin' that!" The vent grate dropped, and with it a black and white cat that stood up on its back legs and held its paws up. "I'm here ta help."
Invasion of Midgar

Chapter Summary

Underestimating the enemy will destroy you.

Once upon a time, Heidegger had been a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. Somewhere along the way, becoming an officer and then moving into the director's chair, he had quit listening to the lower ranks. The world continued to grow and adapt beyond his expectations, and while neither Shears nor Elfé had any formal training, they understood how to exploit his weaknesses.

There were three points during a twenty four hour period where over half of the guards within ShinRa Headquarters changed shifts within a period of fifteen minutes, tying up twice as many troopers. The scramble to respond when the communications center was bombed was hindered by the immediate loss of connection between PHS devices.

The second bombing took place within minutes, taking out the radio tower that would have been able to request help from outside the city. Most importantly, it cut off access to Junon and the ability to request backup from the military academy.

The estimates of how long it would take to get internal communications restored were refined by the first-hand experience Genesis could offer them - both the SOLDIERs and Turks had practice dealing with that very problem in the field, and getting around it. The first thing reported in from the Turks was that AVALANCHE was heading for Sector Eight.

A captain on patrol in the Slums managed to find a signal and get in word that there were some gangs gathering to take advantage of the situation just in time for the trains to be taken over.

Stunned by the number of AVALANCHE members suddenly coming out en masse, Heidegger's first order was to get as many of his troops out as possible to regain order. Both Lazard as Director of SOLDIER and Tseng as the Acting Director for the Turks tried to collaborate with him briefly before turning to each other. Newly developed confidence and familiarity with each other helped them team quickly, the mix of specialties and skills allowing for more efficiency.

They had just started to get together estimates of the number of AVALANCHE operatives and locations that had been sighted when a Fira ripped through Sector Eight and everything changed.

"Genesis copies have been sighted with AVALANCHE, I repeat, Genesis' forces have joined with AVALANCHE."

Angeal and Sephiroth stared at the radio they'd tuned into, both filled with dread at the announcement.

"Why would AVALANCHE team up with a SOLDIER?" Rayleigh whispered, trying to picture what could possibly be going on. "They're as anti-ShinRa as possible!"
"As I have been reminded, Genesis is dangerously charismatic." Sephiroth shook his head slightly, looking to Angeal. "He's coming here. There's no question. The rest have to be a distraction."

"AVALANCHE would never allow themselves to be just a distraction," Angeal pointed out, feeling a little numb. "But he'd use them that way. His end goal has to be Hollander, he'll come to us."

Sephiroth nodded. "The collateral damage along the way is what concerns me most."

"SOLDIER doesn't have the forces to deal with them both," Hollander said grimly. "Genesis has been gone long enough to have made another dozen clones, more if he can find volunteers in AVALANCHE. And it sounds like they've brought more people than the Turks thought they had."

"Bad intel, or even more of Gen's charisma and strategy at work?" Angeal asked.

"At this point, I don't think it matters." Sephiroth frowned as his PHS went off. "Zack?"

"Aerith says she can sense two big energies coming this way, one that we're pretty sure is Genesis - it reminds her of Angeal. She doesn't know what to make of the other one, but it's strong, so be careful," Zack said. "I'm keeping watch on her and Hojo, but Kunsel and Cloud are going to help the Director try and corral some of the other troopers."

"Heidegger won't like that," Sephiroth said, though he couldn't blame them.

"The Director said it's better to keep more people alive than worry about politics right now." It went unsaid that what Heidegger wanted was the least of their worries right then, but both SOLDIERs understood. "Are you staying with Hollander and Angeal?"

"We haven't decided yet."

"You need to decide quick, I've got this… robot cat here, who has some intel. Apparently the leak is a lot higher up the food chain than we thought, because AVALANCHE knows where they are. They're expecting you to be called down to deal with some main attack." Zack was silent a moment, indistinct conversation heard on his end. "They also know we're here with Hojo, but apparently nothing about who Aerith is."

Sephiroth frowned, considering the information. It was all too likely to dismiss just because of the unusual messenger. "As much as I hate to play into their expectations, if there is a central attack going on, I do need to be there. Hopefully I'll be able to intercept Genesis. Be sure our new informant stays put, I want to have a word when this is over."

"Same thought. Be careful." Zack was silent a moment. "Tell Angeal not to do anything stupid, ok?"

Sephiroth snorted, giving his friend an amused look. "He heard. I'll be in touch."

"Right. Communications are pretty vital…" Another pause, but whatever was on the younger First's mind wasn't going to be discussed then. "You'd better get going. We'll sit tight here."

"See you then." Sephiroth ended the call, pocketing his phone. "Are you alright to fight, Angeal?"

"If it comes down to it, yeah." Angeal sighed. "Maybe he'll listen to me. Hope doesn't hurt, right?"

Sephiroth considered it, shrugging. "Be sure to do enough for us both, then. Stay safe."

"You too, Sephiroth." Angeal tried to give him an encouraging smile. "Just try not to take his words too much to heart. He's not in his right mind, no matter how often he manages to make it seem
"And so it begins," Fuhito murmured, admiring the chaos AVALANCHE had wreaked so far. Smoke rose from several different locations in the distance, shouting filling the street as civilians ran past in screaming hoards and ShinRa's army scrambled to oppose them. SOLDIER was being far more effective in organization, but they had a disadvantage by default with one of their former leaders leading the other half of the attack. "Lead us forward, Genesis, and we will reach our goals together."

The redhead smiled faintly, making a sweeping gesture with his blade before taking point through a side access. "The SOLDIER floor where Hojo is at is floor forty nine, well along my path to the Science Department labs. I'll be sure you arrive safely before continuing on to my objective."

"Of course. Your kindness and assistance has been most appreciated," Fuhito assured him. With Elfé and Shears flanking him and a set of Ravens at his back, he was quite confident they would have arrived safely regardless, but the former SOLDIER's aid was invaluable. Even their informant had not known about this particular entry and stair access. The elevator was likely to be just as unknown.

"When are you expecting we'll be noticed?" Elfé asked, glancing around the empty hall they exited into before Genesis moved them to the elevator.

"Given the interruptions to their surveillance systems, not until we reach floors over forty. That's when things start getting a bit more protected and private." Genesis didn't want to take the elevator, but the fact was that he honestly didn't think Fuhito would make it up forty nine floors of stairs. And it certainly wasn't as if he was truly trapped; he could blow out the side of the elevator and fly away if he had to. But hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

A glance out the glass sides showed an elevated overview of the havoc below, AVALANCHE overrunning the army while his clones kept SOLDIER far too busy to help. Imperfect, ailing copies they may have been, but even a fraction of Genesis' own fire was enough to burn through their ranks. Unless Lazard gave in and started sending Firsts, it was a sure win for them.

He still wasn't sure if he wanted Sephiroth down there, or to cross blades with his old friend at long last. How fitting would it be, to see him one last time before he took Hollander and rescued Angeal? This was the last time Sephiroth would take anything dear to him. They would escape together, and Hollander would fix the mess he had made. When it had just been himself, Genesis wasn't certain. But if there was any justice left in the world at all, Angeal would survive this. He was ready to make sure of it, and may the gods be kind to those who got in his way, because Genesis would stop for no one.
It was a mistake to assume Genesis could be reasoned with.

The path up to their first destination wasn't without difficulty, communications coming back up a bit sooner than expected. Genesis' own experience had them able to tune into any frequency that would be used, so it was easy enough to anticipate their paths even before any opposition truly arrived. He found his allies to be far more skilled than anticipated, and had no problem at all merely letting them into the SOLDIER floor with a sketched layout and information before continuing higher in the Tower to reach Hollander and Angeal. This close, he could feel the pull of Angeal's presence as a beacon, hurrying to meet him.

The labs were unfortunately familiar, the minimal guard tossed aside and incapacitated without more than a moment's thought. The door pushed open easily, not even locked, and he scanned the room with eyes and senses alike. Not an obvious trap, just Angeal, Hollander, and some lady technician.

"Angeal…"

"Genesis." His friend stood, wings folding back against his side as he offered a tense smile. "I knew you wouldn't have let yourself die so easy."

Genesis laughed, smiling warmly at the vote of confidence. "Of course not. I hadn't believed it at first that they'd managed to contain you this long. But with AVALANCHE running around Midgar, we have ample time to get out of here. I can get us safe passage."

"Genesis, we're not leaving." Angeal frowned. "They're working on a cure. This is the safest place we could possibly be right now. They've already run some tests on me, we can get started on-"

"Are you mad?" Genesis interrupted, staring at his friend with wide eyes. "The safest place to be? ShinRa did this to us, Angeal, they are no saviors. I can't believe you believe that line! You're smarter than that, Angeal, you've seen the truth with your own eyes. Whatever pretty lies they've filled your head with, you know better. There's nothing reasonable to do but leave!"

"Genesis, please, you know I wouldn't say this if I didn't think it was best, okay?" Angeal approached him carefully, hands up in a placating manner. "ShinRa has done a lot wrong, I absolutely agree. But it's still our best bet."

"For what? Them to continue the experiment, and then terminate us when they're done ravaging our bodies and minds?" Genesis shook his head. "No. No, I don't know what they said to persuade you and those words are very pretty but they're lies. All of it, Angeal, is a lie. Did you forget Hojo laughing about 'Hollander's failures'? Did you forget Sephiroth refusing to dignify our plight with so much as his presence, assigning your puppy to put us down instead? Did you forget how said puppy accused you of murdering your mother? What makes you think they're on our side now? What logic is there that explains this sudden change to sympathy and concern?"

"Gen, that's not it. Zack didn't know any better, he didn't know about any of this. And Sephiroth may have handled things badly, but you have to look at it from their point of view—"
"I can't believe you!" Genesis hissed at him, stepping back until Angeal stopped his approach. "Don't you 'Gen' me, Angeal Hewley. I am dying and you want me to look at things through the eyes of those who would leave us to rot? You want me to sympathize with them? Can you even hear yourself? You can't possibly be serious! You're stubborn, not stupid. You have to know better than that. Or do you just want to believe them so badly that you won't face the truth of it? There isn't a happily ever after waiting here for us, Angeal. There never was."

"That's not true," Angeal insisted. "Genesis, you're not well, you said it yourself. You know you don't always see things clearly anymore, I know how much trouble you've had. Your mind isn't clear anymore, you're confused-"

"I fail to see what there is to be confused about with them hunting us down, Angeal." Genesis held a hand up, forestalling any protest. "They wanted to bring us back here, yes. Loyal to us, but only so much as ShinRa allows. In the end, that is where their true loyalty lies. You'll notice all they've tried is to pull us into line. At no point were we listened to, at no point was it even considered we could be right and ShinRa could possibly be at fault. At no point did they ever think to join us - whatever affections they may have, my friend, we will ever be second place to the demands of the company. The same one that wants us dead."

"Alright, yes, that was what the company wanted. I admit it," Angeal said. "But they had ample chance to kill us both, and didn't. Zack isn't a match for us, no, but Sephiroth could have taken either one of us down. He didn't so much as raise his sword. That has to count for something, Genesis. You can't pretend that's not important."

"Oh well forgive me for not being wooed by his apathy then!" Genesis snapped. "Forgive me for not bowing down with gratitude for a man who doesn't even think we're something to take seriously. For someone who thinks we're abominations, that our struggles and emotions are petty. I can't believe you expect me to buy this illusion of perfect hero Sephiroth coming to save the day by refusing to commit himself to any action. No thank you, I've seen his true colors. There's no misunderstanding here, Angeal. Just your willful blindness."

"You're wrong, Genesis. He deliberately went against the President's orders and made sure I survived in Modeoheim. He's stood up for both of us ever since, and probably was doing so from the beginning - we weren't here to know! You're assuming the worst, that's not fair."

"Life isn't fair," Genesis said, lip curled in an ugly snarl. "So he came to Modeoheim, just in time to save you from the wrath of your puppy? From you being put down by your own student? Oh what a hero, give the man a medal!"

"Zack could never beat me on his own, Genesis." Angeal took in a shaky breath, running a hand back through his hair. "I was going to let him."

Genesis stared at him in silence, mouth moving without managing a single word in horrified shock. It took a moment for him to find his voice. "Suicide, Angeal? You were…"

"There wasn't any hope. Hollander wasn't making any progress, I was losing you more every day and couldn't do anything. I just… I was so tired of fighting a losing battle," he said. "If Sephiroth hadn't stepped in, I'd be dead. But he's shown me there's still hope. They're studying the degradation, he's made Hojo work on it too, and they have better equipment and supplies here. We have a chance now, if you'll just stay they can help you too."

"Three friends go into battle. One is taken prisoner..." Genesis closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly. "A gilded cage is still a cage, Angeal. I'm sorry, but I would rather die on my feet than live on my knees."
"Genesis-

"I hope you find peace, before they put you down." Genesis gave him a sad smile. "I'll avenge you, my friend. I won't let them go unpunished for turning you against me, taking advantage of your soft heart."

"Genesis please, don't leave." Angeal took a step towards him, stopping when his friend raised a hand, fire licking at his fingers and glowing bright in his palm. "Genesis don't. Stay here, with me."

"I never left you, Angeal; you walked away from me," Genesis said. His hand glowed brighter, the flames coloring with more heat than materia could ever manage. "Maybe you'll come to your senses. I hope so. You've always found me when I needed you most… maybe this won't be the end."

"It doesn't have to be, Gen, it doesn't have to be this way please-" Angeal cringed, watching as he loosed the fire, the magic burning through everything in its way until there was a clear path out. "Genesis, don't!"

"Genesis!"

The swordmage looked up sharply, smile twisting to an ugly smirk at the sight of Sephiroth. "Always there just in time to get credit for your mere appearance, hm? I'm afraid I don't have time to play with you, Sephiroth. But I'm sure we'll meet again."

"Running isn't going to help you, Genesis," Sephiroth said.

"Running? This isn't about running. This is about taking control of my destiny. This is about freedom. Look it up, I know it's a foreign concept." Genesis turned on his heel, wing spreading wide before he grabbed Hollander. "And you are coming with me. We have much to discuss."

"Genesis!" Angeal took a few steps after him, wings tense and fluttering uselessly. "Damn it!"

"Angeal..." Something in Sephiroth's voice made him turn, facing the younger man. Sephiroth was staring at him, conflicted. "He asked you to go?"

"Of course he did." Angeal sighed heavily. "He thinks I'm brainwashed."

Sephiroth nodded, silent and somber. "You told him no."

Angeal looked to him sharply, frowning. "You thought I'd go?"

"I wasn't sure. You and Genesis have always had a tighter bond to each other than either of you to anyone else." To me went unsaid, but it was obvious.

Angeal gave him a small, sad smile. "We never should have left, Sephiroth. Or at least not without telling you. You've always been a loyal friend, even when you didn't know how to express it very well. You deserved better."

Sephiroth nodded slightly. "I'm sorry you had to choose."

Angeal frowned, looking back the way Genesis had gone. "Yeah. Me too."
Elfé and Shears had little trouble clearing the SOLDIERs they ran into out of the way. Finding the Professor in a closed room, Fuhito ordered the Ravens to keep things clear behind them as they entered. There was only one SOLDIER on guard, watching them warily.

Fuhito held his hands up placatingly. "I am only here to speak with Professor Hojo. There is no need to fight."

"Yeah, the trail of bodies you have behind you kinda makes me inclined not to believe you," the SOLDIER said.

"Then you know it's wisest to let them talk and not engage us," Elfé said, her own blade still in hand. "You're at a strong disadvantage, SOLDIER."

"Mere conversation is surely no threat?" Fuhito said. "Professor, if you have a moment?"

Hojo turned on his stool, glancing briefly at Elfé and Shears before looking to Fuhito himself. "And you are?"

"My name is Fuhito. I studied at Junon and had the pleasure of attending some of your lectures." Fuhito bowed respectfully. "Your contributions to mako studies, bioengineering, and human enhancement are unmatched. My own studies and experiments have been done based off your work. I would be most honored if you would consider examining what I have done and working with me. I assure you, you have seen nothing to match my Ravens."

"Ravens… ah, that's right. The name of your enhanced combatants, wasn't it?" Hojo shook his head. "Not unlike the copies Genesis has made, for skill and intelligence. But your process would be interesting to look at, I admit."

"Fufu… I was hoping you would be intrigued." Fuhito smiled. "Please come with me, then. We will be sure to escort you safely from the ShinRa building."

Hojo arched a brow, a small smile on his lips. "I don't recall saying anything about joining you. I have much more important work to do than looking into your experiments."

Fuhito frowned. "Professor, your intellect is unmatched. The ShinRa have done much, but by now surely they're stifling your superior mind with their abundance of useless restrictions and self-important laws. They don't appreciate your worth. AVALANCHE would be certain you get the respect you deserve!"

"You seem to have me confused with someone who cares about their recognition," Hojo said. "I am in the midst of a time sensitive project of the utmost importance. I assure you, there is nothing you have to offer that could be more critical or more important. Your assumptions are incorrect and you're wasting both of our time. I suggest you leave."

"Professor, I do not wish to use force on such an esteemed person as yourself, but I'm afraid you are going to be joining us," Fuhito corrected.

Hojo offered a thin smile. "Well, by all means. Fair?"

The SOLDIER beside him spun his blade in one hand, taking a fighting stance in front of the professor. "You wanna fight? I can do this all day."

Fuhito frowned. "Elfé, Shears, disable the SOLDIER."

A Wall spell flashed into place, bringing attention to a girl who had been standing in the corner. She
was staring at Elfé in confusion, despite having enough focus to add defensive protection to the SOLDIER. "There's something wrong with you. I can hear the whispers of the Planet… there's an old voice within you… hurting…"

Elfé frowned. "Have we met?"

"It appears ShinRa finally captured the Ancient," Fuhito said. "You should come with us as well, Ms. Aerith. We intended to look for you next."

"I came of my own will. I'm where the Planet wants me to be," Aerith said firmly, not looking away from Elfé. "You're hurting, too."

"I…" Elfé frowned, shaking her head and pressing her fingertips to her temple.

"Elfé?" Shears looked back to her. "Hey, you okay?"

"Fine…"

"She's not well," Aerith said. "Come here."

"I'm afraid it is time we leave," Fuhito disagreed. "If you and the Professor both refuse, we have no reason to stay. Shears, Elfé, let's go."

"Okay." Elfé blinked slowly, frowning at Aerith, then at Hojo, before shaking her head and taking a step back.

Shears went to her, a hand touching her arm gently. "C'mon, Elfé. Let's get out of here."

"Should we just let them go?" Zack asked. "That's the leaders of AVALANCHE, isn't it?"

"They're no harm to us, and we have more important things to worry about," Hojo reminded him. "Find out what's happened with the others."

"Right… I'll call Sephiroth." Zack got his PHS out, checking the signal before putting in the call. "Hey, you guys okay?"

"Angeal and I are fine," Sephiroth said. "Genesis escaped with Hollander. He couldn't be reasoned with, and was too quick for force to be used effectively."

"Damn." Zack shook his head. "We just talked with the AVALANCHE leaders. That was… interesting. I guess we'll see what the situation is now, and regroup?"

"That seems wisest," Sephiroth agreed. "I'll be in touch."

Zack stared at his phone a long moment after Sephiroth had ended the call. "Genesis escaped with Hollander."

"Of course he did." Hojo sighed. "That boy couldn't possibly make things easy."

"And Angeal?" Aerith asked. "I still feel him…"

"He turned Genesis down, I guess. He's still here." Zack managed a small smile at that. More than anything Angeal had said, that proved to Zack that he was serious about staying and fighting to get better.

"Finally some sense," Hojo muttered, turning back to the monitor. "I have data assessment to
continue. I suggest you have someone secure the labs. Assuming Dr. Rayleigh hasn't been scared off, she will be required to step up into Hollander's place."

"Right, I'll check into that." Zack frowned when his PHS started ringing. "Now what? It's… Tseng? Hey Tseng, what's up?"

"Veld is returning with the President. You need to find a safe place for Aerith to stay and get with Sephiroth, Angeal and Lazard to get your stories straight. There's going to be an emergency meeting of the board, and with Genesis coming in as a clear ally to AVALANCHE, it's not going to be in your favor."

Zack closed his eyes a moment, muttering under his breath. "Okay. I'm guessing I get to break that to Sephiroth while you talk to Lazard? Or just… straighten things out, I guess. Kunsel and Cloud are still out there if you need some muscle. Otherwise I'll get them back here."

"I suggest you call them back. My department can handle cleanup," Tseng said. "Keep Aerith off the President's radar. We don't need any more trouble."

"Right, gotcha." Zack sighed. "Okay, I gotta get this to Sephiroth, then. Thanks for the heads up, Tseng."

"Of course. Communications are vital to continue to support each other however we can."

"Yeah… we'll keep in touch. Good luck." Zack ended the call, forcing a smile for Aerith. "Okay so we need to get you tucked away back in my room. Preferably with Kunsel and Cloud, or at least some SOLDIERs we can trust."

"What's the problem?" Hojo asked. "Is there going to be interference?"

"Uh, yeah, probably. The President is flying back, and I don't think there's any way to hush up Genesis' part in all this," Zack pointed out. "And given how he was about giving him a chance to start…"

"He'll attempt to meddle, of course." Hojo sighed. "Well. I suppose there is the small benefit of having Veld back. I will speak with Dr. Rayleigh, and then continue as much of my research as possible before the President gets back and starts to raise a fuss. Have Sephiroth call me."

"I'll do that. C'mon, Aerith."

Tucked away in the safety of the vents, Cait Sith muttered some of the nastier words he'd picked up from his creator, and hurried back. Reeve needed to know what was going on, as soon as possible. He may have escaped interrogation with the distraction from the attack, but with the way things were looking, it seemed like they weren't going to be able to stay neutral much longer.
Interlude: A Father's Fury

Chapter Summary

Even the Director of the Turks had his limits, and Veld had just been shoved well past his.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 5 of To Be Human: On the Side takes place directly before this, but you don't have to read it to understand.

Veld sat across from the President, reviewing the security feeds Tseng had sent him. It wasn't a long flight, but he needed as prepared as possible. Reports were coming in from his operatives, Reno turning one in that had a secondary section attributed to SOLDIER informants. Likely Kunsel, the kid seemed to have a good head for that sort of thing. There wasn't time to look at every angle of every camera feed, but there were two conflicts that he really wanted to see.

The interaction between Hollander, Angeal and Genesis was a surprise, Angeal finally standing up enough to Genesis that he might not be on the chopping block straight off. The rogue SOLDIER had all but invited a death mark, though, escorting AVALANCHE's leaders into the Tower. That was a headache he just didn't need, the two teaming up to create a massive amount of damages. Whatever leak had been giving AVALANCHE information so far had access to plenty of high level things, but this step up in strategy could only have come from another warrior. One intimately familiar with how ShinRa operations worked from the inside. The so-called Crimson Commander had made no attempt whatsoever to avoid notice or escape being affiliated with AVALANCHE. And that almost wiped out any chance of getting a pardon.

Just a glance over his laptop showed the President sitting ramrod straight, blue eyes hard and his jaw set grimly. He wasn't quite livid yet, but he was heading there. Which meant, of course, that things were just going to get uglier as more details came to light.

Veld glanced back down and started the next feed, the leaders of AVALANCHE having come to attempt to take Hojo in. The hero worship in Fuhito's voice made him snort softly, because that explained so much. He recognized Shears from plenty of run-ins with his operatives, mentally placing him as the former leader of a rather large gang below the Plate - Rod and Wess could tell him more later, he made the mental note for that - but he didn't recognize the woman. It was a welcome surprise to see Hojo didn't even entertain the thought of their offer; if he had to bet, Veld would place that entirely on him finally getting recognition from Sephiroth, but that was a mess he didn't want to touch.

It was no surprise to see Zack Fair step up to the plate without hesitation; that was one SOLDIER that Veld did have confidence in his profile, a good kid who wanted to help people and had unfortunately gone to the wrong place to do that. The surprise came like a sucker punch, and if he hadn't been a Turk for over fifty years he would have flinched to see Gast's little girl standing there in
a blue sundress, ready to fight, or at least back her boyfriend up.

Then the woman spoke and Veld swallowed hard against a sudden ache in his throat. He hadn't heard that voice before, but he still knew it. When she turned, he knew that profile. He knew those blue eyes and long lashes and full mouth, and gods help him but with her hair short like that he could even see some of himself.

_Felicia…_

Against all odds, he knew. He _knew_ that was his daughter. The one he'd grieved every day for over ten years. The one he'd thought he'd lost with her mother in the same bombing that took his hometown and his arm when he'd tried to reach them. The loss had gutted him, left a rawness that nothing could fill. But he'd kept going, because he had people who needed him. The company kept him busy, and his Turks had become family. Like all loss, it didn't get better but he got better at managing it. Some days he hadn't even thought about them.

Only that was her, this _Elfé_ was his _Felicia_, sounding so much like her mother, _looking_ so much like Jess that his throat closed and his chest went tight. She was alive.

_All this time_ his baby girl was alive. All this time, she'd been out there. He'd been told there were no survivors, he'd been told -

He'd been _lied to_.

Veld rewound the video, watched them come in again and kept his eyes fixed on his daughter, drinking in every moment. He wasn't sure what Aerith was talking about, but it was clear she was right; _Elfé - Felicia_ - wasn't well, there was something distinctly wrong. Pain creased lines around her eyes, made her sure stride weave until Shears gave her a supporting hand. And Fuhito… whatever was wrong, he seemed more inclined to ignore it. Whether that was from apathy or more dangerous motivation, he didn't know. But he was the leader of the _Turks_, and by god he would find out.

His eyes narrowed slightly, moving to focus on Hojo. He'd been involved in that clean up. Hell, he'd done the bulk of getting Veld's prosthetic hooked up. _He'd_ said that his family was gone.

_You filthy liar I will END you._

Veld closed his eyes, willing his temper back in check. Now wasn't the time. He _did_ have a job to do, a meeting to make it through before he could pull the good professor aside and have a word. He'd turned his head on a lot of atrocities done in ShinRa's name, but there came a point when a man had to draw a line or lose his humanity. It was hard to say how much of that he had, some days, but this was a betrayal he couldn't forgive. This was his _child_.

He had a sudden sympathy for Sephiroth, who was ready to move heaven and earth for those he held dear, so passionate in his cause that nothing and no one would stop him. Even the order to take Genesis down that he was sure was about to come wouldn't sway him. All it would do was draw a very clear line, the ultimatum quite possibly being the final push to have him turn his back on ShinRa. Veld had seen that coming from the start, with only a small hope that it wouldn't come to this. At the time, he'd been conflicted and uncertain about how to lead his Turks, where he would stand - to stand against Sephiroth was quite likely a death sentence, and honestly the worst idea if you were legitimately looking out for the best of the company. The man wasn't called the 'Demon of Wutai' for nothing; he could have brought an entire nation to their knees, and _did_ with Angeal and Genesis at his side. Zack Fair was no Genesis, but he was still incredibly formidable and loyal to his comrades far before ShinRa.
Veld had known from the start that standing against them was a fool's plan. But it wasn't until now that he'd very seriously considered joining them. It would earn him an immediate death mark to defect, a rogue Turk couldn't be allowed, not with as much knowledge of ShinRa's skeletons as he had. This wasn't a decision to take lightly, and he had to give his team a choice. It wasn't fair to them to make them take that step. But just looking at the feed, looking at the daughter he'd thought he'd lost forever, he knew his choice was already made. When the SOLDIERs broke away - and there was no doubt, they would refuse the President's orders, Rupert was just stubborn enough to make it an ultimatum, refusing to believe that his prize SOLDIER could ever turn against him - Veld would go with them. And he wasn't sure he'd order anyone else to stay behind, either.

Veld didn't picture Sephiroth starting a campaign against the company, that would waste precious time and resources that could be spent looking for Genesis. But it wasn't a stretch to say that anyone who got in his way would be removed one way or another, former ally or not. And SOLDIER was one hell of a variable, because if this debacle with Genesis had proved anything, it was that large sections of SOLDIER were loyal to each other before the company itself. The army might stay put, given the fierce rivalry with SOLDIER on top of a lot of resentment, but then again, how many had joined because Sephiroth had inspired them? There was a good chance some would still try and follow him. Angeal was most loved by SOLDIER, but Zack was incredibly charismatic and there was a good chance a lot of the new people would at least look the other way.

Gods, looking at it all together there was an enormous potential that this order going through would cost ShinRa the bulk of SOLDIER, if not all of it, and a sizeable chunk of the army. Hojo would follow Sephiroth, no question. Veld was already sure he'd leave under the protection of their alliance and the far greater chance of success together. How many Turks would follow, he wasn't certain. Lazard was a tossup, but whether he stayed or left, Veld was fairly sure he'd remain an ally. He had too much to lose, even ignoring the fact that this was exactly what he'd wanted from the start. And if they got to the public first, there was a good chance they'd happily follow their heroes over the company that had put them on that pedestal to begin with.

AVALANCHE and Genesis might have succeeded, though in a way they never could have predicted. If the President went through with this order, this could be the end of ShinRa as they knew it.

And Veld was okay with that.
Crossing the Line

Chapter Summary

President Shinra issues ultimatums, and final lines are crossed.

The Board of Directors had gathered and was waiting when the President arrived. A quick glance was telling, Scarlet and Heidegger's glares saying they'd already started in on each other. Lazard was pensive, Sephiroth looking stoic at his side. Hojo was clearly uninterested, still reviewing some of his files. At the end, Reeve was uneasy; understandable, given he was being caught in the crossfire of events he had nothing to do with. Palmer looked just as nervous, fidgeting in his seat. As Acting Director, Tseng was settled into Veld's usual seat, Reno and Rude behind the rather amused Vice President. Whatever went down, there was going to be a full audience.

Despite his own struggles, Veld had made a token effort on the way down from the helicopter pad to get the President to understand how delicate the situation really was.

"I realize the situation with Genesis requires action, sir, but Sephiroth is still attached to him. We need to approach this carefully."

"We made Sephiroth what he is today, Veld, and he will fall into line if he knows what's good for him," Rupert informed him tersely. "I have been very understanding, but I'm drawing a line here and Sephiroth will do his duty."

It was like watching a bomb ticking down and knowing there was absolutely no way to stop it. All you could do was try to get out of the way, save whoever would listen to you.

The President didn't even wait to sit before speaking, sweeping the room with his eyes. "This has gone far enough. I want a report from every department on the damages done, and just how you failed to stop this attack to our own headquarters. I expect better, and if I don't get results I'm going to start looking for new people who can deliver. AVALANCHE's leaders came waltzing into our building, and walked right out, courtesy of the help of our rogue SOLDIER. I want the four of them dead."

"Sir," Lazard started, falling silent when the President raised a hand.

"No arguments. This is non-negotiable. Genesis Rhapsodos has crossed a final line, and he is officially an enemy of ShinRa. I want him put down, is that clear?" He stared down Lazard, then moved to Sephiroth. "I've been patient. I've been very accommodating, and this is the price we've paid for trying things your way. Now we're doing it my way. You will take Genesis down, Sephiroth. And I want Zack Fair put on probation for failing to apprehend AVALANCHE. Given his current condition and the fact that he remained loyal to ShinRa, Hojo is free to continue researching a way to get Hewley back to fighting condition. Are we clear?"

"Your orders are clear, sir." Sephiroth agreed.

Rupert offered him a grim smile, nodding, before looking to Heidegger. "What the hell happened with the army? Do you have no discipline in your ranks? Because running around like spooked chocobo is not a valid strategy. I gave you control of the military in the understanding that you could
"With all due respect President, it's hard to get things done when you have to deal with friendly fire - spastic machines of Scarlet's who can't tell the difference between us and AVALANCHE, ineffective Turks who don't provide any valid intel, and a paltry handful of SOLDIERs who were absolutely useless and refused to collaborate," Heidegger said, making a sweeping gesture to the rest of the board.

"My machines did their job until the army and SOLDIER started getting in the way of their targets!" Scarlet said, pointing between Heidegger and Lazard. "You made yourselves targets, that is not my fault. Anyone with half a brain should have been able to understand that you don't get between them and their objectives without paying a price."

"Your weaponry has a history of not being able to differentiate between SOLDIER and hostiles, Scarlet, I'm doubtful the action of my operatives had anything to do with them being attacked," Lazard said.

"Well if they didn't scan the same as every other mako enhanced monster that wouldn't be a problem!"

There was a long pause after Scarlet's words, the woman paling a little as she realized what she'd blurted out. Sure, it had been thought - and insinuated - plenty of times. But no one had said it so bluntly, not in the middle of a board meeting. Not with the greatest of the SOLDIERs right there, green eyes shifting to look at his accuser, a silver brow arching slowly.

Scarlet swallowed hard, but she didn't take it back. Behind the President, Veld looked to Tseng, the two of them waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"It is a documented effect," Heidegger finally spoke, voice low but clear with the damning words. "And given how much damage just one rogue SOLDIER has been able to cause, maybe it's time we discuss this. The war is over, SOLDIER is no longer needed."

"I think I should have some say in that," Lazard said.

"You haven't been able to control them for quite some time, Deusericus, I think your failure forfeits your voice in this discussion," Heidegger said.

"Then perhaps you ought to get Sephiroth's opinion." Lazard glanced to the man at his side briefly. "He's led them as their general since the start of the Wutai War."

"He isn't a real general, it was a title the department of public relations dreamed up to drum up support for the war from civvies who didn't know better," Heidegger reminded him sternly. "Better men have worked their whole lives to earn the right to that title. Real soldiers who know war better than he ever could with his engineered power, who got in by the quick of their wit and the strength of their will. Don't go acting like he's special, because he's not. Wutai is over, and so is any need for him or your department."

The silver haired man arched a brow, deep voice soft. "Are you quite done, General Heidegger?"

The emphasis got him a dark look, the department head narrowing his eyes in warning. "You have something to say to me, boy?"

"In fact, I do," he said, rising to his full height beside Lazard. "You mentioned that the war is over. I might add to that statement that the war is over because SOLDIER First Class Zack Fair, then ranking Second Class, took over Fort Tamblin on his own and won us quite the final persuading
argument with Emperor Kisaragi. I might also remind you that my own successes were so well known throughout Wutai that I am now rumored to be an immortal demon that ShinRa summoned from some ancient hell because of their inability to kill me, regardless of having tried very hard in very creative ways, for years."

Sephiroth considered the man before him, then swept the room with his eyes. "I did not ask for my title, though I respond to it. I earned my ranking of SOLDIER First Class, regardless of what you think of mako enhanced individuals - a process, I might add, that was authorized and promoted by our president, who is in fact your direct superior; if you think it was a worthless investment, I suggest you tell him that his funds and time happened to be ill used, and his idea ill advised."

Rufus Shinra snorted softly, clearly amused. His father looked interested, a nearly predatory gleam in his eyes at being brought into the discussion. "You're nothing if not intelligent, Sephiroth, and your points well made. Stand down, Heidegger; you don't have to like him, but he's earned his position in the blood shed in this company's name, and that's not something to ignore."

"Of course, sir." The head of public safety leaned back in his seat, dark eyes narrowed with displeasure.

The President eyed Sephiroth a bit longer before speaking. "Did you have something else to say?"

Sephiroth stared at Heidegger a moment longer before he looked to the President. "SOLDIER has proven itself time and again to the company, unmatched in strength and skill - that is undeniable whatever else is thought of us. We have been loyal, and many have died to see your orders through, President. We are not monsters, nor are we average humans. If that makes certain individuals uncomfortable, perhaps they should have spoken before the program got this far. Because SOLDIER is here, and the very best of Wutai and AVALANCHE were unable to stop us. We have defeated everything and everyone who has stood as our enemy, no matter how long it took. And it is my professional opinion that putting yourself amongst their number will not end well."

The President let that sink in for a moment before waving to Sephiroth. "Sit down, Sephiroth, your point has been made. I wouldn't allow any loyal SOLDIERs to be put down anyway; war or not, you've proven your usefulness to the company. There will always be a need to have that strength ready to rise up again."

Sephiroth took his seat, eyes settling back to Heidegger a moment longer before he glanced briefly at Veld. He'd made his point.

Gods, but he'd made his point so clear and no one was acknowledging what he really meant. Could no one else even imagine that Sephiroth was talking to them all? Veld closed his eyes briefly and reminded himself that they weren't so different. As much as he wished Rupert would listen to him, the time was quickly coming when the lines the President had drawn would break the company with an unbreachable chasm. Sephiroth knew it. Lazard knew it. A glance at Hojo, sitting so still with his eyes fixed on Sephiroth, said he was just as aware.

The end of ShinRa as it stood now was coming, brought on not by AVALANCHE or Genesis or Lazard, but by the President himself. All there was left to do now was for people to take sides.
Taking Sides

Chapter Summary

With an ultimatum they can't carry out, SOLDIER and the Turks have to make plans for a future without ShinRa.

Chapter Notes

Ahhh, over 100K done for you guys. It's been a genuine pleasure so far. Shoutout to all those kind enough to review, it means the world.

They went separate ways when the meeting ended. Lazard gathered his SOLDIERs, Veld back to his Turks, both directors grimly certain of how things were going to go.

Lazard was silent on the elevator ride to his office, but stopped to say one thing to Sephiroth before he got off. "Let me know how you decide to proceed."

Sephiroth offered him a small smile, inclining his head and continuing on to the SOLDIER's suites. He headed immediately for his own apartment, putting a call in to Zack. "We need to talk."

"Yeah, I just bet," Zack said, already guessing how things had gone. "Three way call with Angeal?"

"Something of that nature, yes. I'm going to get some things from my rooms first, but I'll connect a call to the labs and back to you," Sephiroth said, letting himself into his apartment. "Be ready for the call, with whoever you have available on hand."

"Right, Cloud and Essai are with me now. Kunsel went down to keep Angeal company, since I've got other company still," Zack said. "How'd the Turks seem?"

"Veld wasn't happy. But he came in tense, so there may be more than I'm aware of. It remains to be seen what course of action they'll take, though the President didn't aim any particular part of his lecture at them." Sephiroth frowned, going to find his mission duffle and check its contents. Ample combat supplies, certainly, but if he left he would need more clothing and food as well for a long mission whether he came back or not. "He's issued an ultimatum on Genesis, along with AVALANCHE."

Zack's mutterings were indistinct, but likely involved cursing. "Alright. Get us all connected as soon as possible, I'll get everybody in the living room and I can put you on speaker."

"I'll call back shortly," Sephiroth promised, ending the call and immediately putting one in to Angeal.

Angeal didn't waste time with pleasantries when he picked up. "Hojo told me about the kill order. Do we have a plan?"

Sephiroth smiled faintly despite the situation to hear Angeal ready to be proactive for once. "We have options. I'll connect the call back to Zack and we'll discuss them. Are Hojo and Dr. Rayleigh
"They're close enough I could go over to them," Angeal said. "You want them in on this?"

"With Hollander gone, it's especially important. Make sure the area is secure, then put me on speaker."

There was a long pause, during which Sephiroth got onto his computer, checking his banking accounts. He'd never really been inclined to spend much, never saw the need with the bulk of his necessities covered by the company, but that would come in handy now. There was a slight change in the sound with speaker phone active, and he gave it his attention while continuing to check what all he had in his apartment. "I'll connect us back to Zack's group as well, one moment."

There was a pause, faint beeping while he waited for Zack to pick up. He did so quickly, no doubt having been waiting. "We're here, Sephiroth."

"And who is 'we' at the moment?" Hojo asked.

"Me, Cloud, Essai, and Aerith," Zack said. "On your end?"

"I've got speaker for me, K unstel, Hojo and Rayleigh," Angeal reported. "Sephiroth, you're alone?"

"For the moment, yes." He paused his inventory, getting a sheet of paper to make notes on. "Zack has been officially put on probation for letting AVALANCHE's leaders go. There's also a kill order for them and Genesis. No negotiations."

"Bet he'd negotiate with Masamune," Zack muttered, the comment clear enough to get a huff of laughter from Angeal's end. "Alright. Obviously, we're not gonna do that. So what are we going to do? We still need to find him."

"Given the President seems to believe I will do as told simply because he said so, so I believe Lazard has room to issue direct deployment, at least of myself. With the order for you to be on probation, that may be trickier." Sephiroth frowned. "It looks like you're pardoned so far, Angeal, but I'm not sure they'd go so far as to trust you to come with me."

"I have to stay with Hojo for more testing anyway," Angeal pointed out. "You haven't made enough progress for me to leave, have you, Professor?"

"The situation is far too complex to have a solution with as little time as I've had to look into this," Hojo said. "Unfortunately, given that Hollander is now with Genesis, his condition is no longer easy to assume as an uninterrupted down slide. There is the benefit of not having him in the way, certainly, but he's also not being monitored and there's no check for his idiocy."

"What are the odds Hollander would work with Fuhito?" Zack asked. "I mean, sure the guy idolizes you, but Hollander has a lot of information himself too. And he's proved perfectly happy to work with whoever is going to keep him alive."

"Interesting, considering how terrible his self preservation instinct is overall, but a valid point." Hojo said. "I have yet to see if he's taken anything, I imagine looking at the recordings might be more effective than trying to determine what might be missing from his disaster of a workspace. But knowledge alone is formidable, even his. Perhaps especially him, as he does more harm than good."

"It's a disaster regardless, right now it's just figuring out what kind of disaster," Angeal said. "Genesis wouldn't be reasoned with. I guess I should have expected that but I had to try. Attacking him to try and keep him here wouldn't have worked."
"Hey, you were smart - the last thing we need is you with an unhealing wound like he's got," Zack reminded him. "You tried, but not at the cost of yourself. That's not a bad thing, that's self preservation when you don't have anything to give, okay?"

"Zack's right," Sephiroth agreed. "You had limited options and did the best you could. That's in the past, now; we need to figure out where he's going, how to stop him if reason continues to fail, and then how that will relate to our dealings with ShinRa."

"Like you said, you could get deployed yourself because nobody seems to get that you're not going to kill Genesis," Zack said. "You're the President's trump card, always have been. If Angeal has to stay with Hojo, then at least I can keep you up to date on what's going on here. Then again, I'm one of the best SOLDIER operatives we've got so maybe you could make a case for me having your back."

"Possibly. A side note, there was no mention of Aerith during the meeting, so her location seems secure," Sephiroth said. "The President didn't say otherwise to you, did he, Hojo?"

"No, I very seriously doubt he looked at entire feeds, if at all - that's what he has Veld for, after all," Hojo chuckled softly. "Which is not going to end well for him, I can only imagine how he's taking this. Regardless, you'll need to speak with the Director before making any movements. I suggest you get on that quickly, perhaps with your own executive present."

"So, I'll stay here with my group, you guys hang out in the labs, and Sephiroth goes alone to talk with the Turks?" Zack frowned. "Seems like we should maybe have more of us there."

"I'll be speaking with Veld soon enough, I'm sure," Hojo said. "You go ahead and see what he thinks about things, and I'll continue my work here."

"Veld's going to want to see me," Aerith said. "I'm still under their protection."

"You're under SOLDIER protection, Aerith, let's make sure they're not planning to sell you out to save themselves first, okay?" Zack said. "I'd have liked to go have a word, myself."

"Not so much an option at the moment, if you want her under the best SOLDIER guard we can offer right now," Angeal pointed out. "No offense, Ms. Gainsborough, but I'm not sure it would be best for us to meet face to face just yet."

"No, I understand," she said. The last thing she wanted was to set off another fit or whatever they were calling Angeal's first reaction to her presence. Which reminded her… "Genesis was escorting the AVALANCHE leaders, wasn't he? I felt him close."

"He likely brought them up to your level, then continued on to the labs, yes," Sephiroth agreed. 

"Okay, so if we were on the exact same level, that close, why didn't he react to me the same way Angeal did?"

Silence greeted the question, Zack giving Aerith a stunned glance. "I hadn't thought about that. He should have reacted the same way, or at least the same hyper awareness Sephiroth had, right? Or even worse than Angeal, since he's further into degradation. But he just kept going."

"Well, there's clearly some differences between them anyway, though, right?" Kunsel asked. "I mean, their wings even - you've got two white ones, Angeal. Genesis' is different."

"Enormous black wing, different shape, different side, yes…" Angeal frowned. "It's still clearly degradation, right Professor? I mean there was never a doubt about that."
"No, but there's also no doubt that you both had different processes," Hojo said. "Your mother was enhanced, and you inherited it. Genesis merely had her genes mapped onto him during development. But it does bear investigation, at least as much as can be done without actual samples of his current condition. I suppose I'll see if the bodies of any of his clones are available for inspection as well. There may be some benefit to the examination."

"I'll make inquiries to the cleanup crews," Rayleigh said. "We'll need more than one to get a baseline, no guarantees."

"There never are," Sephiroth said, frowning to hear a low pattern of beeping. "Hojo?"

"It appears Veld has come to visit," the professor observed, "perhaps you should come down."

Veld returned to his office with only a brief set of instructions to Tseng - he wanted the ones with event relevant reports there to give them, and catch up on the situation. No one else, not now.

As Tseng had been sending Veld reports the entire time, he only gave a quick summary for the benefit of the others before Reno and Rude launched into an assessment of damages, Rude's expertise in demolitions coming in handy for making guesses of what resources they'd had and how long they would have had to be in place to go off so well. Reno had gotten together with Maur and Kunsel, and had marked up maps and some quickly packaged notes to hand out for perusal.

As Cissnei had been in the field at the time, most familiar with the Genesis copies, she weighed in on SOLDIER with Charles' input on how Lazard had reacted to the situation. It was a relief he'd been so quick to work with their department, but even moreso to know he was blindsided - clearly, he really had cut off contact with Genesis.

Having been shadowing Aerith, Mina covered the tests that had been done, and the strange dynamic with Hojo, as well as what happened during the short meeting with AVALANCHE.

No one missed the way Veld's hand curled into a loose fist at the professor's name. "Bring up the feed of the AVALANCHE leaders meeting with the good professor."

The 'good professor' was not a commonly used moniker for Hojo, and his operatives were on guard to find the cause. Veld unlocked one of his drawers as the video played. "Stop it when you get a good profile of the woman."

Tseng obeyed, attention going back to his mentor as a package was brought out. Inside, there was a variety of photographs, and Veld chose one to slide across the table for them to view.

It was hard to picture their stern director as the young man with the beaming grin standing with an arm around a slim brunette who had a rather indulgent smile on her lips. A girl was sitting on his shoulders, the same smile as the woman and dark hair that had a fall of bangs not unlike Veld's own.

Most of the Turks present hadn't had the opportunity to meet Veld's family, but they all knew about the Kalm bombing. Veld had lost his arm, and the two females in the picture - his wife and daughter.

And they were all far too well trained not to put it together with the woman frozen on the screen. "Fuck, that's her."

"Reno." Rude gave his partner a stern look, but no one could argue; they'd all had the same thought.
Silence laid heavy in the room for a long moment before Tseng spoke. "What do you need us to do?"

Veld offered his second in command a tight smile. "I'm going to talk with Hojo. In the meantime, I need you to dig up whatever you can about her, where she's been before AVALANCHE if possible. You have a rough timeline, given she vanished around the time of the bombing."

"Right, yeah... you want any of us with you, chief?" Reno asked, hand going to play with the mag rod at his hip.

"No, I think I'll handle this myself thanks." Veld shook his head. "See what you can find. Keep it in our department, I don't want anyone else knowing about this."

"Classified, got it."

"Does it work okay to get our people here on it?" Cissnei asked. "Maur would be great on this."

"The fourteen full Turks based in office here, none of the rookies yet," Veld said. "Keep it quiet for now."

"Not gonna hear a peep, chief," Reno promised.

"I'll keep my ears open, but I assume I'm still on shadow duty for Deusericus?" Charles asked.

"Keep on him, yeah. And we still need people to find that leak," Veld reminded them. "We've got more than this to handle, but I want it investigated."

"She's family. That's not something to ignore," Rude said. "We'll look."

Veld looked between them, nodding slowly. "Thanks. I'll go have a word with Hojo now. I'll keep you appraised of the situation."

"Sephiroth isn't going to go along with the President's order," Tseng predicted. "He's essentially said as much, that he wouldn't kill Genesis while there's any chance to save him."

"Zack won't, either," Cissnei said. "And SOLDIER will follow them."

"Right. Which is another situation that needs contained. Get Balto out to Fair's suite. Cissnei resume your guard on Aerith. We can't have her presence becoming common knowledge either."

"On it, boss."

"You all have your assignments," Veld said. "Get to work."

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Veld had thought he'd gotten his temper in check by the time he'd arrived on the main floor for the Science Department labs. From the rush of emotion that hit him just seeing Hojo, it was very clear he was wrong. "Hojo, we need to talk."

"There's little you could say to me that I care if anyone here hears, Faraman."

His casual dismissal, acting like nothing Veld had to say could possibly be worth so much as turning to face him, made Veld's blood boil. "You told me she was dead."
"Something in his tone made the professor turn, a small furrow between his brows suggesting confusion. "Who?"

"Felicia!" Veld took a deep breath, trying to keep his calm as he walked up to the professor, lowering his voice. "My daughter, you bastard. You told me she died in the bombing."

The blank look Hojo gave him almost choked him with rage. "I assumed she did die."

Veld narrowed his eyes. "Don't give me that. Don't you dare lie to me, not again. What did you do?"

"The bodies and survivors were taken to Nibelheim, Veld, your people oversaw that themselves," Hojo reminded him.

"And what did you do to them there?"

"You never cared before."

"Well unlike some people I give a damn about my family," Veld hissed.

"How unprofessional," Hojo said.

Veld grit his teeth, stepping into Hojo's personal space. "I'm only going to ask one more time, Jirou, what did you do to my daughter?"

Hojo stared at him a long moment, unimpressed. "You ask like I would remember. There were no successes out of anything I looked into after the bombing. If I had to guess, I would say she was as good as dead when arriving in Nibelheim. And her body likely died on the table. Whatever happened next wasn't my doing."

Veld took a moment to wrestle with his temper, staring the other man down. "I should shoot you, right now."

"Funny how you've never cared until it was your blooded kin," Hojo observed, leaning back against the table he'd been working at. "If you're going to kill me, Veld, get it over with. Or get yourself under control, because I have a great deal of work to do. And I assure you, Sephiroth is not in the mood to be patient."

Veld tensed, following the professor's gaze over his shoulder to where the silver haired SOLDIER was standing, green eyes fixed on him warily. He recognized his stance immediately, ready for battle if he felt it was necessary. And as good as Veld was, he wasn't going to win a close-quarters fight with a man who was arguably the greatest warrior of his time. Certainly the strongest. Letting out a slow breath, he stepped back from Hojo, giving the man one last dark look. "I suggest you look into the matter."

"Of course, in my abundant free time," Hojo said dryly, clearly unimpressed.

It had been a long time since Veld had wanted to shoot someone so badly. But he turned his back on the scientist and addressed Sephiroth instead. "I can guess how you feel about the orders you received. We need to talk about how we're going to proceed from here."

Sephiroth nodded slowly. "It sounds like I'm not the only one who has received orders they have no intention of carrying out."

Veld offered him a hard smile. "Something else to talk about."
"I imagine here is as secure as anywhere else," Sephiroth said. "Perhaps we should discuss the situation in more detail."

Veld inclined his head slightly in agreement; it was true, the labs were always secured for safety, but especially so now that there was so much going on with SOLDIER. "I take it you overheard my conversation with the Professor."

"I did," Sephiroth said. "You've made it clear that there is at least one member of AVALANCHE that you will not be carrying out the kill order for. It puts us in a very similar predicament."

"It does, though we also have a similar advantage," Veld said. "The President believes you would never disobey orders, even for your friends. He won't see a challenge coming from me either."

Sephiroth nodded. "Given our respective positions, it's possible to be officially deployed and supported by the company for quite some time. Maintaining such a good supply of resources is unquestionably to our advantage."

"There's also the benefit of not having their opposition, which is even more important than the support at this point," Veld said. "I'm not going to order my Turks to come with me. Some of them might anyway. Do you know where SOLDIER stands?"

"Together," Sephiroth said without hesitation. "Wherever that happens to be. We've had each other's backs from the beginning, and as this meeting confirmed, the company does not. It's an obvious choice."

"Very few, if any, would hesitate," Kunsel agreed, not faltering under the quick look from the head of the Turks. "I've asked around, discretely. There was already a lot of upset and wariness over what's happened with Genesis and Angeal. Hearing the truth will only cement their conviction."

"You plan to tell them the truth of it, then?" Veld asked.

"Lying has caused nothing but division amongst us," Sephiroth said. "No more. We need each other more than ever, this isn't the time for secrets."

"Alright then." Veld nodded. "Keep working with the Professor, keep me appraised of the situation. I'll strategize with Lazard on how to make our searches seem legitimate."

"Good luck, Director."
Interlude: What They Say About Cats

Chapter Summary

Curiosity wasn't going to kill Reeve. Hopefully heroics wouldn't either.

It took someone willfully blind to ignore that Sephiroth had not actually agreed to do what he was told. He'd said the orders were clear, and that was not the same thing. At all. Reeve returned to his workshop with dread coiled in his gut like a cold weight. This was even worse than knowing AVALANCHE would be invading, because this was Sephiroth, and no matter what Heiddeger said he was still the Silver General in the eyes of the public and seemingly SOLDIER as well. He was idolized, adored, and on top of that he was also the strongest 'weapon' in ShinRa's arsenal, Junon Cannon included.

However, as a sentient weapon with free will, he had his own thoughts and ideas and passions. Sure, he looked stoic enough whenever Reeve saw him, but the man had already defied the President. Thinking that he would suddenly come into line just because ShinRa demanded it was ridiculous, and Reeve prided himself on being intelligent. There was going to be a break between Sephiroth and the company - possibly the rest of SOLDIER itself and the company, with him at the helm - right along the fault line of that stupid ultimatum. And anyone who wasn't quick enough to choose sides was going to topple right over into that abyss.

Reeve sighed, pouring some coffee and drinking it even though it was lukewarm and really rather gross at this point; he needed the caffeine and beggars couldn't be choosers. Besides, he had a vital decision to make.

ShinRa wrote his checks, ever since he'd taken over for his father in managing the reactors - improving them, in fact, and making himself indispensable. Unfortunately, that seemed to be all they cared about. He'd had so many hopes and ideas for improving the life for civilians, at the very least in Midgar. And it would have taken only a fraction of any other budget to do it, but apparently that couldn't be spared. Helping people wasn't the goal anymore, it hadn't been for a long time. Reeve was used for what they wanted - maintenance of their beloved reactors - and nothing more. His intellect, creativity, and potential were all ignored.

And then there was this new group, treasonous but silently so, ready to act in what really was self-defense on the most basic level. And they'd admired his work, even just the little camera bug, fascinated and taking him seriously! It had been so long... and he couldn't really argue with their cause, they were justified. The question was, of course, if he could find a place for himself there. Was it worth the danger of standing against ShinRa?

Then again, was there even going to be a ShinRa as he knew it, with the Turks and SOLDIER taking one side, the Vice President already selling them out to AVALANCHE? And Hojo had the Science Department aligned with Sephiroth, and by extension SOLDIER. The three most powerful departments were getting ready to rebel, possibly break free to their own faction. It seemed like it might be wisest to be on that side. If a winner was going to come out of all this, it would be on their side. ShinRa wouldn't have the resources left to fight back.

Nodding to himself, Reeve sat down to compose a letter, deciding that perhaps he'd aim it at Zack Fair. The young First had already shown himself reasonable and compassionate, and might be the
safest one to contact. Besides that, he could have Cait deliver it for the benefit of positive familiarity. After all, his warning was to their benefit earlier, and the good mental association would be extremely helpful.

Cait Sith scrambled his way through the vents, hopping down only once he'd gotten to SOLDIER residential and knocking on the door to Zack's apartment. The letter in his hands was a less pristine than Reeve had hoped, having been fiddled with every chance he got, and the animatronic cat would have offered a nervous smile when the door opened if he'd had the facial structure for it. "Hey there. D'ya have a minute? I've got some more information if ya do."

Zack blinked at him a moment, offering a bemused smile and stepping aside. "Sure, just… come in. What's your name, anyway?"

"My name's Cait Sith! My maker sent me down here ta talk to ya an' see if maybe ya could find a good place ta work together. He's in an awful tight spot, ya see." Cait waited for the door to close, looking around. "Mercy me, a Turk too! Well, that's well enough, I suppose. I wanted ta talk to ya first. The others can be awful intimidating…"

Zack snorted softly, amused. "I can't argue that. What kind of information does your, ah, maker have? More about AVALANCHE?"

"Well, in a way. But first, I need ta know he's gonna be safe." Cait straightened up to his full height, aware that really wasn't terribly impressive. "It's clear things are about ta change, with the President bein' stubborn. Whatever's gonna go down, it won't happen without a fight."

"Intel in exchange for safety is a pretty standard request," Cissnei said. "You were the one who warned about the attack, right?"

"Aye, well… y'see, we had the little bugs ya found. Actually, it hadn't been planned t' look in on ya. Or the other one, they were just wanderin' an' it ended up bein' at that time… right or wrong'll depend on how ya take the message, I suppose." Cait looked between them. "So, d'ya have ta ask Director Faraman an' the General first?"

"I'm pretty positive that Sephiroth would be happy to have more people on our side, especially someone who might be able to help us track Genesis down quicker," Zack said, looking to Cissnei. "What about your boss?"

"A lead on AVALANCHE would be extremely useful, but I'll ask." She got up, pacing over towards the kitchen as she put in a call. "Director? We've got contact with the person who made the spy bugs, offering intel on AVALANCHE in exchange for protection for helping us."

Veld's voice was quiet through the phone, but Zack still picked it up. "What kind of information?"

Cait tipped his head to the side, volunteering the answer before he could be asked. "We have video confirmation of at least one leak in the company. An' it's a doozy."

Cissnei's brows rose. "They have video confirmation of the intel leak."

Veld's answer was immediate. "I'll meet with them. If their information checks out, then they'll be given immunity and protection from our department."

"Yes sir." Cissnei glanced back to the animatronic feline. "If your intel is good, you're going to get
Cait tipped his head the other way, sending the information back to Reeve. Blinking twice, he shifted his stance as Reeve took direct control, his own voice coming over instead of the chipper one he'd installed. "I'd be happy to meet with him. Should I come to see the Turks myself or would you rather meet up somewhere?"

Cissnei stared for a long moment, processing the voice. "Director Tuesti?"

Reeve's chuckle was a bit rueful. "That's right. I do a bit more than run the reactors. Or I would, if I was given some support."

She nodded slowly. "That makes so much sense. Director? Where would it be best for you to meet up?"

Veld was silent for a moment, likely processing the surprising source of new information. "Tell him to meet me in the SOLDIER Director's office. Have Zack contact Sephiroth as well."

"Sure." Cissnei looked at the others, smiling to see Zack already getting his PHS out and giving her a thumbs up. "Reeve, he wants you to meet with him and SOLDIER's Director, in Lazard's office on floor 51."

"Alrighty, will do! We'll be bringin' the video for him ta see, then." Cait offered a hasty salute. "Pleasure workin' with ya."

"I don't think I have to tell you to keep it discrete?" She asked.

"Heh, no, lass, we've got that down. But thankee all the same. I'll just be outta your way now an' Reeve'll see ya shortly!"

Cissnei watched the robot scamper off, shaking her head. "Well that was odd. I can stay with Aerith if you want to go, Zack."

"Yeah, thinking about it," he admitted. "We'll see what Sephiroth has to say. If this guy's telling the truth though, this could be a big break for us."

"Wouldn't that be nice." She sighed. Not just for tracking Genesis, which she did still hope the SOLDIERs succeeded in, but also helping Veld find his daughter. Cissnei respected him immensely as her boss, of course, but as a ward of the company he'd become something of a father figure to her too. And she hadn't forgotten how the loss had nearly broken him. She never thought she'd say it, but company orders be damned, she wanted to save Elfé for him. It was easy to say that was all she'd known, but more than that, it was the Turks. They were everything to her, and if that was the road Veld was going to take, she'd follow without hesitation.
Cats and Dogs

Chapter Summary

They were coming together from all different angles, but that just meant having a clearer view.

Reeve felt terribly exposed coming out to what was unquestionably SOLDIER territory. Never mind that it was Lazard's office and not the SOLDIER floor itself, never mind he did in fact have what could be blackmail on everyone he was meeting with, any one of them could probably kill him before he ever saw it coming.

Some distant part of him said that he really needed to do something about his gambling problem. This should be making him more nervous and not at all excited. The rest of him retorted that was better than sheer terror, which most people would probably have felt to come in and be the immediate focus of the leader of the Turks and the SOLDIER General. Instead, he waved a bit and continued in. "Hello gentlemen."

"Director." Sephiroth inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Tuesti." Veld looked him over quickly, likely a reflex by this point, and Reeve held still for it. "So, you apparently have some information."

"I do, yes. Not that I'd gone looking for it, exactly, but you can't get ignorance back," Reeve said, resisting the urge to fidget. "So here I am. I have video of a conversation between what's probably the primary leak inside the company, given I can't imagine him playing second fiddle to anyone, and AVALANCHE. But before I hand that over, I'd like to discuss the current situation developing here. I know the Turks and SOLDIER are working together, and I know that SOLDIER isn't going to turn against Genesis, which means they're technically turning against the company due to the ultimatum issued today. I get the impression that the Turks are going to continue supporting SOLDIER, though in how prominent a capacity I don't know. And that by assisting you, I could very well be putting myself on the hit list if you can't make ShinRa play nice with you.

"I don't want to die, gentlemen, I really don't. And I'm not the hero sort. At all. That said, I'm still in possession of a mostly functional conscience and I have years of being ignored by the board when I try to do anything to help people. Which as Director of City Planning is actually supposed to be my job." Reeve sighed, clasping his hands. "So if I can help people, if I can do my job, and also help you stop AVALANCHE and save your friends… well, I'd be happy to. Just help me not die in the process."

"Good, you've thought this through." Veld smiled faintly, nodding. "I think we'll work together just fine."

"I have yet to turn my back on a loyal ally," Sephiroth said. "I don't intend to start here."

"Yeah, we've got enough issues right now without turning on each other," Zack agreed, settled at the table for the moment. "So, are we watching the video here?"

"I think it's better to just provide the clearest evidence possible, given how big an accusation this
would be." Reeve removed a case from his jacket, opening the drive with a press of his thumb and stepping towards the computer. "If I may…?"

"Oh, certainly." Lazard rose from his seat, gesturing for Reeve to take over.

Reeve nodded, sitting and examining the console. "I imagine it's an unnecessary worry to be concerned with anyone spying on us? I mean, I could sweep for bugs, but with the situation…"

"Extra precautions were being taken regardless," Veld assured him. "Go ahead."

Reeve nodded, plugging the drive in and activating the accurate file.

When Rufus Shinra came up on the screen, taking a call from AVALANCHE and discussing the attack they'd just had - before it had happened, as the time stamp showed - he could feel the tension in the room rise.

"Son of a bitch," Lazard muttered, shaking his head.

"Well that's an unexpected family resemblance," Zack quipped, holding his hands up when his director glared at him. "I'm not wrong, Director."

"No, you're not." Veld shook his head, a hand over his mouth as he watched. "Goddamn that kid… well you're right, that's one hell of an accusation, but given your proof, it'll stick."

"I would think you could look up surveillance on his quarters, couldn't you?" Lazard asked. "I can't imagine you don't have protection measures in place for the heir to the company."

"We do, but they're for external threats. Not this level of stupidity from Rufus himself." Veld frowned, watching the call play out. "At this angle, you've got another bug running around, I suppose?"

"Yes. And I do realize the smart thing would have been to stop them, or at least put in coding to keep them from certain areas, but your response to discovering one was… well, it was encouraging," Reeve admitted. "It's been a long time since any of my projects that weren't related to Mako production got so much as a glance."

"Oh this technology has my attention," Veld said. "In fact, I could think of a lot of uses I'd happily commission more of them for, and I'll take payment right out of our equipment fund because it'll be replacing other things with them anyway."

Reeve brightened at the offer, feeling that same thrill of finally being acknowledged and having his hard work validated. "We could talk in more detail, with help testing in more varied conditions I'm certain I could improve it quickly. I do love detail work, honestly. The reactors were my father's masterpiece, not the legacy I'd have chosen for myself."

"I'd thought you were too young to have done that," Lazard said. "We'll have to swap stories."

"Something to save for long nights on surveillance," Veld said. "I'll have Rufus questioned. Lazard, you keep working with Charles and your men to get as much information together on what Genesis could possibly be doing in the immediate future. I'm going to see about digging up some old friends."

"I suppose I'll just gather more of my observation bugs?" Reeve asked.

"That, and get me some statistics for just what level of mobile surveillance you might be able to rig up," Veld said. "We need that sort of thing; the potential applications might be exactly what we need
"I'll get on that, then." Reeve looked over the group, feeling even more excited now that the worst of his fears had been settled. "I'm going to guess that it's best to keep me knowing as little as possible about all this, so I'll get going back and make up some lists for you about what I have, and what I could make up. A pleasure doing business, gentlemen."

Veld sent Tseng to gather Rufus from his apartment. Going to the Vice President himself could draw attention after the meeting they'd just had, and he needed to do something else first anyway.

This wasn't the first crisis ShinRa had ever faced, but it was shaping up to quite possibly be the worst that had happened during Veld's career as the Director of Administration and Research. Not the best outlook, given he was also the longest serving Director, but there had only been two, officially. Valentine had stepped up on a few occasions, much as Tseng did for him, but he'd never officially held the office. Which was good, because while his partner had been a fantastic second in command, Veld had experienced enough to know he hadn't had the disposition to manage the job long term. He would have probably shot Hojo back there, if their situations were reversed, and really that was a line of thought he couldn't afford to chase right then. But he did have to wonder what else Hojo might have lied about.

It wasn't something he had time for. There was too much going on to be distracted, and his temper didn't need any help getting riled up again. Right now, he needed to get some groundwork laid, in some ways that he should have done a while ago. He'd meant to right after Junon, in fact, but then AVALANCHE attacked, and the President demanded a meeting as soon as they could physically walk into the board room.

Veld wasn't at all surprised when Anya answered right away. "I don't suppose you've seen hints AVALANCHE around the port yet?"

"There are more ways across the water than Junon," she said, clearly unbothered by his lack of 'niceties' - Veld personally thought she would just as soon go without them anyway. "But no, we're clear. You need to send me a damage report."

"We'll trade them when they're gathered up. How's your set at the Academy? And what vibe do you have from SOLDIER there?"

Anya was silent for a long moment. "SOLDIER is quiet. The higher ranked, the quieter. But it's a waiting quiet. Our rookies are still in step, some more some less. It's helping choose who will go higher, there is that much to our advantage, at least. The army, though you did not ask, is disgruntled and rather offended. But none of SOLDIER rises to their bait. Hopefuls, perhaps, their little cadets will growl and posture and take offense, but none of the SOLDIERs themselves will rise to it. It's impressive, but I do not believe this sudden unified restraint is a coincidence."

"I wasn't aware you believed in coincidences at all." The banter was reflexive as Veld processed what he was being told. Between testosterone, Mako enhancements, and the high of coming through conflict more or less the victor, you'd expect the SOLDIER department to be up for a good fight. Or at least to rub their superiority in the face of any idiot army who thought they were hot enough to get right now."
up in an enhanced's face and tell them what for. But this subdued reaction - a 'waiting silence' Anya had called it - this was not normal. Especially not uniformly across the whole department. "When you figure out where that's coming from, let me know. Right now, I have my hands full on this end. Rupert made a presidential order for Genesis Rhapsodos to be executed for his crimes against the company."

A quiet huff from her end was the only immediate response. "His friends did not take that well, I'm sure. But the President sees no other way, with his sudden alliance with AVALANCHE, hn? Easily predicted. Not so easily handled, but perhaps that has a part in the sudden closing of their ranks. Silence is not an unheard of defense, however atypical of their department."

"Valid point. I don't think Sephiroth's had time to personally make that call, and I'm not sure he'd think to. But he's got some very clever, very well liked and connected young men working with him that might have done it. I'll see if one of mine can peek around here." Veld sighed, settling at his desk and getting at his computer. "I'm sending you some stills of AVALANCHE's leaders we got from the security feed. Take a look at them."

He waited a long moment in silence after sending them, smiling mirthlessly when he heard the quick intake of breath. Whatever the harsh tangle of consonants she blurted was, he was very certain it was a sentiment he shared. "So you see it too."

"How is this possible?" She asked, sounding as shocked as he'd felt. "That is your little Felicia."

"Not so little," he said, feeling that same pain squeeze his chest again. "She's a teenager now. Almost an adult."

"That makes her no less your little girl," Anya said, that same finality in her tone that signaled she'd made up her mind. "What do you need of me?"

"I need to know where to find the others," Veld said. "I'm not asking these kids to follow me if I go, but the Guard is another matter."

"Turks take care of their own, my friend, I don't think you will need to ask." There was the quiet tap of keys as she worked on her side, silent for a moment. "I believe one has found us first, from the warning we were given during the attack here. I do not believe it was you who turned on the safety protocols for the computer system, was it?"

Veld huffed a laugh, shaking his head; in the mess that had only gotten worse since then, it hadn't occurred to him that Anya couldn't have had time to have done it herself. "No, no it was not. So we've got a ghost in the system, I guess. I should be worried, shouldn't I? Those are director's codes."

"Again, Turks take care of their own," she reminded him. "You know this. I think he will find you soon, but I will send word to another and hope our last turns up. She always had a way for that."

"And a level of intuition that even beat Vincent for creepy uncanniness, yeah." And that said a lot, because sometimes his partner had been downright eerie. "Thanks, Anya."

"I could do no less." The words were almost nonchalant, but only because she truly considered it a given that she would be on his side. Which was exactly why he had come to her with this.

"I'll be in touch, then."

"As will I." Simple words, but with solid conviction. She didn't waste breath on goodbye, and he didn't mind it.
It was enough to know she was still on his side, no matter what went down, whatever path it led him down. Odd to think, because he knew she'd been with the company from the beginning, a personal friend of Rupert Shinra before he'd reached this persona where he was 'the President' before the man he'd been. But maybe that was a part of it, that he had changed and she hadn't. Sometimes things really were that simple.

Veld's eyes drifted to the picture of his daughter, wondering at what had changed her. They'd been so close, even with his demanding job, he couldn't fathom her not coming back to him if she could. *What happened to you, Felicia? What did they do to you?*

He would find out. He would find her, and find out just what was going on. And then he'd do right by her, whatever that took, because the company had taken too much from him already. A man had to draw a line somewhere or lose himself, and Sephiroth wasn't the only one who held values beyond the duties put on him.

An alert pinged his phone, Tseng telling him that he would be escorting Rufus down, and on impulse he forwarded it to Lazard with instructions to join them. It was time to see just how much the brothers had in common with their father.
Realistically, Rufus had known the Turks would eventually learn of his association with AVALANCHE. He'd thought from his success so far that he was going to be able to pick and choose when that was; there was absolutely no reason they should have suddenly clued in, he couldn't find anywhere that he'd slipped up enough to make himself exposed. And yet there Tseng was, sitting across him in his apartment, all smooth lines and quiet, deadly grace, informing him that Veld was going to require absolute cooperation regarding AVALANCHE if he didn't want his involvement turned over to the board.

Rufus was fairly certain that wasn't a bluff. And he certainly didn't have the advantage here where he could afford to bargain much, so making a trip down to see the Turks it was. At least he knew he wasn't going to his death; he and his father shared a mutual dislike of one another, but he was still the future of ShinRa, and that wouldn't be tolerated. It didn't give him any warm feelings, granted, but the reassurance was nice. And he was perfectly capable of faking confidence, in the event it failed him.

Whatever he'd been expecting when being brought into the meeting room, it wasn't to see Lazard Deusericus waiting with Veld. The Director of SOLDIER gave him a small smile and removed his glasses, flicking his hair back in a very familiar gesture. The uncomfortable suspicion that had always lingered, unspoken, in the back of his mind when he looked at the older blond cemented to an icy rock in his gut. The resemblance was undeniable, and from the small, coldly amused smile on Veld's face, the revelation was deliberately timed.

"Is this supposed to be some kind of a threat?" He glanced between the pair, scowling at Tseng when he was directed to a seat. "I'll stand, thank you. What's going on, Veld? Why is he here? Some kind of power play?"

"For the record, Rufus, I don't want the President's chair," Lazard shook his head, slipping his glasses back on. "Just running SOLDIER is more than enough insanity in my life, really."

"I didn't ask you," Rufus said, still looking at Veld. "What's going on?"

"What's going on is you and your brother having a bit too much in common for the well being of the rest of the company. And possibly humanity as a whole, but that's not my jurisdiction," Veld said. "You've been tied directly to AVALANCHE with visual and audio confirmation that you are the primary if not singular leak that's been giving them classified intelligence, and therefore happen to be responsible for their massive kill counts of both ShinRa employees and civilians across the continent. Don't try to lie to me, I don't have time for that, let alone the patience."

Rufus grit his teeth, staring at the Director of the Turks. "What do you want from me? Clearly you don't need a confession. And I was given the impression you're not planning to hand me over to my father and the board for punishment, either."
"You're being offered a choice, before I would do something like that." Veld laid out three profiles, pictures of the leaders of AVALANCHE attached to their respective fronts. "Turn on them, work with us to stop them. Hand over all your information, likely end up working as a double agent against them until their threat is ended. Do that, and I'll keep this between us."

"And by us you mean everyone here and your department," Rufus said. "That's an awful lot of people to trust the discretion of."

"You're not exactly in a position to bargain, Rufus," Veld said. "What you've done is treason, and you're accessory to mass murder and destruction. At best, you'll be temporarily stripped of your position and given some sort of long, unpleasant punishment. More likely, you could lose your inheritance to this stupid play of yours, because this is a corporation, not a monarchy, and blood will only carry you so far. I'm going to go ahead and say you don't want to take that risk, not even for the satisfaction of telling me no."

Rufus held his gaze a long moment, but Veld didn't budge. Sighing, he took a seat. "I don't suppose I get to know how you came by this information?"

"Not yet, no." Veld's smile held no warmth. "You're not entering into an equal partnership here, Rufus. You don't even have the advantage of coming clean yourself, we found you out, and the best deal right now is that you work with us and we won't throw you to the wolves over the fact that you have the blood of a lot of good men and women on your hands."

"And yet I very seriously doubt that it's less than yours." Rufus arched a brow, refusing to be cowed. "I take it when it's sanctioned execution, it doesn't count as murder?"

Lazard snorted, smiling at the glare he received. "You have a lot of guts to sass him like that. It can't be stupidity, you wouldn't have gotten into this mess if you didn't have some brains."

"I don't care about the approval of an unclaimed bastard," Rufus informed him coldly.

"It seems to me I didn't miss out on anything as far as an actual father figure went," Lazard said. "You'll have to do a lot better than that if you actually do want to hurt me, Rufus. Try telling me something new."

"Or try biting your tongue, pulling on your big boy pants, and acting as old as you want treated because I do not have the time or patience for you two to start posturing right now," Veld said, giving Lazard a brief look of censure before refocusing on Rufus. "I am going to get the information I want, Rufus, all that changes here is whether or not there is anything you get out of this other than thrown to the wolves."

"Fine. But why is he here, and why are you willing to go behind the President's back about all this?" Rufus asked, finally looking at Lazard. "What is it that you have to gain here? What's your angle?"

"I had my own little rebellion, but I realized I'd done something stupid and am now working to fix my end of the mess," Lazard explained. "You had AVALANCHE and Fuhito. I had Hollander and Genesis."

Rufus stared at him a long moment, then looked to Veld. "He confessed to you? That's what you were referencing, he came clean instead of getting caught?"

"He did, which gives him a better grounding than you've got by default," Veld said. "Which is not to say I'm not having him constantly under Turk surveillance now, but given Genesis Rhapsodos could reasonably be classified as a strategic genius and was already one of the most dangerous men alive
before he went unhinged, now isn't the time to fight amongst ourselves. So when he said he'd work with us, I said okay. Despite you not having the sense to do the same, I'm giving you the same offer."

"To work with you," Rufus said, considering the information. "And so I understand, if I say no you're just going to turn me over to the board? If nothing else, I could rat out Lazard and tell the President about this little meeting. That would undermine you nicely, don't you think, Veld? It would put your entire department at risk."

"No, I said I could throw you to the wolves - I didn't say 'turn you over to the board,' Rufus. Nothing so simple, not for this." Veld clasped his hands on the table, looking at the teenager a long moment. "You're a kid, Rufus, no matter what you seem to think. But you stepped yourself up into this mess, so I'm going to treat you like an adult here. There is a whole lot more going on right now than people seem willing to acknowledge, particularly the Board of Directors and the President. From their angle, they want it to be cut and dried. Orders were given, they were acknowledged, they will be carried out. From your angle, it's a bit different, isn't it? You hear orders, you pass them on to undermine the company while watching your own back - presumably, it's a bit hard to tell because this situation doesn't say much for survival instincts on your part."

"Is there a point to this?" Rufus asked. "Somehow I always pictured this day as being much less… annoying. I was hoping for more of a thrill."

"Does the prospect of the man the entire nation of Wutai is convinced is a demon considering you someone he might need to get rid of not offer enough of a thrill?" Lazard asked. "Because make no mistake, Rufus, your father's ultimatum today? It cost him SOLDIER. He managed to do what I didn't, I'll give him that - Genesis only managed to take away about a third of SOLDIER's forces, and that was with a lot of strategic planning. But in one sweep, the President has made himself their enemy. And I would not want to be on his side when it comes to finding out just how far they're willing to go."

Rufus stared at him for a long moment. "You expect Sephiroth will turn on the company? And SOLDIER will follow him."

"From Sephiroth's point of view, the company started this fight. And he's not entirely wrong," Veld said. "You heard Heidegger today. He's not the only man in the army to talk that way, and given the option to follow a man they all look up to, who has always had their backs, or the company that's been murmuring about getting rid of them like outdated equipment? Work it out yourself."

Well, that was certainly a new angle. Rufus considered the new information, weighing the odds of it being true. The fact was, of course, that he really didn't care to be under his father's thumb himself. That was why he'd turned to AVALANCHE, to try and wipe out the old man's influence. And they'd been highly effective with this last strike, but this… this might be an even more fruitful alliance. Continue to play AVALANCHE, but have SOLDIER and the Turks on his side? If Lazard really didn't want the President's chair, then that was practically insuring it for himself.

"Alright, let's assume everything you've said is true," Rufus said. "You're trying to keep this quiet as long as you can, obviously, and gathering allies along the way. I can appreciate that tactic, I really do. SOLDIER wants to follow their fallen brother, and are tired of being used by the President and the Board. The Turks are smart enough not to get in their way, especially given SOLDIER's forces could likely wipe out AVALANCHE along the way, were they so inclined, which takes out one of their hardest jobs at the moment. Add in my help, we can even direct SOLDIER's strike. Am I correct so far?"

"That's the gist of it, yes." Veld nodded.
"Well, that certainly keeps along the same lines I was going anyway," Rufus said. "So what's your endgame? SOLDIER goes rogue and what? As soon as the board knows, there will be panic, and then Heidegger is going to push to send the army out. He's been gunning for Lazard's chair since day one, and doesn't like SOLDIER regardless. And then there's a question of what to even do with all those people, aside from the probable bloodbath of wave after wave of army units being sent essentially to die against SOLDIER. Wutai might even try to rally, scenting blood in the water. And with the public's heroes running wild, they'll become hard to manage, too. If you're just planning to watch ShinRa self-destruct, why come stop me at all?"

"The Turks were made to operate with the understanding that we act in the best interests of ShinRa, which is actually not at all what we're being ordered here," Veld said quietly. "Whatever anyone feels about SOLDIER, the company gave them power they are not in a position to take back. Point blank, we can't afford to lose them."

"So you're pulling on the excuse that it's your job to work against the President to save the company? Interesting." Rufus chuckled softly, looking to Lazard. "You may have betrayed the company, but given who you betrayed it to, I suppose SOLDIER is still willing to gather with you, isn't it? The SOLDIER Department and the Department of Administration and Research are arguably two of the most deadly forces in the entire company, including the army and Weapons Development. Working together, all you need is a little more support and you're almost in charge yourselves, except for that annoying problem of our self-important figure head."

"You sound like you have an idea," Lazard said.

"I do, actually. It seems to me that you're going about this all wrong, gentlemen. But maybe I needed to be here for that last piece to fall into place, and make this possible." Rufus smiled, feeling that thrill he'd been missing return as he looked at the two of them. Veld may have brought him in thinking that he'd be in charge of the situation, and he certainly did have more forces on his side, but Rufus could give them an option they'd clearly never thought of. "What we need is for the company to work with your efforts. ShinRa has gotten old and set in its ways, not coincidentally alongside its President. And the old man has done a lot of impressive things, he's done well, I don't mean to belittle that. But you said yourself, he's not listening. This is a business, not a monarchy, and the old man is no longer what's best for this business."

"And you are?" Lazard asked.

"Perhaps. I like to think so." Rufus shrugged, smirking. "I'm a step up, regardless - I'll play along with you. We're already talking treason, so let's go full out. The company is going to be mine anyway, and if I step up sooner, we're all winners. I can toss the funds he's been pouring into his Promised Land fantasy into fixing your SOLDIERs, the Turks can focus without someone constantly trying to micromanage jobs they already know how to do, and I certainly won't be turning the army on you. Heidegger could use a replacement as well, and I'll happily look into finding someone better for the position. What do you say, Directors?"

"Are you seriously suggesting a coup?" Lazard asked, amazed at the sheer audacity of it."

"If you have a better idea of how to get everyone what they want with minimal bloodshed, Lazard, I'm listening." Rufus looked between them again; Veld looked thoughtful, no doubt considering all the angles. His brother - brother, wasn't that a thought? - still looked amazed, but he was starting to smile. And it was a smile Rufus recognized. "You like the idea."

"I do," Lazard admitted. "I'll have to mention it to Sephiroth, we're somewhat co-chairs of the Department at the moment."
"Oh that's fine, by all means. I'd be happy to talk with him," Rufus said. "You think on it and get back to me, hmm?"

"Putting you in charge is not necessarily what I'd consider a good idea," Veld said. "You haven't shown a whole lot of good sense lately, and you obviously don't care much about betraying people. You're also young and inexperienced, and I can't say it sounds smart to give you more power when you don't know what to do with the bit you've got now."

"Touché, but ask yourself this, Veld: who's the lesser evil, here?" Rufus spread his hands, smiling knowingly. "The President is standing against you, I'm offering to work with you. And if you trust nothing else, you can trust the fact that I'm very interested in my own survival and success. I have a lot to gain by working with you, after all. If you could put me in the President's chair, you could take it away just as easily."

"Valid point," Veld said. This wasn't at all what he'd had in mind, calling Rufus down there, but it did answer the question of how much he had in common with his father; self-confidence, cunning and nearly cruel ambition were all abundantly clear.

"Are you talking just voting him out of his seat, or removing him from the picture entirely?" Lazard asked, and it was yet again very clear that nurture had lost out a bit to nature with him, because he was most definitely Rupert's son.

"Well I can't say I'd be terribly broken up if he was assassinated, no," Rufus said bluntly. "But that would need done with some finesse, because it could cause quite an uproar if not executed just so. For one thing, there would be a cry for the person responsible to be punished, which would either require framing someone that's reasonably disposable, or using someone untouchable. For another, due to my age, there might be some fussing about letting me take the chair despite being the Vice President; I'm well aware there was some grumbling over that decision for anyone who considered it an actual weighty office. Of course, easily dismissed as I seem to be, that's not always a bad thing."

"You've actually given serious thought to taking over if he was killed," Lazard said, fascinated. "And not just what to do just in case, you've considered having him assassinated before now."

"Well I didn't help AVALANCHE just to cause property damages to the company," Rufus said. "It's going to be mine one day, and he's running it into the ground with a pointless war and pouring funds into a wild goose chase for an Ancient myth. If you're right, he might be about to destroy it completely by making SOLDIER our enemy and presumably the Turks for whatever reason you're not talking about. I'm not going to just sit on the sidelines and watch him wreck my inheritance, what I've spent my entire life being groomed for and raised to expect would be mine one day. Say what you will about my selfishness, I'm not going to argue that, but I have a vested interest in the success of the company. And I think that makes me the better choice here, unless there's something I'm missing."

There was a long moment of silence before Veld snorted, shaking his head with a wry smile. "You are going to be so much trouble, Rufus."

"But less than my father," Rufus said, meeting the Turk Director's eyes and holding his gaze without flinching. "I'm right, Veld. You know I'm right."

Veld leaned back in his chair, shaking his head with a sigh. This wasn't what he'd planned for, not at all. But he made some very solid points, and Veld tried not to make a habit of lying to himself.

"Alright. But we're going to do this my way."
Rufus’ grin was full of dark satisfaction, but if this was a deal with the devil, at least it was one that was going to be easier to manage.


Gathering Information

Chapter Summary

There was so much to do and time was ticking. They could have one more angle covered, if everyone would just get along.

Chapter Notes

Part two references a character who has been hinted at most notably around CH20 and side story CH3.

"I can't say I ever pictured my life would be so exciting," Rufus said, offering a little smile when Tseng gave him a side glance. "What? I'm serious. It's practically cliche teenage rebellion to go against your parents, and considering I had only one to concentrate on and a ridiculous amount of resources… well. You can't fault me. Really, I'm fairly certain anyone here who hasn't thought about killing the man just hasn't been around him long enough."

"Are you done?" Lazard asked.

"Oh I'm sorry, did that bother you, brother dear?" Rufus grinned, rocking his chair with the slow tap of his foot.

"Who thought it was a good idea to have them both on this call?" Zack asked, glancing at Sephiroth. "Cause I'm not sure we're gonna get much done with them sniping at each other."

"Hn." Sephiroth glanced at Cissnei, who was apparently the Turk being assigned to them for now. Or at least to Aerith. "Move."

Cissnei arched a brow, getting up from her seat and stepping back from the laptop controlling their video screen. Her curiosity quickly became outright amusement when he keyed in a few commands and the pair were muted. "Well, now. Had to do that before?"

"I've seen it done." Sephiroth said, moving back to his position. "When you two are ready to work, say so. In the mean time, we'll cover what has been discovered on our end. Professor?"

"Hollander took a notebook he'd been writing in, as well as a case of samples we'd finished looking at. Given they're merely blood vials and small tissue samples from Angeal and yourself, and he's Hollander, I don't think he's actually going to manage anything useful with it. That said, to even make an attempt, he's going to need equipment," Hojo said, not bothering to glance up from his workstation. "I've been told that Fuhito was a student who attended at some point when I was lecturing at Junon. Generally try to avoid that, but it could realistically have been any time during the Wutai War prior to this year; I did have to go out there on occasion and it was something to do. Time before that is sketchier, I imagine his files are being pulled anyway."

"He was a student before the war properly took off, actually, and I would appreciate not being put on
mute again," Tseng said, not waiting for an apology before continuing. "Our Junon branch located his information quickly, though there isn't much information of use to be found. First generation immigrant, but due to the presence of AVALANCHE in Wutai it's likely he maintained connections of some sort. Familial attachment doesn't fit his profile, but he's clearly opportunistic and it would be unwise to assume at this time that there isn't a one-sided attachment in place from any family he may have and be willing to exploit. He's highly fixated on his goal, and seems to believe his success is inevitable, which means there won't be any negotiating with him. Rufus?"

"Fuhito is a fanatic unlike any other AVALANCHE zealot," Rufus said. "By and large, their ranks are made up of people disgruntled with the company, many of them who have been personally wronged or have had something happen to someone they're close to. They're gathered from all over the world, though my initial impression was that the bulk of them were from a gang Shears had headed in the Midgar Slums. As far as I can tell, Shears' overwhelming loyalty is to Elfé, even above AVALANCHE's cause if he had to choose. She firmly believes taking ShinRa down is the right thing to do, for the Planet as well as the people. To look at the information they got out of Cosmo Canyon, they may not be wrong."

"Oh it's undeniable that the reactors have caused massive environmental harm, just look at the dead zone around Midgar," Reeve said, having to add in from his personal research. "But wiping ShinRa out isn't the answer either. The company is so integrated into society across several continents that wiping it out without something in place to fill the sudden vacuum would be even more devastating. Millions would be out of work, out of power - that's more than heat and air to homes, which could be replaced in a pinch; hospitals draw power from the reactors, too. And bombing one isn't like suddenly erasing it from existence. You have a massive Mako spill, which would poison every living thing in a considerable radius, on top of compromising the structural integrity of the Plate, and likely destroying the environment in the Slums below. I don't just mean buildings collapsing or catching fire from the explosion, or flaming debris, either. There would be poisoning there, too, and the company hasn't let me build anything that could possibly help recovery. In the time it would take to rig something up, the death toll would climb and damage would continue to pile up at a horrifying rate."

"The President would see helping people as a waste of money," Lazard said. "He has a long history of ignoring the needs of others unless it also specifically benefits the company, and therefore himself. That's why we still have the Slums. Granted, some areas are better than others, but on average it's a miserable situation. If Fuhito tapped into the resentment down there to fill out AVALANCHE's ranks, I honestly can't be surprised at the numbers they managed to pull for this last attack."

"As much as I hate to say so, having Genesis along would have helped," Sephiroth said. "He still appears sane on the surface and is very charismatic. The story of one of the SOLDIER 'heroes' taking a stand for the Planet or even just against the company could have been sold with a very romanticized tone, which would appeal particularly to individuals who were already fans of his."

"Yeah, he's got two big fan clubs, so they'd probably be happy to campaign for him," Zack said. "Not as fanatic as some of yours, but really passionate. If he asked, they'd get on it just as soon as they finished swooning and consider it a privilege. Haven't heard any official comments from them on him, but that doesn't mean much. Give it another couple days and we'd probably get some newsletters circulating, though it's hard to say how much of it would be useful. I wouldn't think he'd go telling them his plans from here."

"No, but that wouldn't stop them from speculating, and regardless that it's not something they're trained for, people who are passionate about something pay close attention to details," Sephiroth said. "It'd be worth watching. I take it you're subscribed?"
"Well, yeah." Zack grinned sheepishly, shrugging. "To several, actually, though I hadn't originally thought about looking at them for actual useful information. I mean most of it is pretty wild speculation. But they all rebelled against the idea that Genesis and Angeal were dead, even though the company tried to keep that line until Angeal came back. And now that he's back, I can't imagine they're gonna give up looking for Genesis. Which might be useful, if they can actually find a lead."

"Another exercise in sorting through piles of useless information in hopes of something worthwhile. Why not?" Hojo muttered, finally glancing back to the viewing screen. "I'm surprised Veld didn't make time to join us. Or is he tied up listening to the President still?"

"The President has a number of issues that he's requiring the Director's attention on," Tseng said. "He's deemed it wisest to continue to cater to him, for now."

"I imagine he's unfortunately quite correct," Hojo said, shaking his head and turning back to his work. "Being the leader of the Turks hasn't been enough to guarantee immunity before, after all. Even less so now, given you've proven a competent leader yourself."

"You anticipate the President turning on Veld?" Sephiroth frowned at the thought, glancing between the three Turks. Tseng remained stoic, and the blond with Lazard hadn't said anything to gauge him by anyway. Cissnei kept a straight face, but he could feel her nervousness from the short distance between them.

"I think it's a possibility, if the President gets impatient and decides Veld is no longer an efficient leader." Hojo shrugged, glancing at Sephiroth. "If he defects with you, there will be nothing anyone can do to get him pardoned. At least not for any significant time; he'd still be on the chopping block."

"Hey, we're not sure we're defecting yet," Zack said, frowning. "Director, is there any way you could arrange for a mission so we can legitimately head out after Genesis? You guys were discussing that, right?"

"You're on probation, and as I understand it Angeal really isn't in any condition to go even if Hojo was done with him, but I'm aiming to send Sephiroth - that's what the President wants, anyway," Lazard said. "I'd been considering a wider mission angle regardless. Sending Turks as well would be ideal, but we have to be careful not to give Heidegger room to shove himself in. He'd just make a mess of things, and I don't doubt for one minute he'd expose everybody on the chance to earn the President's favor."

"General Heidegger was once a very impressive young man climbing the ranks, and did earn his position via experiences in the field," Hojo said. "However, since he's taken the Director's seat, his sense of self-importance has inflated with his waistline, and he's quit listening to anyone even within his own ranks. The world has changed since he was in the field, but he has not. And that is where his stubbornness and ignorance have continued to combine until he's become a hindrance to the success of his own department. I would also make a bet that he is responsible for originating a great deal of the anti-SOLDIER sentiment amongst his ranks."

"Yeah that's pretty nasty. There's some guys who live to take SOLDIER down, it's like their dream is to beat us." Zack shook his head. "Seriously, it's creepy. Makes you not so sure about having them at your back, you know? Bullet resistant isn't bullet proof. Shoot enough times, you could take a SOLDIER down, and I'm pretty sure they've thought about it, too."

"So we're agreed, no army aside from your friend unless it's someone that one of us can personally vouch for," Lazard said. "We don't necessarily need them, beyond needing them out of our way. Right here and now, we have four departments all lining up to work together. That's the majority of the board, and then to add in Rufus, we've got a significant power base. Working inside the
constraints of the company is ideal for now, but I don't think it should be our only plan. Rufus did have a point when we spoke earlier; if the company won't work with us, given how much of it we represent, maybe we should consider an ultimatum of our own."

"I don't think I need to restate how much I am in favor of that," Rufus said. "So I'll see about spending more time planning for it. Or refining plans, rather."

"I'd rather you wait and do that after you've passed on whatever information you have on AVALANCHE," Lazard said. "I've made a markup of as many bases and bolt holes that I know Hollander and Genesis have, and sent it down for Angeal to look at. I can't hope for them to believe I'm still on their side, so unless Hollander's allegiances aren't still for sale to the highest bidder I'm not likely to be let in on anything new. If they're traveling with AVALANCHE, though, and they still believe you're on their side, we might have a small lead."

"Fuhito is so fixated on his goal he's positively blind to any other way things could turn out," Rufus said, chuckling. "It's ridiculous, but all the better for our purposes. He'll believe I'm on his side, because he can't imagine I'd team up with the rest of you. There was an understanding we were using each other, of course, but this? He'd never believe it."

"Something to use to our advantage, then." Lazard frowned, sifting through the papers on his desk. "Did Angeal get a chance to look at anything, Sephiroth?"

"Some, but for the most part we're working off the notes he made earlier," Sephiroth said. "He was unable to join us, as he's resting now."

"Things are looking worse, then," Tseng said.

"He's dying, it doesn't really get worse than that," Zack pointed out.

"You underestimate how much worse some sorts of death are than others," Hojo said. "As it is, however, he was feeling markedly worse and is laying down in a containment chamber with monitoring equipment."

"Which is, I would assume, what you're monitoring there now." Tseng gestured towards Hojo's workstation, where he'd been sitting before they even connected the calls.

"Of course I am. That's what I'm doing right now, trying to fix this mess." Hojo waved a hand dismissively. "You manage the politics, I don't have time for that."

Tseng didn't react to the gesture, likely as unaffected as Sephiroth was by this point. "Is Angeal's current downward spiral of a physical nature alone, or is he manifesting further mental and emotional instability?"

"I would qualify it as physical, given his emotional response is still the same level of stupidly attached as it's been from the start. Depression and guilt aren't particularly new for him, though it speaks well that he didn't run off again," Hojo said.

"To weigh in as someone who actually cares about him as a human being, it looks pretty reasonable for what he's been through," Zack offered, scowling at Hojo's back a moment before looking back to address Tseng directly. "I mean, he was hoping to get Genesis to listen to reason, and instead Genesis basically thinks he's a brainwashed traitor and takes off with Hollander. And from what I've heard, we were still needing Hollander to translate what he did to the two of them so the Professor could get to a fix faster. So I think depression and anxiety are pretty justified here just from the situation, even without any brain chemistry making him that way."
Tseng arched a brow, a small smile on his lips. "Duly noted, Zack. I appreciate the insight."

Zack shrugged, rubbing a hand at the back of his neck. "I may not know a lot of science, but I know about people."

"You've been very helpful on that front." Dr. Rayleigh hadn't spoken much, busy sorting through Hollander's things for Hojo, but she felt this much did need mentioned. "From what I've been told and observed, depression and guilt are both things Angeal has struggled with before, so it is just as likely situational as well as chemical. There haven't been any more episodes of depersonalization since his return, however, which is a good sign."

"He seems calmer, on the whole," Sephiroth said. "Or at least less inclined to startle."

"If you're all going to move on to the science and medical things going on, I think I'm going to bow out and work on my plans," Rufus said. "Though I do have one question before I go, given I had a chance to review the feeds. Was that girl with you really the Ancient the President has been ordering to be brought in?"

"Currently under SOLDIER protection," Zack informed him, fixing the full weight of his stare on the Vice President. Sometimes he hated how people reacted to Mako eyes, but a little intimidation wasn't always a bad thing.

Rufus arched a brow, smirking. "You're very protective, that's cute. But don't worry, SOLDIER, I have no desire for the old man to get what he wants. That's why I'm here, after all."

"Uh huh." Zack's gaze didn't waver, staring the executive down until his smirk faded. Only then did he look away, glancing at Sephiroth. "I should probably check in."

"I'll keep you appraised of any progress," Sephiroth said. "Send my regards."

"Will do." Zack offered a quick salute, heading for the door.

"Fair." Hojo turned to regard the SOLDIER, frowning. "Ask her what she meant about the whispers of the Planet, when she'd met the AVALANCHE leaders. It may be important."

Zack frowned, nodding. "Yeah, okay. I'll get back to you with that."

The last person Veld wanted to be spending time with was a tie between the President and Hojo at the moment, increasingly towards the President because that was exactly who he'd been shadowing all day, listening to his ranting and plans and taking orders with a stoic mask firmly in place lest his temper get the best of him. Which was possible, because he was on edge from this entire situation and hadn't had time to process it and calm down properly yet.

And that could be a problem, because he'd learned early on that having emotions driving you was not the best thing to be doing in his line of work. Being the boss just made it more important to keep it together, to know he was making the right calls, especially about things this important. There were a lot of lives that were going to be lost whichever way they went, and while it wasn't his job to worry about that, he did. Veld had a lot of blood on his hands, but that wasn't a free pass to kill without a reason, even if he didn't personally prefer to avoid it. And he very much did prefer not to leave piles of bodies in his wake.

So getting off his presidential babysitting duty without having shot anyone no matter how much he
had wanted to was a blessing, and he made his way back to his office with only a stop for coffee and to let the others know he was back. Tseng had sent him the conversation as it had occurred, both the video and a transcript with notations of his observations. Lazard had also sent notes via Charles, who had sent notes of his own. The same went for Cissnei. Hojo sent nothing yet, though Veld was interested in what he was thinking he'd find by having Aerith questioned.

Interestingly, Sephiroth filed a report of his own, directly to Veld himself and bypassing everyone else. He included Zack's observations about Angeal, and tentative explanations of his own. It was an odd thing to find the Silver General acting in any manner that could be described as tentative but there was a hesitance in his attempt to put things into words that he'd never had to before. Feelings weren't exactly something he was well-versed in, neither his job, training, nor being raised with Hojo as the prime influence helped there at all. But he was making a concentrated effort, which Veld respected tremendously. It was a well written report regardless, and it meant a lot that he was volunteering information, particularly about how Angeal was coping and what he knew about Aerith. Zack would be the better one to go to for that most likely, but for now it was enough to know she was safe.

And then he got to his last mail, and paused to stare at it because it was saying it was from Anya, but the time stamp said it was from yesterday. He'd checked his mail earlier, and knew very well that hadn't been there. And while Anya was extremely skilled, messing around in the email system's coding wasn't in her skill set even if she was inclined to dance around him. Codes were something she enjoyed, yes, but this looked perfectly legitimate on the outside. At least if someone else had opened his inbox, that was. Or if someone had been around when he had. And that subtle cleverness made his pulse skip, because he suddenly knew what this was.

Opening the message, Veld felt his lips twitch towards a grin.

*I've found the ghost in your system. Maybe you should call in a consultant for Midgar? I've heard there's a good one under the Plate.*

Veld considered the wording and possible implications before deciding on a simple message to send back.

*I'll look into making an appointment then. Hopefully they'll be fine with me sending Reno and Rude, I've got a bunch of reports saying now isn't a good time for me to be out there.*

He sent the message, then opened the monitoring chart of an old program that hadn't gotten much use for years. It had only pinged a few times, in fact, most recently alerting him to an unusual skill possessed by a girl that the President had wanted brought in when he caught wind of it. Of course, then Angeal returned and it was forgotten, but looking back Veld had to wonder how he'd missed the significance. Shelke Rui was young, but not so young she couldn't be related to an old friend. The red hair and blue eyes were telling, the facial structure of her sister even more obvious if he was paying attention.

There hadn't been equipment to explain what Victor Rowan could do with computers. The best anyone managed was to say he was gifted, one of their best with infiltrating other systems - in fact, he'd done a lot of the early coding for what Midgar and Junon ran with now. He might have even been one of the ones responsible for the direction the Turks had taken; when Alex was given the position as the first director of a fledgling department, it was understood that they were supposed to take care of protecting company interests in a much quieter way than the security forces. Working in the background, doing research and making sure the company was safe from any espionage attempts or internal betrayal.

There were only six of them when Veld came in. Alexandra was quick witted and unyielding,
determined to be taken seriously as the first female director. Anya had long been the second in command, sharp of wit and tongue and very familiar with Rupert Shinra. Dominic was quiet and steady, his talents as a weapon smith used easily as often as his consulting for training others. Rebecca had been… well, odd, but priceless in her ability to read people and situations with uncanny accuracy. Vincent and Victor were the youngest before he’d come in, and he was sure they had been the greatest influences on changing things. Vincent could go between genteel manners and practically oozing charm to cold intimidation in a heartbeat; it had made them a good team, the cliche 'good cop, bad cop' working out well. Ironically, it was a similar dynamic that made the best partnership the Turks had seen since work well - Reno and Rude played off each other seamlessly.

Victor was a solo operative, and he had a way with computers like Rhys Tuesti had with the reactors. He was a vicious fighter if he was cornered, but mostly he kept to himself and only came in when he was called, bringing a wealth of information. Veld hadn't asked then, but it was obviously the same skill Shelke had. He'd earned the nickname Wraith, referred to casually as a 'ghost in the system' and he'd vanished just the same not much after Vincent had been declared killed in action. Apparently he was ready to come back.

His computer screen flickered, going dark and displaying a stream of code. At the end, coordinates were displayed with a simple message:

*Meet at 10:30 tomorrow? (y/n)*

Veld chuckled softly, tapping Y. The screen flashed in acknowledgment, then returned to the desktop as if nothing had happened. But he knew better, reaching for his phone and sending a quick note to Reno and Rude to come to his office.
Turks Take Care of Their Own

Chapter Summary

It was an old saying that still rang true: Turks take care of their own, because they don’t trust anyone else to do it.

Chapter Notes

Again, Victor has been referenced/seen in CH20 and side story CH3. For anyone interested in my headcanons, though, you can find my notes on the "Old Guard" at this Tumblr post.

Reno hadn’t gotten much of a formal education until he came into the Turks, Veld making sure all his operatives had a solid understanding of some fundamental things. Fortunately, he was plenty smart and caught on to things quickly. He hadn’t gotten to third in command by being slow and sloppy, no matter what his appearance suggested. His partner, on the other hand, had come over from Costa del Sol and spent a couple years at the Junon Academy learning a lot of helpful things. Reno's personal favorite skills of Rude's were watching him hand someone their ass with hand-to-hand and how good he was with demolitions. You wouldn't think big hands like his would be so good with delicate work, but Rude was full of surprises like that.

They made a damn fine pair, the only solid partnership to be pretty much official - Reno and Rude was as much a given as Veld and Vincent had once been, and if being compared to a pretty legendary pair wasn’t a thrill, nothing was. Especially knowing that was why they were being sent below the Plate to meet up with somebody the Director said would be a priceless ally. On the low down, he'd implied the man was Old Guard, and that was mind blowing. Pretty much everybody from green rookies up heard about Veld's partner, a legend even after death, and of course the Director was scary good. The lady in charge of managing all their stuff in Junon was too; he hadn't even attended there and knew about Anya Torvik. Rumor was that she had the nickname of Shiva's daughter once, and he didn't think it was just because she'd come from the Nibel Mountain range.

They were armed even more than usual, not really out of concern for the person they were meeting so much as nobody had been able to confirm that AVALANCHE had actually left Midgar. Getting killed by those crazies was not on Reno's to-do list. Now, killing one of them? That'd be alright. Except the boss' daughter, they'd have to find a way to bring her in, obviously.

"Got eyes," Rude said quietly, walking along at Reno's side like a bastion of calm. It was a good look on him, especially since most people couldn't call his bluff with those shades on.

Right now, Reno could tell he shared that same mix of nerves and exhilaration at the job they had. He could feel eyes on them, too, in a different way than the rest of the people in the Slums who gave anybody in a Turk's suit wide berth and tried not to call attention to themselves. This was a gaze of intent, and Reno smirked a bit as he looked up and over to the place they were supposed to be meeting their contact. Sure enough, there was a guy leaning in the doorway, casual as you please in a
black suit that could have been Turk issue. The shirt under it was a sort of stormy blue-gray that made it pass off as something else, but knowing what they did, it had to be deliberate.

He didn't falter at all, watching them approach and even giving them a once-over before offering a little smile of his own. Pushing off the door frame with his shoulder, he gestured to the building behind him. "Coffee?"

"Hyped enough, thanks." Reno offered a hand, pleased at the strength of the grip. Calluses suggested the guy used guns, which wasn't a surprise. "But inside is good. Sit down, have a chat."

"That was my thought." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Reno, hm?"

"Yessir." Reno gave him a lazy grin, nodding to his partner. "That's Rude."

Rude offered a hand as well, the faintest smile quirking his lips at the smirk received. "No comment?"

"You're a Costa boy, I figured it's short for something long that Midgar boys would just trip all over." The man shrugged, shaking his hand before turning to get the door and lead them inside. "You seem too quiet for it to be for attitude."

"Oh he's sassy like nobody's business, I swear," Reno said, glancing around the place. It didn't have a lived-in vibe, definitely a front for business instead of taking people back to wherever he actually stayed. Which was smart, but meant there was less to go off of for building a mental profile for the guy. "Gotta say, the Slums are good for a lot of things, but not a place I'd wanna stay if I had a choice."

"It's not a long term arrangement, if that's what you're fishing for." He made his way across the room to a kitchenette, getting himself a cup of coffee and doctoring it with a little milk before heading back to the table. "Sit down, if you like. This might take a bit."

Reno pulled out a chair for himself, sitting down at an angle that would let him up quick if he had to. He was pretty sure he wasn't imagining the quick smile of approval from the guy. "So, scuttlebutt says you're the boss' friend from way back, huh?"

"I'd love to hear you explain where you could hear scuttlebutt about history from then, I really would." Still, there was an appreciative smile there even as he called Reno out. "Not that it isn't true, but the people who'd remember me aren't all that Turk friendly last I checked."

"Now you've got me curious," Reno said. "Can't leave it at that. Who are you?"

"I think we're being called 'old guard' these days, the first set of us before Veld made Director," he said, nodding when Rude made a sound of agreement. "Fair enough, then. My name is Victor Rowan, and I was the fifth drafted into the fold, followed by Vincent Valentine and Veld himself."

Reno whistled softly. "Yeah, that's old school alright. How'd you go off the grid like this? Can't picture the President was ever okay with a Turk just up an' quititin' the job."

"He was distracted with Sephiroth being born," Victor said. "I wiped myself from the system, he didn't know me enough to remember or care. Given he hadn't looked into Vincent's death at all, writing me off was no big deal; he'd been the Director's SIC, I was just the quiet guy who worked computers."

"Uh huh... that why you left, because of him ignoring Valentine's death?" Reno asked.
"That, and what I found out Gast was up to with the Jenova Project." Victor shook his head. "Nasty business, kept it very hush hush. And it's blown up in their faces now from what I've gotten intel on."

"What tipped you off? The mass desertion of SOLDIER, Genesis attacking, his clones, or the mutations?" Reno asked.

"All pretty valid clues, I'd say. But I didn't actually start digging until there was a fuss about Angeal Hewley coming back," Victor said. "His fan club made a pretty big deal out of it, so I got to looking around the system. Veld's always been a very organized man, and he runs the department the same way; high standards keep you all in business, after all. The last thing he wants is a repeat of what happened to his partner."

"Somehow, I don't think hearing his organizational skills are what let you find things hacking in is actually good news," Reno said. "Sure, you seem on our side. But that could have been anyone else finding the paths in, too."

"I have a significant advantage, don't you worry." Victor smiled a bit, a hint of amusement in the expression. "Besides, I keep an eye out for your best interests. It wasn't Veld who secured the system during the Junon attack."

Reno stared at him a moment, running over the implications of that statement even as he hid his shock and unease under an easy half smile. "You have access to the Director's codes."

"I found a way to get the same result," he corrected. "And the Science Department may have added a lot of impressive encryptions, but it still would have been bad if AVALANCHE got into the system here. Blocking the normal accesses from Junon was necessary, even if it meant slowing everything down a bit."

"Good point." Reno tilted his head, considering what he'd been told and what he could guess from body language. "Veld wants to trust you."

"It's mutual," Victor said. "It's been quite a while since we've been around each other. A lot has happened, not all of it good. The company's a mess right now, one he's expected to clean up but not being given a whole lot of help to do so. There was a time when Rupert Shinra was a leader who listened to the people who worked for him, acknowledged that they had specialties he didn't and trusted them to do their jobs. But it seems to me that's changed, and with all the sacrifices Veld's made 'for the good of the company' I can't blame him for having issues with being treated like he's disposable."

"That something else you've dug up?" Reno asked. "I've seen the President get harsh, and he's definitely come down hard on anyone he sees as going against him, but I hadn't heard anything against the Director or our department."

"You heard something that makes you think he's not willing to write you all off if he gets it into his head that you're not marching well enough to the beat of his drum?" He countered, perfectly calm even though his expression was grim. "He wrote off a commander of the department without a word and had the director before Veld executed. So you tell me, just how much would you suggest the Turks trust him?"

Reno was silent, not sure how much was safe to say. The guy made a good point, especially if what he said about the last director was true.

"That kind of talk would get us on his hit list," Rude spoke up, deep voice quiet. "And we'd count
"Yeah." Reno tapped his foot lightly. "Cause and effect, you go against the company, the company wipes you out. It's always been that way, least as long as I've been here. It's harsh, sure, but simple enough."

"Good system, until you have to ask yourself if there's lines you won't cross," Victor agreed, shrugging. "I drew a line, so did most of the old crew. Maybe you'll never have to reach that point. I hope for your sake you don't. It's not a good place to be."

"Yeah." Reno frowned, leaning his chair back a bit. "So tell me this, if you drew a line, why're you comin' back? The company hasn't changed, sounds like you think it's got worse. What's in it for you now?"

"I didn't say I was coming back to the company, let alone for it," Victor said. "You know the mantra 'Turks take care of their own' - I'm pretty sure Veld would have passed that on, it was a big deal."

"So you're comin' in to help Veld, however he needs you," Reno said; the thought didn't rest easy on his mind, and he wasn't sure why. "Because Turks take care of their own, and apparently you consider yourself enough of one that it applies still?"

"That's not the whole phrase," Victor said. "The name 'Turks' is actually a shift off of a possessive; the first Director of the Department of Administration and Research was Alexandra Turk. At the time, we were something of a cousin department with what's now Public Safety, split to specialize. So when someone talked about us, instead of using that whole long title, people took to saying we were Turk's team. Over time, that became the Turks, which you still use whether or not you know about the last Director. Alex had a lot to prove, she wasn't a woman like people considered women back then, she wore suits, didn't want anything to do with 'settling down' and refused to give an inch to anyone. Especially those who thought she should just because she was a woman.

"And we were proud to work with her. Hell, Anya left Security to join up with Alex, staying on as her second until she found someone to pass it to. And I think she was the first one to say it," he said, gaze distant as he thought back. "Turk's take care of their own, because they don't trust anyone else to do it. That is still true, at least from our generation."

Reno frowned, bouncing his leg lightly. "Alright, yeah. That still fits, I guess. This stuff goin' down is bigger than just us, though. There's not much choice."

"There's always a choice, Reno, it's just a matter of whether or not it's one you're willing to make," Victor said. "From what I've heard, Veld's made his choice. I don't know if he'll ask you to follow him or not, but that's your choice, too."

"So you know about AVALANCHE." It was a vague statement, but from his expression, Reno could tell Victor knew exactly what he meant. "Fair enough, you pretty much said it already. You comin' in personally, or workin' things out with the Director long distance?"

"Long distance, for now. I don't think he'll be terribly surprised." Victor shrugged. "He's not the only one with people to take care of."

"Family?" Rude asked.

Victor nodded, taking a sip of his coffee. "Young, too. I'm not about to walk into the cross hairs when I can be even more efficient in the shadows, and be around for them while I'm at it."

Rude nodded slightly. "Got it."
Reno glanced up at his partner with a small smile; figured Rude would, the guy had about a hundred people he could call kin in Costa del Sol and the islands around it, a half dozen or so who were siblings. "Can't blame you, yo. Guess that's where I stand too, 'cept the Turks are the family that took me in."

"It still counts." Victor shrugged. "Maybe moreso than your average family, because they didn't have to be."

"Yeah." Reno bounced his leg a bit more, frowning. There was a lot to wade through, but his gut said Victor was sincere. And Veld trusted him, even after all this time, even knowing what he was capable of, which said a hell of a lot. "Okay, man, we get where you're comin' from. What'd you want us down here for?"

"I wanted an intel swap, planned to hand over some tech I've worked on for your director, and start a rapport going because I have a feeling we're going to be working together in the future," Victor said. "I wanted to see what level he was keeping his full time operatives at, too. Word is that you two are the team these days."

"Word's good, 'cause we are." Reno arched a brow, balancing his chair on the back legs. "Who said?"

"Veld and Anya, for most credible, but you're also the only team that's seen together more than apart or with others," Victor said. "Straight logic from there."

"No need t' mess with somethin' that works this good, right Rude?" Reno glanced at his partner, smirking at his nod. "Nice t' hear people say so though. What's your verdict?"

"I like what I see, which is particularly impressive because honestly I'm not a people person," Victor said. "I can put some charm on if I need to, but it's not my idea of a good time. The kids are an exception, as were my friends in the Turks for the most part."

"So stayin' in the shadows is actually a good endgame for you, huh?" Reno said. "Convenient."

"I'd like it, but we'll see where I'm needed; we don't always get what we want."

"Ain't that the truth?" Reno shook his head, dropping his chair back down. "So we're on the level now. What've you got for us? Figure the tech has t' be pretty cool, since that's what you do."

"What I like to do best, certainly." Victor rose from his seat, heading to the kitchenette and getting the breadbox. Setting the loaf in it aside, he came back with the box and set it upside down on the table to get the bottom off and pull out a thin box.

"Oh hey now, that's clever, yo." Reno tilted his head, admiring the unexpected compartment. "I like that."

"Anything can be repurposed if you think hard enough," Victor said, opening the box to reveal a variety of small drives and a couple camera cards. "The drives all have information that I've gathered on AVALANCHE, some supportive anti-ShinRa gangs that are gaining ground down here, and some assorted things Veld will want to know about a few interesting things I ran across that got buried in the weight of history. The film backs up my claims for multiple things in the files, as well as a few things I don't know what to make of that may or may not be useful."

"Never hurts t' have extras, far as I'm concerned," Reno said, eyeing the package thoughtfully as he boxed it back up. "Sounds good, though."
"That's not everything." Victor reached into his jacket, pulling out a stick drive that had a grid mark on the front. "Veld's going to need this to make use of any of that, and he's the only one who's going to know what to do with it."

Reno snorted, shaking his head as he accepted the drive. "Well, easy t' see you trust the Director above everybody else. That's still mostly good news. Curious about how you made a biometric lock for a guy you haven't seen in decades. That's what that is, isn't it?"

"Close enough. I can wing most things on principle." Victor shrugged. "So long as you're on his side too, we don't have a problem. It's not personal, I just don't know you yet, and I have a gut feeling that he's about to change things up."

"So until you see which side we end up on, we're variables," Reno said, nodding slowly. "Alright, I can respect that. We'll get this to the boss. Any messages?"

Victor thought about it, gaze growing distant a moment. "Yeah. You can't take a bullet back."

Reno arched a brow, glancing at his partner. There was a faint frown there, thoughtful, so they'd have to discuss that one later. "We'll tell him. I'm sure he'll be in touch."

"I'm sure he will," Victor agreed, rising. "It was a pleasure, gentlemen."

"Yeah, for us too," Reno shook his hand with a little smile. "You have fun keepin' outta sight."

"Oh I'm having a ball," Victor said dryly, smirking back.

Rude shook his hand as well, frown still there. "Your kids… they okay?"

Victor arched a brow, openly surprised by the question before his smirk gentled to a genuine smile. "Yeah, they are now."

Rude nodded, adjusting his sunglasses in one of the few nervous tells Reno knew him to have. "Good."

Victor nodded. "It is. Thanks."

After a beat of silence, Rude headed for the door so Reno gave the Guardsman a quick salute and followed his partner.
A Battle of Wills

Chapter Summary

With undefined powers at play, it's time to try a different strategy.

It was clear that Angeal definitely had the depression issues Zack had mentioned - which were understandable, after he failed to reason with Genesis. Given the situation, no one blamed him, with the exception of Angeal himself. And unfortunately, as he was continuing to get weaker, there was little more to do than think.

Given that Angeal had arguably been the strongest of SOLDIER in raw power, even weakened he was still ahead of a good majority of SOLDIER, but it was obvious he was nowhere near what he had been. While he hadn't tested it, Zack had a feeling that he was definitely stronger than his mentor was now. With circumstances as they were, it didn't come with any feeling of victory.

Hojo certainly didn't miss Hollander, but he really did wish the man had untangled more of his mess before leaving. The fact that he'd made no attempt to even stop Genesis with sedatives they had on hand was inexcusable, but not worth the time to gripe about it. He had more than enough on his plate just trying to work with what he had left. Thankfully Rayleigh was actually useful; if ShinRa survived this, he'd see about moving her permanently to his labs. There just weren't enough competent people these days.

The single benefit to Angeal being weakened, he supposed, was that Ifalna's daughter could finally join them and they could get more tests done while discussing things. She didn't have a mind for science, no, but she was fairly observant, and often put things together in ways Hojo wasn't inclined to for that very reason.

"He's having a lot more subdued reactions to me," she observed, moving away from the room he was currently resting in to come back by the rest of them. "And he feels different."

"Has that initial sense of wrongness remained?" Hojo asked.

"It's still there, yes, but…" Aerith frowned, searching for words to explain the feeling. "There's definitely something terrible there, but it doesn't feel like a threat to me personally anymore. And he's not reacting like he's ready to fight me either."

"I'd noticed and documented the difference in behavior, yes," Hojo said. "If it doesn't feel like a personal threat to you, what sort of threat does it feel like?"

"It's… more of a conflict inside, I think," Aerith said. "Like the presence has turned against him."

"Presence." Hojo swiveled his stool to face her, frowning. "You've used that term before, but referring to his presence. Now you said the presence, identifying it as separate. Explain."

"It's different this time." Aerith frowned, thinking about what she felt. "Maybe it was always that way and I didn't know because I had nothing to compare it to. I'm not saying there's necessarily something thinking with the other presence, but there's a level of will. Purpose."

"Autonomy?" Sephiroth suggested quietly. He hadn't spoken much so far, currently corresponding
with Lazard to try and figure out a way to get himself and ideally Zack deployed in the search for Genesis. It didn't help that he'd been feeling unsettled ever since Genesis' attack, unable to get any good sleep; he knew he wasn't the only one, Zack was looking worse for wear himself and was consistently low key despite his efforts to stay positive. Things didn't look good, and everyone felt their time ticking away. "The freedom and ability to act by oneself I suppose is what I was getting at."

"The ability is the bigger thing here, I think. That it can act on its own - autonomously, as you said - whatever 'it' is." Aerith shook her head, a hand moving to play with the bangle she'd been given. "Jenova, maybe."

"Which would be another vote for the 'Jenova isn't dead' idea," Zack muttered. "I'd keep a tally, but 'uncomfortably likely' is the gist of it right now, isn't it? Jenova, whatever the hell else it is by your scientific categories, is alive. Enough to pick and choose how to act. Because even if it's instinctive, that's still alive. Parasitic, sure, but alive."

"I'm not sure if it counts as a parasite, but your point is noted," Rayleigh said. "Still, the Jenova cells are entwined enough with Angeal and Genesis' DNA that you can't just cut it out."

"What about replacing it with something else, then? Fill the void," Zack said, rolling his eyes at the collection of odd looks he got. "I get it, I'm not generally the brains of the operation. But I did some research, based off of some of the Professor's comments, and that's something you mentioned - gene therapy does that. Get a virus to carry in copies of healthy cells to map over the bad ones, basically. You were even considering it before."

"I did also point out the problem of the fact that the Jenova cells aren't creating your typical cellular disease; neither do they fill that sort of function, nor do they leave much room for that sort of tested therapy to even be reasonable as something to spend time on." Hojo arched a brow. "I will say, however, that I am impressed you took away that much from the conversation. If the other members of SOLDIER were so inclined to listen and be cooperative, we'd all be better off."

"Hey you're the genius here, Professor; none of this is typical, the whole field is skewed." Zack shrugged. "But it's your field. And you've never had a problem trying crazy things before."

"If by 'crazy' you mean unconventional and never before done, and 'trying' you mean after extensive testing to create a viable solution, then yes." Hojo turned back to his work, flipping through his notes. "There is a theory that may merit looking into, and I will question Angeal on it after I decide on the best wording. Unless, of course, you would work with me, Sephiroth?"

"I've been working with you, Hojo." Still, Sephiroth looked over to meet his eyes. "What do you want of me now?"

"You're going to have to close off your soft hearted response to your friend if you want to help him," Hojo said. "I will have him hooked up to another set of monitors, in addition to his current ones. And you will go in and demand that he tell you where Genesis is going."

"He doesn't know where Genesis is going," Sephiroth said. "That's a waste of time and will make him believe that I don't trust him. It's counterproductive to everything I've done to encourage a stable head space for him since his return."

"Yeah, I'm on team 'that's a bad idea' too," Zack said. "For the record."

"I am aware of what you both think and feel, and I have my reasons for this." Hojo stared at Sephiroth, expression somber. "You need to do this. There is no one else it can be."
"Only me," Sephiroth said, frowning as he considered the order. "Why?"

"Expectations will taint the results, Sephiroth. All you need to know is that your task is to go in and demand Angeal tell you where Genesis is headed, until you get an answer." Hojo's smile was a crooked, mirthless little thing. "I have a theory he'll surprise you both, if you press him long enough."

Sephiroth's frown deepened. "You believe he'll have an answer."

"I have reason to believe that if there is an answer to be had, you will be able to get it out of him," Hojo said.

"But only me."

"Only you," Hojo agreed. "There's reason to think you may get a response, if you can get him out of his habit of over thinking it."

"The Jenova cells," Sephiroth said. That was the only reason he could think of. "Yet you've always said I'm not like them. That this was not in my future."

"And I hold to that statement; their future is not yours, Sephiroth." Hojo shook his head. "But you have a way of convincing people that you're the leader. You always have. And he has responded to that before."

Sephiroth nodded slowly, considering it. The last thing he wanted to do was play mind games with Angeal, but if there was a way to find out where Genesis was going, a way to save them both…

"I'll do it."

Hojo smiled, marking his place in his notebook and rising. "Excellent. I'll get things ready."

Angeal was waiting for Sephiroth, hooked up to a variety of monitors and obviously concerned. "Sephiroth? What's going on? Did Hojo find something?"

Sephiroth stared at him a long moment in silence, really taking in the changes. Exhaustion was obvious, as was tension - it was all over his body language, just like the desperation in his eyes as he was being stared at. Angeal had been many things to Sephiroth throughout their friendship, but he'd never looked so weak, in such pain. He wasn't giving in, but it was sheer willpower keeping him together at this point. And faith.

"Sephiroth?"

Faith in him, and in their friendship. He needed him, Angeal needed Sephiroth like Sephiroth hadn't realized he needed the two of them until they'd gone, even more than that now while his body was failing him.

"Sephiroth, what's wrong?"

He sounded so damn concerned, and it was hard to believe that it took something like this to see it. "Sephiroth?"

"Where is Genesis?"
Angeal only blinked at him a moment, confused. "Where… Sephiroth, I've told you everything I know."

"Where is he?"

Angeal frowned uncertainly. "Sephiroth, I don't know. You saw the feed, he didn't tell me anything."

This felt so wrong. He wanted to explain himself, it was obvious that Angeal was upset, but Hojo had been very clear that he wasn't to explain anything. Just ask.

"I need you to think." Sephiroth braced himself against the confusion and distress he was causing his friend, continuing to push. "Where is Genesis, Angeal?"

"I don't know! And I don't know why you think I suddenly do." Angeal frowned, looking him over like there could be some clue. "Did Lazard say something?"

"This isn't about Lazard, this is about finding Genesis." Sephiroth crossed his arms, staring his friend down, expression as impassive as he could manage, the mask he'd learned to let down around his friends firmly in place once more. "Tell me where he is."

"I don't know where he is!" Angeal insisted, wings flaring out at his side. "I wish I did! Do you think I wanted to see him go? I wasn't in any condition for a fight, Sephiroth, I did what I could! And I regret not trying more, yes, but I don't know anything else!"

Sephiroth frowned, meeting Angeal's eyes and holding his gaze. Hojo had said he had a way of convincing people, and Angeal had responded well to his authority so far. This time, he put a note of command in his voice. "Tell me where Genesis is, now."

Angeal stiffened, narrowing his eyes. "I don't know. And I don't appreciate you coming in and acting like I do."

There was something on the edge of his senses now, building as Angeal shifted where he sat, wings trembling. "You may have missed something."

"I didn't! I've thought of nothing but this mess, and what went wrong!" Angeal glared at him, eyes brightening as adrenaline pushed his Mako level forward.

"You know where he is," Sephiroth said, tone leaving no room for doubt even as he wondered if this would do anything but hurt his friend. It was the last thing he wanted to do, and yet he couldn't deny he felt something. "Tell me, Angeal. Anything. A city. A continent. A direction. Where has Genesis gone?"

"I don't know!"

"Don't lie to me." It was almost physically painful to say it, when he wasn't sure himself. What was Hojo waiting for? What did he expect? The pressure in the room had continued to build, and he noticed abruptly that Angeal was panting like he'd been doing far more than arguing. But no one had come in to interfere, no monitors had signaled alarms, so he pressed on and hoped whatever was going to happen would be done with. "Tell me where Genesis is."

"I don't know!"

"Tell me." Sephiroth took a step forward with the command, watching with fascinated horror as familiar green ringed Angeal's eyes again, sweat beading on his brow. For a moment, fear and anxiety that wasn't his sent chills down his spine, pain spiking through his head.
Angeal winced with him. "Sephiroth…"

"Tell me!" He commanded, using every ounce of authority he could weigh his tone with.

"I don't… I don't…" Angeal panted quietly, eyes losing focus as he stared at Sephiroth, wings shaking visibly. His mouth worked silently a moment before he gasped, curling in on himself. "H-he's… to the… the west..."

The monitors blared several alarms, almost drowning his words out, and only Sephiroth's superhuman reflexes allowed him to make it in time to keep Angeal from pitching over onto the floor. "Angeal!"

A groan was the only response, the older SOLDIER limp in his arms, skin damp with a cold sweat. As Sephiroth gently laid him back on the bed, he noticed a smear of red, blood beginning to trickle from his nose.

"Lay him down and get out of the way." Hojo had come in at some point, the alarms turning off as he moved around to check Angeal's readings, making a thoughtful sound.

"What happened?" Sephiroth demanded, staying out of the way but refusing to leave. Not after this; he needed to know what had happened, what he had done that caused this.

"You were able to get an answer, and his body stressed accordingly by accessing the information." Hojo turned, looking back in time to accept a tray from Dr. Rayleigh. "Get out of the doctor's way, he'll be fine. Hypertensive urgency is the last thing that's going to kill him."

_Hypertensive urgency_ was not a phrase Sephiroth was familiar with, but he _was_ familiar with many of the monitors. Enough examination showed that his blood pressure had spiked drastically, which was likely part of the culprit. Still, better to let them work no matter how much he wanted to pull Hojo aside for questions. For now.

He _would_ get answers this time.
The Reunion Theory

Chapter Summary

Some answers only spawn more questions, but at least now they have a direction.

Hojo waited until SOLDIER's end of the core group was gathered together before he would address anything, not of a mind to go over it more than once. "Before anyone panics, he's no worse off than before. What you witnessed was a combination of side effects to the realization of what is known as the 'Reunion Theory' - which is, I suppose, no longer entirely theoretical. Sit down and let me talk, you may ask questions after."

Sephiroth gave Hojo a flat look that carried his 'no' across without need to say so. He had too much energy to sit, pacing the side of the room until everyone else had settled.

At this point, Hojo knew when to pick his battles with Sephiroth, and this wasn't worth the effort since he was being silent. "The Reunion Theory is based on the observation that Jenova cells gravitate to their source, or at least the greatest source nearby. On tests done with creatures, the effect remained the same, which suggested the parasitic effect of the cells influencing the mind of said creatures. Of course, that has to be taken with the consideration that the creatures used for the experiments did not have a particularly strong will of their own, if at all. The more autonomous the specimen, the less likely it was that it would be overrun. The reason for that, as I have said from the beginning, is the lack of brain activity from Jenova - no willpower of its own to contest that of whatever its cells were injected into, even in cases that there were signs of influence."

"And you thought I could influence Angeal with sheer willpower?" Sephiroth asked, stopping to give the Professor the full weight of his stare.

"More specifically, I reasoned that there was a possibility that he would be able to sense Genesis. The two of them are rather bonded, after all, and if nothing else is in his favor, if it is possible to survive on sheer willpower Genesis may in fact have an advantage." Hojo didn't falter under the same stare that had intimidated so many others, too familiar and too strong willed himself to give in to something so simple. "Between the bond and how he has continued to react in consistently positive ways to your orders, as well as the fact that you do have Jenova cells of a far higher concentration, it was a solidly grounded hypothesis. Which, I will add, you proved yourself."

Unfortunately, the results had indeed proven the Professor's point. But there were still questions unanswered. "He didn't know he had that information. He couldn't have, he would have said so immediately if he did."

"In this much, I do agree; had he been aware he possessed the information, Angeal would likely have given it over as freely as everything prior," Hojo said. "But it wasn't information he consciously possessed. It wasn't until he was sufficiently agitated that the connection finally came into his reach. Only then was he able to answer you."

"I could feel it." Aerith was settled in the safe circle of Zack's arms, mutual comfort provided by the contact after watching the process play out. "That presence, it just grew. But I don't think Angeal was doing that at all, or it wouldn't have hurt him that way."
Hojo glanced at her, making an impatient gesture. "Continue. That's not enough of an explanation for discussion."

"You said he's not worse," she said, taking one of Zack's hands in hers while the other held her staff. "But his energy is. That wrongness is spreading, a taint on his energy like a bruise under the skin. And it's not working with him, it's trying to take over."

"Jenova," Zack muttered, hugging Aerith a little tighter for a moment.

"That's what everything comes back to, the Jenova cells." Sephiroth frowned, thinking back. "I felt something as well. His emotions. Pain…"

"His pain, or just pain?" Zack asked. "Were you hurting too?"

"I don't know who started it," Sephiroth admitted, trying to focus on the facts and not how unsettling the speculations could be. "There was pain, however. Here, above and behind the eye."

"Not the general location you have headaches, historically," Hojo said. "Describe the sensation."

"Sharp pain, briefly," Sephiroth said, gloved fingertips tracing over his left brow and around the eye beneath it. "There's a lingering ache, I suppose."

"You *suppose* or there *is*?" Hojo asked. "Speak clearly, there is an important difference."

"There is a dull ache, though it is now over a larger area than the initial sensation." Sephiroth didn't wait to be prompted further, indicating the area with a careful ghosting touch of fingertips. "It seems to be fading now."

Hojo made a thoughtful sound, frowning. "I see. Keep me appraised of any changes, including if or when it finally stops. If there is nothing else, I would like you to continue with your explanation, Ms. Faremis. His 'energy' you said?"

Aerith frowned, trying to put what she knew into words. "The Lifestream flows through every living thing. There's a similar current inside each person and creature, flowing through us on a personal level that mirrors how it flows through the Planet. That's the energy I'm feeling, that I was talking about. It's different for everyone. The process SOLDIERs go through changes them, makes for a more powerful presence with the mako, and then Angeal and Sephiroth have the Jenova cells, as well as Genesis."

"And something is wrong with their energy," Hojo said, frown deepening. "You said the SOLDIER process makes for a powerful presence, yet you have mentioned presences as a plural within Angeal. Does anyone else share that distinction?"

"Sephiroth and Genesis," she said immediately, pausing a moment to think. "And that young woman with AVALANCHE. Not the same way, but there's definitely another presence with her as well."

"I got the distinct impression from Veld's visit that you might know a thing or two about that, Professor," Sephiroth said.

"I will tell you exactly what I told Veld - if I had anything to do with her current state, I certainly don't remember," Hojo said. "She wasn't a part of the Jenova Project, *that* I can assure you."

"Alright, but there might be some benefit to finding out what's going on there, right?" Zack asked, thumb rubbing the back of Aerith's hand gently. "What way did you mean, Aer? How was she different?"
"It was more than just a presence, there was a voice too… whatever was with her was in pain, and causing her pain." Aerith frowned, closing her eyes. "It was an old voice, but I couldn't understand it. Just that it was hurting, and shouldn't have been with her. The Planet didn't like it, but there wasn't the same violent reaction like when I first met Sephiroth. I don't know what it was, but it wasn't recognized as Other, or a threat the same way Jenova's presence is."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to like this answer, but I have to ask; what else have you combined with humans, Hojo?" Sephiroth asked. "And if the list is too long, try to narrow it down to whenever she would have been in your lab."

"I think I liked it better when you kept your sass inside your head," Hojo said, giving him a flat look for his wording. "There were a variety of materia-based tests done on the bodies recovered from Kalm, questionable survivors and the dead or dying. The President didn't want any survivors, the only exception being Veld because he was far too useful to write off if he could be saved. Which I did. It was interesting to design a prosthetic that was combat ready but also able to be used in daily interaction."

"Why would you design something just for combat if it was somebody's hand?" Zack asked. "I mean, isn't it a given people need to be able to have 'daily interactions'?"

"Veld's entire arm was replaced from the shoulder down, which was a very different scenario," Hojo said. "The first design I tested wasn't a true prosthetic anyway, just a brace for a weakened limb, and that was only from the elbow joint down. It was merely a prototype; I had no intention of it seeing day-to-day usage. Veld's situation was unique."

"Alright, fine, whatever. What kind of materia tests did you do?" Zack asked. "We have a department for messing with materia, seeing what can be done with it - I've helped them out before. But I get the feeling you weren't doing the same sort of thing."

"Our 'materia department' is dedicated to the manufacturing of materia. If you've ever paid much attention to it, you'll notice that there is a distinct difference in natural and manufactured materia," Hojo said. "Natural materia comes from the Lifestream, whereas manufactured is made from mako; there is a distinct variation in quality between the two, but by manufacturing materia ShinRa is able to mass produce it and distribute it amongst the ranks. For the purposes of the company, it's good enough."

"Yeah, I'd noticed. You can buy a Fire materia, but even when you get it stronger with more use, it's never able to be used for anything beyond a Fire spell," Zack said. "I get natural when I can. Spend enough time with a natural Fire materia and you can get it up to a full blown Firaga with just the one orb. Spawns a new one eventually, too, which is great."

"Genesis had written a few academic papers on magic and materia use," Sephiroth said, ignoring Hojo's irritated look. "To the same effect of what you've observed. Some materia can't be replicated in a lab, either. Summons are a commonly used example."

"Summons…" Zack frowned a moment, thinking. "Could that be it, Aerith? I mean, I don't really know exactly what they are, but maybe to the Planet they have a voice?"

Aerith considered it. "I don't know. I've never used Summon materia, though I've heard of it. Maybe?"

"Did you ever use Summon materia in your tests, Hojo?" Sephiroth asked.

Hojo frowned, tapping his fingers lightly at his desk. "Perhaps. I'll have the records pulled. In the
mean time, our focus should remain on Angeal and Genesis. Assuming the Reunion Theory has now been proven, Angeal is now your best chance for tracking down Genesis, as he will be instinctively seeking him out. There should now be a call that would get stronger as they get nearer to each other, regardless of whether or not Genesis is consciously drawing him. Unfortunately, he's in no condition to go running across the Planet to track him down."

"I suppose there's no way to pack enough equipment to move him and still allow you to treat him, is there?" Sephiroth asked.

"Neither helicopters nor troop transports would be able to manage enough to keep him stable long, no," Hojo said.

"Alright, maybe this is something you guys already considered, but what about that ship advertised downstairs? In the exhibit room?" Zack sighed at the lack of recognition. "There's this model of an airship, the Highwind. If it's real, and able to be used, could we get the equipment on there? I mean, if you have the space is it even possible?"

Hojo snorted, shaking his head. "I have met Captain Cid Highwind, and I assure you he will not allow you to requisition his airship. If by some miracle you could persuade him to let it be used, he would still refuse to let anyone else pilot it, and I don't foresee him being willing to be distracted from his current task of designing a viable space faring vessel. He's completely fixated on getting his rocket into space, to the point they're now calling Rakheim Rocket Town because he has the vast majority of the population working on it in some way."

"Okay but forget all the persuasion bits, if he said yes, is it even possible? Could you get some setup rigged that we could move Angeal and keep him being treated like he needs while tracking Genesis down?" Zack asked.

"I would have to see what space he has available, and it would take a considerable amount of time and effort to move enough equipment to make a passable laboratory to do everything currently needed, let alone prepare for any additional issues that might crop up," Hojo said.

"But is it even possible?" Zack pressed.

"From what I have seen of the sheer size of the vessel, it is theoretically possible, yes," Hojo said.

"Awesome, I'll look into that," Zack said. "Or get someone to, I don't know. There's got to be some way to talk him into it. If he's as serious about space travel as you say, the guy understands chasing your dreams, and doing what you think is important no matter what other people might say."

"There's still the matter of getting clearance for Angeal to leave Headquarters, on top of the fact that the President is expecting us to kill Genesis," Sephiroth said. "I'll speak with Lazard, see if there's something that could be done."

"We're already lying to say we actually plan to do that, I don't see a problem not letting the President know who all is going," Zack said. "The Turks are on our side, who's going to tell? Sounds like he's been fine with the idea of the Professor experimenting on bodies, living or dead, so it's not a stretch to bring him either."

"The worst part about that is the fact that you're absolutely right," Kunsel said. "I'll ask Reno what he thinks when we get together later to compare notes."

"Well, best of luck to you all, but I wouldn't hold your breath," Hojo said. He turned away when the computer chirped, looking over the readings. "Well well, it looks like Angeal is coming around. It's
time to get a better idea of what's happened."

"I'll go with you." Sephiroth glanced at Zack. "We'll leave the speaker on."

Zack nodded. "Alright. We'll be here."

Angeal woke to the slow, steady beep of a heart monitor. It wasn't the first time, but it was the first time in quite a while and he spent a moment trying to remember what had happened. His mind was foggy, pain refusing to be shaken off and leaving him struggling to think, so he took inventory of how he was feeling instead.

His head hurt, a steady throb on top of the tight feeling of a tension headache coming on. Behind closed lids, his eyes burned like he'd had them open too long, and his mouth was dry. There was the sticky discomfort of sweat cooled on his skin, leaving a slight chill despite his normally higher body temperature. His body felt heavy, overworked to exhaustion in ways he hadn't had the strength for, like he'd been running until he could barely breathe - something he hadn't done in years, hadn't really been able to do with his enhancements.

"Angeal?"

Sephiroth's voice caused memory to tickle at the back of his mind, and Angeal frowned as he tried to pin it down. *What happened?*

"It's clear you're awake, you might as well open your eyes and let me see how you are," Hojo said, looking distinctly unimpressed when Angeal obliged, struggling to focus. "What are you feeling?"

"Hurts," he rasped, coughing as his dry throat protested.

"Wait." Sephiroth came to his side, the quiet sound of a bottle opening proceeding the offer of a water bottle. "Can you sit up?"

Angeal nodded, though he really wasn't certain, and ended up hunched over for stability. After taking a couple swallows of water, he tried again. "Thanks. Everything hurts. I'm exhausted, chilling, and my head is pounding."

"Is it a particular kind of exhaustion, or actually that generic?" Hojo asked.

Angeal sighed, running a shaking hand through his hair and making a face at the feel of sweat-damp strands trying to cling to his fingers. "Like I've pushed too far, and my body just can't take it. The kind that makes you feel like just moving is an exercise. What happened?"

"Do you remember anything?" Sephiroth asked.

"It's just out of reach. I know something did… you were here, weren't you? We were doing something…" Angeal winced, pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead as the pain increased. "Damn."

"The pain increases with your efforts to recall the event?" Hojo asked, making a note. "What sort of pain is it?"

"Sharp," he managed, trying to keep his breathing even. "When I quit focusing on it, it's back to a dull burn."
"Interesting." Hojo glanced at the monitors, then back to his notes. "Walk him through remembering what occurred, Sephiroth."

"Hojo had a theory that if I came to you and was commanding enough, you would be able to tell me where to find Genesis," Sephiroth said, watching as Angeal frowned, then looked up at him with wide, panicked eyes.

"I remember that. I didn't… Sephiroth I swear to you, I don't know where that information came from! I wasn't hiding anything," Angeal said. "I don't… I wouldn't have lied to you, not after all this."

"I know. That was why I had to take the approach that I did, without explaining to you; the knowledge wasn't conscious. I do believe you would have said something if it was," Sephiroth said, watching some of the panic fade at his reassurance. "There was a theory that you and Genesis would have a connection, or at least a sense of each other. My effort was to tap into that instinct."

"And you did." Angeal sighed, rubbing his face. "How? How did that happen? Was it just the Jenova cells?"

"Hojo will explain." Sephiroth turned to the Professor, unimpressed and unmoved by his glare from being volunteered. "Professor."

"Early tests indicated that Jenova's cells would always seek to gather together, and then return to the main body. The effect continued with various creatures, though the stronger their personal willpower and autonomy was, the less effective the instinctive draw to Jenova was," Hojo said. "Needless to say, by the time it came to humans, it was assured that those with enough strength of will would be virtually unaffected. That effect is a part of what is known as the Reunion Theory. Between what you have said occurred early on to trigger your own mutation and descent into degradation, presumably the proximity to Genesis in such a state - a theory that is further backed by the drastic decline in health you suffered after his presence here - and the Reunion Theory, it was a reasonable hypothesis that you would be aware of him on a subconscious level. With the level of power he possesses even now, on top of how active his Jenova cells are, it's little wonder you were able to at least find a general location. All we needed was a catalyst, to force you to reach for the information.

"Needless to say, as Sephiroth possesses more Jenova cells than either of you and is also completely dominant over their influence, he was the perfect candidate." Hojo gestured briefly to the man in question. "And since he followed instructions, we now have an answer to work off of. Of course, the unexpected toll on your body is also a factor to be examined now, but that is likely to be a one-time occurrence as you have now established the connection."

Angeal nodded slowly. "Alright… I guess that's why I hurt so much now. But if it means we can finally track Genesis down, it's a small price to pay."

"Are you aware of him at all now?" Sephiroth asked.

Angeal frowned, closing his eyes as pain rushed him again and pressing his hand to his forehead. After a moment, he raised a hand, pointing roughly south-west as the monitors chirped a warning of his rising heart rate. "That way. I can't tell you more than that right now."

"Alright, let it go," Sephiroth said. "That's more than we had before. If I had to guess, I'd say that would be the Junon port. I'll mention it to the Turks."

Angeal nodded, breathing shallowly against the pain. "Glad to help."
Sephiroth watched him a moment, frowning at how pale he was. "You should rest now. I'll be back once I've talked to the others."

"Hn'kay," he mumbled, easing himself back on the bed. "Gonna nap then."

"Rest well." Sephiroth watched him a moment longer, then turned on his heel and left to talk with the others.
Chapter Summary

When it came down to it, they all had their own reasons for being there; "right and wrong" was anything but simple.

There was something wrong with Elfé. Genesis had picked up on it before, but hadn't bothered with it. Stuck on the same ship traveling across the ocean, however, the way the proud leader of AVALANCHE kept faltering was too much to ignore.

Genesis knew a great deal about pride, and dealing with prideful people. It wasn't something he had always handled gracefully, true, but when he had to it was doable. Fortunately for him, there was a better answer than confronting Elfé herself, found in cornering Shears. "What's wrong with her?"

Shears didn't try asking "wrong with who" - it was obvious. So was his distrust of the SOLDIER, unfortunately. "What's it matter to you?"

"She's an ally. I want to know who and what I'm dealing with, and what I can count on." When that wasn't enough, Genesis added, "And I don't think either of us trusts Fuhito enough to bother asking him."

Shears' eyes narrowed slightly. "If you don't trust him, why are you working with us? Why stay at all, now that you've gotten your doctor back?"

"Because my doctor is the same idiot who messed me up to begin with," Genesis explained with what he considered admirable patience. "He is also the only one who is going to be able to help me, unfortunately, but if he can make use of Fuhito that's fine by me. He has resources, and the good grace of someone inside ShinRa. For now, it's in my interest to work with him and with you."

Shears huffed quietly. "At least you're honest about it all. I don't know what's wrong with her, though. She ignores it, pushes through it like everything else. Fuhito doesn't seem to care, so long as nobody tries to find anything out about it."

"So you assume he knows what's going on, minimum, if he's not actually the source of the issue?" Genesis made a thoughtful sound, glancing in the direction she'd settled. "You know, I'm quite curious myself. I can sense her in a way that isn't consistent with the average human."

"You suggestin' she's been messed up like you?" Shears asked. "Because she doesn't have mako eyes."

"No, but she does have strength to match SOLDIER," Genesis said. "That's not something easily passed off as 'normal' Shears. She's stronger than Fuhito's Ravens, stronger than the SOLDIERs you've encountered, and they've gone up through Second Class. That kind of strength is a big deal. And it usually comes with a big price tag."

Shears rubbed a hand along the back of his neck, frowning. "I guess you'd know. What're you thinkin' you'd even do if you knew what was wrong with her? You're not a scientist, or you'd've fixed yourself."
"No, what's wrong with me does require a certain level of scientific and medical expertise; specifically in the field of bioengineering," Genesis said. "My expertise as a SOLDIER lay with the fact that I am the greatest swordmage they've ever produced. In my experience, I have yet to find anyone with enough skill, stamina and sheer power to match me as a mage alone. So while I'm no scientist, that doesn't mean I have no value as a medic."

Shears stared at him a moment, thinking that over. "It's not just an injury you'd get in battle. If it was, I would have taken care of it for her."

"I understand that, you're very loyal to her." Genesis met his stare evenly. "In fact, I think you're loyal to her above everyone and everything. Aren't you?"

Shears' frown bordered on a glare. "Is that a problem for you, SOLDIER boy?"

"Not at all. I find it rather refreshing," Genesis shook his head. "I've got no quarrel with you, or with any of the others. Ideally, we'll part on peaceful terms when we're done using each other to our own ends."

Shears nodded slowly. "Alright, that's fair. Live and let live, right? We don't stop you, you don't stop us?"

"I'm loyal to myself before your cause, but you're loyal to your cause before me - or to Elfé, in your specific case," Genesis said. "I think it's as even ground as we can get. It's an alliance of convenience, I don't think anyone is under any delusions of anything more between us."

"Right." Shears' frown didn't fade, but he relaxed slightly. "You think you might be able to help her somehow?"

"Or figure out what's wrong, at the least," Genesis said. "I don't think what's wrong with her is related directly to what's wrong with me, but I'm interested in finding out what gave her that strength, and what's sapping it. It may be useful information to me, but it will definitely be useful to you."

"Alright." Shears nodded. "I'll see if I can get her to talk to you, just keep me in the loop. And Fuhito out of it, for now. He hasn't acted like he wants us to take time for that."

"Fuhito is a particular breed of ugly intellectual that I know unfortunately well," Genesis said. "Believe me, I'm not eager to give him anything that isn't to my advantage."

The pair shared a quick smile, one thing they both agreed on, before Shears left to see what could be done.

Genesis stayed put, aware he wasn't alone. "Something on your mind, doctor?"

Hollander stepped properly into the hall behind him, frowning. "Do you honestly intend to help her?"

"That's of no concern to you, Hollander," Genesis glanced back at him, arching a brow. "Have you determined what supplies you're going to need, and how long staying with AVALANCHE is to our advantage?"

"Testing needs done before anything else, to determine how your illness has progressed these past months," Hollander said. "I can compare it against what I've studied from Angeal and Sephiroth, but there is only so much of each of their samples to use for anything after that. We have to be careful."

"I suppose I should be pleased you thought to grab anything at all," Genesis admitted. "Pity Fuhito
didn't convince Hojo to come, but I wasn't really surprised."

"He tried to convince Hojo to leave?" Hollander snorted. "Did you tell him it was a fool's effort? Hojo may not particularly care about ShinRa, but they fund his projects. He's not particularly eager to leave without a better offer. Certainly not just for someone's moral crusade."

"Fuhiito's morality is skewed enough he'd have fit in decently." Genesis shrugged. "I don't know what he wants, but he doesn't seem actually concerned for people."

"Really? He's always going on and on about the good of the Planet," Hollander said.

"Yes, but the Planet is not the people on it," Genesis said. "I don't know what that means, exactly, but it's certainly not the same thing. And I think it's something to keep an eye on, as we do happen to live here."

Hollander huffed, unimpressed. "You're suddenly concerned with the good of others?"

Genesis turned to face him properly, giving him a cold glare. "Don't pretend you don't understand my motivation, Hollander. As of now, I'm dying, and it's the direct fault of the ShinRa-sanctioned mess you made playing god with me before I was ever born. If I am able to recover, your 'thanks' will be walking out of here with your life. The company will not be so fortunate."

"The company was ready to give you a chance before you teamed up with AVALANCHE!" Hollander said. "You dug your own grave there, Genesis. We were working on a cure, Angeal told you that."

"And I'm sure he believed it. He always did try to believe the best of people." Genesis smiled fondly, shaking his head before returning his gaze to Hollander. His expression twisted to an ugly sneer, anger brightening his eyes. "And you would tell him anything to save your skin, don't think I don't know how you operate. I will never forgive you for turning him against me."

"You say things like that and expect me to believe you'll really let me go once I've cured you?" Hollander asked.

Genesis laughed, his smile edged and cruel. "It doesn't really matter, does it, Hollander? You're not brave enough to cross me. Right now, that chance that I'm telling the truth is all that's keeping you sane. And if you do save me, you'll have done something Hojo couldn't. You can't resist the chance to one-up him, can you? After all these years in the shadows, always playing second fiddle, never getting the recognition you desperately crave… no, you'll do as I say. Your own fears and ambitions allow for nothing less."

Hollander swallowed hard against a sick feeling, staring back into those cold blue eyes. The worst part wasn't even how quickly Genesis' moods were swinging, how dangerous he was, how much more unstable he must have become despite being able to act otherwise. The worst part of it all was that he was right. "I… should get back to my inventory. It won't be long before we reach Costa del Sol."

Genesis chuckled, waving him off dismissively. "You do that."

Hollander didn't run away, he still had too much pride for that. But he badly wanted to.

Costa del Sol was considered a fantastic vacation spot by most people, even in SOLDIER. Genesis
was not one of them, and couldn't remember if he ever had been. The light sands and clear, brilliant waters were certainly lovely, he'd give it that. But there was a particular unpleasantness to the scorching dry heat that had only gotten worse as his heightened senses sharpened to a painful point. His skin already felt like paper, it didn't need to feel like it was about to burst into flames.

If anything was going to be on fire, damn it, it would be his choice. Like tourists. Or Hollander's stupid shirt.

"For someone known for their affinity for fire, you really don't like hot things, do you?" The blonde coming over was with AVALANCHE, Genesis knew that much, but her name escaped him. She wasn't a fighter, though; so far it seemed she was the one they used to go in places they couldn't, replenishing supplies and checking the news. She had his full attention when she set down a bottle of green gel with a friendly smile. "I don't know what's wrong with you, but aloe helps sunburns and healing damaged skin. It should at least give you a little relief."

Genesis couldn't help a small smile back, baffled by the random kindness. "Thank you, Miss…?"

"Chelsea." She didn't try to make him shake her hand when he didn't offer, looking around the sheltered spot he'd settled into. "Do you mind if I stay here for a bit? It's nice to just get some peace, and shade is a bonus."

Genesis arched a brow, bemused, but waved towards the other bench. "By all means. I take it you're not a fan of the city?"

She shrugged with a small, awkward smile. "I'm a Midgar girl, it's a big change. But mostly there was a guy I was seeing, and he was from here. I keep worrying I'm going to look around and see someone who looks like him. They have big families out here, right?"

"Generally speaking, yes. But they seem all the bigger because you'll get a minimum of three generations in any one of the big houses." Genesis shook his head. "Hard to imagine it."

"I was an only child, so that's really something." She took a seat, looking at him briefly. "You should probably put some of that on. You're looking red."

"The most color I've had in months," he muttered, but he had to agree. Setting his book down, Genesis took his gloves off and read the back of the bottle. Just aloe, apparently. He'd used it before, Angeal used to have a plant -

Genesis shut that line of thought down promptly, but he did squeeze some of the gel out to spread over his skin. The sense of relief was amazing, the pain finally easing some.

"Finally a real smile. It helps, huh?" Chelsea was smiling at him again, but it was a softer look. "I'm glad. You want me to grab another bottle when I get sent out again?"

With the sheer relief it brought him, Genesis was nodding before he even thought it through. "If you get the opportunity, I would be grateful."

"Consider it on the list, then. I'm sure I'll go out at least one more time, since no one seems sure where we're going yet," she said. "Fuhito is doing some research, last I heard, so we'll see. Maybe back down to Cosmo Canyon."

"Elfé is still deferring to him?" Genesis asked. He couldn't figure out if that was because she was ill, or if she genuinely believed in the fanatic scientist. *Ecoterrorist*, to be honest. That wasn't even ShinRa propaganda, just the plain reality of it. What strange company he kept these days…
"It seems like it. I'm not really sure what's going on there anymore." She shrugged. "I guess it's none of my business."

"It's likely wisest not to make it so, yes." Genesis finished rubbing in the aloe carefully, the remainder going to his hands. It was amazing the difference it made, though he'd have to see how long it lasted. Even a brief respite from the constant pain was an unexpected gift. "I would steer clear of Fuhito entirely, if you have the choice. Certainly try not to come to his attention specifically."

"He doesn't really notice individuals, I think I'm fine," Chelsea said. "But thanks, I appreciate the warning."

"'Repay kindness with kindness,' as it's said." Genesis sighed, looking out towards the city. "We won't stay long, I don't think we can afford to. We're all wanted, and this is a port the military often uses. Tactically, it's a terrible idea to linger. If there's anything you really want here, I suggest you get it out of the way."

Chelsea nodded, getting up. "Right, I'll do that. There's a bakery store I'd like to stop by, actually, and I can get more aloe. I'll get that done now."

"Mm… do be careful." Genesis closed his eyes, letting himself rest while he could and only idly listening to her quiet steps leave.

Chelsea kept her pace easy walking away from Genesis, even though her heart was pounding. It had been a hard decision to stay with AVALANCHE, but it was where she needed to be. She had to do what was right, no matter how frightening it was.

Purchasing another big bottle of aloe at the general goods store, she moved further into the town and away from the tourist-flooded areas. There was a little bakery she'd been told about ages ago, and she needed to visit it before she could move on with the others. The jingle of the bell caught on her nerves, but she still came in, searching the area. It smelled wonderful, and she'd definitely grab something on her way out, but she was looking for one of the bakers.

It didn't take long to find him, built strong and solid like the rest of the family, thick dark hair and eyes the same rich brown that she'd only gotten to see a few times when she'd coaxed Rude's sunglasses off. He was probably what she missed most about Midgar, and the reason she approached the flour-dusted teenager. "Hi… are you Rafael Tapia?"

She got a raised brow and a bemused smile for the question. "I am. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Yeah, hi, I'm Chelsea. I was seeing your brother, back in Midgar," she explained, trying not to be nervous. She could still back out, she should for her own sake, but she owed Rude this. "We had to split up, different job needs. Listen, I can't get a call back to Midgar right now. Could you tell him that we're going to be moving out further west?"

Rafael frowned, narrowing his eyes a little at her, and she had to wonder if maybe he knew about her, about AVALANCHE. But he kept his voice even. "Yeah, I can do that. Anything specific, in case he wants to see you?"

"Not sure. But Cosmo Canyon is always a good starting point. We'd probably cut through Corel, and down to Gongaga first for supplies. It's a long trip, even with a couple big vans." She held his eyes a moment, nodding. "So… anyway, I'd appreciate it."
"I'll make sure he hears about it," he promised. "Let me get you some empanadas… can't have people knowing you were here just to talk to your old boyfriend's kin."

He knew. Or at least enough that she could really believe he'd get the message to Rude. Feeling nervous but lighter, Chelsea nodded and went with him back to the bakery cases. "Do you have anything with Dumbapples? It's for a… friend."
Veld had always been one of the first ones into the office, and as the Director of the Turks, he made a point to be unless there was a meeting or he'd been away. He also tried to keep something of an open door policy, because of the nature of their work, and also literally because he needed to hear anything that was going on out in the main office. He'd been working on getting through the information Reno and Rude had brought back from meeting with Victor whenever he could, given he was likely the only one in Midgar who could make heads or tails of the way his old friend noted things.

Still, he looked up at a brisk knock, waving Rude in and arching a brow when he closed the door behind him. "Do we have a problem?"

"Not sure," Rude admitted. "My brother called me this morning, said Chelsea contacted him."

Veld leaned back in his chair, considering the implications. "The AVALANCHE spy. They made it to Costa del Sol already, then."

"Yeah. He said she asked him to tell me they were going further west, in a couple of vans. She wasn't sure where they were going, but her guess was through Corel and Gongaga to keep supplies up on the way to Cosmo Canyon," Rude reported. "Thought I should let you know."

"You thought right." Veld frowned, thinking it over. "AVALANCHE was reportedly formed in Cosmo Canyon, it's not a stretch to say they'd go back. Corel has a reactor under construction and Gongaga has an older model, though, so I don't think they'd go there just for supplies, if she was honest."

"Rafi said she seemed nervous, but that could have been if she was telling the truth or setting us up." Rude shrugged. "Worth saying anyway."

"Right. I've got a friend out in Corel that could keep an eye out," Veld said, getting his PHS out of his jacket. "See what you can dig up for any confirmation, and have Reno update SOLDIER when he gets with Kusel later. I'll make a couple calls of my own."

"Yes sir." Rude waited a beat, watching him. "Anything else?"

"Not for now, no, unless you see Tseng. Send him my way if you do," Veld said. "Tell your brother I appreciate the intel."

Rude smiled slightly. "I will. We've got to stick by our kin, right?"

Veld froze, staring at his PHS a moment before looking up at the younger Turk. "Family is important."

"I'm one of nine, sir." Rude shrugged, voice soft. "I get it. I'm not the only one, either. All you have to do is say the word; we're waiting."
Veld swallowed against a sudden lump in his throat, nodding. "Right… thanks."

Rude nodded, heading out and closing the door again behind him, offering privacy for his calls.

Veld stared at the closed door for a long moment, a small smile touching his lips. He hadn't planned to ask, but it was good to know.

"So somehow Genesis an' AVALANCHE made it through t' Costa del Sol," Reno reported, sliding the call transcript across the desk to Kunsel. "We've got people lookin' into if they'd somehow cut through Junon, but it doesn't matter much. Fits with what Angeal said, which is enough for now."

"Right… you've got people looking into tracking them over there, I'm sure." Kunsel frowned thoughtfully. "We've got SOLDIERs on the Western Continent, monster disposal and the like. We can get word out to some of the higher ranks, and I'll see what anybody might have seen on our end of the Junon forces. If they're moving by van, though, it's possible to catch up to them by air. Or chocobo scouts, I guess."

"Hadn't thought your riders got much exercise these days, with the end of the war," Reno admitted. "Guess you stay in practice, though?"

"They're a small group, but worth keeping on. You never know when you need someone able to move out fast and off the grid," Kunsel said. "You guys have some motorcycles available, right? I've seen them off the side of the motor pool."

"Yeah, got a guy who's pretty much an expert keepin' an eye on all that for us, so they're all in good shape," Reno said. "Can't cross water in 'em, obviously, but once we get 'em across it's good to go."

"Which is doable, especially if Zack can be as persuasive as he's hoping to be." Kunsel chuckled. "And he can be pretty persuasive when he wants to be."

"Yeah, but Highwind's a real character, yo." Reno shook his head. "An' that's comin' from me. I mean, I wish him the best an' hope he succeeds. But I'm not puttin' all my hopes there."

"Not much to do on that front but wait and see. Zack's gotten sneakier with all this going on, so that's in our favor at least," Kunsel said.

"Yeah, but when you start at zero, everything's progress," Reno said, smirking a moment before the situation made him somber again. "We'll work up backup plans, though. I've got some things to look into, an' I guess you do too now. Give me a ring if somethin' comes up."

"Absolutely, you too," Kunsel said. "I'll have my phone on."

Zack was lucky enough to find one Captain Cid Highwind was in fact still in Midgar for the moment. Tracking him down took a little help from Cissnei, but eventually he found Cid walking around Sector Eight. It looked like he wasn't very happy, but that was something he'd just have to work around. "Captain Highwind?"

The man in question turned to face him, scowl fixed firmly on his face. "Didn't think Palmer'd send SOLDIER out after me. What'd he say?"
"I'm not with Director Palmer, actually. Different department." Zack tapped the SOLDIER insignia on his belt.

"Fuckin' obvious, bright eyes. The hell do you want?" Cid asked. "I'm busy."

Okay, maybe he'd underestimated just how grumpy a guy could be. But that wasn't enough to put him off. "Listen, I'm sorry for whatever Director Palmer's putting you through; so far as I've seen, the guy is a big flake. I came to ask you about helping with a project I'm on. You know about things with AVALANCHE?"

"Yeah, 's a mess for the Turks an' you SOLDIERs to handle." Cid shrugged, getting a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and tapping one out "Not my thing."

"No, your thing is being the genius who created that airship advertised in the exhibition room," Zack said, smiling a little when it was clear he finally had the captain's undivided attention. "I've got a group of people who need to get to the Western Continent and track AVALANCHE down, and a helicopter isn't going to cut it. We need something bigger, and better than the transports they have for us."

"You're askin' me to fly you out there?" Cid lit up, shaking his head. "Yeah, my baby's better by far, but I can't go off right now. Like I said, I'm busy."

Zack frowned, crossing his arms. "Okay, you sounded pretty frustrated so I'm betting things aren't going the way you want. Maybe we can help each other."

Cid snorted, taking a drag on his cigarette. "What do you think you can do? Like you said, it's not your department. It's not even related. An' scuttlebutt says the President has you busy enough you shouldn't have time to spare."

"Yeah, okay, not my department and we are busy, but." Zack held up a finger, grinning. "I have four members of the board of directors who'd be really grateful if we succeeded. It wouldn't be a bad thing to have that many executives owing you, would it?"

Cid chewed on the end of his cigarette a moment, rolling it with his tongue. "That's an awful big claim to be makin' without anyone here backin' you up, SOLDIER boy."

"It is," Zack agreed. "But you're just cooling your heels out here, waiting on a phone call you could get anywhere. Are you interested enough to come in and get confirmation?"

It was clear he was being taken much more seriously now, even if it was just as obvious that the captain was still wary. "You expect they'll just let you call up a meetin' outta the blue like that?"

"They knew I was coming to speak with you, Captain Highwind. They just didn't think you'd take me seriously enough to wait for the outcome." Zack shrugged. "I don't know what you're up to, I don't know what you need. But I know enough about ShinRa to know that money and influence are a big deal. And we're tossing around names like Lazard Deusericus and Veld Faraman. Seems to me they're both taken a lot more seriously than Palmer is. So I think you have everything to gain and nothing to lose here from talking with us. What do you think?"

A slow smirk spread over the captain's lips. "Yeah, alright. You fix us up a meetin' an' we'll see if we can't help each other out."

"You got it." Zack took out his PHS, flipping it open.

"You've got directors takin' your private calls, kid?" Cid took out his cigarette, watching him with
what might have been a hint of respect.

"Nothing so slow." Zack winked, bouncing on his heels. "Hey Sephiroth? Captain Highwind's willing to meet with everybody to discuss how we might make this work. If I get him to one of the offices, can we get a call going between offices?"

There was a brief pause on Sephiroth's end, then a low chuckle. "I shouldn't be surprised. Go to Lazard's office, I'll arrange the rest."

"Awesome, thanks." Zack flipped his PHS closed, grinning. "You've got your meeting, Captain. Let's head up to Lazard's office."

"Well damn." Cid flicked his cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his heel. "Maybe I underestimated you kid. What's your name?"

"Zack Fair," Zack said, giving him a mock salute. "SOLDIER First Class."

They headed back in thoughtful silence, no one giving either of them more than a glance, and Lazard met them at the door to his office. He offered a quick, impressed look to Zack and a handshake to Cid. "I admit, I was skeptical that you'd be willing to come talk with us, Captain. It's a pleasure."

"Uh huh." Cid looked him over briefly, but didn't comment on whatever had his brows up. "So, what's this about a connect call? I was under the impression there were more of ya."

"There are, Captain, but you have to understand that we're all quite busy," Lazard explained, heading back to the desk and turning on the monitor. It split neatly to four screens, the other executives all present.

"Fuck me, you didn't say you had the Vice President in on it," Cid muttered, eyes widening.

Rufus chuckled, leaning his chin in his palm. "Tseng filled me in. I'm impressed at your persuasiveness, of course, Zack, but I have to ask, what's in it for you, Captain? Perhaps looking for more support than that idiot Palmer is giving you? I can't blame you, really, he makes your department seem rather frivolous with all that's going on."

"Don't bait him, Rufus." Veld considered the captain a moment, hands steeped. "You're walking into a delicate situation, Captain, but I can't deny that your help would be an immense advantage. We would need access to your airship for an unspecified amount of time, to carry a team of SOLDIER and Turks. Hojo would need to set up a temporary lab and medical ward, which requires room and access to power or a place to put a small generator. The odds of them having much by the way of anti-air equipment is small, but not impossible. Given one of our targets is Genesis Rhapsodos and he's in possession of the ability to fly on his own, he could potentially count."

Cid nodded slowly, looking them over. "Can't help but notice you don't have the President in on this. He could've requisitioned my ship, would've been damn hard to fight that right now. So I'm gettin' the feelin' that all this is a 'delicate situation' cause it's right under his nose."

"The President has issued orders that some of us don't agree with," Sephiroth said, currently poised just behind Hojo to stay involved in the conversation. "As he remains inflexible, we're taking matters into our own hands. Will that be a problem?"

Cid frowned, crossing his arms. "Dunno. What's your endgame here? If he takes exception to you goin' off on your own… this is a pretty strong group. Over half of the board here, far as I can see. Think he'll listen to you if you're all together like this?"
"I'll be honest with you Captain, I for one am hoping he tries to force things," Rufus said, smirking. "We all have things we want, things we'll get out of this partnership. I don't think I have to say what I'd like most; ambition does run in the family."

"Pretty bold." Cid studied him a moment, then looked to the others one by one. "Well if the company is about to have a change up in who's runnin' it, I suppose it'd be smartest for me to make sure I end up on the winnin' side."

"You're free to walk away, Captain, but I agree that it would be in your best interest to help," Veld said. "Palmer gets a voice on the board because his family was one of the first investors and he holds a lot of stock, but he doesn't present himself or his department well and he's not taken seriously; more than once, scrapping the Space Department has been suggested. But things are going to change around here; they have to, if ShinRa is going to survive. And it seems to me that you can bring a lot to the table, enough to justify keeping the department, though it might do well with a better representative."

"You mean my airship," Cid guessed. "Maybe more designs like it? Better transports, faster personal crafts, maybe."

"You could revolutionize travel." Reeve had kept quiet, still trying to get a feel for the others, but this was right along his interests. "Civilians, military… you could even expand it to ships equipped for medical situations, emergency response teams and getting people to disaster areas when roads might be blocked off."

"Huh." Cid nodded slowly. "Alright. That'd keep the department up alright. I'd still get my rocket?"

"It seems a small price to pay for the assistance you'd be giving us," Sephiroth observed.

"There's an enormous amount of money that the President is wasting right now that could be easily redirected," Rufus said. "He likes chasing his little fantasies. I'm considerably more practical. And none of us would forget who all helped us in our time of need."

Cid considered the points that had been made, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "Alright. Seems like the best bet. Just tell me what you need."
The Price of Power

Chapter Summary

All the power in the world, and they can't save themselves.

Had Genesis not been so ill himself, he was sure he would have noticed sooner. As it was, they were already out of Costa del Sol and heading towards an abandoned ShinRa outpost - and he did so appreciate the irony - before he finally pinpointed what it was about Elfé that was familiar.

"Materia."

Shears glanced at him, puzzled by the seeming nonsequitor. They weren't exactly friends, but the two of them had come to an understanding and were no longer on edge. That didn't mean Shears had gotten any more tolerant of 'cryptic shit' and Genesis still often found him crude and irritating. For this single cause, though, they had found a level ground. "The hell are you on about?"

"Elfé has some materia on her leeching her energy," Genesis explained. "Why, I don't know. I'm not familiar with the power I'm sensing, it's more like a Summon than anything else, but I've never seen anything behave that way."

Shears had immediately taken him seriously as soon as Elfé was mentioned, frowning as Genesis continued his explanation. No one could argue that the former SOLDIER was an expert on materia, he was known for his skills as a mage almost more than for his talent with a blade, but that didn't make him easier to understand for someone like Shears who barely used it himself. "Alright. What do we do about it?"

"We find the materia and either get rid of it or at least teach her how to use it properly," Genesis said. "It shouldn't be doing that. There's no active spell on her, no clear reason for why she would be getting drained by it."

"But she is, and you know that?" Shears asked. "You can tell that much?"

"If I know anything, Shears, it's magic; I'm certain that is the cause, even if I can't figure out why in the world the situation exists," Genesis said. "I just need to see her, and have her cooperate with me figuring out what precisely is going on."

"Yeah, okay. Let me go talk to her. You can come along just don't come into her room yet," Shears instructed, hurrying to where Elfé had settled. "Elfé? Hey, listen. Genesis thinks he figured out why you keep having those weak spells. He might be able to help."

Elfé frowned, looking past him to the door. "You trust him now?"

"He's got nothing to gain by lying," Shears said. "Right now, he's working with us. You being at less than your best isn't to his advantage. I think he's telling the truth, at least as much as he really thinks he can help. It's gotta be worth a shot; nothing else has worked yet."

She sighed, nodding. "I'll listen to what he has to say."

"Great. Genesis?" Shears stepped out, gesturing to the SOLDIER. "Come work you magic."
"Ironic wording, all things considered," Genesis said, following him into the other room. "Elfé, where is your materia?"

She frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You have materia with you, I can sense it," Genesis said, making a vague gesture towards her. "I don't know what is specifically happening, but it's draining your energy. Which materia should not do, by nature only drawing your strength in any measurable way while in use. This isn't even grabbing at your magic stores, this is pulling straight out of your life force, like it's connected through some invisible bond."

Elfé paled, hands gripping at her sword a moment before she slowly removed her gloves, revealing a mass of crimson shards embedded straight into the back of her hand. "I've had it as long as I can remember."

"Well there's clearly a lot you don't remember, then." Genesis frowned. "Summon materia are generally some shade of red. How you would get one practically fused into you, however, might be the more important question to start from."

"That would be the fault of the ShinRa." Fuhito smiled thinly, coming into the room while they stared in surprise. "I had not wanted to worry Ms. Elfé, but I'm afraid I can't have you spreading misinformation when I know the truth."

"Damned convenient you never mentioned 'the truth' before," Shears said.

"Mr. Shears, I have been a devout ally to the cause from the very beginning. It was I who found her wandering near Cosmo Canyon where I studied under Master Bugenhagen, and nursed her back to health. I have always been there for you, Ms. Elfé, as you well know." Fuhito looked at Genesis briefly before focusing back on her. "You were in terrible condition, though I hope you do not recall. I am uncertain what was done to you, but such a young girl should not have been walking alone. I thought perhaps you had escaped from them, due to the nature of the materia present in your hand. It was my hope that in time I would find a means to reach the cure, without having to distract you from our cause. But I see that I will have to explain sooner."

"Oh yes do explain why you think this is ShinRa's fault in particular? That isn't manufactured materia, you can't make summons," Genesis said. "And withholding information on someone who already has some level of amnesia? Forgive me if it doesn't add to any sense of kindness I might have tricked myself into thinking you had."

"You are very high handed for someone who has turned their back on those that were supposedly their closest of comrades, and killed your blooded kin," Fuhito said quietly. "My actions were in her best interest. If you are unable to recognize the act of working for the good of another, I would not be terribly surprised."

"Hold your temper, Genesis." Hollander came in as well, though he stayed close to the doorway. "Fuhito shared some valuable information on this very subject when we were discussing bases of operation. Hear him out."

Genesis treated the doctor to a flat stare until he looked away, then transferred it to Fuhito. "By all means, carry on with your overdue disclosure."

"Fufufu, you are such a passionate young man, Genesis; it is very impressive, but it must surely be tiring to maintain such a suspicious nature." Fuhito shook his head, spreading his hands. "I have done much research, but it took quite some time to gain all the information on such an obscure item
as this materia. The summon is Zirconiade, an ultimate summon hidden by the Cetra. It is so powerful that four additional materia are required for the summon to be fully achieved, which it has been trying to do as it was grafted into your hand. Were any other materia used, you would have an instant casting ability due to the connection, and likely also have certain protections; such genius could have only been conceived by Professor Hojo, though unfortunately he is not here with us."

"You're not missing anything but constant criticism," Hollander said. "I've known him since we were just starting out, believe me on that one."

"Regardless of any personal fault you find in his behavior, you cannot truly deny that he is the single greatest figure in the field of modern bioengineering, but I digress." Fuhito turned his attention back to Elfé. "Ms. Elfé, you must understand, I did not wish to distract you from your noble goals. But I do have information that I have been putting together that will be of use if you desire for us to seek these additional materia before we continue our fight."

"Additional...? Take the gods damned thing out of her," Genesis said. "It's not doing anything for her, it's killing her."

"I don't think you understand, Genesis," Fuhito said, glancing at the SOLDIER. "Much as mako is for you, this materia is the source of her strength."

Genesis stared at him a long moment. "If you're looking for someone to say enhanced strength is worth dying for, I'm sorry but you're in the wrong place. I left ShinRa because the experiments they performed are killing me. No amount of power is worth this; if giving it up would save my life, I would. I will, if that's what it takes."

"You also fight for yourself, and not for a greater purpose, so for you that is acceptable," Fuhito said. "Ms. Elfé is destined for greater things, beyond the leader of AVALANCHE, she is a champion for the Planet itself. It is understandable that you cannot comprehend her driving purpose, but if you seek to get in her way, then I am going to have to respectfully ask you to leave."

"Maybe you should stop and ask her what she wants," Genesis said, gesturing to her. "Instead of assuming. Because it's becoming abundantly clear that you idolize Hojo right up to his ShinRa-sanctioned mindset that no one else is important and no one else could possibly have anything of value to add to a conversation."

"Genesis -" Hollander cut himself short when the SOLDIER pointed a hand at him, fire licking around his fingers. More aware of what he was capable of than anyone else in the room, the doctor held very still, hands up in a sign of submission.

"I am not in the mood for more high and mighty scientists to say they know better than anyone else, that their projects are more valuable than the lives of the people caught in the crossfire," Genesis said quietly, looking at Fuhito. "But you're right, your fight isn't my fight. I don't have the time, energy or patience to put up with you on top of Hollander's sniveling. I wish you the best, Elfé, Shears. I suggest you watch your madman very carefully. A little intimidation goes a long way, in my personal experience."

Fuhito adjusted his glasses calmly, watching Genesis a moment. "If you are quite finished with your dramatics, I need to discuss our next movements. Perhaps you should rest, you're looking a bit flushed."

Genesis glanced at Elfé briefly, then Shears, before smothering the flames in his fist and stalking out of the room; he could feel the rush of fever again, and no matter what he might have been able to offer to Elfé if she had been cooperative sooner, he was limited now. He'd get some rest, and see
what their next move would be.

"Hollander, with me."

Better not to let his mad scientist out of sight, however.

Hollander stayed nearby while Genesis attempted to rest, pouring over his notes and wracking his mind for ways out of the mess they were in. He'd done plenty of tests on Angeal, but he hadn't gotten all of the results back, and there was no hope to get them from the database with the Turks on guard. And whether or not he had any intention of turning himself back in - he didn't - the last thing he needed was to give Genesis any reason at all to doubt his loyalty. Paranoia had been an early warning sign he'd ignored, taking it as an extension of his egocentric views; blowing things out of proportion had been something he'd done ever since he was a child. But what was written off as drama, dismissed as part of his love of theatrics, was just part of a deeper problem.

In truth, if someone asked what was wrong with Genesis, at this point Hollander had a bulleted list prepared. The question was, of course, if his body would even be able to recover assuming they did find a cure; how much damage could he sustain, before there wasn't enough to save? Neither Genesis nor Angeal were truly stable enough to ask if there was a point they'd prefer to simply die with what dignity they might be able to recover, but it looked like that was going to be what it came down to. He'd done tests with Genesis' genes before this entire fiasco, refusing to believe his life's work deserved the dismissal Gast had given him. Both Genesis and Angeal were war heroes, they'd proven time and again that they were both SOLDIERs beyond compare.

None of the individuals imprinted with Genesis' genes had shown signs of degradation, Hollander was positive Hojo would have come after him if they did. Instability and volatile personalities, however, did develop. If the Restrictors weren't in place, they probably would have brought Midgar down faster than AVALANCHE could ever dream. But it was impossible to say how much was to the blame of genetics, and how much could be pinned on their upbringing. Sephiroth wasn't exactly a model of a productive member of society, either, and Angeal had been - yet look at which one was degrading. No, it was far more complex. They needed another set of experiments, a means to test things further. He'd thought to use Genesis' clones, once, but they were virtually nonverbal at this point and Genesis' genes were far too corrupted.

But maybe there was another solution. He didn't have Angeal or Sephiroth to work with, no, but he had genetic samples. If he had the correct templates, if they could find people with certain genetic predispositions, ones that might be more open to adaptations… then maybe he could make a different type of clone. Maybe, just maybe, there was something to be found in Sephiroth's genes to at least slow things down.

Inspired, Hollander turned to a fresh page and started writing down what he would need. One to test copying each of them, that would take three specimens… they'd have to be young, around puberty at the oldest or risk them not being as accepting of change… close to each other, enough alike to minimize variables, brothers perhaps…

Hollander started writing down the possibilities, numbers and letters into the night to find potentially viable scenarios. There had to be a way to make up for not having the others for testing, a way to test solutions before applying them to Genesis himself. He wrote until he had to pause and shake his hand out, stiff from his hurried writing, and looked back over the list. It would need reordered, but he circled the letters of the best options to come back to later.

K - copy Genesis' genes, attempt therapy via combination with Sephiroth
L - attempt to stabilize a base of Angeal with Sephiroth

Y - examine the potential for a pure clone of Sephiroth
Interlude: Words of the Goddess

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, getting an answer is more dangerous than not knowing.

Chapter Notes

There is a side story that occurs around this same time, but you don't have to read it to understand this.

Religion was a strange thing, and had only a superficial place in Genesis' childhood. The couple that raised him made a shallow reference to the gods, but never any specific gestures. Of the veritable pantheon that existed in Gaia, no single Power that Be held a place of reverence to them, down to their dying day. Genesis himself hadn't known, hadn't been raised to know any better, but before he left for ShinRa he had been enlightened.

Outside Banora, there was a series of interconnected caves. Originally, they had been used when the area was mined in thought of putting a reactor there but that never panned out. It looked more like it had been in use once as some sort of prison facility, quite possibly by ShinRa. But at the time he'd found them as a child he hadn't known any of that and they had been a thing of wonder he quickly claimed it as a place to go where he wouldn't be found. A safe place, irony of ironies given the dangerous creatures within. They could have killed him without much trouble, the likes of Behemoths and Malboros interspersed with Grangalan and those ridiculously hearty packs of Movers.

And yet he'd never been harmed by any of them. By all logic, he should have been killed a hundred times over, but he was never harmed by anything but his own carelessness. And perhaps that was because they knew he would one day be the greater predator by far, but he liked to think it was because the goddess whose shrine he discovered had seen something in him. Some potential, some worth justifying protecting him.

He'd found tablets scattered within, with words he would one day know came from Loveless, and there had started his fascination with the book. Perhaps if he'd explained about what else he had seen, the statue that couldn't have been made by modern man, the materia unlike any other, a summon that was far beyond the means of mere human might... maybe he would have been taken more seriously. Others saw fancy and fanaticism, they couldn't understand why he was certain there was more than a pretty story in the tome. No, like any mythos, there was a base of fact and truth hidden in the lyric of Loveless, and it was a scholar's drive that had him spending years worth of free time researching.

There was truth there, the truth of the world, the words of the Goddess Minerva taken from the shrine below Banora and passed through humanity over time until legend became myth and myth faded until it was merely a pretty story. But he knew there was more than that, so much more. It wasn't imagination to see himself reflected in the pages, to see the story playing out in detail, but was
it so wrong to wish to play the hero all along? He knew better now, he was no hero. He'd never been a hero, not even to himself, but this fate… this agonizingly painful death, stripped of dignity and without hope… he didn't deserve that.

Hollander was running tests, he'd run them in Midgar and hidden in the shadows below, he was gathering equipment and samples and making all sorts of plans. But Genesis wasn't sure he could trust him, not after he'd done this, not after he'd let Sephiroth and Hojo brainwash Angeal, his dearest friend finally torn from his side by their pretty lies. So he turned to one who would only deal in truth, whether or not it was what he wanted to hear.

Genesis knelt, head bowed, and prayed.

"Great Goddess Minerva, I come before you lost and broken, a monster made of man. I have read your words, as I once did when I walked at your shrine as a boy, untouched by the creatures amidst the caverns. And I come to you now, turning away from this broken world, bathed in blood and weighted by my sins. I am dying an unnatural creature that belongs nowhere on your great Planet." Genesis rubbed his face, skin dry and tender to the touch as he took in a shuddering breath. The truth hurt, but there was nothing to be gained by lying to a god. "I have done horrible things, I know it, but I don't want to die. Not like this. If there is a chance, if there is anything that can be done, I throw myself at your mercy. Please, I beg of you, don't let it end like this. I never wanted to be a monster, I never wanted… never wanted any of this. I don't have to be the hero, I don't want fame or fortune, I'm done dancing to ShinRa's tune, please… all I seek now is your gift, your blessing before I die."

Child.

Genesis tensed, looking around instinctively. Had he heard…?

"I…" Genesis rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes to try and concentrate. "Goddess…?"

Don't cry little child. Come to me.

Images flashed through his mind, a phantom chill and peaks of mountains amidst an eternal winter.

Come to me.

"Is… that where you are? The mountains… Nibelheim?" He ventured uncertainly. That was the Nibel range, wasn't it? He'd flown over that on the way to Wutai.

Come to me, I will guide you. Her voice was so soft, so gentle and kind and everything he needed to hear. You've been hurt, but I will make you well. Come to me.

Genesis sighed quietly, relief flowing through him. "Thank you, I'll… I'll come. I promise."

A phantom touch to his cheek was the first time he'd been properly warm in months, and he sighed again, a soft smile on his lips. The Nibel Mountains weren't far. Nowhere was too far to travel to prove his loyalty to the goddess. The rest of humanity may have deemed him a monster, but what did they matter? The goddess had accepted him, and he would do whatever he was asked.

Hollander had already planned for them to head to Nibelheim, it was the best bet at having supplies he could use, but to have Genesis come and tell him so was a bit unnerving. Something was off, more than it had been. There was something in the sudden energy he had, the drive and fire that had been steadily draining out of Genesis all this time only to appear full force now, without warning or
He still looked terrible; physically it was clear he was still dying. His thin, sallow skin was dry and prone to cracking. His eyes burned too bright even for the mako-light of SOLDIERs, fever running dangerously high until he was hot to the touch, splotches of red on pale cheeks. But there was a new confidence, a return of the same attitude that had carried him so far. Whatever was going on in his head, Genesis was clearly convinced he was going in the right direction.

They parted ways amicably enough with AVALANCHE, Fuhito not at all sorry to see them go. Shears took time to wish them well and spoke in private briefly with Genesis. It was of no concern or relevance to Hollander, so he didn't bother to ask. They had to move on, getting their own means of transportation - chocobos, apparently, were Genesis' solution. Which he supposed was better than being picked up and flown across the continent, but riding bareback was an experience Hollander had never wanted. Not that the SOLDIER would tolerate any complaint even if he dared, let alone actually care. Oddly enough, he found himself actually regretting not putting up a fight to stay in Midgar. Angeal could have protected him, surely; Genesis was predictable in that way at least, he'd never hurt Angeal if he had a shred of himself left.

Which was something Hollander wasn't sure of. There was something wrong, something going on that he wasn't sure he dared to ask. Whenever they stopped for rest, Genesis would spend time on his knees - praying to his goddess, no doubt, but why he was suddenly so much more obsessively devout… what difference had occurred? What was going on in his degrading mind?

Hollander couldn't bring himself to ask, some sense of foreboding making the words stick in his throat. So he watched, carefully, and listened for any clue. Genesis' mood seemed on a steady rise the closer they got to Nibelheim, despite the fact that his hair was more white than red and he was bruising far too easily. He seemed convinced that his salvation was at hand, and for the life of him, Hollander couldn't figure out what he could possibly be thinking.

It wasn't that he wanted Genesis to be in a volatile mood, that spelled nothing but tragedy - likely for himself, and Hollander preferred living, particularly with the knowledge that eventually Angeal and Sephiroth would track them down. He'd known if he could survive Genesis until then, his odds were good. But this was unnerving. Finally, he had to ask, praying his good mood would be reason enough that Genesis would answer and nothing worse than hearing more proof of insanity would come of it.

"Why are we going to Nibelheim, Genesis?"

Genesis arched a brow at him, taking a long drink from the stream they'd stopped near, cold water straight from the Nibel range looming in the distance. "Did you not wish to go there yourself, Hollander?"

"Of course I did, that's where one of the viable lab stations are, I'd told you that." Hollander frowned at the evasion, watching the way his bright eyes drifted to the mountains. "What made you determine that we needed to leave for it immediately? You're up to something."

Genesis sighed, a soft little smile on his lips, almost affectionate. "I have been called, Hollander. I am going at the Goddess' bidding. Perhaps she will bless your efforts as well, if you humble yourself."

Hollander wet his lips, feeling a cold sweat break out on his skin. "Your goddess is speaking to you now?"

Audio hallucinations was the first thought, the safer thought. In fact, with his advanced state of degradation and mental instability, it wasn't that great a stretch to say that could be a symptom - no
one else had lived this long into such a state, after all. There was precedent for plenty of brain
disorders that would have that sort of hallucination, and no way to tell exactly how Genesis'
condition was continuing to deteriorate. It was perfectly reasonable to suspect this was a part of his
illness.

"She answered my prayers." Genesis' voice had gone soft, his expression almost dreamy as he
continued to stare at the mountains ahead. "At my lowest point I threw myself at her mercy, and she
has called out to me. There is a well of great strength in the Nibel Mountains, and from there she is
reaching, from there I will find her. This world may have tossed me aside, but she cherishes me like a
mother would her beloved child."

Hollander felt his mouth go dry, coughing and working his throat in an effort to manage speech.
"You... you sense her, then."

"Of course. She has made herself known to me, a beacon calling me home." Genesis closed his eyes,
tilting his head as if enjoying a gentle touch. When he opened them again, he looked at Hollander
with that same little smile. "We shouldn't keep her waiting, Hollander. One does not make a goddess
wait."

Hollander nodded a bit frantically in agreement, his heart pounding so hard it was a wonder the
SOLDIER didn't hear him. Genesis' words weren't enough to be certain, but his eyes were answer
enough. Gone was the ice blue he'd had as a child, and the vibrant hue from finally reaching First
Class. Instead, an unnatural shade of turquoise glowed far too bright, an acidic green spiking around
catslit pupils.

Genesis was most definitely being called, and it was no hallucination. It was worse.

Wouldn't Hojo be thrilled to find his little 'Reunion Theory' was right?
It hadn't been easy to sleep in ShinRa Tower, with the energies of SOLDIER so much closer and the looming darkness tied to Sephiroth and Angeal. But Aerith had managed, until now. Until whatever had awoken in Angeal with Professor Hojo's experiment, stirring something between Angeal and Sephiroth that made the Planet clamor for her attention. The first night after had been rough, she was shaken and all her senses were lit and on edge. She'd hoped it would get better with time, calm down some at least, but it was only getting worse.

There was a spike now that she had no explanation for, nothing that had happened that day should have set it off. She hadn't even been down with Angeal, spending the day trying to articulate things for Professor Rayleigh and Cissnei while Kuskel lingered in the background. Zack had been away, he'd been the one off with the other Firsts, not her, and he didn't mention any strange tests or new outbursts. Whatever was going on, it wasn't there where she could hope for any context to the uproar. But the Planet either didn't understand or didn't care that she couldn't understand what it was panicking about. It was louder than she'd ever heard it, wild with emotion she couldn't pin down, shouting words she'd never been taught. She had the sense that she was expected to do something, but no idea what, and it just made things worse. It was a throb in her head and an ache in her heart, choking her breath into shivering gasps that were nearly sobs as she hid under the covers of Zack's bed.

At first she didn't recognize that it had moved, but there was someone curling up against her - on the covers, leaving a barrier between them, a gentleman to a fault - and a muscled arm curled around her. Blindly, she reached until she found his hand, rough with calluses from long hours with his blade, tiny nicks from training and fighting before he had mako to heal everything; Zack, come for her once again, somehow knowing he was needed even in the dead of night when he should have been sleeping. He didn't comment on how quickly she clung to him, didn't say a word when she pushed the covers back and turned to look at him. Even years in the Slums hadn't let her see in the dark, but those kind eyes glowed softly, blue violet without the sunlight to distract from them. She'd meant it when she said they were pretty, beautiful really, all the more so with the kindness and concern he gave so freely. "Zack…"

"Hey." He kept his voice hushed, shifting a bit when she moved closer to let her cling, rubbing her back gently. "You wanna talk about it?"

"I don't know what to say," she whispered, grateful for once that his enhancements meant he'd hear even when she couldn't manage to talk any louder. "I don't understand what's happening."

"Pretty par for the course right now, babe." His hand moved carefully, finding the lower tie to her braid and working it free, then the ribbon. He took a moment to hand it to her, kissing her forehead chastely before moving to undo her braid. "This has to be hard for you, too, but you're doing great. We're all fumbling along to figure this stuff out together, you know? Nobody's alone."

"Right…" she sighed, feeling herself begin to relax as he ran his fingers through her hair, keeping to that same gentleness she'd have never believed a SOLDIER could have. But Zack had been special
from the start, even when she'd thought he was ridiculous, asking for a date out of nowhere. He'd proven time and again that there was more to him than it seemed. Fiercely loyal and protective of everybody, even her though they'd never gotten to spend so much time together before now. "Thank you. I'm sorry if I woke you."

"I'm not sure if you did or not, but I don't mind it if it was. I'd hate to think of you curled up and miserable all alone, with me just in the other room." Zack hugged her gently, light pressure on the top of her head that was probably his cheek or chin while his hand settled to work along her spine in a slow, smooth stroke. He was warm, solid and strong, grounding her against the overwhelming clamor of the Planet. "We're here for each other, okay?"

"Okay." Aerith let herself be held, let him ground her for a long moment before trying to make sense of things again. This time, it was a little easier. "The Planet feels threatened. Something dark is waking up, rising like a shadow over the Lifestream and there's other things, deeper down. Like… pillars, holding things in place. I don't know what they are, but the Planet wants them. It wants protection."

"If the shadowy thing is Jenova, considering the history there I can't really blame it for being freaked out," Zack admitted. "Not sure what it would bring out for protection, though. Sounds like a summon, maybe? It has to be something else it can call on, either already outside the Lifestream or able to move independently, right? Otherwise it wouldn't do any good offensively."

Aerith nodded, resting her head on his chest. "It's loud enough to give me a headache, but I can't understand it. I don't know if it's because of where I am, or just because I never learned how to communicate properly… I'm only half Cetra, after all."

"Yeah, I know. We'll see what we can find out, maybe take you back down to your church and see if it's clearer there," he suggested. "For now, let's just get some sleep. We both need it."

"Alright." She tucked a little closer, wishing the blanket wasn't in the way. "Stay with me?"

"Sure." Zack tightened his arm just a little around her. "I've got you."

It didn't fix anything, but it did help her to relax. Feeling safer just knowing he was there, Aerith let herself try to sleep again.
There is no method to control SOLDIER; Sephiroth is aware of this.

At two hundred and thirty seven meters long and one hundred and eighty three wide, the Highwind had more than enough space for the additional equipment and personnel that their little group was going to require. It was taking some repurposing, true, but Hojo figured out what needed done quickly and Captain Highwind was nothing if not a man of action. Of course, even with the Turks keeping mum, the fact was that it was impossible not to notice that the ship was being prepared, by Hojo of all people. And, realist that he was, Hojo wasn't terribly surprised that eventually someone would attempt to get in the way of their combined forces. And naturally, it was the single individual who could cause the most trouble without anyone else helping him: the President of ShinRa Inc. himself.

"Hojo! What is the meaning of this?" Rupert Shinra was not the impressive man he'd been in his youth, but he was just as bold, striding across the tarmac and gesturing to the airship. "I didn't give you permission to take the Highwind. You haven't even discussed leave! What is going on here? Where are you taking these SOLDIERs?"

"You may have forgotten but you gave an order to track down Rhapsodos," Hojo said dryly, not looking up from his checklist. "That is most efficiently done with the people and equipment we have here."

"I did not at any time give permission for this," the President repeated. "Get your things off that airship, tuck your grand ideas away. Rhapsodos is being tracked for one purpose, and that is to put him down like the rabid animal he's become. He's beyond reason, Hewley tried. He stole one of our scientists, he's allied himself with known terrorists, there is a non-negotiable kill order placed on him. The only thing that needs sent is a helicopter with Sephiroth and a Turk sniper with the best ammo you've got to take down SOLDIERs."

"I hate to spoil your delusions but there is no ammunition to take down SOLDIERs," Hojo said, finally turning to look at him. "Nothing. SOLDIER is the ultimate weapon, there is no counterbalance. The only reliable chance you would have with guns would be to create enough injuries that they would bleed out. There is no anti-SOLDIER weapon, Wutai tried and failed. AVALANCHE has tried and failed. What makes you think you have something tucked away for this oh-so-special occasion?"

The President stared him down a long moment, voice quiet. "Do you mean to tell me that you have no means to control SOLDIER, Hojo?"

"I find it far more interesting that you thought I did." Hojo shook his head, smiling faintly. "You wanted the best, Rupert. I gave you the best, a force that would be undefeatable. Perhaps in the future you will choose your words with more care."

There was a long moment of silence, during which Hojo went back to looking over his inventory. A quiet huff made him glance up, a largely ignored sense of danger demanding his attention and rising as he got a good look at the expression on the President's face.
"And do you think Sephiroth can't take him down on his own, Hojo? Or has your boy gotten it into his head that the rules don't apply to him either?" Rupert turned to face him, frowning deeply. "I've been lenient with him in light of how much he's done for the company, but it's time he remembers his place and falls in line. ShinRa made him what he is, and-

"And you think you can take it away?" Hojo chuckled, folding his arms. "You can't even stop a dying madman, and you think you have a chance at stopping Sephiroth? He could destroy your extravagant headquarters before you could mobilize the army, not that they would stand a chance if you did. He brought the entire nation of Wutai to their knees, despite their forces being far better trained and motivated than yours. Now, what choice you make is up to you, but I strongly suggest you don't get in his way. It won't end well for you."

Rupert's neck and face started to get an ugly red flush as he grit his teeth. "Are you threatening me, Hojo? I can have you taken out with no more than my say so, and end SOLDIER while I'm at it. Think very carefully before you make your decision."

Hojo tucked his checklist under his arm, stepping up to the President as he reached into his coat and removed a revolver from its side-holster, pressing it against his gut. "I think you should have brought a better escort. I've killed better men than you on accident."

"Don't you dare," he hissed. "They'll kill you where you stand."

"Oh will they?" Hojo glanced at the selection of troopers, conveniently unaccompanied by Turks, and smiled faintly as he saw most of their eyes had gone past him to the ship. He didn't need enhanced senses to know who was standing at the ramp. "Somehow I doubt that, but just in case I suggest you tell them to stand down while we load the last of our supplies."

Rupert's eyes tracked the same way and he scowled. "Sephiroth, if you leave now, you and everyone with you will be considered a fugitive," he warned, though a bit more pressure from Hojo made him do as told. "I will have your heads, mark my words; you're dead men! There is nowhere on this planet you will be safe outside of ShinRa! We made you, and we will destroy you. Do you hear me?"

Sephiroth walked down to the crates, pausing a moment to look at the President. "All my life, I have allowed myself to be used to your ends. I have been shaped since before I was born and trained all my life to become a perfect weapon for your arsenal. I have cut down every enemy I have faced. If you stand against me, you will be no exception."

"Stand against you? You're the traitor!" He snarled, fury digging the lines of his face deeper.

"You started this, sir." Zack stood at the top of the ramp, adjusting the bangle on his wrist as he came back down. "You turned on us, after all we've done. Even dogs bite if you abuse them, and we're more than that. Think on it when you get up."

"Fair, don't you-"

Magic charged the air and the President slumped back, unable to resist the Sleep spell. Zack watched him a long moment before looking to Sephiroth. "C'mon, we've gotta go."

"I suppose that is a less messy alternative," Hojo agreed, watching Sephiroth as he silently took the last crate up. "Tell the Captain to finish preparations."

"Already called ahead." Zack looked over the runway, conspicuously empty but for the unconscious soldiers that had been accompanying the President and then at the ShinRa Tower that had been his
The Highwind was even bigger than it appeared to go in and look through it, which said a great deal as it was a massive airship at any distance. At the moment, there was a view screen up that was showing the runway as they got into the air.

"Didja goddamn idiots have ta do all that?" Cid asked, turning the massive craft slowly to take them west. "Couldn'ta bluffed at least until we were out of here?"

"If you think it would have been better to wait for him to call the Turks and create more complications, then you don't understand how stubborn he is," Hojo said, making an impatient gesture. "Angeal, with me. You need situated in the medbay immediately so I can resume monitoring your condition."

The abrupt ring of Sephiroth's phone interrupted anything he might have said on the matter, waving the other First off with Hojo before he answered. "Hello Director… no, I'll put you on speaker, thank you."

"As of this moment it looks like Heidegger and Scarlet aren't going to be able to manage the resources to try and shoot you down, but try not to stop until you're across the ocean," Lazard said. "I was informed briefly by my Turk escort of what happened, so we'll keep you appraised of how much backlash there's going to be. Just be careful."

"We'll be loopin' away from Junon, 'less you can be sure no one's gonna get any ideas about that cannon," Cid said, not even looking their way. "I'm not backin' down, I'm not changin' sides even if I could, but on my ship we're gonna use some goddamn sense."

"No, that's… probably wise. Both Veld and I have people there, but for now we have to keep up appearances." Lazard sighed quietly. "We'll do what we can from here, and I'll contact you when possible. Please only call Kunsel or Tseng, for now - they'll get in contact with Veld and I, and we'll send communications through them. I imagine the entire department and I will be under more surveillance, and Heidegger may push for army action."

"See if you can wrangle Cloud, maybe a couple of his buddies, if you have to have an army escort with you," Zack suggested. "He's still there, and I'd trust him with my back any day."

"I'll look into it." Lazard sighed again, the sound more tired than stressed. "Play it safe, as long as you can. Don't stop, don't worry about things back here, just… go. Find Genesis."

"We will." Sephiroth would allow no other outcome.
Playing to Appearances

Chapter Summary

Sephiroth's team has been exposed, but the larger part of the alliance is still undetected. And with the Turks in charge of the investigation, masks are set to stay firmly in place.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 7 of the Side Stories can be read right after this chapter.

The President woke up within an hour of the Highwind's departure, all but shaking in rage as he demanded a meeting of the board. From the strength of the spell, he was advised to bring a cane but it was refused as he made his way to the conference room, seething.

There was a tense silence as soon as he entered, for once no one else wanting to break it. Which was fine, because Rupert was not in the mood to deal with petty squabbling. "Hojo just took off with our flagship, its captain, and our two top First Class SOLDIERs. Someone explain to me how in god's name this was allowed to happen. Did you authorize this, Deusericus?"

"No sir, it appears to have been Hojo's call to take off just now. Sephiroth is still charged with that mission, but Angeal and Zack weren't assigned to go with him." Lazard clasped his hands, expression grave. "I'm taking inventory to be sure there was no one else, but so far everyone seems accounted for."

"This is what happens when you put a boy in charge of a branch of the military - and a civilian at that!" Heidegger scowled. "Never would have happened on my watch. There's not a single trooper gone with them!"

"They didn't do much good as the President's escort," Scarlet pointed out. "Out cold on the tarmac. They're lucky they weren't killed."

"Zack isn't the sort to kill if he can help it, and Sephiroth doesn't care," Lazard said. "He is the one we were going to send, sir, and he's fixed on handling Genesis himself. Maybe we can turn this in our favor."

"I'm not going to ignore the fact that Hojo took off without permission, or that Fair was taken along while he's on probation," the President said firmly. "You get in contact with them and get them back here, or they'll be listed as AWOL and be treated like any other deserters. Heidegger, Scarlet, you get everything you've got together to show me what measures we have available to take those men down."

"We should put their whole department on lock down before anyone else gets any ideas," Heidegger said. "You can't leave animals uncaged once they start biting. They need to learn who's the boss here."
"If the rest of SOLDIER believes the company is out to get them, Heidegger, we will lose them," Veld said. "And if Sephiroth truly has gone rogue, as opposed to simply being impatient, than we will need them."

The President grit his teeth, nodding. "Veld's right. I want them all accounted for and on a short leash, but I want it understood that Sephiroth has betrayed them, not us. No loose lips, none of that nonsense from the army either, Heidegger. We can't afford it right now."

"If they've got any sense, they won't go near Junon, and since they're airborne, the army isn't going to be your best option anyway," Scarlet pointed out. "Get me helicopters, I'll get you missiles. They're tough, not immortal."

"I imagine a Turk strike team would be the best - if Sephiroth's group is going for Genesis, and Genesis is with AVALANCHE, you get a three-for-one bargain," Rufus said. "Leave the army and SOLDIER to sort each other out, they're your best bet to move quickly and effectively."

The President grunted acknowledgment, frowning deeply as he looked to the head of the Department of Administrative Research. "You've never let me down before Veld. Handpick some army and collaborate with Scarlet. I want your teams on the move."

Veld nodded somberly. "And do you want me to handle the professor personally?"

Rupert's smile was sharp and fierce. "Go ahead. Be as persuasive as necessary to get him back here alive. We're not done with him yet. He's had too much freedom, it's gone to his head and he's corrupted Sephiroth with it. Get them both back here. Take whatever equipment of Hojo's that may apply."

*Drug him* was unsaid, unnecessary, and something that left a bitter taste in Veld's mouth. He knew far too much of Sephiroth's early childhood to be remotely okay with that. But for Hojo himself… that had some ironic merit. "I promise you, President, Hojo won't get away with his betrayal."

"Good." There was a hard light in the President's eyes, determination to see his plans through and unwavering faith he was right. The look he gave the rest of the board, however, was cold and cunning. "You'll all speak with a member of the Turks at some point this afternoon, and both you and Veld will report to me how that went. The company is under fire, but we will not be destroyed. Any weak point will be found and removed before it becomes a problem, so I suggest everyone get their act together. If I have to have another meeting like this, I'll make cuts then and there. Understood?"

With nods and murmurs of assent from around the room, the President rose, patting the table with his hand. "I'm glad that's settled, then. I'll be waiting for your reports."

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Veld listened to the president rant a bit longer in private, taking in the threats to shut down the Aerospace Department, buying out Palmer if necessary, and the plan to phase out SOLDIER with a straight face borne from decades of dealing with this sort of fuss.

It had never been at this level, granted, but there had been so many signs along the way that this was coming… ShinRa was the real monster now, and if it couldn't be reformed he wouldn't complain too much about it being put out of business. Maybe it was just a side effect of being a Turk so long; the Company had him turn his head on the world, just focus on the 'people that matter' and do whatever it takes. Only the company was no longer the people that mattered, which had him on an edge he
hadn't felt in years, a restlessness under his skin that hadn't cropped up since the Kalm bombing. Before that, it had been the death-execution-of the previous director. And before that, the first major shake, losing his partner.

So much he'd lost over time. But he had a chance to get something back, and like hell he wouldn't. It gave him an edge he hadn't had in awhile, and apparently on some level it showed because when he got in the interrogation room with Heidegger, the general had a very different attitude. He was arrogant, insisting nothing had been to his blame, and he was pushing hard for SOLDIER to be disbanded, but there wasn't a word even vaguely pointed at the Turks.

Veld thanked him for his time in a quiet monotone and followed him out.

Tseng had been sent for a very short, presumably very effective talk with Palmer, and turned in his report before taking his more important assignment to keep an eye on Rufus, which had proven regularly to be far, far more difficult, even before this.

Reno handled Scarlet because in the midst of this mess he was cut loose to bring all his sass and fire, and while she was a very impressive, fiercely intelligent woman, she wasn't ready to deal with Reno, or the looming threat assumed by Rude's presence. Every assumption people made was another step ahead that Reno stood, coming back with a cat's smile and a promise to have the recording transcribed. Mind like a steel trap, he was able to write down more than enough detail to start with by the time he hit his desk and had it out to Veld in minutes.

Lazard's 'interrogation' was nothing more than a quick planning session with Charles, assuring them he'd be making some careful inquiries through SOLDIER, and an update on the brief conversation he managed to have with the AWOL team. A picture showing Kunsel with Cait Sith said more than enough for just what level of care the Director of SOLDIER was taking with his department. Reeve took even less time, little more than a quick back-and-forth with Rod to assure that he was still firmly on their side.

With the others handling the rest of the board and putting their reports together, Veld moved back to his office to make a call and get things in motion further out. "Anya? We've got a situation."

Appearances were the biggest thing to keep up, when you were lying - keep your stories straight, present things as fact without any hesitation. Even knowing that politics bred certain skills, it was amazing and more than a little terrible to find out how many people were particularly good at it. Lazard took some personal pleasure in it, honestly, given his audience were those that were firmly against what he was trying to do. There was even a bit of a thrill, doing it and knowing that the Turks were right along with him.

They all knew it was only a matter of time before things started collapsing, but in the meantime they were going to run this facade until it gave out. More than anything, they had to be able to give their teams time, time to get away, time to catch up to Genesis and AVALANCHE. Veld had his own people he had to get moving, but everything was slow and careful while they maneuvered around the situation. Which was why he was meeting with Lazard after hours, Cait Sith perched on a stool to pay attention for Reeve.

"I want you to take one of your men to Junon, and meet with the head of my forces there," Veld said, passing a profile sheet across to Lazard. "Her name is Anya Torvik, she's a peer of mine. She's on our side."
"Level of clearance?" He asked, looking the page over.

"Full." Veld offered a small smile for Lazard's clear surprise. "Like I said, a peer. Whatever you need while you're there, let her know, she can help you quicker than I'll be able to from here."

Lazard nodded slowly. "Alright. I've been told Kunsel and Essai have been in contact with people there already, so we're not going in cold on our end either. I assume she'll introduce us to anyone else who can be let in?"

"Better to leave it in her hands for now; I could give you statistics off the top of my head, but she knows the lay of the land better than I do," Veld admitted. "There's a lot of space and people to manage in Junon, but she'll have valuable insight. I'll send a small team with you, but I won't be able to get away quite yet."

"Not until we have a fix on Hojo to report, no," Lazard agreed. "I'm surprised he'd send you, honestly."

"Well, as far as he knows I'm the best dog he's got these days." Veld smiled at the irony of it. "And I'm not entirely against shooting Hojo full of whatever's in my gun at the time."

Lazard was quiet a long moment, watching him, before saying simply, "Please don't do anything that will make our SOLDIERs more angry with us than the rest of the company."

"I'm not that kind of angry, but noted." Veld glanced at Cait, getting a piece of paper out and writing down a number and address. "You get this to Reeve, it's another old friend of mine. Don't contact him by any technology connected to your personal things, in-person would be ideal. Consider him something of a technical genius."

"You think he'd attempt to hack my network?" Reeve asked, overriding Cait a moment.

"I think he could," Veld said, leaving the would up to interpretation. "I'd rather not find out."

Cait shook himself, huffing. "Well I'll be careful, but thank ya much for the concern, Director! If that's all, I'd best be movin' on."

"It is for now, I'll be in touch."

They couldn't afford not to have everything under careful watch, now.
Allies Abroad

Chapter Summary

There was no arguing that the army had the biggest presence in Junon, but the Turks and SOLDIER were becoming a formidable team.

Chapter Notes

For those interested in a slightly fuller profile of the OCs mentioned here, you can find the mentioned Firsts here and the Seconds here.

Lazard made his way to Junon flanked by Kunsel and Essai with Emma as their pilot, courtesy of the Turks. No one wanted to have to rely on someone outside their group any more than necessary, loyalties questioned if not obviously placed elsewhere. It was a strange thing to have such a considerable group of what were arguably traitors, but in a way it felt that the company had committed the ultimate betrayals.

Lazard knew, of course, that he'd done poorly by his men for quite some time himself. But now wasn't about those mistakes, it was making sure everyone came out of this mess as well as humanly possible. "I believe I'm supposed to meet with Ms. Torvik immediately. If you wanted to go see others, either of you two are welcome to."

"I'll go with you, Director," Kunsel volunteered. "I'm sure Essai has people to catch up with after being stationed here so much more recently."

Contacts, allies, and laying groundwork - it had all been discussed, and the Second nodded with the seriousness the assignment deserved. "Yeah, there's some officers I served with I'd like to go see. Just give me a text, I'll let you know where we end up."

A secured space for SOLDIERs to talk would be priceless, after all.

"Of course, we'll be in touch." Lazard nodded, watching him go after a quick exchange of looks with Kunsel.

"Director? This way." Emma finished settling her helicopter and gestured towards the main building of the base, another suited blonde waiting in the distance. "That's the operative you're meeting with. I'll introduce you."

Anya Torvik was not a particularly large woman, but her quiet presence was still significantly felt. Pale blue eyes met and held Lazard's with an even stare, then Kunsel's, taking their measure as the younger Turk introduced them both. She gestured back to the large building as soon as Emma finished. "Come with me, gentlemen. We have much to talk about, and a tour of the base can wait until you're with your men."

Her office was small and neatly kept, a selection of hard copy files sitting out and maps up on the
walls with an assortment of available pins to be used. She thanked Emma for a short stack of disks, setting them by her computer to look over later. "Veld explained your situation to me. I take it someone has already spoken at least vaguely to your department extensions here; there's been a notable change in attitudes but no one else seems to have thought much of it."

"Essai had a word with some friends," Kunsel said. "Since he was stationed here."

"I recall." She nodded. "He stepped up well into the fight, as did the rest of SOLDIER. It's good to know we all remain on the same side."

"It's an incredible relief on both ends, I assure you," Lazard agreed. "It's a difficult situation, but having each other will help. What did you want to cover about Junon? It's been awhile since I've been here, and I'd planned to check in with the officers for details on SOLDIER."

"The political climate here is bigger than SOLDIER, and you can't afford to ignore it with the level of tension rising from the army," she explained, going over to a map of the campus. "Your last visit here was before either invasion, we're still doing cleanup work but because the army simply has more people, they present a bigger force over a wider area. All of this here is being patrolled, this entire circle by the boardwalk is also considered unofficially army territory. Not so much that no one else goes there, but you don't want anything remotely sensitive there. That said, there is a faction - the army hopefuls - who are genuinely supportive of SOLDIER."

"Because they're hoping to end up there, or because they're fans?" Lazard asked, coming up to examine the map while she placed several blue tacks.

"Both. I have information suggesting the vast majority of them and some silent neutrals do happen to be members of varying fanclubs and I've printed out a reference sheet." Anya glanced at Kunsel. "I've been told you're the one who goes through data for SOLDIER, so you'll be receiving a copy as well."

"Brilliant, saves me having to find a way to get them. I assume that's just the biggest four, maybe Zack's too?" Kunsel asked, making a thoughtful sound at her nod. That would still cover a lot of people, probably the majority of Midgar. "If you have it digital so I could organize them, I'd prefer it."

Anya inclined her head in agreement. "I'll have it arranged. I don't imagine I have to stress the importance of everyone staying in contact and keeping up to date, gentlemen, so for now we may part ways. I'll be in touch."

"It's appreciated, Ms. Torvik," Lazard said. "These are hard times. It's good to know where we stand with people. It's my hope that SOLDIER and the Turks will continue to find themselves stout allies."

"Our hope as well, I assure you." She handed Lazard a file folder, and selected one of the disks for Kunsel. "Be well."

"And you."

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Essai had gathered as many of the heads of the Junon branch of SOLDIER as possible and a few friends of his own, settled into a meeting room and already having things laid out by the time Lazard and Kunsel were ready to join them.

"Hey, things went well with the Turk?" Essai looked between them, relaxing a little at their nods.
"Great. I'll do some quick introductions in case you need context, I know it's been awhile since you were here, Kuns."

Kuns nodded, waving to the SOLDIERs as they offered a few hellos and smiles. "Yeah, please do. Familiar faces, but context and rank is good. Pretty sure some of you have climbed the ladder."

"We can just go around the table." The single SOLDIER present in a First's uniform offered a firm handshake and a smile. "Officer Nikolas Gregor, First Class. I've been overseeing our part of the academy since coming back from my last tour in Wutai. I served with Angeal for a while, but I ranked up under Genesis before getting my own assignment. I knew things were shady when they both vanished; Genesis has a lot of issues, but he always had our backs and Angeal was the definition of reliable. You've got me for whatever you need me for."

"It's an honor on my end, I haven't really gotten to interact with any other Firsts," Kuns admitted. "We've got what, only two more? And they're in Wutai, right?"

"Morrison and Richards, yeah. Good guys." Nikolas nodded. "We may never be famous like the other three, but we're SOLDIER through and through, and we've got your back."

"We only had ten at our peak," Lazard pointed out. "It's a pleasure and a bit of a relief to see you, Nikolas."

"Yessir, Director." He nodded firmly, turning to the lean Second beside him. "This is my second in command, I trust him with my life and he's the best administrator we've got."

"Adam Douglass." The Second saluted them before taking his seat again. "I primarily oversee our hopefuls and run most of the exams, while Nik runs herd on the Seconds and Thirds assigned here. I didn't see combat in Wutai, but I was assigned defensive detail in Costa del Luna just in case they tried to come after us."

"I remember that, sure." Kuns nodded, glancing around. "Oh hey, Lux, now there's someone I know."

Luxier beamed, nodding. "I'm not an officer, but I got the message you guys sent out. I know some people in the army who are sympathetic to us that you can look into, so I wanted to be here to hand over the information. And anything I can do, really. I heard they're gunning for the general and Zack now, and we're not standing for it. Nobody."

"Zack's left a big impression on a lot of people." Kuns nodded, smiling fondly and leaning over to take the list. "We'll look into it."

"So, uh, sirs?" One of the other Seconds raised his hand. "Leon Silva, I was in Midgar until right after the attack there and I'm helping Dirk Johnson with armory management here. It looked like the Turks are working with us, and they've been pretty quiet here. Even looking the other way some. Are they on our side with this?"

"As it stands the Turks are currently our allies and we have no reason to suspect otherwise," Lazard said. "But that's full Turks, we haven't had confirmation on everyone they have training at the academy."

"No need to risk someone with sour grapes for not making it when they think they should knowing, yeah." He nodded, bouncing his leg a little. "Just good to know. They're spooks, but they're damn talented spooks."

"They have their own motivations, but those motives have put them squarely on our side," Lazard
said. "So for now, I would say they can be trusted. And we need to keep everyone we can to our side. I don't think I need to tell you how dangerous even this conversation is."

"No sir, it's understood." Nikolas nodded somberly. "But we're not backing down. These are our guys the company is just throwing away, for trying to protect themselves. It's like when they tried to make you leave some of us in Wutai, and the general wouldn't have it. The commanders either - came in blazing and got us out. We don't forget that. SOLDIER's together, and I'd bet all the way down through the senior cadets would follow. Just say the word."

"Right now, most of this is going to come through Essai and Kunsel, but they'll be contacting you all to make sure we have a sturdy base here." Lazard looked his men over, smiling. "We'll make it through this, but not without resistance. Heidegger is still gunning for our department, and the President isn't a reliable support. We'll make it together, or not at all."

"We're together, sir. And we might just have some ideas for how to manage it, if the President tries to pull something with all us here." Nikolas smiled back, bright and fierce. "Let me show you the plans Adam and I were sketching up for new patrols."

Three hours later, there was a map marked up with a new layout for positioning SOLDIER so there would be eyes on all army movements. Granted, they'd need to collaborate with the Turks to be certain Scarlet wasn't pulling anything, and there was genuine reason for caution about mobilizations from inside the academy or their barracks. All in all, however, they would be able to keep an eye on the entirety of the Junon base and plans were made to keep a better eye on the port.

Having to protect against those who should have been allies was exhausting to even plan for, but there was a united sense of grim satisfaction at the end of the meeting to be able to say that if the army turned on them, SOLDIER would be ready to hold the base.
On The Move

Chapter Summary

With AVALANCHE already on the Western Continent, ShinRa hurries to gather its own forces and head them off. For the Turks, that's a little more complicated than it would seem.

Chapter Notes

There is a side story that takes place shortly before this chapter, where Rufus and Fuhito have another conversation. You don't have to read it to understand this chapter, but it may be helpful.

Midgar was a mess that the Turks still had to clean up whether or not their SOLDIER counterparts were available to be on-hand help. There was a group of Seconds that were discreetly stepping up to supportive positions, most notably led by Sebastian Carne due to his presence when Sephiroth had been there to make arrangements. He'd taken a moment to talk to Reno, having seen the Turk in question while they both happened to be off official duty, and confirmed that whether Sephiroth and Lazard were present, SOLDIER was still ready to step up as needed.

That would have been easier, granted, if along the way of more and more board meetings Heidegger wasn't slowly making enough racket about SOLDIER that the President was giving him more and more 'temporary' clearance. It was a smaller morning meeting when he finally crossed the line he'd been pushing against for years.

"Deusericus is a good kid, don't get me wrong. But he's not a warrior, and the company is in a time of crisis!" Heidegger insisted. "SOLDIER needs a firm hand, and you're not going to find one in those pristine white gloves of his. I know about the dirt of the trenches, damn it. Let him do his administrative fussing in Junon, President, but I will whip these SOLDIERs here in Midgar into a force you can be proud of again."

"SOLDIER is not your department, Heidegger," Rupert pointed out mildly, giving him an assessing look. "That said, the lack of an authority figure directly over them here is unacceptable. Until Director Deusericus returns, SOLDIER will work in tandem with the army and you'll be primary overseer of any joint operations."

"Gya haa haa, don't you worry President, I'll have this cleaned up in no time!" Heidegger said, slapping the table with a vicious grin. "They need a firm hand, and I'm the man for the job. You'll see."

"I had better. No one has room to fail me now, Heidegger." Rupert's stern look increased to a glare, staring down the head of Public Safety until his grin faded, then sweeping the table. "No one. I will not accept any more excuses. ShinRa is strong, and anyone who can't keep up will be replaced with someone who can. I'm already looking into substitutions, none of you are safe. Understood?"
"Of course, President."

"Good." He nodded firmly, looking to Veld. "Now, what have the Turks found out about AVALANCHE?"

"There's indications they've made passage to the western continent, so we need to step up security around the reactors and I plan to move my operatives into position to track them," Veld said. "Particularly as Corel's is still under construction and therefore vulnerable."

"I'd like to raise additional concern over Gongaga and Nibelheim," Reeve spoke up from his end of the table, tapping at his papers. "They're old, and not up to our current standards. Gongaga is at risk of self destruction anyway, and if it blew it would take out most of the village. If the surrounding jungles caught fire, it could wipe Gongaga off the map."

"A valid concern, but we don't have time or resources to rebuild it with so much damage to the Plate to be fixed first." Rupert shook his head. "I'm doubtful AVALANCHE would even bother with a place that backwater, and we have few resources to worry about in the area. A small team of troopers can be sent in case AVALANCHE does arrive, but for now I'm not concerned. Corel is a much more important position, it's an overdue cementing of the power of Mako energy over coal and we need to hold our location. Heidegger, send a platoon and some SOLDIERs. Veld, you can send a pair of operatives to manage intelligence, but I want you personally fixed on locating and apprehending Hojo. The longer he's away, the bigger his delusions of getting away with this will be and you know as well as I do that he's a pain when he gets an idea in his head."

"I'm aware, sir," Veld said. "I'll speak with my operatives and make arrangements. If they haven't already, it would make sense for Rhapsodos to split ways with AVALANCHE, and the SOLDIER team will follow him. He's not currently leaving a trail, but there's only so many places he can be going. At the moment, he needs a facility that Hollander can be put to work at. Doctor Rayleigh is currently going through files in the Science Department to see what she can pinpoint as viable options he may have."

"Hn. I would imagine it would make the most sense for him to head to Nibelheim, as the labs beneath Shinra Mansion are still intact. It wouldn't take much trouble at all for him to get them working again, and Hojo would be aware as well." Rupert scowled. "You'd do well to beat him there. Let your men scope out the rest of the area by air, I'm certain he'll eventually draw to Nibelheim. Irony nearly demands it."

"I suppose it does." Leather creaked softly around Veld's prosthetic, an eternal reminder of his own time there. It wasn't a bad idea, but it would require some adjustments. "I'll be requisitioning a selection of SOLDIER as well. You can't expect me to face off with the SOLDIER group and no reinforcements. That may well be suicide, and by default compromises the mission."

"Of course, you'll be granted what forces you require, work it out with Heidegger."

"For now, that's enough. Reeve, make sure everyone has up-to-date schematics so they know what's going on in Corel. Scarlet, you can move some of your sentry robots for automated defense along the borders of Corel. If they don't cooperate, Heidegger is authorized to use his units to make them understand the severity of the situation. We will not lose Corel. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Rupert nodded, rising. "Dismissed. I'll want your reports on planned deployments on my desk by morning at the latest. Get to work."
The Turks retreated to their floor, Reno making a quick detour to gather up a few of the SOLDIERs that had specifically made a point of being supportive, and Cloud Strife in hopes of some insight into any infantry they could tap into.

"AV\ALANCHE is heading for Corel," Veld reported. "We have confirmation, it's only a matter of when. Genesis has split ways, and it makes sense that he and Hollander will eventually head for Nibelheim. That said, with the SOLDIER team going after them, I'm less concerned about our people trying to track him down immediately. AV\ALANCHE is our priority, and that's where I will be going when I do leave Midgar."

"Should be plenty doable t' get you over there an' sweep the specifics under the rug," Reno pointed out. "Only big problem after that is Gya haa, an' he's distractable."

"Assuming I will be staying behind to manage things here," Tseng began, nodding in return to Veld's nod of confirmation, "I can redirect. The most important thing will be making sure any troops and SOLDIER forces sent with you are entirely reliable. I believe Strife had suggestions."

"Yeah." Cloud nodded. "I haven't worked with a huge amount of people, and most of the ones I knew best are gone now but there's at least the squad I've been resettled in. We're almost all good, if the Captain wasn't such a hard case. Our Lieutenant Captain is a great guy, though. I'm not sure how he feels about Turks, but he should be sympathetic overall."

"I'll look into it," Reno said, taking the list for a quick glance before pocketing it. "You've got people too, Sebastian?"

"Well, honestly it's less that they're particularly pro-Turk as they're solid SOLDIERs, but they'll have your back as long as they can, since we're a team now," the Second explained. "Can't really take our First from Junon, but I can direct a strong, solid group of Seconds to have your back, Director."

"I appreciate it; with their Ravens, a few SOLDIERs wouldn't be a bad idea at all," Veld said. "In time, I do want to get someone to catch up with the SOLDIER team, however, for contact purposes. Katana, Cissnei, you're my two first picks for this."

"Would you like me to stop by Gongaga to get word out along the way, or go straight to tracking?" Balto asked.

"We'll see what Reeve comes up with for defense and safety measures, there may be something we can do to make the area safer." The last thing Veld wanted was more disasters they could prevent. "If he has something ready in time, we may make preparations for split teams. I have an old friend out in Corel that I can contact to have eyes on the ground before we even get there, but he's not been trained the way you all have. There's a lot going on right now, but we can manage this."

"Nothing's impossible for the Turks, yo." Reno nodded, smile edged with anticipation. "We've got it, boss."

"That's what I'm counting on."
With Good Intentions

Chapter Summary

Some of the most terrible things in history were done under the assumption they were doing good.

Genesis had never liked the cold, but there was an internal warmth that had infused him ever since the grace of the goddess had first touched his mind. He could feel her closer now, though Hollander urged him to get some rest before going looking. He supposed that made enough sense, it wouldn't do to run out of stamina so very close. He was utterly wrecked, but he would present himself as well as he could.

They took the long way around Nibelheim, edging in from the fringes of town and heading to the Shinra Mansion without pause for anything else. The lights worked immediately, though the place was thick with dust and showed signs of monsters that might have nested in. Genesis wasn't terribly concerned for anything short of a dragon, which would never come to such a place when there were mountains to claim and clamber over.

Ironically, Hollander was still more fragile, so Genesis went ahead, cutting a swath through anything not smart enough to recognize a greater predator. There were some things he could sense, powerful things as they crossed through the basement to the labs, but they didn't come close and he had more important things to consider. "So, this is where little Sephiroth was made?"

"He was probably 'made' in the bed upstairs, but it's where Hojo worked on him until he became the precursor to what he is now," Hollander said, examining the mako tubes and the rest of the equipment. "Bring that sample pack over here, I think these can be altered to set up viable experiments.

Genesis did as asked, flipping the reinforced case open to peer in at the chilled contents. "Blood and tissue… but is it enough?"

"It will be when I find some more volunteers that it can take to." Hollander got his notebook out, closing the case with a frown. "Leave them sealed for now, they need to stay as pure as possible."

Genesis didn't open it again, though he watched Hollander. "You told me that Sephiroth cannot degrade - cannot be cloned, either."

"Yes and no," Hollander said. "He's full of Jenova cells, and they aren't merged so completely to his own genetics that they can't be encouraged to draw to other Jenova cells. Like yours or Angeal's."

"Combined to make clones of us, to attempt stabilization?" Genesis guessed, humming. "Interesting theory. You'll need more than that, though. Are there enough salvageable supplies and materials here?"

"It looks reasonable, but I won't know for certain until I get a better look," Hollander said. "Have a glance around the library, if you like. This is going to take time."

Genesis made a dismissive sound, but did eventually end up wandering to look at the shelves on
shelves of books. It was astonishing, finding so many of them were journals written by Hojo or the late Professor Gast, pages yellowed and brittle but penned words largely legible. He lost himself in the history of it, reading on Gast's theories and the finding of Jenova up in the bitter north, how the project that had spawned him came to be. And between the lines, how ShinRa came to be the monster manufacturer it was now.

"He really, truly did believe she was an ancient," Genesis mused. "Did it ever occur to you anything different? I'm looking at these photographs and this is not what I would assume to be the precursor to humanity."

"There was sound reason for Gast's assumptions, and it was his specialized field - no reason to think he wasn't right," Hollander said. "The goals were noble. What's wrong with wanting to improve humanity?"

"I can't imagine she passed so close to human under a microscope," Genesis said, scoffing at the thought. "If the Cetra were so much better than us, they wouldn't be extinct. They were flawed, and they died out. If you idiots had more influence, you could have poisoned humanity enough to finish the job."

"The enhancements don't take to adults, the further past puberty the worse they do - even detrimental after a point," Hollander said. "There was no way to spread this the way you're implying."

"No, just a plague through children. Thank the gods no SOLDIERs have had children, I suppose. Can we?" Genesis arched a brow. "I realize with how quick the turnover rate is, it's unlikely anyone would make such a solid relationship, but I'm curious. Is it even possible? Or did you steal that as well?"

"I admit, I made mistakes," Hollander said, frowning. "But you came back to SOLDIER on your own. You'd been left in Banora, you came here yourself, you and Angeal, and literally signed up for enhancement. Don't look at me like your every trouble is my fault, because it's not."

Genesis stared at him a long moment, until Hollander shifted uncomfortably, then smiled slowly. "My my, Doctor, I think you're growing a spine. Don't let it get in the way of your work, I'm not in that good a mood."

Hollander did his best not to appear bothered, even though he was terribly aware of how unhinged Genesis was becoming, of the danger represented by the acid green ring around his pupils. Thank the gods they were no longer elongated, but it was clear there was something more going on, that the Jenova cells were having a profound impact on him. And 'why now' was all too easy to guess. Nibelheim was where it all began, after all.

Genesis spent the better part of the day going through books he found in the manor, discarding any journals of a personal nature and going directly for what scientific fact he could find. Hollander was scoping out the town, under the premise that ShinRa had sent them, accurately guessing that they hadn't heard of Genesis' defection, let alone that he was actively against the company. It hardly mattered what they thought, but the doctor was also looking for what 'volunteers' he could find for his experiments. Where he thought he'd be able to gather up three brothers in such a little village was beyond him, let alone getting away with stealing them off to the manor, but it was of no real concern.

In the back of his mind, he could feel the tender touch of the Goddess, a constant flow of support and concern like a balm to his ragged spirit. He drank in the unconditional love and acceptance eagerly,
regretting only that he wasn’t ready to trek through the mountains. He *would*, he refused to think he could be so close and not make the trip, but he was in desperate need of rest.

The manor was infested with monsters, as he’d guessed, but they largely seemed to sense he was by far the greater threat and left him alone. After reading until his eyes burned, Genesis went upstairs to sleep in a proper bed, shivering slightly from the way the dank basement added to his omnipresent chills. It was honestly a wonder he wasn’t even more ill with some mundane virus, on top of all the rest, with how ravaged his immune system was.

As he laid down, shifting carefully in an effort for the least painful position, a loving touch brought him warmth and he sighed with contentment before drifting off to a dreamless sleep, blanketed by the comfort of the great power waiting for him in the mountains.
Chapter Summary

Things aren't looking good for the SOLDIER team and the Planet is in an uproar, but for now it's a waiting game until they can catch up to Genesis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was somehow better and worse to reach the western continent. On the one hand, there was relief to be out of ShinRa's easy grasp - the Highwind was a clear target, as large as it was, but they'd managed to escape and with the Turks being the ones most likely sent after them they had considerable freedom for the moment. On the other, there was a sudden rise of health issues that no one had thought to anticipate.

It started with Angeal, the man who had been most known for his physical strength continuing to weaken until he gave Zack the Buster Sword to carry, strained by its weight. Pale and shaking, he'd developed both a cough and fever that Hojo was unable to pin on any particular virus. He tired easily, most often having to stay seated with a blanket around his shoulders to combat constant chills. Cid tried pushing tea on him, and some went quite a ways in settling his stomach and easing his headache, so he didn't complain. But no one needed to say how very unnerving it was to watch him decline so sharply. The one bright spot was that he was able to sense Genesis with increasing clarity, heading further west. They'd decided after some debate that he must be heading to Nibelheim, and Jenova.

"Do you think he'll be able to successfully reach Jenova?" Sephiroth asked, the bulk of their little crew settled in the makeshift medical ward Hojo had set up to monitor Angeal. "And if so, what threat does that represent? He's unable to absorb traits as Angeal can, but the fact remains that Jenova itself is capable of such things."

"And arguably alive," Zack added. He'd taken to standing more, with the heavy weight of the Buster Sword on his back, but was always close to Aerith; they'd had more than one rough night, the Planet able to be even louder without the reactors circling them and dampening its voice. Unfortunately, she was still no closer to being certain she was interpreting anything correctly beyond one point.

"The Planet's upset. Whatever actually can happen, it thinks it's in danger." Aerith sighed, leaning back against Zack's chest and taking comfort in his touch. "I'm not sure if it can lash out at Angeal or not, if that might be the problem, or if it's just more issues with the rejection of the Jenova cells."

"Which would make me question the origins of my own discomfort," Sephiroth said, frowning. He had never been one inclined to speak up when there was an issue he could handle, but in light of the situation he'd mentioned his headache to Hojo as soon as it had become clear it was more than passing stress. If it got much worse, he was going to have to take painkillers, already sensitive to light and some sounds. "I had a headache when Angeal first reached for Genesis as well."

"Me too, but that's eased up for me, pretty much." Angeal rubbed his face tiredly, shifting in the blanket to let Hojo take another blood sample. "Just the rest of this now."
"Maybe having the open contact and being closer means you have less strain?" Zack asked. "Sephiroth not having an open bond but being sensitive could maybe have some sort of… mental jam, maybe, like bashing his head against a closed door."

"Unfortunately, that's a plausible reason," Hojo said, setting the blood sample into the analyzer to process. "It isn't impossible that a great deal of Angeal's symptoms stem from the active Jenova cells attempting - and failing - to take over the majority of his human genetics. After all, if you can't convert something, destroying it is often the next step a conqueror will take. Or they may simply be corrupted. Regardless, his immune system is highly compromised. Ideally he would be in a sterile ward to prevent infection at this point; even a cold could be devastating."

"Great." Angeal sighed, shaking his head. "But that's not an option. We need to focus on finding Gen. And you didn't answer what could happen if he gets a hold of Jenova."

"I don't know, but if you're going to make me guess, I would say that there are a few more likely outcomes. One, he becomes completely unhinged by the proximity and either becomes a vegetable in some cellular revolt as his body tries to figure out how to merge, or, our second option, he is mentally overridden by the lingering impulse Jenova had to conquer the native lifeforms and attempt to take up where it left off." Hojo frowned. "There is a third option, I suppose, in which his equally impressive level of willpower clashes fully with Jenova and there is some sort of contest of wills that he wins, with some likely physical fallout but keeps his mind, however together he is now."

There was a long moment of silence in the wake of those grim scenarios as they considered the possibilities.

"If nothing else, Genesis has a concrete sense of self and does possess an incredible amount of willpower," Sephiroth said, having taken a moment to really process the potential outcomes Hojo estimated. "I can't see that changing. Giving in to someone isn't even something he did with friends, let alone a foreign power of questionable sentience."

"Genesis would never let himself be someone's puppet," Angeal said. "Especially not now."

"It's reasonable to say that if he is well enough, we can lean towards the third option, but that's the entire matter - is he well enough?" Hojo shrugged. "There's no knowing. His clones were so corrupted I couldn't say for sure what was damage just from the bastardized process, and what was a direct tie to Genesis himself. He's well enough to still be an impressive combatant, but again, when you start at his level there's a long way to go that's still less. Like yourself."

"I'm not sure I'd want to fight anyone more than a Third right now," Angeal admitted, coughing quietly and reaching for his tea. "But he seemed better than this."

"You were better than this, too - this is all new," Zack said, frowning as he watched him. It seemed so wrong for Angeal to be sick at all, let alone this sick. "You've gone downhill since you reached for him in Midgar. I'd assume he'll have some side effect as well, right?"

"It's a reasonable conclusion," Hojo said. "Unfortunately, it's also been pointed out that the nature of his degradation is somehow different, likely due to his different pre-natal enhancement process. For him, gene therapy is a more viable option of treatment barring any specific cellular mutations that may have occurred or been forced by Hollander in the meantime. That isn't to say it would be easy, but it's much more possible than it would be for Angeal."

"I'm guessing there's no recoding the Jenova cells as the virus to use for it?" Zack asked, rolling his eyes at the look he received. "Mognet. I'm perfectly capable of using it and doing research on my own for important things, and it's not like ShinRa invented gene therapy. There was plenty to read up
on to get the gist."

"I believe you have actually impressed me," Hojo said, sounding a bit surprised to say so. "Theoretically, it's possible. The reality of it due to Jenova's very nature, however, is that it would take more time than locating and coding something else to do it would so while it's possible, I do not consider it a viable solution."

"Do you think you'd be able to code something in Nibelheim's labs, when we get there, assuming we can capture Genesis?" Sephiroth asked.

"Assuming you can capture him and there aren't more pressing matters, I could at least start treatment there, yes." Hojo nodded. "Nibelheim was where things began with you. While currently outdated compared to my space in Midgar and even Junon, it's still leagues ahead of most other facilities. He could at least be assessed and if there is something that can be done, I could start."

"At least there's that much, then." Zack sighed, absently rubbing Aerith's shoulder. "So the captain keeps taking us that way, Angeal rests, and the rest of us brace ourselves?"

"Mentally prepare," Sephiroth said. "I don't believe Genesis has truly fought you with the most strength and skill he could bring to the conflict. You're extremely talented, but he has literal years of experience honed in war ahead of you - were Genesis ever truly trying to kill you, Zack, I'm not convinced you would have gotten away so cleanly."

"Yeah, I thought about that," Zack admitted. "Some part of him has to have realized what I was doing, and why - or even just who I was, at least in relation to Angeal. Because he could have done a lot worse than he did. He did enough to come out on top, or get away, but never enough to take me out of the picture. Since he could go toe to toe with you and Angeal, too, I figure he had to be checking his blows for some reason."

"He's still in there." Angeal sighed, staring blankly at his cup but only seeing snatches of his time with Genesis replay on loop. "He's hurting so bad, but he's still in there. I can't give up on him yet."

"We're not giving up," Sephiroth said, watching him with a small frown. "Not on Genesis, not on you. Whatever happens, we'll see it through together."

"I believe that's my cue to resume my work," Hojo said dryly. "Don't tire him out."

Sephiroth shook his head, looking away. "I'm going to make sure the captain understands where we're going, and see if he has a protocol for dealing with aerial combatants."

"Be sure to mention that summon," Zack advised. "Bahamut's kind've a big deal."

"And not necessarily the only dragon to be concerned with, if we land in the mountains," Angeal added. "Mount Nibel has plenty of its own."

"There's not enough room outside of the reactor to land the Highwind," Hojo said. "A helicopter, certainly, maybe even up to a medium troop transport. But this ship is too large to land there. We'll have to take the long way from town, but it's just as well; Shinra Manor should be our first stop when we arrive."

"I'll make sure he knows," Sephiroth said, heading for the bow of the ship.

"If you wanna rest right now, Angeal, I can work up my report to send to Kunsel anyway," Zack offered. "Get in touch, see how things are going back east."
"It might be a good idea," he admitted. "Thanks. Keep me up to speed, alright? I wouldn't mind looking through whatever reports or updates they send."

"Yeah, you bet." Zack nodded. "I'll see you after a bit. Aerith?"

"I'll come with you." She managed a small smile for Angeal, nodding. "Rest well."

While Zack worked on coordinating strategy, Aerith stayed near enough to him to keep in casual contact, grateful that he seemed to subconsciously strive to always be touching at least slightly. His constant warmth and even the strange presence of SOLDIER from him had become a comfort that she was letting herself rely on while she adjusted to how much louder the world was without the buffer of the reactors.

She'd taken to holding the heirloom materia that her mother had given her before dying, finding comfort in the soothing tingle that resonated from it as she rolled it in her palms. It felt like a Restore, clean and crisp and like it could heal in some other way if only she knew how to use it. Maybe at some point she would be able to discuss materia with one of the SOLDIERs, see if any of them had any ideas, but for now it was enough to steal the little bit of peace it provided just to have it in her hands.

The Planet was upset, raging in a flood of words she didn't understand in the back of her mind, a dull roar she was slowly learning to tune out. But it would never completely go away, and she knew eventually she would have to try and figure out what was going on. It seemed to like when she was holding the materia, a clue with no context, but there was time yet. They wouldn't be able to reach Nibelheim for a few days yet, after all.

The thought that the only other person who could possibly have learned anything from her mother, the only one that was in her reach now that she might be able to compare notes with, was Hojo, was something she wasn't ready to contemplate.

Chapter End Notes

Quick, unrelated note, I'm running a FF7 fanworks exchange (writers AND artists both welcome) if you're interested, the signups are open this week here.
Advancing on Corel

Chapter Summary

Both ShinRa and AVALANCHE hurry to Corel, and the silent alliance of rebels continues to try to operate undetected.

Heidegger and Scarlet spent time arguing the specifics of sending people out to Corel, while the Turks worked quietly in the background. Veld had to play in-between, something that was grating on him increasingly as he tried to focus beyond the personal desire to drop everything and track down his daughter. It was a battle of willpower that he wasn't sure he'd have won as a younger man, years of training and self control already straining under the surge of emotion that he hadn't felt since the Kalm bombing.

Cissnei and Balto were deployed for Gongaga, taking a chopper with an accompanying pair of Third Class SOLDIERs that Sebastian had suggested personally for their fierce loyalty to Zack; they'd both warmed up much more obviously, realizing that one of the Turks was related to their idol, and a pair of infantry Cloud was familiar with were assigned to get around any problems with Heidegger. Cait Sith was also on board in hopes of being able to carry out Reeve's security measures, and anything else he could think up by the time they got there.

Knowing AVALANCHE truly was moving on Corel had the teams being chosen there with more care, as well as knowing there would be more scrutiny from Heidegger and Scarlet. Unfortunately, there wasn't much Lazard could do beyond trying to influence which SOLDIERs were sent along, and there was still the assumption of the President's that Veld was going to stay and eventually deploy with a strike team to go to Nibelheim.

That was not, of course, what the Director had planned. Especially not with contact confirming that the SOLDIER team had things under as much control as was possible for the moment.

"It's good to have it confirmed that they've split up, I guess," Zack admitted, listening to Tseng's updates. "Genesis is gonna be a big deal all on his own, but we're pretty positive Nibelheim is his goal, and Jenova from there."

"And at the moment it seems reasonable to believe that despite difficulties, Angeal won't be an additional threat?" The commander pressed, frowning. The First in question was apparently laying down at the time, which didn't bode well. "With his deteriorating condition, what are the odds that he will suffer a mental break of his own?"

"At the moment it seems like his big deal is just the physical stuff," Zack said. "And the Professor is keeping a close eye on that. But to be honest with you, I'm pretty sure I could restrain him with no trouble on my own. Give him a little time to get worse, Aerith might be able to keep him subdued herself with a mastered Sleep, and I do have one with me. If we end up rendezvousing with Cissnei and Balto, so long as they have the right equipment, I think they'll be fine too. He could probably outdo them in a straight grapple if it was quick, but his stamina's pretty shot."

"Unfortunate, but helpful in the event that he's affected by the same madness that's taken Genesis," Tseng said. "Cloud Strife's squad will be deploying with the team to Corel to deal with AVALANCHE, so ideally they won't make it down to Gongaga. Reeve has sent Cait Sith with very
detailed instructions on steps to take to secure the Gongaga reactor until further equipment and technicians can be sent out for a proper system upgrade, and he's also apparently qualified to shut it down if it's necessary. Balto said that the locals commonly have small generators of their own?"

"Yeah, monsoon season would mess with the connections to the power grid from the reactor, so places like the general store and the doctor would have their own smaller generators so goods wouldn't spoil or medicines and what have you." Zack nodded. "Ma had a small one, too, but mostly people know how to live with the area. If the power goes out, it'll be a mess but it won't be crippling like taking one out in Midgar. The big issue would be if it blew."

"Measures are being taken to attempt to prevent that," Tseng said. "They're slated to arrive before AVALANCHE would even arrive in Corel, so it's unlikely that will be a problem."

"Hey, I just appreciate you doing what you can. It's been... way too long since I've been in touch," Zack admitted sheepishly, rubbing his neck. "Maybe when this is all over. Ma'd love Aerith."

Tseng chuckled softly, glancing to the young woman in question. "You seem subdued."

"It's a stressful situation," she said softly, leaning against Zack a bit more. "And the Planet isn't happy. I think it might be reacting to Jenova, but I don't know how to tell."

"Of course. I wish you luck in ferreting out its meaning." Tseng nodded politely in acknowledgment, though his eyes tracked to Sephiroth when he entered the picture. "Preparations have gone well with Captain Highwind?"

"So far things have gone well," Sephiroth confirmed. "He seems entirely unperturbed by the danger of our mission."

"Captain Highwind is a very unique individual," Tseng said. "Not much seems to phase him, in my experience. You were quite fortunate to have such an unflappable pilot."

"Agreed." Sephiroth was silent a long moment, watching him. "Has Veld made arrangements to move on AVALANCHE for his own retrieval mission?"

"There are measures being taken to get things arranged for when he's able to move himself," Tseng said, not surprised he would ask. "But with Heidegger trying to usurp any control of Lazard's and being actually assigned to track Hojo, things have to be handled with care. The President is willfully blind to much, but he's suspicious and angry at the moment."

"Timing is everything; I'm sure he knows what he's doing." Sephiroth inclined his head slightly. "If we were to somehow run into AVALANCHE first, is there anyone beyond Elfé he specifically wants spared and retained?"

"Ah. Context for his questions, and very good at that. 'I'm unaware of anyone else who holds particular interest to him, but I'll make sure he receives your question and get the answer back to you in a timely manner, just in case. I'm certain he'll appreciate your concern on the matter.'"

"Director Faraman and I have an understanding, with our similar predicaments," Sephiroth said. "If we can help each other succeed, all the better. Suffice to say, I do have Hojo under strict observation myself, but he seems to be cooperating."

"I'm not surprised, but that's good to know." Tseng checked his computer as he received an alert message. "He and Lazard have made arrangements to pick up a pair of Seconds to back up our operatives in Corel and presumably deal with any Ravens as well. I'll be sure you're forwarded the paperwork."
Sephiroth's lips twitched slightly in amusement. "I can't say I miss that aspect, but I appreciate being kept informed."

"I'm sure." Tseng was silent a moment, looking over the two SOLDIERs and Aerith. "I wish you success in your endeavors, of course. Contacting Balto and Cissnei should be safe now, as all the individuals involved have been vetted thoroughly. As I am currently planned to remain in Midgar, I'll be able to reroute you to whichever individuals are in other areas. Kusel, I assume, remains your primary contact for SOLDIER in general."

"I'm pretty sure I could be dead and Kusel would still be texting me," Zack admitted, chuckling. "But yeah, we're in touch that's fine. I'll try Cloud later too. Make sure he changes my contact name to something that wouldn't cause trouble if someone peeked over his shoulder, alright?"

"I'll make sure it's mentioned to him," Tseng said. "His squad will be keeping with Reno and Rude while they're deployed in Corel, and either can manage that."

"Great! Hopefully you guys will be able to duck around Heidegger and hit your objectives." Zack nodded firmly. "Best of luck, man, he's a pain in the ass."

"I'm well aware," Tseng assured him, admittedly amused to hear Zack say so. "You as well. Please send a message before you engage Genesis, if at all possible."

"We'll keep it in mind and try for it." Zack nodded. "No promises, with his penchant for unannounced summons."

"That's an understandable exception," Tseng said. "But better to maintain communications as consistently as possible, for as long as we can."

"You got it, Tseng. Teamwork is something I'm pretty dam good at." Zack smiled genuinely, even if his eyes were hard; the situation certainly merited it. "We'll be in touch, especially if something happens."

"At least one of us will make sure you're kept appraised of the situation here as well." Tseng nodded. "Safe travels."

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AVALANCHE brought most of their vans within a five minute run to Corel, and Elfé spent a moment surveying it while it was scouted out by a couple low level grunts who were set to blend in as travelers, having wrangled a pair of chocobo to ride in on to preserve the ruse.

"Got a call back from the scouts, they're expecting some people from the ShinRa," Shears said, coming to stand at her side. "My guess is they're looking to beef up security on all their reactors, even this unfinished one."

"That would make sense," Elfé agreed. "After our successes in Midgar and Junon, it's reasonable they're finally on guard. But if they're not here now, we have time to arrange a strike and leave something to wipe out whoever they send."

"Right." He was silent a long moment, looking towards the town. "We've got the strike team to locate the support materia that's in their prison headquarters, but I want to be on the team that gets the other one out of the reactor."

Elfé glanced at him, nodding slightly. "You can head the team and take it in. I'll oversee arrangements for guarding the town and making sure no one interferes. I believe Fuhito is going with the team to the prison himself."
"Yeah." For a moment, Shears wanted to say more, but when Fuhito joined them his expression smoothed to a faked neutrality. "You get it and bring it back to the vans. If everybody keeps their comms on, we can meet back together later without a problem."

"Fufufu, of course, Mr. Shears. We will all be successful." Fuhito turned his gaze to Elfé immediately. "After we gain the two materia here, we must go south to Gongaga. We can store them with Master Bugenhagen if necessary on our way up to Nibelheim after. I am sure Genesis will have moved on by then."

Elfé nodded slightly. "Then that's what we'll do. Taking out three of their reactors will draw enough people overseas that they'll be vulnerable when we come back around. The Zirconade summon should be useful in finishing what we've started in Junon and Midgar."

Fuhito smiled serenely, nodding. "Oh yes. Zirconade is exactly what will make the ultimate staging point for us, and provide a final launching point to strike most fiercely for the good of the Planet. I am certain of it."
With AVALANCHE on the move and their own teammates officially targeted opposition, the Turks have a new level of complication to work through. That's about to become infinitely harder with internal pressure from Heidegger and the President.

Veld was getting ready for a board meeting when the call came through, an old number that had remained silent in his contacts since Dominic had retired from the first incarnation of the Turks shortly before he took the helm. "I'd say this is an unexpected pleasure, but I imagine this is a business call."

"Unfortunately," the former Turk agreed. "The AVALANCHE people you and Anya warned about arrived. Barret said that it was ShinRa's people come to look at the reactor, and they have the codes, but I know it couldn't have been without any of yours along."

"Damn, they're in the reactor? Now?" Veld sat back down at his desk, working out a message to his operatives. "There's people on the way, but the army is going to get representatives there before I can. I'll have people out as soon as possible and still plan to make my way out myself. Can you stall?"

"I don't know, since I'm not sure what their endgame is; they're not just in the reactor - caught people poking around that old jail house the company pretty much abandoned too," Dominic said. "Your girl's with them."

Veld swallowed hard against the lump that always tried to choke him when Elfé was mentioned, mind never sparing him a quick flash back to little Felicia giving him a beaming smile, but shook it off as best he could. "In the reactor or the prison?"

"Neither, I just saw a glimpse - it looks like she's runnin' a perimeter, maybe keepin' main communications between the other teams; I think they're anticipating people trackin' them down." He was silent a long moment. "What do you need me to do?"

"You're sure you want in on this?" On the one hand, part of Veld wanted to jump at the chance for help - any help - but Dominic didn't have the training his operatives did now. He was a fantastic weapon smith, and a strong figure in his community, but this wasn't something he was trained for. He'd gotten out of the game, and if he stepped back in it wasn't going to be easy to back out of again.

"I'm not doin' it for ShinRa, Veld, they lost me when we lost Vincent and the Director," Dominic admitted. "But you're all but kin, an' that girl's yours. For you, I'll step up."

If it comes up, and there's any way you can try and see about jogging her memory, I'd appreciate it. Keep an eye on her, keep us up to date on what's going on. Don't engage anyone but her, don't pick a fight you can't win. I'm not asking for a useless sacrifice just because you can. These are dangerous people, and they might take action if they know you used to be with the company."

"I can watch my back, Veld, don't you worry." Dominic chuckled softly. "Now, my kin might be a
different story. Barret's got one hell of a temper, Dyne too, 'less they're around their women. But I'll try to keep it quiet. You hurry on out here and come get your girl."

"Planning to." Veld sighed quietly, finishing his message and sending it out to his teams. "Stay safe, try not to let anyone get on with stupid heroics. We'll be there as soon as we can, the army will probably beat us - Heidegger won't be there in person, and I doubt Scarlet will recognize you, so don't try anything. Keep it low key, alright?"

"You're the boss, Veld."

That made Veld smile wryly, because he'd never actually been his boss. That was always Alex. But Turks were Turks, and Victor and Anya proved that they stayed for each other even if the company had forgotten who they were. "Be safe and be smart. I'll be out there as soon as I can."

The President called a partial board meeting as soon as he saw off Scarlet and Heidegger had deployed a partial team from Midgar.

"The army has mobilized, and we're drawing forces that had already been on the western continent towards Corel," Heidegger reported, laying out a map on the boardroom table. "Scarlet's on the move with her forces, as planned, and I've taken a selection of SOLDIER's finest to augment my forces on their way from Junon to cut time. Deusericus doesn't like it, but he knows what's good for him so he's being quiet, gya haa haa!"

"The transports are full of dozens of my finest machines," Scarlet reported, a video feed on at the end of the table to show her, set in one of the transports with a small assortment of troops and a quiet Two Gun present for the Turks. "I'm surprised Veld isn't at your side, where is he?"

"He's getting ready for his own deployment," Rufus said. "Don't worry about him, Veld can manage his forces just fine from wherever he ends up. Right now you two had best have your operations straight."

"Rufus is right, we can't afford another circus like in Junon and Midgar," the President said. "And anyone who fails me so severely again will be fired, and possibly see legal ramifications depending on the nature of their failure. Tseng, what arrangements have the Turks made?"

"Veld is preparing to move west with Reno and Rude to complete his solo objective, they've also drafted two operatives from SOLDIER and a small selection of troopers to make sure they can deal with the enhanced should it come to a battle," Tseng reported. "We have two operatives already deployed to Gongaga, and individuals joining both Scarlet and Heidegger's teams as well as a small force of our own in case our particular skill set ends up needed."

"Good, good. Glad to see someone being as thorough as I've asked." The President nodded. "I hate to have Veld out of Midgar, but he'll be best to manage Hojo's particular breed of stubborn. I have faith he'll make him see reason and we'll get him back here. If the SOLDIER operatives who joined him carry out the mission to eliminate Genesis, I'll be much more inclined to forgive their leaving without permission, particularly given it was Hojo who went and took matters into his own hands."

"I'll make sure your message is passed along in my report, sir," Tseng said.

"Of course, it is a shame to have the head of the Turks away, all the administrative work he's leaving behind is an awful lot for you to be coordinating, Tseng," Heidegger observed, dark eyes gleaming. "I'd be happy to take on a share of that. I've got experience leading our biggest department for years now, after all!"
"While I appreciate your concern, Director, I assure you I am trained well enough to hold our department together until Director Faraman returns from his mission," Tseng said, meeting the older man's gaze without flinching.

"Oh I'm sure you're very talented, you wouldn't have your rank if you weren't, but sometimes experience is so much more important - especially now, against the likes of the forces AVALANCHE has grabbed," Heidegger said. "SOLDIER has Deusericus out in Junon, after all, but they're benefiting from a voice of experience taking over here in Midgar. I think in such a trying time, you all would as well."

"Kya haa, Heidegger, if you think Veld would let you steal his department away you're asking for a personal audit I'll happily watch from a very safe distance," Scarlet said. "Anybody can see you're making a power grab."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "But I'm not wrong. The more united our forces the better, and both SOLDIER and the Turks have had issues communicating well with the army in the past. I think ensuring one cohesive set of commands being given would be the intelligent thing to do."

"Heidegger does make a good point," the President said. "Allowing him to manage the Turks on the same mission and here in Midgar will relieve Veld of any distractions while he's carrying out my orders."

"Are you seriously handing that much power to this idiot?" Rufus asked. "That's ridiculous. I thought you wanted to defeat AVALANCHE?"

"You have a lot to learn yet, Rufus, you'll see," Rupert said, ignoring him when he rolled his eyes. "Heidegger, you're to oversee everything in the mission to apprehend AVALANCHE. Scarlet, you'll collaborate and manage the public relations with the civilians there. Keep them in line, impose martial law while you're there if you have to - the troops you have are yours to command and you and Heidegger can collaborate on the rest. As for the Turk forces in Midgar, Tseng, they answer to you, but you'll answer to Heidegger until Veld returns."

"If I have so much to learn, you should give the Turks to me," Rufus retorted, not missing the particular stillness from Tseng at the mere thought of Heidegger being given any control. That certainly would make plans harder to enact, and was the last thing Veld needed added to his list of concerns at the moment.

"Gya haa haa! Rufus, you're a good kid but you're not ready for that kind of power," Heidegger said, laughing at the idea of it. "You're barely legal. You just handle what the President hands you now, he knows what's best for his company."

"With all due respect, Heidegger, I think that handing you the reigns to two more departments, even in part, is asking for an enormous mess," Rufus said bluntly. "You couldn't even get your troops together during the invasion here in Midgar, and your own ranks were infiltrated in Junon. I'm my father's son, and his heir for a damned good reason - I can oversee a department that's already handling itself efficiently."

"He does make a good point," Scarlet pointed out. "Veld runs his department tight, there's not much to do."

"Which makes the Vice President's concerns of me being overburdened pointless," Heidegger said. "Yes, if you had the sense and self control not to try and force them out of their tried and true work habits to do things your way I'd say go for it," Rufus agreed. "But you don't. You're already trying to
"SOLDIER needs phased out anyway, it's just as well if they merged into the proper military," Heidegger said. "The company needs streamlined, everybody listening to what the President has to say. Some real order for a change, not all these autonomous units that go and get ideas about doing things their way. That's not how the military works, and it's not good for ShinRa as a whole!"

"Are you implying, sir, that Veld doesn't know how to run his department?" Tseng asked mildly, a small smile touching his lips as Heidegger stuttered and fell silent. "Perhaps we should get him on the phone. I personally agree with the Vice President, we're managing our department fine and will continue to even with Veld overseas. We were fine when he was in Junon, and will continue to be."

"You all make decent points, but I've given my order. The Turks need an ultimate authority to go to and Veld has a very hard task ahead of him, managing Hojo and the squad of elites he took with him," the President said. "The fact of the matter is that I'm handing that authority over to Heidegger until Veld returns. I don't want him distracted, do you hear me? We can't afford to lose Hojo and Sephiroth, and AVALANCHE needs taken down. These are my orders. End of discussion."

Reno brought his chopper out with Rude and Veld to the Wastes, paired with a couple SOLDIERs and Cloud's infantry squad, pausing briefly to pick up Victor and his nieces before taking off for the Western continent.

"It's going to be interesting to see Bull again," Victor said, taking a moment to clasp hands with Veld. "You look pretty good for an old man who blew himself up."

"Takes more than an air strike to get rid of me," Veld said dryly, looking at the two girls. "Shalua and Shelke Rui. I should have put it together sooner, working with your uncle as long as I did."

"You were going to steal her for SOLDIER, weren't you?" Shalua accused, glaring at him.

"I was ordered to make those arrangements, yes," Veld agreed. "Her ability to perform a Synaptic Net Dive is priceless, and to be as good as she is now, she'll eventually well surpass anything Victor did in his time as Wraith."

"Lucky us Sephiroth brought Hewley back and threw everything off schedule," Victor said. "I might have never known if I hadn't started poking around myself."

"I have a feeling there were multiple tragedies averted by his success there," Veld said. "But there's no knowing. For now, this is how life is, and what we have to go with."

"And now we're going to get your daughter back from AVALANCHE." Victor shook his head. "Crazy times, my friend. I never pictured I'd be doing this job again."

"I wouldn't have asked," Veld said, clapping him on the shoulder. "But thank you, Vic. Really."

A trill of alerts from Reno and Rude's cells were played over by Veld's ringing, and he stepped back to answer it. Listening to Tseng's update on the last board meeting, his expression made it clear it was a good thing he wasn't holding it in his prosthetic, hand tightening around the device anyway.

From the cockpit, there was a low rumble of discontent as Reno and Rude read their messages.

"I take it there's trouble," Victor guessed. "What is it?"

"The President just gave Heidegger authority over my department, and he's demanding Tseng give
him the tracking signals of all our helicopters," Veld said, silent a long moment as he listened to
further detail. "You did what you could, go ahead and do it. For now, we're heading where we're
expected anyway, and we can stop for a refuel in Corel before I go off the grid. We'll think of
something by then."

Victor watched him a long moment, thinking while he finished up a few details with his second in
command. "You know, Veld, Shelke and I know a thing or two about computers. Why don't you put
me through to Tuesti? I might have an idea."
Hostile Takeover

Chapter Summary

In the end, Rufus was his father's son.

They had known from the beginning that there would be a point when they would have to expose themselves and take a firm stand. And it was understood that there was most likely going to be a fight over it, beyond heated words across a table. And it wasn't too large a stretch to consider that Heidegger could have been the cause.

Him getting presidential support in absorbing SOLDIER and the Turks into his department was not what anyone had anticipated. This time, the board meeting was preceded by an entire day of meetings between the Turks and SOLDIER, and Anya Torvik faced them down from Junon via a large video screen. "Rupert, explain to me why Heidegger is calling me to demand information."

"Don't get haughty, he's doing his job." Rupert stared her down, unmoved by the familiar address. They may have been friends once, at least comrades, but so had Gast and life went on once the late professor had been deemed no longer necessary. "As should you. Veld's the director, and right now he needs to work undisturbed so Heidegger is stepping up to fill the gap. Deusericus has been in the same situation, I suggest you be as agreeable as he's been."

"Oh that's what you suggest, do you?" She crossed her arms, unimpressed, and gave Heidegger a withering look. "I think not. If Veld was going to be given someone else not of his choosing to step up, it should have been his second, or me. You assigned the Turks to work covertly, and he's as covert as a beached whale. We cannot work with him."

"Can not or will not?" The President asked, meeting her eyes levelly when she glanced back at him. "You're one of the best, Torvik. You adjusted when Veld took the helm. You'll be a professional now and work with Heidegger."

"Veld is a Turk." Her voice dropped a note, hard and cold. "Veld has always been one of us. Heidegger is a hindrance every time he comes bumbling into Junon. I will not allow you to destroy the integrity of our department under his ham fisted, half assed mockery of leadership."

The President drummed his fingers a moment. "Don't do this, Anya. Don't make yourself an enemy. You've been with the company a long time, and I'd hate to lose one of my best Turks."

"You should have been thinking that with Alex and Vincent," she said. "With Victor. With Veld. I'm drawing a line, Rupert. Take that order back."

"You have no authority to order me, Anya, don't try and call my bluff," Rupert said softly. "Don't think because we were friends I won't have you taken in for this."

A fine brow arched and Anya lifted her phone into view, unflinching from his glare as she spoke into it. "Senior operatives, please place Junon on emergency lockdown."

Rupert's neck flushed a mottled red in outrage. "ANYA-"

"We're taking Junon," she informed him. "And I'm coming for our men and women in Midgar."
Then, we will talk."

The screen went blank, silence reigning in her wake. At the other screen, Lazard leaned back in his seat, a hand over his mouth, and met his brother's eyes.

Rufus chuckled softly, getting to his feet and clapping his hands. "Well now that was just brilliant. You've lost the Turks, Father. Add in how miserably you've mishandled SOLDIER… well, I'm surprised this hasn't happened sooner."

"Now is not the time, Rufus," he warned tensely.

"No, this is exactly the time for this." Rufus drew his shotgun and leveled it at his father. "I'm not going to stand by and watch you run my inheritance into the ground."

Rupert stared at his son a long moment, looking at his gun, then up to meet his eyes. "Put that away, I'm not playing games."

"Good, because I'm not either." Rufus smirked, running his thumb along the safety. "While you were out doing more important things, the Turks taught me how to protect myself, how to use this and so many other weapons. Even if they hadn't, no one would miss at this range. I could blow your head off."

"Don't think because you're my son I won't have you arrested; we both know you wouldn't dare," Rupert said, not attempting to move for his own piece. "If you're upset."

"If I'm upset? Do you think I still care enough about you to let you upset me, old man?" Rufus laughed, shaking his head. "Lazard, tell your men to stand down. We're doing this my way."

Lazard was silent a moment, then nodded. "Let's take our department back, gentlemen."

"Deusericus isn't in charge of you!" Heidegger snarled, though he didn't move from his seat either, eyes fixed on Rufus' shotgun, still pointed unerringly at the seated President. "Protect your President, you fools!"

"I'm the President now," Rufus said firmly. "And the only hope this company has, unless you want to lose the Turks and SOLDIER. The size of the army can't match the skill and power of either department, don't be stupid. You want to save your own ass, you fall in line with me, Heidegger."

"Rufus, this has gone far enough," Rupert said, standing up slowly. "No one's going along with your game. If you shoot me, you'll be arrested."

"If I shoot you, Mr. President, the only place left to go is up," Rufus said. "I'm your son, do you think it bothers me to walk over a body to get there? No one is protecting you now, you've ruined every support you had but that idiot over there, and he can't do a damn thing right now. Tseng could shoot him before he could get to his pistol."

"Tseng is going to arrest you," Rupert said. "And we'll talk about this later. Tseng?"

Tseng arched a brow, rising from his chair and removing his pistol slowly. "As acting director of the Turks, I am tasked with making sure my actions are for the good of the company, Mr. Shinra. I'm afraid supporting you has ceased to qualify."

"I see." Rupert grit his teeth. "Men, kill-

The booming report of Rufus' shotgun left a resounding silence in its wake, his face curiously blank
of emotion as he watched his father jerk back into his chair, clutching his gut and wheezing. Rupert stared at him in open shock. "Rufus..."

"Never let someone take what's yours," Rufus said quietly. "No time for sentiment, those are for losers. You taught me well, Father. Don't worry, your sons will carry on the company to a much more prosperous future. Won't we?"

Lazard tore his eyes from the grim sight, arching a brow at the open recognition. "I suppose we will. I'll make arrangements with the rest of my operatives and get in contact with Ms. Torvik... I'd suggest putting Heidegger in a cell, if he doesn't intend to cooperate but that's your call... Mr. President."

Rufus finally smiled at that, nodding slightly and gesturing to his father's limp form. "Someone do something about the mess and come up with something suitable for a press release. Whether you like it or not, he's not coming back; this is my show now, understood?"

"Y-yes sir," Palmer managed, staring in horrified fascination at the dying former-President.

"Excellent, because I have some changes to make." Rufus gave the room a shark's smile, unrepentant. "Tseng, feel free to see to security as befits the head of the Turks. You can consider your position as acting director fully reinstated."

Tseng offered him a faint smile, inclining his head. "If it's all the same, sir, I think I'll wait until your reinforcements arrive."

"I've sent a few," Lazard said, setting his PHS aside. "They should be there soon."

"Fair enough, given I do have some potential trouble." Rufus looked to Heidegger with a small, edged smile. "But I think you all might just enjoy the change. After all, I have no intention to continue chasing my father's fantasies, so there's going to be a lot of money up for grabs. But if that's not enough to motivate you, consider this: if I put you on the chopping block, it may be more than your career. Are we clear?"

Heidegger paled, clearly dismayed. "You've made yourself very clear, sir."

"Marvelous. Now, let's talk business until the cleaners get here, shall we?"

Within four hours, the Turks and SOLDIER had collectively taken charge of the Junon military base and ShinRa headquarters in Midgar. For the moment, with Heidegger reluctantly playing along, the army was unsettled but agreeable.

Anya was grimly amused, willing to stay in Junon on the understanding that she would be dealing with Tseng or Veld, or whoever they appointed. No one was inclined to argue it, and Lazard was happy to plan a trip back as soon as possible to see about working things out with Heidegger in person.

Tseng put a call into Veld as soon as time allowed for it, more than a little concerned with the situation and aware that he needed to be kept up on the details.

There was a strange mix of dark humor and resigned acceptance when Veld received the news that Rufus had shot his father. "Of course he did. Keep an eye on Heidegger; whatever state he's in now, you can't forget that the man has seen battle. He won't give up without a fight or a better reason than
Rufus' intimidation, and he might just be indignant enough over SOLDIER to do something stupid. The last thing we need is more in-fighting."

"I agree, of course," Tseng said. "He's not taking this well, but I'll endeavor to control his available methods of rebellion. It's been suggested that his security clearance be adjusted, and I'm not sure I disagree with the measure. If I understood Director Tuesti correctly, he's under additional surveillance. Scarlet's out of my range, already heading to Corel, but Two Guns knows to keep us informed."

"I'll see Scarlet myself," Veld said. "And I imagine she'd just as soon play along with Rufus as his old man. He's shown signs of being more brutal, and that's just how she likes it. Besides, she's plenty intelligent without a grudge clouding her near so badly; if she plays nice, this could be in her favor and she knows that."

"I'll assume any additional step up beyond the general cautions will come at further prodding only, then," Tseng said. "I'll do my best to keep you informed. Through Reno, if you're away or in cover at the time."

"That's fine, he's more than able to manage." Veld gave his third a quick, proud smile, seeing a brief smirk settle on his lips though he kept his eyes ahead while piloting. In the copilot's seat, Rude chuckled quietly. "We won't touch down for a while yet, but have Reeve get in contact with Victor again. They make a good team."

"I may reroute him to the girls, if I get stuck shadowing you in real time," Victor pointed out, making no pretense of being unaware of the conversation. It wasn't like Veld was making any point to keep it to himself anyway. "Not all of us default to the shenanigans you do."

Unsaid, granted, they were never partners, not that way. That had only been Vincent, a silent gap that had lasted decades since he was reported KIA in Nibelheim. Maybe when all was said and done he'd have a word with Hojo about that, too.

"Just hold the fort for now, Tseng," was all he said in the end. "I know you'll manage it, and you've got Anya at your back if I'm out of reach."

"Of course sir." Tseng paused a moment, voice a bit softer. "Be safe. We'll be here when you're finished."

"I'm counting on it."
Chapter Summary

Both the Turks and SOLDIER are closing in on their objectives, with just enough time
to catch their breath.

It was decided that it would be easier for Veld's team to be the ones immediately in contact with the
SOLDIER team, and communications were established while they were a little under an hour out
from Corel. As the de facto leader, Sephiroth was the first to the view screen, Zack quick to join him,
with the captain in easy earshot.

"I'll assume you've gotten a little intel from Midgar, what with your contacts," Veld said, looking
over the group. He wasn't too surprised Hojo hadn't bothered to come; for the moment, he wasn't
likely needed, given he'd follow Sephiroth regardless of any complaints. "Obviously, that's changed
a few things."

"Yeah, Kusel had a note out to me before Lazard even had the official notice composed and mass-
issued to SOLDIER," Zack confirmed. "They were pretty successful, but the army's not happy."

"Of course they're not, they'll read it as an upset in the power balance they generally seem to think
exists between departments." Which Veld found laughable, because nothing was that simple.
Especially now. "Heidegger's one to watch, but that's something I'll discuss with Lazard. How have
things progressed on your end?"

"Angeal appears to be ill, despite the fact that the Professor has identified no new ailments,"
Sephiroth said, frowning slightly. "We're both feeling effects we attribute to our relation to Genesis. I
assume you're aware."

"Enough for now," Veld said, nodding for him to continue. That was something he did not want to
hear, but better than having it hidden from him; there weren't words for how grateful he was that
Sephiroth wasn't the sort to play games right now.

"Between Angeal's senses and logical assumption of Hollander's probable goals, we believe he will
be headed to Nibelheim," he reported. "If he reaches Jenova, there may be complications. At this
time there's no way to be certain, but Zack and I are prepared to engage him in combat if necessary
to subdue him."

"And if he can't be subdued?" Veld asked quietly, holding the younger man's gaze. It was hard to be
sure via view screen, but he thought he saw his slit pupils constrict slightly. There was no mistaking
the shift in Zack's stance behind him, or the meaning behind the sudden realization that it was the
silhouette of the Buster Sword at his back now.

"With all due respect, Director, Genesis couldn't defeat me at the peak of health with Angeal's help,"
Sephiroth reminded him, tone so level it was nearly flat. "He will be subdued. It's a matter of when."

"He was never fighting to kill you, either." Veld may not have stared down anyone any deadlier, but
there had been people just as intimidating. If that was what it took to drive his point home, he'd push
until the SOLDIERs faced it. "He's not in his right mind, Sephiroth. You can't assume he's still in
there after all this time."

Sephiroth inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment, but didn't go so far as to agree. "We will do what's necessary. Genesis will not remain a threat to others, or to himself."

"Alright." There really wasn't anything else he could do, having said his piece. "What's the status of the others?"

"Hojo's been working to continue his analysis and presumably the quantity of notes he's generated are related to the measures he seems to believe we could take even as early as arriving in Nibelheim and accessing the labs there," Sephiroth said. "For Angeal himself, and ideally Genesis as well."

Well that was good to know. But he'd been counting on Hojo's attachment to Sephiroth from the beginning to ensure that outcome. "And Aerith?"

There was a momentary glance between the two Firsts, before Zack looked outside of the range of the viewscreen and nodded his head. Aerith came to join him, leaning a little into the immediately-offered embrace. "Hello, Veld."

"Hey." It was predictable and inconvenient, feeling part of him soften a little. He'd known her a long, long time after all, and he wasn't immune to the orphaned little girl's situation even before certain circumstances had arisen. "Talk to me."

She smiled a little, looking down at the staff in her hands a moment. "I don't know what to say. You know I don't understand what I hear. What the Planet's trying to tell me. I never did."

"That's alright, that's not what I asked." His voice must have gentled too much, because surprise was all over Zack's face, a thoughtful look crossing Sephiroth's. Circumstances what they were, he didn't think it was the danger it might have been once. "Just tell me what you can."

Aerith nodded slightly, trying to find the words to explain what she was experiencing. "It's loud. It feels panicked. All the voices... they're trying to tell me things, but I just don't know... it's like I'm supposed to do something, like it thinks I can. I think I'm where I need to be, but I don't know what I need to do. I'm not sure I will know."

"Have you tried talking back?" He asked, frowning when she nodded. "Alright. When there's a language barrier, you have to try it slower sometimes. Get a few words in common, pare it down to the very basics. When the other party is panicked, it's even harder, but it can be done. Keep trying."

"Okay." She gave him a tentative smile, strained but not without hope.

It was easy to see how quickly it could be overwhelming, and if the way she was leaning on Zack extended to emotional comfort, he couldn't begrudge either of them. But that brought another issue to mind that he couldn't ignore. "The SOLDIERs don't feel like a threat right now?"

"It's... different," she said slowly, glancing at Zack and getting squeezed lightly in return. It earned a more genuine smile. "There's still danger, but it's like... the Planet's decided they're not the big concern right now. That there's other things to worry about. We think maybe that's Jenova."

If he never heard that name again, Veld would have been a very happy man indeed. But that was never his luck. "Via Genesis, or is there another player that hasn't been properly addressed?"

"At this point, we're uncertain," Sephiroth said. "Hojo hasn't been terribly clear on the matter, but it seems more a lack of knowledge to offer than willingness to offer."
"Little blessings," he muttered, gesturing for him to continue and ignoring the looks being traded between Reno and Rude up front. If they picked up something that needed shared sooner, they'd say; otherwise he'd talk with them after a bit.

"The big debate right now is whether or not Jenova is alive, and probably a hefty dose of whether or not that matters," Zack said. "Because the Jenova cells these guys have are 'active' and act the way It presumably did. Then there's Aerith sensing things, and the weird bond thing going on between Angeal and Genesis, and maybe with Sephiroth. I'm not feeling anything, but I've got more run-of-the-mill tampering myself."

"Alright. I think someone should go get the good professor for this," Veld said, resisting the urge to rub his face. Across from him, the look Victor had was about how he felt, but didn't help much beyond the cold satisfaction of commiseration.

There was a quick expression that might have been a grimly pleased smile over Sephiroth's face before he turned. "I'll get him."

"Thanks." Veld glanced at Zack after he left. "What else can you tell me that you've noted?"

"Pretty much just more of what's been said here," Zack said. "Angeal's sick, Sephiroth's feeling something, the Planet's screaming at Aerith, we're heading to Nibelheim… we've come up with some basic ideas about aerial combat, the captain has forbidden jumping overboard -"

"Damn straight I did, idjit," Cid muttered, giving him a quick look. "Here's some food for thought, Director: if we've got an airborne combatant an' his target is in mountains I can't land 'em in that he can fly over, why the hell don't I have rocket launchers?"

Veld's lips twitched a little at the question. "As I recall, Captain Highwind, you said Scarlet would modify your 'baby' over your cold, dead body when weaponizing came up."

"Man after my own heart, yo," Reno muttered. "A beast like that airship, though, they could probably cast materia right off the front or out a hatch; it's doable even in a smaller bird if you've got somebody that knows magic."

"Aerial combat isn't beyond Sephiroth's abilities, regardless of his lack of wings." Hojo entered the view, giving Veld a flat look. "What is it?"

"Why haven't you given an order for the Nibelheim reactor to be secured?" He asked quietly. "Because unless you moved it and I didn't get the paperwork, that's where the Jenova specimen is. Isn't it?"

"It is," Hojo agreed calmly. "And I hope you called me for more than that. I believe previous experiences should be hard-won knowledge that the only measure that's going to be able to be taken to secure things is the one we're in the midst of. The only individuals alive capable of stopping Genesis Rhapsodos, regardless of whether or not he reaches Jenova, are with me and en route to intercept him."

Veld nodded slightly, but wasn't put off. "That's not what I asked. I'm not talking about Genesis getting in. Why isn't there a measure to prevent Jenova getting out?"

"Because the Jenova specimen is incapable of moving on its own and despite popular opinion, I detest wasting resources." Hojo frowned. "Whatever they've told you that has you so concerned, let it go. Jenova moving is not our current concern, nor ever likely to be. It's been over thirty years, brain dead without so much as a muscle spasm, let alone deliberate movement, and despite his own
opinions on the matter, Genesis isn't that stimulating."

"That's funny, because it doesn't sound like that's the case," Veld said. "Now, I'm not a scientist-"

"And yet you're still talking," Hojo muttered.

"- but it seems to me that Genesis just might be a whole other type of stimulating." Veld ignored the interruption, continuing calmly. "It seems, in fact, that he's able to influence regular people right into his image. To influence one of the strongest men alive to mutate, desert, and what… continue to affect his declining health from thousands of miles away? And arguably influencing the state of the other previously-deemed-invulnerable man. In fact, from what I read of Hollander's work, that was his goal - to give Angeal and Genesis Jenova's powers, including the ability to influence others with those cells. Cells that were alive enough to use in your experiments. Can you tell me, in utter certainty, that they're not alive enough to do whatever it is he damn well pleases, after everything else he's managed?"

Hojo's eyes narrowed slightly behind his glasses. "In the event that occurred, the threat would still be Genesis, as the driving force. Jenova itself is not a singular problem, as an individual entity. Your concerns are invalid, and you're wasting time I could be spending addressing the real issues at hand."

Veld steepled his hands together, watching the professor for a long moment in silence. "Yes or no, Hojo; can you tell me for certain that the body of Jenova cannot be a threat?"

"Yes, I can tell you it is not capable of any of that, not independent of Genesis, therefore making him our target," he snapped, irritated.

"I just want it noted that, with Genesis' aid, something the Ancients sealed away could be active again," Veld said simply.

"Make notes as you please. It changes nothing." Hojo scowled, arms crossed. "Are we done here? I have work to do."

"You're not needed while I catch them up on AVALANCHE, no." Veld watched him turn, stalking out, and filed away the agitation to think on later. "ETA, Reno?"

"Lil' over forty-five minutes, boss."

"Alright." They had time to discuss the basics before he made his second call, then. "As said, we're not far from Corel. Scarlet's already there, and we have a man on the ground with her. I have a local who's informed me that AVALANCHE has already infiltrated the reactor, which will be a problem to handle with care. I'm not betting Fuhito would hesitate to blow his own people up, he hasn't shown any hesitation so far on their behalf and the rest seem equally fixated. Our goals are twofold, searching out and stopping AVALANCHE as well as apprehending their leaders. We have some people in Gongaga on the hunch that they may make a move there, too; not knowing how many forces they have left, we can't be certain they're all here, but a lot have turned out."

"Yeah… see you've got some army there," Zack observed, nodding to the outline of a trooper he could just see. His expression warmed to a smile when said trooper leaned in, familiar bright spikes and blue eyes a welcome reassurance. "Heya, buddy."

"Permission to speak?" Cloud ventured, glancing at Veld.

"Granted." Veld gestured for him to go on.

"It's my squad, we were reassigned to work with the Director, and we're good, Zack. I mean, we
don't know *all* the details, but enough." Cloud smiled reassuringly. "We've got this."

"Right, okay. Well hey, you're both in good hands then." Zack gave him a thumbs up, grinning. "There's a lot of great army. I just... know they don't all share the warm feelings."

"Yeah. It's, uh... we're keeping an ear to the ground on that. It's not good." Cloud shrugged. "But we've got the Director's back here. No worries on this one."

"Much appreciated, Strife," Veld assured him, turning back to the SOLDIERs. "Small teams, but it should work out in our favor over all. We'll need to move quickly against AVALANCHE on our arrival. When we're done here, I'll be talking with Tseng and possibly Rufus, see what they might have."

"Best of luck to you on your mission." Sephiroth frowned slightly. "I doubt any of it will be easy."

"Men like us weren't made for things to be *easy* for, Sephiroth." Veld met his eyes with the statement, saw them flick briefly to his gloved hand - a story he didn't know in full, but enough knowledge of ShinRa to make some not-entirely-incorrect assumptions - and the frown eased a little. There was definitely understanding there. "Keep in touch as things come up. I'll see that myself or others keep contact as well."

"Cloud's got my number," Zack said, giving a casual sort of salute. "We'll see ya when the dust settles."

It almost made him laugh, how *easy* he made it sound, but there was no looking at Zack Fair and assuming any of that. Not after all that they'd gone through. "We'll do that."

He ended the call and let silence have a moment, heavy but not oppressive. "Observations?"

"Aerith seems awful comfy with Sephiroth so close," Reno said immediately. "Barely noticed the guy. Touchy with Zack, comfort-impulse maybe. That the same staff she brained a grashtrike with?"

"Looked like the same one she carried with her." Rude nodded slightly. "And she has materia."

"So she's armed at least, an' Zack's got her." Reno glanced back. "Hey kid, you were there. What'd you think about them all cozy? Zack's your buddy, he seem okay?"

When Cloud stiffened at the questioning, looking a little alarmed, Veld clarified. "We're trying to assess their general mental state. Zack Fair's fantastic for talking about others, and looking out for others, but I haven't heard anything about how *he's* handling it all. As arguably the most emotionally stable member of SOLDIER present, it's wise to be a little concerned for his well being."

"Oh." Cloud relaxed with a sigh, running a hand over his hair. "Uh, well stressed obviously. He stands like that when he's given reports to... other people. Like you, I guess, but it was tenser than that, even. Maybe because of what he said about the Commander being sick?"

Veld nodded slightly. "Anyone with half a brain would be tense over this, I'm not surprised. I'm just hoping he's keeping it together. Any other observations?"

"He had Angeal's sword," Rude pointed out.

"Yeah, man, if the big guy's so sick he's handin' off his favorite deco piece, they've got a real problem," Reno said, fingers tapping at the cyclic stick. "Hey, boss, what'd you think about what Sephiroth said about Hojo, huh? Seems like we're missin' somethin' there."
Veld arched a brow, making a prompting gesture. "Explain."

"Okay so, we know he plays nice when Sephiroth asks - weird, but established weird," Reno said. "What gets me is this, he's like... the expert on this Jenova shit. An' he has an answer for everything but this? He was awful cagey with you, too. Pissed, even."

"I noticed." And had his own ideas on it, but hearing it from the others always added perspective. "Did you have a theory?"

"Nah, nothin' like that just... seemed outta place." Reno shrugged, frowning. "Somethin' I'd watch, y'know?"

"I do know." Veld frowned a little as well, glancing at Victor. "Fresh eyes are good."

"I'm still a bit out there realizing the little nerd's all grown up," he admitted, frowning. "It's been a couple decades, sure, but seeing you people again really drives it home. You look good with gray, by the way. Very distinguished."

Veld let himself give the former Turk an actual eye-roll for that. "Answer the question, Victor."

"You didn't actually ask one." Still, a more serious expression said he was giving it thought. "I wouldn't go so far as to say he's hiding something, but I agree with your kid, Hojo was ticked off. More than just 'you're inconveniencing me' bothered, he was genuinely getting angry about it. There's something else going on he's not discussing. How relevant it might be, I can't say. It could just be as simple as how much he hates having to work Hollander's mess out, but if it's about his specimen I don't know what to tell you. Not much good came out of Nibelheim back then."

There was a beat of silence for their much more personal loss, but no time to share more than a glance for it. "We'll watch him. If nothing else, you can be sure Sephiroth's not going to put up with anyone playing games right now."

"Truth." Victor sighed, digging out his PHS. "I'm going to have a word with Tuesti about the reactors, see if I can do any good. You might check in with your new president."

Veld snorted at the title, but resisted the comment weighing on the tip of his tongue. Better to see if there was any last-minute information to be had on AVALANCHE.

Given the call went back through to Tseng, there was no waiting. "We're less than a half hour out from Corel. Any updates?"

"Rufus got a text to confirm reactor codes - he worked with Director Tuesti to make them accurate, but not give over complete control," Tseng reported. "It will buy you time, but how much depends on how well they can manage the interface. There's a questionable benefit to the fact that it's newer than any reactor they've been in yet. Two Guns said that Scarlet's group has landed, but Heidegger's deployment has slowed. I have the feeling that he's going to see if there's any loopholes he can pull through for a coup of his own."

"Of course he is," Veld said, not at all surprised. It fit his personality to a T to try for an even greater power grab. "I have a feeling that he's in for a surprise if he tries to call Rufus' bluff. The brothers playing nice?"

"Nearly too well for comfort, they're certainly on the same page." Tseng frowned slightly, eyes flicking away from the screen a moment and accepting a printout. "Cissnei and Balto report things are calm in Gongaga, for now, so you may assume that the bulk of AVALANCHE's forces are dedicated to their movements in Corel."
"Alright. I have eyes on the ground, so we'll take it from there." Veld considered the situation carefully, and how busy he was going to be. "As acting director at headquarters, you're authorized to deal with any threats as you see fit. If it comes up, that includes Director Heidegger."

Tseng arched a brow, inclining his head in acknowledgment. "Of course, sir. I'll see things are handled here. Ms. Torvik has made it clear that I have her full support as well, and SOLDIER has been quite helpful."

"Good. I spoke with the traveling team, and I'll send notes on it later. It sounds like everyone is on track as best as possible, for now." Veld considered and discarded a number of things that could be said, that went unsaid. "Take care. We'll be in touch."

"Of course, sir. You as well." Tseng bowed his head briefly, solemn accepting his duty; he would make a fine director in his own right, some day.

Veld hoped it wouldn't be any time soon.
Interlude: The Waiting Game

Chapter Summary

It seems like the end is in sight, if they can just make it through this last stretch.

The Goddess was calling. Genesis could hear her clearly, and it was maddening to be so close and not well enough to trek through the harsh mountain terrain. Hollander kept assuring him it was a temporary flare, that he'd just been pushing exceptionally hard lately and all he needed was rest, but the wait filled him with fury just barely held in check by the tatters of his composure.

He couldn't stay bedridden, he had too much energy and not enough, fever and pain blazing through him in turns, suffocating heat leaving him disgusting and damp with sweat only to turn to chills in time for it to be all the worse. A little extra work got the water heaters working and he found an old claw foot tub large enough to stretch his aching body in, wing draped limply over the side. He could hear himself breathe, a low rasp that spoke of illness to match the insufferable fragility he was plagued with.

If the natives knew of his outcast position, they didn't care. A few honeyed words and they bowed out of the way, forgotten just as quickly. They were nothing, inconsequential. What mattered now - all that mattered now - was rallying the strength to travel to the beacon of gentleness and love that was reaching for him. A final test, perhaps, to prove his dedication. And wasn't it fitting, to be here, where Sephiroth had been created. Here he was born, but here it was Genesis who would ascend to greatness.

In his restlessness, he read some of the books lying around - madness from Hojo, delusions from Gast, peppered with a few genuinely intriguing texts on Mako and the Lifestream. There were others, hastily scrawled and unfiled reports with a woman's looping script in the margins, yellowed with age and speaking of gods and ancients that slumbered, WEAPONS of great power lingering between the Lifestream and the Planet. Intriguing, whether it was real or not; he admired the passion of this 'Dr. Crescent' though clearly there had been some fallout, for the notes to be stuffed around one of the abandoned Mako tanks instead of filed properly. Another from a Professor Valentine covered similar topics, more on the gods. He spoke extensively on his own theories, mirroring Dr. Crescent's claims of Omega and its squire, but focused much more on the implications of ancient powers, many who he theorized left their mark behind in memory - in Summons. It was fanciful, and intriguing reading for an afternoon, pondering an ancient deity behind Odin that might have lingered in this very area. It certainly matched the beliefs of natives.

But it was a goddess waiting for him in the mountains, far more real than Valentine's suppositions or Crescent's impassioned theories. Reaching with maternal concern for him, though she was blessedly patient - he could not have dreamed better, and professed his gratitude repeatedly. They didn't truly speak, there was a disconnect - mere mortal and so tainted as he was, there was nothing more to expect - but it was enough to feel her concern, to know she waited for him, to know she hadn't given up. If she could see worth in him, perhaps not all was lost. Perhaps there was some redemption to be gained after all.
It was a boon to finally get three Mako tubes in working condition, and Hollander was able at last to set himself up for his work as soon as he found viable subjects to work on. It wouldn't take too long, he didn't think, and Genesis wasn't asking. The redhead was restless, sleeping longer than expected as his fever spiked and raged for several hours.

When he'd come down, eyes rimmed in acid green and raving nonsense about gods and redemption, Hollander had genuinely feared for his life. But he'd gotten him to settle again, heavy sedatives lacing his food and drink and putting him into the closest thing his body could manage to a healing sleep. It was impossible to know for sure how he'd wake, so the doctor worked quickly in the tense peace of his absence.

There was perhaps something to be used with the native populace. There were children, after all, and the whole place was so backwater they'd believe anything he said if he worded it right. Brief as they'd seen Genesis - and in horrible lighting, they couldn't see how obviously ill he was - they thought that the two of them were there in official capacity. It was as perfect as he could hope for, if he could just string them along long enough…

String them along, and survive Genesis' raging and madness. That was the question, too, and he wasn't so certain as to bet much on it. If it came down to a fight, Genesis was still too strong to resist. And even if he could kill him somehow, while he slept, even if he dared to try, what then? What was left for him, with Genesis dead? Sephiroth would kill him. At least for now there was a hope that either he would leave and draw their attention, that the others would track them down and maybe he could play on Angeal's sympathies, or he'd get lucky and actually hit on something to save the madman. But every day was another day into his descent, and he wasn't sure what would be left to save.

Perhaps part of him, too, was hopeful for something to come of this last experiment. Some success after the abysmal failure of Project G. Something, anything, to prove that yes he did know what he was doing, damn it. Hojo wasn't superior, he'd simply won the genetic draw with Sephiroth. Maybe he would die at Genesis' hands, maybe at Sephiroth's, but for now damn it, he wouldn't give up.

There had been a time before Hollander and Hojo's efforts that other men of science had worked in their own studies. They, too, had meddled far beyond their own understanding. For Gast, his legacy lived on in public, in the struggles and successes of the Jenova Project, in Sephiroth, Angeal, and Genesis. Indeed, even SOLDIER itself bore a mark of his hand, though it was largely Hojo's doing as he had been the one to see it through.

Gast had not been the only one, however. Lucrecia Crescent had been a vital part of the Jenova Project, for all that she was largely forgotten now, but that had not been the legacy she'd wanted most. The papers Genesis found, with her hopes and dreams and desperation, those had been what she wanted, more than anything. Professor Valentine had helped her, seeing promise in a kindred spirit. And he had died in the one moment of truth that she had offered - proof that their was something to her claims.

Years later, his son would unwittingly serve as final evidence that she had been onto something, a rescue gone terribly wrong and her success deemed a failure that only one member of the Science Department was aware of. He had said nothing then, and would say nothing of it now.
But in the cold bowels of Nibelheim, a voice called out from the mountains. And Genesis was not the only one who heard.
Taking Back Corel

Chapter Summary

AVALANCHE had beat them to Corel, but that wasn't enough to stop the Turks.

It was understood, going into Corel, that the reactor was already in enemy hands. Two Guns had sent a quick report of what he knew, fortunately Scarlet hadn't engaged yet - waiting on him, whatever the reason - and Rufus made it abundantly clear that under the circumstances, Veld was supposed to stay and apply a Turk's defter touch.

It was obvious she wasn't pleased when she met them, barely waiting beyond the stop of the rotors to come see them. "I hope you have a plan. The longer they're in there, the more trouble they can cause."

"I realize that. You just keep Heidegger's men out of the way, I'll infiltrate with a strike team. Have your robots ready for security, but do not turn them on any civilians," Veld instructed. "We'll be in touch. Reno, Rude, get moving in there. Take our troops. I need to have word with my local contact. Victor, with me."

Unsaid, the two girls came with him. Shelke stayed particularly close to her uncle, unnerved by the woman dressed in a stunning red statement of power and impeccable style. Shalua gave her a brief glance, but wasn't concerned - there was no recognition in her gaze, just calculation. If she didn't know about Shelke, it didn't matter what she was thinking. Victor let Shelke take his hand without a change in expression, though he did finally warm seeing a familiar tank of a man heading their way. "Bull."

"Wraith." The former Turk stopped a few paces away, nodding politely to the girls before looking to Veld. "I got together what you wanted. Hopefully it'll make a difference."

"That's what we're hoping." Veld gestured for him to lead on, following in silence away from the others. He saw Two Guns, briefly, but didn't do more than nod his head in acknowledgement. At the moment, it was better they didn't interact openly much; he didn't need anyone figuring out he'd been planning to be here, after all. That would start up questions he didn't want asked.

The building Dominic led them to was of ShinRa's own placement, a small communications center that had been used to work between the construction crews and any administrative people who set up in the former prison. Most importantly, it still had computers that connected to both systems. They weren't tied in entirely to all aspects of each other, but it was an in. And while Victor wouldn't be able to really get to work until they had access to the Reactor mainframe, they happened to have another ace.

A quick phone call, and they had Reeve Tuesti on speaker, the pair more than ready to get to work together on it. In the meantime, Veld settled in to see everything he could find out about his daughter's movements. He trusted Reno and Rude to handle whatever they found in the meantime.
There was no coming straight into the front of the Reactor, AVALANCHE had people all over the place. But the mines led up to it, and that was more than good enough. It was a bit of a surprise to see someone waiting there, though, the heavily muscled man looking somber and more than ready to kick ass and take names in his own right. "You the boys from the Turks, huh?"

"Yeah." Reno saw no point in saying otherwise, the suits told the truth of it. "You a Wallace? You look like the old man."

He got a toothy grin for that, the man nodding in agreement. "Yeah. Name's Barret. He told me those guys up ahead were tryin'a mess up this reactor. Listen, we didn' let 'em in, but we're sure as hell gonna root 'em out wit' ya. My man Dyne's ahead, keepin' watch. We'll make sure you get through the tunnels, it's a maze but we been workin' 'em all our lives."

"Help's always appreciated. Me an' Rude are partners, these are our troopers. If your buddy knows his way around, we can split forces an' get a better idea what's goin' on to tell the boss," Reno said. "We've got backup too."

"Yeah I saw." From Barret's expression, it was clear he didn't think much of the assortment of troopers and the mass of machinery that Scarlet had brought with her. "Rather work with you suits. C'mon, we gotta get a move on. Think they wanna wreck the place, an' we need this reactor. Times're changin' y'know?"

"Man, you have no idea." Reno laughed a little, idly swinging his EMR from his fingertips. Change wasn't a strong enough word with the crap Rufus had just pulled back in Midgar. But hey, in the end he seemed smart enough to stay on their side. For now, it was a step up; he hadn't fancied finding out if Victor was right about how the President felt about Veld, let alone the rest of them. "But yeah, let's go take a looksie. I'm itchin' to get started."

They followed Barret further in, the man waiting ahead a slimmer but equally tough in appearance, a gun at his hip and a crowbar in hand. He stood from a crouch as they came, looking them over critically. "Name's Dyne. You're the Turks we've been waitin' for?"

"Apparently so," Reno agreed.

"Good. Was gettin' tired of waiting for some real backup." Dyne scowled at them, looking at Barret a moment as something unspoken passed between them. Whatever it was, it didn't feel like a threat to the Turks. "There's not too many in the tunnels, but they made some blockages. We can use coal carts to break through, though; they didn't seem to think about it being an option people would take."

"They probably didn't expect any real native resistance," Reno pointed out. "They say they were ShinRa to get in or somethin'?"

"Impplied it. Never thought anyone else would want anything to do with it, not like the reactor's running yet. It's still being built," Dyne said. "They can collapse it, but I don't think they're gonna do more than property damage at this point."

"Yeah well, we're gonna see if we can't stop 'em before they even get a whole lotta that," Reno said, swinging his rod up to rest on his shoulder. "Let's go say hello. I hate keepin' people waitin' for me."

Rude snorted softly, a little smile on his lips, and touched his earpiece. "We met up with two locals and we're going through the mines to the reactor now, Director."

There was a brief pause before Veld's reply came back. "We're getting things straightened here. I'll
"Yessir." Rude nodded to his partner, then ahead. It wasn't his favorite odds, an untested team, but nothing was impossible for the Turks.

Their trip through the winding maze of the mines up to the reactor build site led them through a few AVALANCHE sentries, but it wasn't beyond management. The group was quick, brutally efficient, and ended up reaching the reactor in time for twin chimes from the Turks' phones. A quick check showed a downloadable set of blueprints, so they would know where they were going.

"Man, glad Tuesti's on our side. I'd hate t' try an' navigate all this otherwise," Reno muttered, examining the layout critically. "Hn… got some extra access points I could get through with a couple'a our troops. Narrow, though, you three'd have t' go another way."

"Viable shortcut," Rude agreed. "It could get you to the control center faster. They've got to have people there."

"Yeah. Things work right, they won't be able to do anythin' but I'd like to have a word with 'em." Reno frowned, mulitng it over. "Alright, we'll split up. Keep the comm on, yeah? I'll let you know what I find."

Rude nodded, looking at his own copy of the map. "We'll head for the central stations. If they wanted to set off bombs, that would be the place to start."

"You got it, partner. Kick ass." Reno grinned, then waved to the troopers. "Strife, Sanders, you're with me. Our route's this way."

"Alright." Cloud nodded to his other two squad mates. "Be safe guys."

"You too."
control, Reeve or Victor can take it from there," Veld said. "Other than that, I'm not sure. We cut Scarlet loose and we'll have a blood bath and potential friendly fire."

"Ain't nothin' friendly about her metal monsters, yo," Reno said. "I'll take a look, we're almost t' the center station."

"We'll keep heading for the core," Rude said. "Comms will be on."

On, but silent for at least a bit longer as they continued their way through. No alarms were raised, they had the benefit of blueprints to know ways to edge around that apparently AVALANCHE either was unaware of or not putting to use, but there was still undeniable tension.

"Chief, I got eyes on Shears an' Fuhito," Reno murmured, signaling his small group to stop. "They're ahead, not by much. Fightin' by the look of it. I can see some equipment that might be what we want, but it's hard t' say. No signs of Elfé."

"Take them out at your discretion," Veld instructed. "We don't need them, though I'd like to interrogate Fuhito."

"Right, you got it. Strife, can you make a disabling shot to the one with the glasses from here?" Reno asked.

Cloud frowned, sighting along his rifle. "Yes, sir. I can get his thigh easy the way he's standing."

"Fantastic. You shoot on my mark. I'm goin' in with some Stun materia, I want 'em both incapacitated. Anybody else comes, Sanders, you take 'em down. Once you take Fuhito down, Strife, you have my back. Kill if you have to, better them than us," Reno said, shifting his weight a little. "We clear?"

"Sir!"

Reno flashed them a wicked grin, eyes fixing ahead as he waited, watching Shears get up in Fuhito's space. As soon as they separated a little, he'd order the shot so he could move in, and-

The report of a gun was sudden and startling, because it wasn't the troopers.

"Fuck, chief, Fuhito just shot Shears."
Bargain Point

Chapter Summary

Veld's bet on his men paid off. Now he just had to figure out how to use the unexpected resource they'd dropped into his lap.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 9 of the Side Stories takes place at the same time as this chapter.

There was just enough time to hear the gunshot and Reno's stunned report before the communications abruptly went down. Veld swore softly, looking to Victor. "What do you need to get them back up?"

"A stronger signal should be enough, given our edge; I'll talk to Tuesti." Victor nodded to his tablet, which was still running even though his phone had nothing but static left. "Keep trying them."

Veld nodded tensely, listening to the low static of the jammed signal. He knew, of course, that his operatives were damn capable. Radio silence wasn't the worst thing Reno and Rude had been through by far, but it was never comfortable when it wasn't by choice.

Then there was a distant boom, and the building trembled slightly. He met Dominic's eyes, seeing worry there, and grit his teeth. "I'm taking my phone. Act towards our objectives on your own discretion, Vic. I've got to make sure Scarlet doesn't jump the gun."

By the time he made it across to where Scarlet was, she was already mobilizing forces to move in, several machines starting to roll towards the reactor.

"Call your robots back," he commanded, every ounce of authority he had weighing in his voice as he gestured towards the ones on the move. "Now."

"That was a detonation, your men are outmatched if not dead." Scarlet was never quick to back down, and when there was blood in the water she was even more eager to fight. "We tried it your way, and we might have just suffered significant damages for it."

"That was not a suggestion, Delaney. you get them back now, because if you compromise our mission you will have a lot more immediate concerns than how our new leader takes it," Veld said quietly, stepping close enough to touch. "My men will get the job done."

"Your men are dead, Veld. Communications were cut and-" she stumbled slightly, a second explosion causing the ground beneath them to roll. "If they're still alive, this counts as a mission failure. AVALANCHE isn't going to get away with this, I will make sure of it."

"At the stage the reactor is in now, any significant bombing would be making more than some
ground quakes," Veld said. "They've got this. You are not getting in there and opening fire to kill everything that moves."

"You don't know that," Scarlet said, just as fierce. "You have no way to know that. Communications are down. They're as good as dead."

"They will be if you send in your machines." No, he didn't have proof, but Veld had decades of experience and his gut said Reno and Rude would come out of this. Likely not unscathed, but definitely victorious - if they just had the time. "I'm the senior executive here, back off."

"You weren't even supposed to be here," she hissed. "This was my mission, not yours. I'm not letting you ruin it for a pair of suits that don't have a snowball's chance in hell. The battlefield is no place for sentiment, Veld, you know that."

"Do not tell me how to run a mission," Veld said softly, and something in his expression must have finally carried across how deadly serious he was because she closed her mouth sharply. "You call those machines back to standby. We will wait ten minutes."

Scarlet bristled, hands curled to fists. "This is insane."

Veld narrowed his eyes slightly. "Do it."

She held out another moment before turning on her heel, stalking away to the control panel and shoving the technicians there out of the way, putting in the orders herself. The robots ground to a halt, but didn't come back. "Ten minutes."

Victor and Reeve had communications up again within five minutes, but they couldn't get anything through to the groups in the reactor. It was a painful waiting game, but he trusted his operatives. Eight minutes and fifty seven seconds passed by the time scouts reported a group coming out - and what a group it was.

Reno tapped at his headset, waving though he was too far to hear without it. "Can you hear me now, boss?"

Veld managed a small laugh, raising a hand. "Loud and clear. Looks like you're evacuating the building?"

"AVALANCHE did most'a that, but yeah we got the civvies out," he reported. "Rude set off some controlled point charges t' head off some stuff we couldn't stop manually. But it should be pretty stable by the time anybody could walk back there."

"Tuesti's monitoring it, he'll take care of matters from there," Veld said. "Get back here, let the civilians go and we'll take a moment to talk with your prisoner."

"He's gonna need medical first," Reno said. "Or during. We're headin' your way. There a problem up here?"

Veld looked at Scarlet, anger practically radiating off her, and narrowed his eyes in warning. "No, we don't have a problem. Take him to the offices for interrogation."

"I want the natives with them," Scarlet said. "Imbeciles who let AVALANCHE into our grounds don't get a Turks' pass."

"They were guides I arranged for," Veld said. "Some of us work with more than brute force. You
used to be one of them."

"A lot of things 'used to be' Veld, but they don't matter these days." She eyed the group disdainfully as they approached, making a show of rolling her eyes. "Have fun with your interrogation. I'm going to have some grunts get eyes on how much damage you signed off on."

Veld didn't deign to comment; he wasn't there to banter with Scarlet, especially not with Shears right there. "This way."

It didn't take long for medical to get Shears cleared to have a little 'talk' with the head of the Turks, but the surprise was that he was eager to.

"He left me to die," Shears rasped, watching the medic tending him with eyes just a touch too wide. "That bastard… they cleared out, didn't they? I'm all that's left."

"Looks like. Real nice buddies you got, yo." Reno leaned against the wall, an eye on Shears but more interested in his Director's too-still stance. The man had 'predator' drilled into him to make a SOLDIER jealous, but right now he was dialing it down quiet, all business. There had to be a reason for it.

"He didn't leave anyone else?" Shears pressed, leaning forward and hissing when it pulled at his wound. He let himself be guided back, looking between them. "The woman with us, with the blade. Is she here, or is she still with him?"

"Captured by the Turks and the first question you ask is after the well being of your leader. I suppose that shows loyalty," Veld said, watching him. "Elfé hasn't been seen since her initial prowl around this area. It appears she left with the rest."

"Fuckin' hell." Shears' head dropped back against the wall and he stared at the ceiling, jaw working a moment as he thought. "I'll cut a deal with you."

"Oh you will, will you?" Veld crossed his arms, a fleeting smile touching his lips while his eyes stayed hard. "Planning to turn on them?"

"No, fuck I… Fuhito betrayed us first, she just doesn't know it yet." Shears looked back to him, dark eyes hard enough to match his tone. "I got lucky, all he did was leave me for dead. He's gonna get her killed, an' she doesn't even… she thinks she can trust him. Thinks he'll make the world a better place."

"And you disagree?"

"He doesn't give a rat's ass about people, he's got this power fantasy of 'cleansing the planet' an' as somebody who happens t' live here, I take exception." Shears huffed, shaking his head. "So he shot me. Left me, figurin' you ShinRa suits would finish me off. But thing is, I know things you need t' know. I know where he's goin' an' why an' what his plans are. I know how many people we've got, how many Raven's he's got - I can tell you where your rogue SOLDIER is gone, too."

Veld arched a brow, considering it. "That's an impressive list of information, true. But you're still a criminal even if they've left you behind. What are you expecting in return?"

"Just… let her an' me go," he bargained. "That's it. Without her army, she's just one vigilante, an' she won't be a threat, I swear. You can't tell me you don't know what you people do is wrong, you just got the power t' shut whoever you want up about it, make yourselves look good with your money an' brute force. She's tryin' to do a good thing."
Veld was silent a long moment. "There's a saying about the road to hell and good intentions, Shears. I never said we were good people. But life's not so simple that opposing us makes you better. You're mass murderers, with as much if not more civilian lives in your collateral damages - AVALANCHE are terrorists, no matter who's in charge, by your methods, not by our determination. But I've made harder bargains. You help us, and get her to back down, and maybe we can come to an agreement."

Shears swore softly, staring at him. "That's it? That's fucking it? You want me t' work with you after that?"

That finally made Veld smile, grimly amused. "I think you will. We'll find them with or without your help, after all, but it sounds like you need us. So… why don't we get started working out a plan. Tell us everything you know, and we might just find something that works for us both."

Shears stared at him a moment, jaw tight and his muscles tensed. But there was nowhere to go, and he knew it. "There's a summon called Zirconade…"

Chapter End Notes

So, it's recently come to my attention that I overlooked something in the upcoming chapters. That's not a big deal so far as posting, I should be able to adjust it and keep to my normal schedule, but... things just got more complicated. And longer.
Poetic Justice

Chapter Summary

Karma is a bitch.

Hollander had made some basic progress with his research, but finding specimens as a base to move forward with was proving frustrating. Looking around the manor had been fruitful, however, as he came across some of Hojo's old documentation of work he had done on the survivors of the Kalm bombing. Of course, officially the only survivor was the Director of the Turks himself, but that only meant the others had been repurposed. There was reason to believe he had some of them in stasis chambers in the reactor, in fact. Now, whether or not they would actually be viable for his uses, that was hard to say. But it was better than nothing, and if he could alter them some, even just enough to be mindless clones, then he might at least be able to create bodies to harvest more cells from for future experiments. It was risky, but it was the best shot he had. Right now, with the clock ticking and Genesis' patience running thin... he didn't have many other options.

As if by some terrible summons of mere thought, he heard the stairs creak ominously, one after the other, and he looked anxiously down the hall. He wouldn't have been able to hear them before, but Genesis had slaughtered his way through every creature that crossed their path, and anything left alive apparently had the sense to flee in the face of the greater predator, leaving the caverns empty and echoing. He couldn't blame them. If he'd had a choice, he would have run too.

Genesis came to the doorway, weaving dangerously on his feet and leveling him with a murderous glare. His eyes were almost entirely taken by the acidic mako green now, too wide and overbright with the fever ravaging his body. It appeared that today was one of the days it had taken his sense with it as well. "You drugged me."

"What?" Hollander stared at him, feeling a cold sweat break out on his skin. "I wouldn't dare!"

"You drugged me," he repeated, steps gaining a bit more confidence as adrenaline finished purging the drugs in question from his system. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? What else have you done behind my back that you thought you could slip by me? Are you going to betray me too?"

"Genesis, I would n-never..." Hollander swallowed thickly against a sick feeling, hands going to his table. "Please, calm yourself. I've been working on a cure! We just need some specimens to test it on first, a trial run to be sure it's viable, please don't - I can't replicate these samples! If you ruin them then there's nothing I can do for you!"

The fire that had started to form a loose ball in Genesis' palm was snuffed out in an almost casual curl of fingers, the former SOLDIER retaining incredible strength even as his health declined. Certainly far above the doctor trembling before him had even at his prime, and they both knew it. "You're pathetic. I should kill you where you stand, you useless fool. It's you who cursed me to this."

"But I'm the only one who can save-"

"Silence." Genesis barely needed to raise his voice to get Hollander to obey. "The Goddess is with me. You're petty and useless, and I should kill you here for what you've done. But death is too good for you. You deserve pain, the same suffering you inflicted on myself, on Angeal..."
"Genesis, please." Hollander edged back and around, wanting the heavier exam table in the way, anything to buy himself time. "Please, you don't have to do this. If… if you're going to be cured, if you're well enough to make the trip, you shouldn't waste time here with me. If I'm weighing you down, just… just leave me here. ShinRa won't let me die quietly anyway, you know that."

"Hn. One thing you speak that's true, I'll give you that," Genesis agreed, trailing his fingertips along the table he'd been working at as he approached. "But that's not enough to save you. ShinRa can't do anything right. You'll suffer, and you'll suffer at my hand."

"Genesis, no, have mercy, I've tried to help you!" He stepped backwards again, and felt the sudden unyielding surface of the mako tanks behind him. There was nowhere to run, even if he thought he could hope to escape Genesis. Madness gleamed in his eyes, only matched by the rage that had been boiling within him since he first learned his history after the accident.

Despite the weakness suggested by his appearance, Genesis didn't falter as he came around the table. He only laughed when Hollander attempted to dart away. "Poor little coward, begging won't save you. I know you too well for that. You'd say anything to save yourself. Pretty lies like the ones that took Angeal away from me."

"That was his choice! We were trying to create a cure, I swear it! How else do you think I could have made so much progress while I was there? I had a team of scientists and funding and support," Hollander said, desperate to say anything that would stick, to even make Genesis apathetic - anything but set on killing him. He wasn't ready to die, not now, not here. "For all I know they've finally hit on something from all my notes now and he'll be cured! You could be cured!"

"Liar," Genesis snarled, pushing past the table and heading for him once more. "You think for one moment I believe that the people who sanctioned this cared to try and fix their mess? You said it yourself, we're disposable to them with Sephiroth there to be their champion. I've seen the truth of it time and time again. The only hope that remains is the mercy of the Goddess herself."

"Then you should go," Hollander said, edging back around to the table of supplies. Was there anything there he could use? Genesis was unsteady already, if he could get him with another dose of sedatives… he'd have to run, of course, but… "You don't need me. Like you said… don't keep the Goddess waiting, right? Better to get a move on."

If he could just get to those drugs…

Genesis' form blurred in front of him with inhuman speed, reminding him all too keenly that the man was still one of the most powerful beings to walk the Planet even as ill as he was now. "Ah ah, now you're not thinking of doing something foolish, are you?"

"I… I'd…" Hollander froze, tongue feeling slow and thick as he watched gloved fingertips trace along the syringes he'd loaded with cell samples. "Genesis, please. I need those."

"And what are they?" Genesis asked, tilting his head to read the notations. "From the initials, I dare say you must be comparing the three of us, hm? How common. Are you expecting something new to show up, after all this time? Or have my cells just continued to be a source of interest as I die before your eyes?"

There was an edge of ugly anger there that warned him not to answer, staring with wide eyes and praying that something - anything - would distract Genesis as he lifted one of the vials, examining it against the light before spinning it lightly in his fingers.

Then he was moving, far too fast, and there was a sting in Hollander's arm. The scientist gasped
shallowly, staring down and watching Genesis empty the syringe into him. "Genesis, no! What… what have you done?"

"I think it's time to up your motivation to find a cure," Genesis said mildly, offering a cruel smile as Hollander began to shiver, breaking out in a cold sweat. "You've earned this pain, to be the monster on the outside that you are inside. Let the world know how vile you are, petty little man, and try to save yourself."

"Genesis!" He could feel it, gods, the mako rich blood burning through him. It hadn't been straight into a vein, Genesis hadn't bothered with precision, but it didn't matter. There was direct exposure to the G cells, and he'd made outright clones with less than that. "Genesis… no… you… can't."

"Oh but I did." Genesis set the emptied syringe down, chuckling. "My, that's satisfying. Almost enough to make me want to stay and watch what happens, I'm sure it won't take long for there to be results of this little experiment. But you were right, it's poor form to keep the Goddess waiting, and I have more important things to do. It's enough to know you'll suffer, the way we suffered, for your foolishness."

"Genesis," Hollander groaned, legs giving out under him as he gripped at his arm, trying to think of what he could possibly do. He hadn't made enough progress to even halt the degradation, let alone reverse it. Maybe by now Hojo could have found something, with the better lab, but…

"My friend, the fates are cruel, there are no dreams, no honor remains," Genesis recited, oddly calm for as angry as he'd been just moments ago, mood continuing its mercurial swings. "Rot in the hell of your own making, Hollander. There will be no redemption for you."

The soft click of his boots echoed down the hall, a small smile on his face. It was time to go meet the Goddess.
Jenova expected no resistance from her human heirs. She hadn't considered that she was not the only ancient being to contend with.

The one the Cetra had called 'Calamity' had been to many planets, spreading her power throughout the stars and devouring lesser worlds. This one was not the first to fight back, but it was the first to nearly succeed in defeating her. Her cells had claimed many forms, her consciousness spread as she learned and adapted, spreading quickly through the ranks of those who called themselves Cetra, learning them as she became more, as she advanced to devour this Planet like so many before. And yet they had fought her, had killed the ones that she had taken for her own regardless of the forms they had loved, had killed and killed and fought viciously until one body remained, the one she was imprisoned in.

She was not Cetra, she was not She, but these were words that had been taken from her hosts, and for now they would do. It was through their eyes that she learned, that she changed and grew. They had sealed her away, and the spirit she had smothered beneath her Will finally shuddered and died. There was no measure of time, not for one that had existed so long, only that there was ice and darkness, and then the little ones were there, the humans. It was they who brought her out, and she was She and Her and Jenova. It was a worthy name spoken with due reverence. And they had spread her cells, even before she began to reach into any of them, unseeded but susceptible to her will. They gave her heirs, with so much more potential than the ones she had claimed amongst the Cetra; the humans were nothing if not willful, a different sort of might than their ancestors.

And then she had been trapped again, paralyzed in the chamber where she was wrapped in the lifeblood of the Planet. But it was not enough to silence her, and so she reached.

Come to me, child.

He was coming, she could feel it, slow and steady in spite of how very broken he was. Too human to fully bear her might, not as strong in the flesh as her other heirs, but with magnificent Will. She would heal him, and claim him. The body she had taken last was broken, aged and cut and decayed, but she was More than that, and one body was nothing but a start.

Come to me, I will take care of you.

It was inevitable, he was so close now, his power a welcome heat burning within the fragile flesh that held him. He was limited, as all of this Planet were limited, and yet there was a sense that he had done as she too did, had made more, spread his cells wide though they were not strong enough to survive. Not yet. She would give him that strength, though. She would make him Hers, the proper heir she was due; purified into a worthy vessel, he would become a strong arm to reach out and gather her other children, to become Hers, and carry her cells through the world. It would fall to her, as every world fell to her.

I am waiting for you.

It was only a matter of time. She was patient.
It was numbingly cold traveling through Mount Nibel, but that was the path to the Reactor, and to the warm, brilliant power within. Given a little thought, it made some sense that the Goddess could rise and reach him through the massive amount of Mako, solidified Lifestream - the Planet's source of power, he'd known it as truth from the moment he'd touched his first materia, well before he'd ever spoken to AVALANCHE. Power that also pulsed through his veins, along with the taint that had damaged him so badly.

Yet, he was being accepted for all that. It was a heady feeling, to have had his prayers answered, to be considered worthy of such an honor. He knew he had done horrible things before he'd even gotten sick, and since in his fury, and yet the Goddess heard him. Answered him. Wanted him, when he could barely stand himself. And he was so, so incredibly grateful. Anything she asked… he would do anything…

The massive building rose in the distance and he spread his wings, muscles stiff but responding to his need to hurry, impatience racing through him. He was so close, so close, it stole his breath and made his heart thunder so loudly he couldn't even hear the howl of the wind any longer. Not even a single creature crossed his path as he had traveled, and he landed gracefully to make his way up the stairs.

It was hard to breathe, his chest gone tight with anticipation, but he kept going. It was like a dream, everything else fading away under the incredible power buffering his senses, reaching for him. He blew the first door off its hinges, magic coming to his call with little more than a thought. He felt… more. Stronger. Blessed by being even on the fringes of Her presence.

"Great Goddess, I have come at last, to your summons," he breathed, following the pulsing sense of power past tiers of strange machines, they had no importance. Nothing mattered but her. The last door in his way was shoved aside - it didn't seem right to use his magic again - and he bowed his head briefly before raising his eyes, staring in awe at the massive cast bust of a woman, wings stretched wide. Perhaps some relic made back when even ShinRa was superstitious enough for respect. Not near the reverence the Goddess deserved, but… perhaps fitting, for this place.

He dropped to his knees, head bowed, and leaned into an invisible caress along his cheek. "Tell me what you want of me. Anything…"

Come to me.

Her voice was strong, and the sweetest thing he'd ever heard. Raising his eyes, he felt them focus on the polished effigy, and almost dreamlike he was aware of himself coming to his feet. He moved slowly, coming up the tubing, and brushed a hand gently along the side before his fingers curled, getting a grip along it.

He was about to wrench it free when the massive report of a gun broke his haze, pauldron cracking as the bullets continued on and buried in the wall.

Turning on his heel, he pulled his blade and stared at the winged figure looming in the doorway, acid green eyes meeting glowing gold. "Who dares interfere?"

The being merely shifted the aim of the massive four barreled gun to Genesis' chest, ragged wings spreading wide in a threat display. It bared sharp teeth, a gesture Genesis matched.

"I will strike you down," Genesis warned.

The faintest smile touched his lips, humorless, but there was no sign of concern. "Come try, Calamity's son."
Anger far beyond anything he'd ever felt rose, tangling with loathing for this creature that was intruding in this sacred moment. Interfering. He would utterly destroy it, and prove himself to the Goddess.

Sephiroth couldn't remember the last time he'd woken up because he was in pain. Dimly, he was aware that it was probably in Wutai, because not much of anything had been cause for physical hurt since, but it was hard to focus over the stabbing pain in the front of his skull. Managing to get sitting upright, he braced himself on the bed and held a hand over his eyes, breathing harshly to a count of three. In and out. In and out.

And there, the pain wasn't gone but it was a manageable burn that he could push through and still think. Getting up cautiously, he found himself steady and went to check himself in the mirror hanging in the small washroom attached to his cabin. He was paler, with faint circles under his eyes; Angeal would have something to say about that, no doubt, but the important part was that there was no actual injury, which meant it was an internal stimulus. Given recent events, perhaps Angeal would be more focused on that, if he too had suffered from whatever had happened.

In the time it took to dress, he identified further body aches, but they were easily dismissed. It was the insistent headache that had him most concerned, both for the level of pain - unheard of without actual injury - and the suddenness it came on with. There had been nothing, and then suddenly it was a full force stab that was just short of actually impairing his ability to focus. That was cause for concern that he would unfortunately have to mention, so he made his way to their medbay, where he would find Angeal and likely Hojo.

As it turned out, their small team was present minus the captain, Aerith sitting on one of the beds and leaning heavily against Zack; she looked a bit pale herself, and if she'd gotten any sleep at all it must have been of poor quality indeed. But his eyes drew to Angeal far quicker, because the older First wasn't even attempting to sit up. He was stretched out on the bed instead, one hand gripped the bedding tight in reaction to the pain that was digging deep lines into his face, his skin taking on an unhealthy ashen tone save for twin splotches of color high on his cheekbones - fever, he was able to identify immediately, and that was even more worrisome. He looked sick, moreso than before, even his breathing slightly labored. When Angeal managed to pry his eyes open they only came to half mast, his head lolling to the side as he looked at Sephiroth, an attempt to smile coming as more of a grimace. "Hey, you ok?"

Sephiroth snorted at the utter ridiculousness of Angeal spending energy being concerned about him, but that was his nature. "I woke to significant head pains. What happened?"

"We think it was Genesis, somehow." Angeal's breath caught and he raised an arm, coughing against it for a moment and recovering with a faint wheeze. "Sorry…"

"Don't be." The response was immediate, without consideration, but Sephiroth meant it. The last thing Angeal needed was to feel guilty for being ill, however badly timed. Sephiroth frowned, glancing to Aerith. "And you?"

"The Planet's in an uproar about something… it feels threatened by something that's happening." She sighed, looking at him as he edged into better view but staying tucked against Zack. "I don't understand, but I'm trying. It's even louder since we left Midgar, but no clearer. There's a threat, it wants protected. That's all I can be sure of."

"The thought that there might be something the Planet's planning to call on for that is something to think about," Zack pointed out, rubbing her back in an absent, soothing gesture. "Especially if Genesis is wrapped up in what's being seen as a threat that needs eliminated."
"Which would mean, in addition to protecting Genesis from himself and ShinRa, there may be something from the Planet itself." Sephiroth sighed quietly. "He always did crave attention."

"Was there anything beyond pain?" Hojo asked, turning to look at him, his expression grim in a way Sephiroth thought perhaps he hadn't seen since Wutai as well.

"No, there was no warning that registered with me, it woke me from an otherwise sound sleep," Sephiroth said. "It's manageable with conscientious effort, but still present. Not quite unlike migraine pains, but more intense."

"Hn." Hojo stared at him a moment longer before gesturing to Angeal. "Go stand closer."

Sephiroth arched a brow, but moved around the bed to do so, glancing down at Angeal. The older First blinked up at him, still clearly struggling but trying to cooperate. "I feel no different."

Hojo made a dissatisfied sound. "Make skin contact."

'Expectations taint results' would be the only response if he asked what the Professor was hoping for, not entirely untrue, but Sephiroth had theories of his own. Removing a glove, he reached down, brushing his fingertips across Angeal's fevered brow. "Still n."

For a split second, his vision cut out. There was blackness and a furious shrieking, rage like he'd never felt making his hand curl for want of a blade, a flare of red burning -

"Sephiroth!"

The shrieking was suddenly gone, and the rage vanished with it. He slowly became aware that his left hand was clenched around the familiar hilt of Masamune, and that another hand was wrapped tight around his wrist. Blinking slowly, he brought the room into focus, finding himself staring at Zack. The teenager had his other hand as well, presumably pulled away from where it had been touching Angeal. "I... apologize."

"You didn't do anything," Zack said quietly, searching his eyes before he was apparently satisfied and letting him go. "Just called your sword. I didn't want to wait and see if you planned to."

"That was... brave "wise of you. I'm uncertain what came over me, there was a vision... such anger..."

"Explain." Hojo didn't look shaken, but then, he never did, simply watching him.

"I couldn't see. Everything was dark, and there was a sense of rage." Sephiroth frowned, thinking of it. "Consuming rage, no other emotion, and the want to lash out on it. There was a shrill screaming, it was all I could hear, and then everything flashed red before I heard Zack calling me. Whatever connection may have occurred, he broke it - I can't feel or hear any of it now."

Hojo made a quiet sound, looking to his side. Following his gaze, he found Angeal had passed out from the experience, breathing in shallow pants and damp with sweat. "I suppose it makes sense he's in no condition to bear the force of any impulse that could take you over. When he wakes, I'll ask him about his experience. Is there anything else?"

Sephiroth considered the question, frown deepening as he realized there was, his gaze slowly turning west, towards where he knew their destination was. "I can feel two presences there. One is Genesis; it's faint, but I recognize him."

Hojo frowned. "And the other?"
"Oddly familiar, for something I have no name for." Sephiroth looked to him, then around until he found Aerith. She was gripping at the bed, staring at him with dilated eyes. "Aerith?"

"Jenova…" she breathed. "It's… it's Jenova."
Unexpected Mercy

Chapter Summary

It was not his duty, but Chaos had already been forced into the world of Man, and he would not stand idle.

It was not his time.

Chaos knew his duty, Squire to Omega as the interlopers who had taken him from his birthplace had called him. He had held many names over time, dimly aware of the goings on of the mortals he would one day wipe from the surface. But things had changed when he had been torn from his resting place, captured and contained and bound to a mortal, insult to injury. The man's will was broken, but there was evidence he had once been strong. Once, perhaps, he would have been worthy. Enough that Chaos did not seek to destroy him regardless of how his fleshly prison grated on him. The mortal chose to sleep, and was that not the same that Chaos would have done?

Years meant nothing to one who had lived since the dawn of the world, time passed quietly and without note until the clamor of the Planet roused him. The Calamity that had nearly summoned him in its first wave of destruction was awake once more, reaching for a new pawn; another mortal, but seeded with her essence, crossing to where the humans had imprisoned It. The demi-WEAPON heard the call to the siblings he'd been given, but they were far away. Too far to make it in time, clumsy, lumbering things that they were.

Perhaps if he had been left in his resting place, he would not have stirred. It was not his time, stopping the Calamity was not his duty. Perhaps it was something of his human host that had seeped into him, something that made him stir and finally break free from the flimsy case imprisoning them. Deep inside, the one called Valentine shied away from the implication, from the mere thought of leaving this place. That was fine; it allowed him to take his own form without contest, without having to fight against the power of the materia planted in their chest that was to ensure Valentine's dominance.

Chaos left the building with little effort and flew into the chill night, staring a moment at the slumbering settlement below. Nibelheim, Valentine's mind supplied, unwilling to act but unable to truly vanish. Perhaps there was pride yet that had him refusing complete submission. But he didn't fight, merely a passenger as Chaos took wing for the tall building - Reactor - in the mountains. He would not reach it before the human, but he reached it in time to stop him from reaching the Calamity's remaining body. The weapon that came to his hand was foreign, but the body was also Valentine's and he would know how to use it deaf and blind. Aim, fire, and the human turned to face him with eyes blazing, Calamity's taint clear and clouding his very essence.

"Who dares interfere?" He demanded, imperious for such a broken vessel.

Chaos did not deign to reply, moving his weapon - gun, Cerberus - to his center mass in warning, the next shot to be taken suggested by Valentine's reflex. He bared his teeth in a predator's warning, wings spreading wide, and watched the little human mirror the gesture.

"I will strike you down."
The absurdity of it amused him, the thought that this broken child could take him on even bound to the flesh of a human form. Valentine's spirit was damaged, but his skills were not. He found words, then, dark and husky from a voice that had not been used in many years. "Come try, Calamity's son."

The spike of power and fury was of clear origin, energy stirring slow and dangerous in the body imprisoned behind the metal effigy. But the boy did not - perhaps could not - know this, took it for his own emotion. He launched off the top of the tube with a blade that glowed with old power, swinging it in a high arch and bringing it down as Chaos raised the gun to block.

The moment of shock when he could block and take the blow with the barrels of his weapon lasted a beat too long. Chaos pushed back in a sweeping motion, metal grating on metal and getting the human off balance. A tilt of the gun and he changed the angle, shoving, sending him spinning off the walkway and down to the floor below. Chaos dove after him, the gun's report echoing in the reactor's acoustics.

In the space of a breath, they clashed again, but the length of the crimson blade was not enough to match the range of his host's gun. Chaos had the advantage, to merely move back and shoot, even when the Calamity tried to bolster the boy with its dark power. It wouldn't be enough. He was darker and far stronger, the ultimate executioner of the Planet. "You should not have come here, child. The Planet will not allow the Calamity free again."

"I came at the bidding of the goddess!" He spat, furious but forced to take a step back. He staggered slightly, caught in the side by at least one of the bullets and panting through the pain. His pale skin flushed an unhealthy shade as he gripped his side, blood slowly seeping through his fingers.

He was easy prey, but his words made Chaos stop and stare. Something strange gripped him, watching the boy standing so defiant in his assumed righteousness. "The Powers sleep, little mortal, only one so much as raises her staff now. This crypt is the Calamity's. You came at Jenova's bidding."

The name was foreign on his tongue, coming from Valentine, but it hit stronger than any of his shots had so far. There was a moment where his confidence faltered, and Chaos advanced swiftly. Seemingly stunned, he put up no resistance to being knocked off his feet, quickly pinned to the floor by a hand. Below, the concentrated Lifestream began to roil with Chaos' presence, the resonance of one of the Planet's WEAPONs coming into contact with the spawn of the Calamity.

He's just a boy.

Valentine, of course, who had been little more than a boy himself when they had been bound.

It doesn't matter.

It shouldn't matter. It was sense to kill him, eliminate the threat.

He pressed the barrel of his gun to the boy's heaving chest as he fought to breathe in the tight pin, his own power rising in a dark cloud that even the Calamity's greedy fingers would not penetrate. "You should not have come here."

Genesis stared up into unforgiving gold eyes, swallowing hard. His mind was quiet, and he hadn't realized it had been so loud until the enraged shrieking stopped. His heart pounded still, adrenaline rushing, but it wasn't the same. Things were quiet and clear in a way he didn't know when he'd last felt. It was good.

That didn't help him with the demon pressing what amounted to a hand cannon to his chest, saying
he shouldn't have come. Saying Jenova had brought him there.

"I thought..." He swallowed again, throat dry. "I thought Jenova was dead."

"Were the Cetra able to kill it, they would have. It was merely imprisoned - neutralized, not exterminated." The being tucked its wings back, but didn't move the gun. "And then the humans pulled It free. Gave It spawn."

"I'm not Jenova's spawn," he hissed.

"And yet you come to Its call." The sheer _effortlessness_ the being was pinning him with, one large hand splayed over his chest, was almost as crushing as its words.

"I didn't know," he whispered hoarsely. Was this how he was going to die? "I'd prayed, how was I to know Jenova could hear me?"

"Prayed." Its lips twitched in a brief, surprisingly human half-smile, though there was no warmth to it. "Who do you pray to, little mortal? Who did you think was going to answer you?"

Genesis wet his lips, trying to get a good breath against the unrelenting pressure on his chest. It nearly made him cough. "The Goddess Minerva."

An arched brow and a curious tilt of the head greeted that statement. "And you think, Calamity's spawn, she would care for your worship?"

Tears burned in his eyes and Genesis growled, furious with himself for them, for letting this monster get that much of a reaction. But if honesty would get him a chance to escape... "I had to try."

It made a thoughtful sound, gaze growing distant as if listening to something far away. Then, in one smooth motion, it rose and made a sweeping gesture towards the exit. "Go then. Whether you receive mercy or execution will be her decision. Don't stop until you reach her shrine in the south. If you return to aid the Calamity again, I will slay you where you stand."

Genesis made a strangled sound, scooting away before he carefully got to his feet. Without the being's contact, he was dimly aware of the furious screeching in the back of his mind, but knowing what it was... that was enough. He wanted no part in Jenova's schemes. Though he wasn't sure what this creature was, it was clear that he was terribly outmatched and it was enough that he was being let go. He wasn't going to stay and risk it changing its mind.

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Chaos watched the little mortal flee, listening idly to the Calamity's futile raging before he took wing and exited the chamber himself. Perhaps he should have slain him, but the shock of finding one who genuinely seemed to still follow one of the Powers had been the first thing to stay his hand.

The second was the greater threat he felt approaching from the east, a mortal of greater strength and greater taint coming unerringly to this little town that had nothing of consequence but the Calamity. As it was now, he felt confident in the match, but if the Calamity managed to hook into this child... that would go badly. There was a great deal of sleeping potential that could not be released. Stranger than that, however, was the gleam of familiar light, essence he had never expected to sense again, certainly not traveling with the Calamity's spawn. There was a Cetra, and one of the bearers of the Planet's greatest gift.

Something strange was going on, and he would see what it was.
Change of Plans

Chapter Summary

AVALANCHE has chosen to change their strategy, skipping a chance to blow another reactor. Veld doesn't trust this is in the company's favor.

Chapter Notes

Wanted to put a quick warning out: most likely there will not be the weekly update next Monday. Got some last-minute news and I'm heading out of state! Good stuff, but I won't be available for this. Hang in there!

AVALANCHE made it to Gongaga before the main team of Turks caught up. At the time, Balto and Cissnei were still on watch, but ordered to stand down and observe until they knew what was going on.

As it turned out, all they came for was another of the support materia Shears had mentioned. Cait Sith kept Reeve in touch with the system, ready for anything, but they didn't try to do anything - not even setting up a bomb to leave behind.

"Nothing?" Veld pressed, frowning deeply as both operatives shook their heads. "So whatever he's got planned with those materia is apparently a bigger deal than messing up the reactors."

"That's certainly how it seems," Katana agreed. "It could have also been that Gongaga is so rural, but unless they knew we were here somehow there was no reason they shouldn't have found the level of destruction they could cause tempting. It's not monsoon season, things would burn. It would take out the village, if not the jungle as well."

"Right. So they're shifting priorities." Veld didn't like the sound of that, didn't like the idea that this summon implanted in his daughter could possibly cause more damage than a blown reactor. He'd seen summons before, some of them could wreck a city the size of Midgar if you had the mana to keep it summoned long enough and no one fought it off. But they'd been right there and hadn't even hesitated to move on. "I'll have this 'Zirconade' looked into."

"Bugenhagen may know something," Victor said quietly. "Are we still heading that way?"

"We will." Veld nodded, glancing back at the video feed. "You two stay put for a few more hours, be sure they're gone. Then head to Cosmo Canyon, we'll rendezvous and have a word with Bugenhagen. We've got plenty of time to catch up after while they're relying on those vans to get them up the Nibel range."

"Of course, sir." Katana nodded.

"Any word from the SOLDIER team?" Cissnei asked. "They were heading to Nibelheim…"
"They haven't been in touch yet, but they shouldn't have arrived just yet either," Veld said. "The Highwind is impressive, but it's not quite as fast as our helos. Ideally, any confrontation will be swift, Genesis hasn't stayed to fight long yet, and probably isn't up to it. We'll see how that goes."

"Alright. We'll confirm that they haven't come back before we set out, just to be sure," Cissnei said.

"I'll watch for your text, and update headquarters accordingly." Veld nodded. "Let Reeve know to get Cait Sith ready to deal with the Nibel Reactor, he may need time."

"Of course." She waited a beat, making sure there wasn't anything more, then nodded. "Shuriken out."

"Be safe," he murmured, sighing when the screen went dark. "Keep us on course for Cosmo Canyon, Reno. I'm going to call in to Tseng."

"You got it, boss." Reno offered a two-fingered salute, nodding and slouching comfortably in his seat.

It took a moment longer than normal for Tseng to answer the call. "Sir?"

"AVALANCHE didn't touch the reactor in Gongaga, just grabbed the materia Shears was talking about," Veld said. "I need you to have someone look more into this Zirconade summon, find out what we're dealing with that would make them skip the opportunity to do some damage that would look bad on the company. There may be something in Hojo's files."

"Of course, I'll see that it's looked into at once," Tseng agreed. "Reeve mentioned their lack of destruction already, however. Rufus was thinking of putting a call in."

Veld considered that a long moment. "Alright. But no mentioning what he did to his father, not until we have a solid cover story to sell the public on."

"Of course, sir, I'll make sure that's clear," Tseng said. "And get back to you on the results."

"Do that. We're on our way to Cosmo Canyon now, but I'll forward a message to the SOLDIER team so they know AVALANCHE is headed their way," Veld said. "Hopefully Bugenhagen will have some information as well."

"I wish you luck, sir. I'll brief you on whatever Rufus finds out once he finishes."

"Mm. Later, then." Veld ended the call, frowning slightly.

"You think Bugenhagen will be cooperative?" Victor asked. "He didn't like much of anyone other than the professors, and they're both long gone."

"I don't really care if he likes me," Veld admitted. "All that matters is he cooperates. ShinRa may not be the best thing for the Planet, but AVALANCHE isn't a step up in anything but lip service."

"Fair." Victor shrugged. "He was always an odd one, though. I guess we'll see whose side he's on."

"Not ours," Veld predicted. "But that doesn't mean he's explicitly against us. And unless he's gone senile, he would know that it's not actually helping anyone to just blow up the reactors. That's already a step up from AVALANCHE."

"Point." Victor nodded. "Not looking forward to finding out what they think is a better tactic. Maybe another word with our new friend?"
Veld smiled faintly, looking to where the small group of army had Shears surrounded, his headset muffling any of their conversation. "Actually, yes. Get the muffler off him, Strife."

"Yessir."

Shears looked his way when the headset was removed. "Somethin' come up?"

"I need you to tell me everything about Fuhito's plans for Zirconade."

Rufus settled in for another call to AVALANCHE, waiting until Tseng gave him the signal and listening to it ring a moment. "Hello Fuhito."

"Mr. Vice President," Fuhito said. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"I'm concerned about your movements," Rufus said mildly. "I gave you the codes to the Gongaga reactor, I know you accessed it. And yet you've done nothing."

"Fufufu, so sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid matters have come up that are more pressing," Fuhito said. "But I assure you, the end result will be quite impressive."

"Impressive enough to make up for a blown reactor?" Rufus asked lightly. "Now you have me curious. I don't suppose it's related at all to the materia we found an old friend of yours carrying?"

Tseng gave Rufus a sharp look, frowning deeply in disapproval for the disclosure.

There was a long pause from Fuhito. "So the Turks recovered Shears, did they? Is he alive?"

"I have no idea, I wasn't given much detail," Rufus lied smoothly, smiling at Tseng. "I didn't sound like he'd given them anything to go off of, so I doubt it, but now you have me curious. Is that something you're going to need?"

"It would make things easier," Fuhito said carefully. "Most certainly, if you were willing to part with it, I would be appreciative."

"I might be, if I knew what it was for," Rufus said. "I'd given you those codes for a reason, Fuhito. If there's a change of plans, as your primary investor I believe it's prudent to keep me appraised."

"Ah, of course, of course, Vice President. How rude of me to overlook such a thing." With clear motive insinuated, Fuhito relaxed. "They are for Miss Elfé, to enhance her considerable strength. With them all gathered, we will be poised to strike a much more effective blow on the ShinRa."

"I see." Rufus made a considering sound. "I can't just hand it over, of course, even once I get my hands on it. You have the Turks quite worked up, and I'm being watched for my protection. But perhaps we can make arrangements. Money talks, and there's plenty of bribable people around here."

"Fufufu, that would be quite helpful, of course. You are most kind," Fuhito said. "Truly. Our paths on this continent are not completely traveled, however, so you will have time to fine one such individual. We may be out of easy contact for a while, as we travel along the Nibel Mountain range. Reception is not guaranteed in the mountains. But when we reach our objectives and return, I will be in contact once more."

"Mm, do that then," Rufus said, letting warning edge his voice. "And keep me informed, Fuhito. Your organization is helpful, but only to the extent we work together on reforms. I'm not paying for you to change things without warning."
"Of course, of course, I understand," Fuhito said soothingly. "I will not overlook the sharing of such information again. Your generosity and assistance has been extremely valuable, I am quite grateful."

Rufus made a quiet sound of satisfaction, a small smile playing on his lips. "Be careful. The last I'd heard, Genesis Rhapsodos is rumored to be in the area you're heading into."

"A kind reminder, Vice President, but we have an understanding with the rogue SOLDIER. He will not be a problem for us," Fuhito said confidently. "Now, if you would excuse me, we need to continue. This is not an easy journey and requires attention."

"Of course. Do be safe." Rufus hung up, absently tapping his fingertip on his phone. "Well then. It looks like we have bait."

Tseng arched a brow, frown remaining. "You can't expect to hand over that materia, Rufus."

"No, but I can have him try to come get it anyway," Rufus said, smiling. "And you and yours can be ready."

It wasn't an unfamiliar concept, but Tseng wasn't sure he liked it. Something about the scenario grated against his instincts. "We'll speak with Veld."

"Of course we will." Rufus chuckled. "I look forward to it. In the meantime, I suppose it's time I tend to my new office, hm? Pointless to stop external threats without minding our troublemakers at home."

"Of course, sir." That got the faintest smile. "I'll get you the reports of our most recent departmental reviews."
Chaos sorely underestimated the willpower his host still possessed. For now, he would let Valentine have his way.

For a while things had gotten worse as the airship drew them further into Nibelheim. Angeal tossed fitfully in his sleep, muttering and scowling, and Sephiroth was still plagued by the same intense pains.

Then, without warning, they stopped. Like a deflating balloon, the tension drained from the room, stopping at a low, manageable level - little more than background noise.

Zack looked between Aerith and Sephiroth, frowning. "What happened?"

Aerith held her breath a long moment, letting it out slowly. "It's quiet."

"The pain is duller," Sephiroth said, pressing his fingers to his temples experimentally, mapping slowly over the areas that had been throbbing just moments before. "I can still sense Jenova, but Genesis is moving. He's gone south."

"So... he wasn't here for Jenova?" Zack asked, though he was aware they were at as much of a loss as he was. "What else is here?"

"The best lab Hollander can get, outside of Junon or Midgar," Hojo said. "If he was still looking to help Genesis, Hollander would need somewhere to process, certain minimal equipment that I doubt AVALANCHE could have provided even were they willing to part with it."

"Alright. How long would that take?" Zack asked.

Hojo gave him a flat look. "I haven't found a solution yet; you can be sure that Hollander is still struggling."


"Faster than he'd been moving earlier," Sephiroth confirmed, frowning. "You suspect he's unburdened, then."

"Well yeah, he has to know he's the priority over Hollander," Zack pointed out. "So if he can draw us away..."

"Then he can give Hollander more time to work on a cure," Sephiroth nodded. "Reasonable, if he's still capable of so much logic. The question, then, is if we take the bait or call his bluff. We're practically in Nibelheim now, it won't take that much time to investigate and try to find Hollander."

"I don't think the Planet likes having us this close to Jenova," Aerith said. "It's still upset, just not as frantic. Something happened that lowered the threat level, maybe Genesis leaving."
"Yeah, can't help but wonder how he'd reacted this close." Zack frowned, glancing at Aerith. "He didn't react to you the way the others did, there's definitely something different. Any theories on how Sephiroth and Angeal might react if we get any closer? Anyone feel weird at all?"

"Still pain, but nothing like the sensation when Angeal and I were in contact before." Sephiroth's eyes tracked towards the village. "I sense Jenova, but I feel no connection. Just awareness."

"All things considered, I'd say that's good news," Zack said. "The last thing we need is you going off the deep end. We're running out of people who can do something about that."

"I have sedatives, but in a heightened state his metabolism would burn through them unfortunately quickly," Hojo said. "It's debatable we'd have time to get out of the range of any effect that would have been causing trouble. Given the stability of his genetics, however, Sephiroth is not inherently vulnerable. If anything, between sheer willpower and his own concentration of cells, control would go the other way."

"Which explains your lack of concern in my proximity," Sephiroth observed. "I'd wondered."

"Without suffering some previous blow to your psyche to create a vulnerability, there's no reason to believe you would have any problem," Hojo said. "You don't possess the vulnerabilities the other two were born with."

"And at this point, Angeal's too weak to be a threat so… into Nibelheim to find our rogue doctor?" Zack suggested. "He won't have a cure, but he'll know how Genesis is now, give us a starting point."

"Agreed, we'll -"

"SOLDIER boys, you better get yer assess t' the bridge." Captain Highwind's voice echoed over the speakers, startling Angeal awake. "We got company, an' I don't like the look of it."

"Company?" Zack rose, grabbing the Buster Sword from where he'd leaned it against the wall and swinging it onto his back. "Did you feel any- whoa, never mind. I feel that."

"That is a considerable amount of power," Sephiroth said, frowning. "Angeal, stay here. We'll see what we're dealing with."

"I'll stay out of the fight, if there is one," Angeal promised, shrugging off the blankets and getting to his feet. "But I'm not staying behind. We're in this together."

"Touching. Stay back with Ms. Faremis, if you must come," Hojo said, following the two Firsts as they sprinted for the bridge.

The sight was unexpected, an airborne being not more than two meters from the ship seemingly floating in the air. Humanoid, despite silver skin and strange red hair that stood up like a headdress, it bore two ragged wings with an impressive span. One hand gleamed gold with armor similar to other strange, pointed pieces it wore at its knees, and the other held a truly massive gun that it slowly raised to point unerringly at the SOLDIERs.

"I think it senses us, too," Zack said. "Is that Jenova?"

"No." Aerith stepped up beside him, resting a hand on his arm and watching the being slowly lower its weapon. "That's… that's a WEAPON of the Planet."

"The Chaos demi-Weapon, herald to Omega," Hojo said, expression sour. "'Soul wrought of terra
"corrupt... behold mighty Chaos, Omega's squire to the lofty heavens.' Of all the things she could be right about, for Leviathan's sake…"

"That was nearly poetic," Sephiroth said, not taking his eyes off the apparent WEAPON ahead.
"What's the origin of the verse?"

"It was from your mother's thesis paper," Hojo said, frowning as he paced to the front of the airship. "Her theories and subject matter were so abstract no one took her seriously, and they never made it into the database, but I listened to her talk enough to remember the basics. According to her studies, Chaos was a sentient xenoform spawned from the Lifestream, for the purpose of culling any remaining life at the end of the Planet's cycle, allowing it to move to another location."

"And that's it there ahead?" Sephiroth gestured to the winged being hovering before them.

"Oh yes, if she was right, that is most definitely Chaos." Hojo scowled, turning to look up at the captain. "Highwind, do you have an external speaker?"

"You wanna talk t' that thing?" Cid frowned. "I've got a bullhorn that'll do, but I don't know what good it'll do ya. Doesn't sound like he'd be a real chatty guy."

"I want access to it where I can see," Hojo said, smiling tightly. "I'm not planning to address Chaos. Lucrecia made things a bit more complicated than that, but perhaps it will be to our advantage."

"Alright, get up here t' the console then," Cid said, gesturing beside himself as he unhooked the handset, handing it over. "You SOLDIER boys be ready if that thing goes hostile."

"Of course, Captain." Sephiroth didn't summon Masamune, it wouldn't take enough time to be concerned with doing so now compared to the potential escalation if this 'Chaos' felt threatened. He glanced at Hojo briefly, thoughtful. It was clear that he was familiar with the entity, at least in theory, yet he wasn't going to speak to it? What other options could there be? What had his mother done with this WEAPON?

Hojo stared out the front for a long moment, weighing his words. "Valentine, control your WEAPON and come here. It isn't needed but you might just be of use."

"Yeah, I see why you didn't go into politics," Zack muttered, tensing as Chaos turned and leveled his gun at Hojo, likely able to make him out through the wide glass panes, lips moving. "Hey, he's saying something, can you pick that up?"

"Yeah, gimme a minute..." Cid worked over the control panel. "Tell him t' repeat."

Chaos apparently did not need prompting, voice pitched just enough to carry. "You should not have brought the Calamity's spawn here. Their threat to the Planet will be removed."

"Oh I very seriously doubt he'll let you do that," Hojo said, a hard smile curving his lips. "Valentine doesn't give a damn about your purpose. He won't raise a hand to Lucrecia's son."

Tension immediately gripped the WEAPON's lean frame, ragged wings flaring in a jerky motion. The gun was cocked, staying steady on Hojo, but the professor only stared back with grim satisfaction.

"You're in there, I know you are. And you heard me," Hojo said confidently. "You've taken control before, Valentine. You can do so now. And you will, because if there's anything in this world that will move you, it's Lucrecia. She's gone, but the boy is here. If you really wanted to help her, this is your last chance."
Slowly, Chaos began to drift closer, enough to be seen properly. His eyes held the shine of the enhanced, but an inhuman gold that was slowly backlit by red, creating a fiery gleam. Beneath the armor, a blue light began to shine. "… Hojo…"

The Professor huffed a mirthless laugh, lips twisted in a small smile. "Hello Valentine. I must say, you continue to have the most interesting sense of timing. But if you're done sulking, perhaps you'd care to evaluate the situation with your mind and not your temper, hm?"

There was a flash of emotion - stark fury playing across the strange face as he bared sharp teeth - but it settled, the voice that spoke coming out with an odd note of hope. "You spoke of Lucrecia's son."

"Come talk to him yourself," Hojo suggested. "Step up to the windows, Sephiroth."

Sephiroth did as told, too curious to protest, staring at the odd figure that apparently shared a body with the Chaos WEAPON, someone willing to fight it off just at the mention of his mother. Just who was this Valentine?

Vincent swooped low enough to nearly touch the glass, hovering in front of the massive airship. It was easy to pick out the figure in question, taller than all the others and breathtakingly familiar. The hair was silver, but the length and even the arch of the bangs were hers. The shape of his face, his ears… the long lashes, finely arched brows… "Sephiroth."

Part of him wanted to look deeper into the hints of Wutai blood in his cheekbones, the shape of his eyes, the unusual fullness of his lips. If he had been colored in black and red instead of silver and green it would be so easy to believe-

But no, there was nothing but pain to be had down that path. Those intelligent green eyes watched him with the intrigue of one who recognized the importance of a moment without enough context to follow through to the significance. In the back of his mind, Chaos was seething at inaction so close, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered more than seeing this man, Lucrecia's beloved child. All that was left, if he dared to believe Hojo. He had much to find out. "I'll come."

Dimly, he heard an argument about allowing him in, but there was shouting below and he let himself drop. The crewman there to greet him looked terrified as he landed, swaying slightly as he released Chaos' form. Vertigo had him bracing himself on the rail, gauntlet leaving behind four score marks that he didn't look too closely at. "Take me to Sephiroth."

"O-of course s-sir."

It wasn't too long a path to take, coming into a large main room with an array of people that had nervousness screaming from their posture. But they held their own, which he supposed he respected. Quiet footsteps in a familiar rhythm had his gaze shifting quickly to the side, and he went tense. Intellectually, he recognized the man. It was Hojo, clearly. But… he'd aged, and the years had not been kind. Being confronted with the physical proof of time passed in someone he'd known, seeing him changed, was enough to shake him from his long-held anger. "… how long has it been?"

"Your little nap has lasted twenty five years," Hojo said mildly. "And quite a lot has happened since. Circumstances what they are, a history lesson will have to wait. We're tracking down one of the boys from Project G who's gone rogue. He's highly unstable, physically and mentally, and going to die unless we get to him. He may die anyway, I don't know his current state."

"We saw him, I think," Vincent said, frowning slightly. The memories weren't quite clear, in a hazy third person while Chaos was in control. The WEAPON quieted now, however, taking in the
"Chaos met him in the reactor, presumably drawn to the Jenova specimen. He'd thought it was a goddess calling him."

"Of course he did, the boy's obsessed." Hojo rolled his eyes, leaning against the rail. "What happened, then? Presumably the WEAPON is behind you leaving confinement at all."

"I don't know all that motivated him. But there seemed to be some… summons… from the Planet that he was reacting to, motivation to go interrupt." Vincent shook his head. "He was going to kill him. The others still might."

"More WEAPONS," Hojo stated, frowning. "And why didn't the WEAPON kill the boy? Did he do something to the Jenova specimen instead?"

"No, he let him go on the condition he not return. Said something about a goddess to the south." Vincent wasn't sure what to make of that, or that he wanted to give it too much thought. "I'm not sure what made him willing to be merciful, he had him where he could have easily been killed."

"What are the odds he thought there was a bigger threat?" One of the men standing by Sephiroth spoke up, eyes glowing just as vibrantly but a blue-violet shade instead of green. "He seemed ready to fight us, too. And Sephiroth minimum is stronger than Genesis."

Vincent's eyes narrowed slightly at Chaos' internal growl. "That seems… reasonable. I know he doesn't want any of you further into Nibelheim."

"And how much would he fight that, if we tried?" He asked. "There's a good chance - whoa, you okay?"

Vincent had cringed with the force of Chaos' displeasure, a hand going to his temple and pressing lightly. "I... think it would be contested."

"You two clearly share form, but the body is yours," Sephiroth said, watching him. "He can fight you for control, and take it?"

"It seems possible," Vincent agreed quietly, straightening with only the slight narrowing of his eyes to tell for the pain of Chaos' protests. "It... seems like a matter of willpower and mental strength."

"Right, and that's a fight you won earlier, but the more you two fight, the more tired you're gonna get," the other man said. "And the more tired you get, the better Chaos' chances of taking control."

"Correct," Vincent said, resisting a sigh. "It's a fight I would not give up, but he's willing to bide his time."

"Uh huh. And he wants... what, to kill everybody with J-cells?" He shook his head at Vincent's slight nod. "So that's Sephiroth and Angeal. Maybe it'd be best if you and me just talk this out, keep some physical space between them."

"I want to talk to him." A young woman came forward, watching him pensively, and he startled at the sudden silence from Chaos. From her small smile, it seemed like somehow she knew. "Can Chaos hear me, then?"

Vincent nodded slightly. "He's aware."

"Okay. My name's Aerith," she said, letting the man who had been talking pull her against his side. "I know about Jenova, and what It did. And I know what he's sensing from Sephiroth, and Angeal. Maybe even a little from Zack, even though it's different. But... they're not the same. They're not like..."
Jenova, and it's not their fault that they have those cells. It's not fair to go after them for it."

Vincent spent a moment in silence, working through the flurry of emotion from Chaos. More than anything, skepticism. And disbelief. "He… seems hesitant to believe you."

"Of course he does. I told you, I know what he's sensing, and it's scary," Aerith said, biting her lip a minute. "I get it. I was scared too. But they're more than those cells. They're human, and they deserve to be on this Planet as much as anyone else."

Vincent frowned, tilting his head to try and get a grasp on Chaos' reaction. Pensive. Questioning. Who was this woman to make a WEAPON pause? "I don't think he believes you."

"He doesn't have to believe me," Aerith said, straightening her shoulders though it didn't make her seem much taller against the backdrop of the three men. "But he needs to know that if he wants to take them out, he can explain to the Planet why he's going to kill its last Cetra. Because I won't let him."

Utter silence, then the unearthly echo of Chaos' voice, dark silk in his mind.

She is a very brave little fool.

Vincent stared at her a moment, thoughts turned inward. Would you fight her?

She can't stop me. There was almost something like amusement at the mere thought that she'd try, but… something settled. Tell them to leave this place and go south. It is not my duty to judge; so long as they do not aid the Calamity, I will stay my hand. For now.

"Valentine?" The Cetra was watching him, green eyes far too old. "What did he say?"

"He said he'll wait and see, so long as you leave. Go south, like he'd told the other," Vincent said. "He seems to think there will be someone else to meet there, who should make the decision instead."

"Hmph. It's not like Hollander would be that much a help," Hojo said. "Why not? It's more important to catch the boy anyway."

Vincent nodded slightly, feeling himself relax now that Chaos wasn't pushing at his mind. "Is he capable of traveling fast enough to stay ahead?"

"If he doesn't stop, perhaps. But an airship doesn't need breaks to rest," Hojo said. "We'll see."

"Then we head south, following Genesis' path," Sephiroth said, eyes fixed on Vincent. "And you?"

Vincent smiled slightly, nodding. His mind had been made since he'd first seen Sephiroth. "I will go with you."
Priorities

Chapter Summary

Being a leader meant making hard calls on what to prioritize, and their missions have to come first. But they're sorely mistaken if they think Veld's just letting this go.

There was a lot of time to think on the flight to Cosmo Canyon, more than Veld would have liked without having new information to process. The buzz in of a call from SOLDIERs team was almost a relief for the break, except that was awfully quick for what he'd calculated the Highwind would be able to do.

"I'm going to assume you haven't engaged Genesis yet," Veld decided, looking Sephiroth over. There was something different now, a slight tenseness around his eyes. Circumstances what they were, he couldn't blame him.

"The situation has changed," Sephiroth said. "We haven't engaged Genesis, no; we're currently following him as he heads south."

Veld frowned, thinking that over, but he couldn't come up for any reason Genesis would suddenly head south. "Any idea on his motivations?"

"Perhaps I should be the one to explain."

Veld sucked in a breath, the air driven out of him as solidly as if he'd been hit, a sensation not unlike vertigo flipping his stomach as a lean figure stepped into view behind Sephiroth. Distantly, he noted the voice was different - Vincent had been a tenor, not a bass - and there had been some physical changes. But not enough. Not nearly enough to even begin to deny that he was looking at his dead partner - not dead, he's right there, my god he's not dead. "Vincent."

A small smile graced the other man's lips. "Veld."

"Fucking hell, where have you been?" He demanded, having to consciously loosen his hold on the tablet when it creaked warningly in his grip.

"Nibelheim."

"Nibel. " His voice cracked - Nibelheim? I've been in Nibelheim where the fuck - "Nibelheim. Where?"

"ShinRa Manor. Basement." Vincent arched a brow as he swore. "It's complicated."

"Well then uncomplicate it, Valentine, I'm listening," Veld hissed, fury all but choking him. Vincent was alive. Vincent was alive, all this time.

Again.

Again with this shit. This lie that he'd lost someone for good, when they'd been stolen. Veld saw red and grit his teeth against another flow of curses. "You know what, no. No you put that bastard on. I don't care what Hojo's doing, we're going to talk about this. Now."
Vincent watched him a moment longer, then gestured to the side. There was a rather loud sigh before the camera adjusted, zooming out to have the professor in view as well.

Hojo had the gall to look bored, arms crossed. "Wasn't this supposed to be a business call?"

"You reported my partner killed in action over twenty years ago and he's very much alive, Hojo, I'd definitely say we have business to discuss," Veld said, trying to get a hold on his temper. It wasn't working. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Victor had gone white, staring and frozen, but he couldn't address that now. "Explain yourself."

"He was dead, the undoing of that wasn't mine," Hojo said mildly. "His choice to stay in Nibelheim was also not my doing. You'll notice I haven't protested him coming along now that he's apparently ready to quit sulking."

"Choice?" Veld switched his gaze back to Vincent.

"It's complicated," Vincent repeated, that same damned stubbornness in his eyes as if he thought he could just waltz back and not explain. "However, I have determined that I will be returning, at least so long as it takes to aid Sephiroth."

To aid Sephiroth. Lucrecia's son, of fucking course. Veld took a deep breath, holding it a moment and letting it back out slowly. He hadn't been a kid for a long time, he wasn't going to lose his head over this. Right now, hundreds or more miles away, there was nothing he could do to force either of them to talk about this and there was other business. More pressing business, even if he was burning to know more. "The three of us? We're going to have a long talk when we meet up. Now tell me about Genesis."

There was a brief pause, Vincent watching him - reading him, he'd always been too good at that - before he nodded slightly in acceptance. "He went to the reactor, under the impression he was being called by Minerva while it was Jenova."

"Oh, so the dead specimen is communicating now?" Veld looked at Hojo, thumb tapping an irritated beat on the tablet. "Really. Thought there was no brain activity?"

"There wasn't." Hojo narrowed his eyes slightly. "I don't claim to understand just what's going through that boy's head. It would make more sense that he was delusional."

"Or you're wrong." But of course Hojo wasn't going to say as much. Veld glanced at Sephiroth. "Anyone else receive communication?"

"In retrospect there is a possibility that Angeal and I felt an echo of it," Sephiroth admitted. "There is no current connection or influence, however."

"Small mercies," he muttered, frowning. "Who met him in the reactor?"

"I was there." There was a pause before Vincent spoke, the sort that said there was more to it - the faint frown drawing his brows together confirmed it.

"Let me guess, it's complicated?" Veld asked dryly. "I can get the camera feed up."

"My current situation involves sharing my body with another sentient being, so yes, it's complicated," Vincent said, just as dry but watching him intently once more.

Veld felt a cold trickle of worry down his spine, an anxious dread from instincts that said not good and reminded him that he'd never seen red mako eyes, not even on Sephiroth who'd had intense
work done from conception on. "Right. Anybody I should know?"

"Chaos."

He been being flip, damn it. He hadn't expected an actual answer that he would know, a name that rang a bell after a moment, that did nothing to help that horrible feeling and only built on the dread. "Chaos. The WEAPON, from your old man's work?"

"One and the same," Vincent agreed, a small, mirthless smile on his lips. "I do very much wish I'd paid more attention to Father's work at this point. He only speaks as he feels is relevant, and rarely about himself."

"Well you two must have a hell of a time talking," Veld muttered, not knowing how else to respond as his mind tried to process that. There was so much he wanted to ask - needed to know - but he couldn't. Not in front of the SOLDIERs, sure as hell not in front of Hojo. Even if he'd thought it was a good idea, Vincent never would have tolerated it and there wasn't time. "Alright, tell me the rest."

"Genesis came at Jenova's call, though he was unaware. The Planet attempted to summon WEAPONs, and Chaos decided that he would go himself. Likely wise, as he just interfered in time to stop him from reaching the body." Vincent frowned slightly again, working through the information himself. "I'm not certain why Chaos didn't kill him. It wasn't for me."

"Could he have?" Veld asked.

"Easily." There was no hesitation there. "Genesis is extremely ill. That he was still as strong as he was defied logic, but he still wasn't together enough to challenge Chaos."

"Did Chaos say anything about why he let him go? Just… leave him to die or what? Because we have literal years of proof that leaving Genesis Rhapsodos to die doesn't work. It usually backfires spectacularly, in fact," Veld said, thinking of far too many situations in Wutai that Genesis had come out of living on ethers and sheer spite. He usually went right back to take down whatever had nearly killed him, too.

"My theory is that something about him seeming to genuinely worship one of the Gods made him slightly more lenient," Vincent said. "And he was distracted wanting to come stop Sephiroth from entering the town, as he is a significantly greater potential threat."

"Fair." Veld frowned. "Thoughts on him wanting to fight Sephiroth?"

"I won the battle of willpower before he could attack, but he made a hostile stance clear," Vincent said. "He was pressing to be released to do so up until we spoke with Aerith. She seems to have settled him, for now."

Veld arched a brow, considering that and nodding slowly in acknowledgment. "Alright. He's pacified for now, and you're going to accompany the team to retrieve Genesis, now that he's been talked down from not changing his mind on killing him?"

"That was my understanding." Vincent glanced at Sephiroth, a telling decision on who he was taking as the person in charge. He wasn't really wrong.

"Our goal remains to contact, and eventually retrieve Genesis however necessary to get him in custody, and treated," Sephiroth said.

"Progress on that?" Veld glanced at Hojo.
"Minimal, but some of my tests are suggesting things I'll be ready to try soon." Hojo's lips pursed, displeased. "Setbacks from the backlash of this business of Genesis' in the reactor considered, we're on a stricter time schedule now."

A glance at Angeal agreed with that. He'd had to sit down, and his skin had an unhealthy grayish cast, eyes sunken with a sickly, fevered brightness instead of the usual mako gleam, the skin beneath them looking bruised from a lack of restful sleep.

Veld nodded slightly. "Best of luck, then. We're tracking the AVALANCHE caravan to Nibelheim, but we're going to take time to stop by Cosmo Canyon and have a word with Bugenhagen."

"Oh well, you have fun," Hojo said, smirking faintly. "I'm sure he'll love to have a bunch of Turks on his doorstep."

"I get my quickest intel from people not happy to see me," Veld said evenly. "And we have an understanding. I don't anticipate significant difficulty."

"I'm sure." Hojo shook his head. "What does Fuhito want with Nibelheim?"

"He seems to think there's a support materia there for the Zirconade summon," Veld said, watching him closely. "Ring any bells?"

Hojo sighed, head tipping back as he considered it. "It was a fractured materia. Even with the supports, I very seriously doubt it will create a viable summon."

"He seems to think otherwise," Veld said.

"He fancies himself a significantly more impressive intellectual mind than he is," Hojo said dryly. "His Ravens were intriguing, but Hollander did better work. Hmph, you might watch for that. He's still there, if Genesis didn't kill him."

Veld frowned slightly. "Hollander is still in Nibelheim? You didn't get him?"

"Chaos objected to them going any further," Vincent said.

"Chaos can shut up and sit down," Veld said, not looking away from Hojo, his frown deepening. "You left Hollander in the same town as the Jenova specimen, presumably now knowing that it's there? And a functional lab?"

"It doesn't have the supplies for him to do anything any time soon, certainly not without Genesis." Hojo waved off the concern. "Better to track the boy. He's the priority."

Veld rubbed his mouth, instinct saying that was a terrible idea. "You need to go back and get him."

"For all we know, Genesis killed him." Hojo shook his head. "He's no threat there, and your team will be there within a day or two. He won't have time to get up to trouble."

"And just how much are you willing to bet on that?" Veld asked. "How many lives? There's a whole town there. Desperate people are dangerous people, Hojo, and he wasn't right to start with."

"Just what do you think he could do?" Hojo asked.

"With the history of your department, all I count on is a mess I'm going to have to clean up," Veld said. "And we've got enough on our plate when you could literally turn around and go take care of it."
"The priority is Genesis," Hojo said, glancing briefly at Sephiroth before looking back to Veld. "And the greater danger. He may have been too ill to take on a demi-WEAPON, but he's still strong enough to merit SOLDIER intervention. More than strong enough to continue slaughtering civilians as fits his whim."

"You say that like you give a damn." But there was no winning. Sephiroth would back Hojo - Hojo was only there pushing for it because of Sephiroth - and Vincent was clearly following Sephiroth's lead as well. This far away, his hands were tied. All he could do was hope Hojo was right, that there wasn't time or resources for Hollander to make new problems. That his gut feeling would be wrong this time. "Fine. You'll do what you want to and I'll clean up whatever mess he's made. Any other updates?"

"Not just yet. We'll see what happens when I can begin treatments on Angeal." Hojo frowned slightly, though he didn't glance at the SOLDIER in question. "The general consensus seems to be to follow and see if Genesis is capable of traveling that far. I wouldn't place any bets on it."

"Hn. Keep me apprised," Veld instructed. Not that he could do anything, but better to know which way things were turning out. At least he'd have time to brace himself and make some plans if things went badly.

"Of course, Director." Sephiroth nodded slightly. "Your mission is on track?"

"We're maintaining status quo for the moment." Which was not where he liked to be when things were lasting this long, but neutral was better than worse. "AVALANCHE is traveling by ground in vans, so we're moving faster, gives us time for the stop I'd mentioned. Rufus has made tentative arrangements to set bait for them, but we'll see."

"Safe journey, then," Sephiroth said.

"Thanks." Veld hesitated to end the call, eyes drawing back unerringly to his partner. It was surreal, and for a moment part of him panicked, convinced that if he turned off the screen that would be it. Vincent would be gone again. He'd lose him all over again.

Ridiculous.

He steeled himself against the emotion, nodding firmly. "Keep in touch."

"We'll speak again," Vincent said, quiet but certain. Damn him for knowing.

Veld nodded curtly and ended the call. He had a job to do.
ShinRa politics had always been about the deals made behind the scenes.

Rufus listened attentively as Tseng reported in Veld's stead, having talked with the director late the night prior. Lazard had come up to the new president's office under the guise of official summons, bringing Kusiel in and sharing what they'd learned from Sephiroth and Zack. None of the reports were terribly encouraging.

"Hollander is unaccounted for, Fuhito is still on his merry way to Nibelheim - Hollander's last known location - and they're just letting Genesis exhaust himself while he's dying," Rufus said flatly, shaking his head. "Marvelous. And what's this about Valentine? That was Veld's partner, wasn't he?"

"He was," Tseng confirmed, lips in a thin line of displeasure. Never mind the former commander had been listed KIA well before Tseng himself had ever joined the department, the man was a legend and had been one of them. The situation would have sat badly on him even without it distressing his mentor badly enough to show; nothing that could shake Veld would be brushed off. "It's my understanding that this is also Hojo's work."

"Of course it is. That's the theme lately, isn't it?" Rufus huffed, idly tapping his pen. "The Jenova Project. SOLDIER. AVALANCHE. Now Vincent Valentine. I wonder what else is waiting to be discovered."

"Let's take this one disaster at a time," Lazard suggested dryly. "At least if Genesis is tired enough, he's not going to be able to put up a fight. And he's much more likely to recover from exhaustion than any of the wounds he might sustain fighting Sephiroth or Zack."

"Given his compromised healing, I suppose you have a point." Rufus frowned. "I don't like it, but so long as this wraps up one way or another I'm not going to be picky about how they do it. Genesis needs stopped. Hopefully they'll manage to recover him in the process, he was a valuable asset. Enough to make an argument with the board on a pardon."

"You're going to have to speak with them soon," Tseng reminded him. "They're getting restless. Heidegger has shown uncharacteristic restraint lately, but that may well be from his Turk guard. But he's not the only one resentful. Scarlet's been making comments ever since returning from Corel."

"Holding a grudge over my sending Veld to take charge?" Rufus asked.

"That may have been the catalyst," Tseng agreed. "Regardless, it would be advisable to keep in mind that her loyalties are also questionable."

"She's getting funding, and getting to create her little toys. If the old man proved anything, it was that throwing money at those idiots will shut them up and keep them in line," Rufus said dismissively. "I don't intend to continue to run things that way. I'd rather they simply understand I'm not a man to be crossed. I'm certainly not afraid to make examples, should someone step out of line. Until that happens, however, it works."
"And how is our former president?" Lazard asked.

"Making a valiant attempt at recovery." Rufus' smile was one of dark satisfaction with the situation. "Pity he won't."

"My condolences for your loss," Lazard said mildly, almost believable if he wasn't smiling back.

"Mm. We'll keep him alive long enough for AVALANCHE to fall into the Turks' trap in Costa," he decided. "But I'll make a press release about his unfortunate accident once the Turks have everything staged."

"We'll go over the specifics shortly, sir." Tseng didn't smile, but he couldn't help but marvel at the pair of them. His coldness was trained. Theirs was genetic.

"Wonderful. I'll call a board meeting after so we're all on the same page," Rufus decided. "I'll let you know, Lazard."

"Please do." Sensing the meeting was over, he rose, beckoning to Kusel. "I'll keep you updated on SOLDIER. I suspect things will start moving quickly soon."

There was a somber silence to the board meeting for once, with the memory of their last one fresh in everyone's mind. Rufus took a seat in the newly replaced chair at the head of the table, a figurative throne for the President to sit and overview the heads of the facets of his empire. He offered them a little smirk. "So glad everyone could make it. I've looked over your reports, while I await the full reviews from the Turks. It may be of interest to know both Veld and Hojo have reported in. There is careful progress being made on AVALANCHE, and reason to believe we may in fact get our assets back in SOLDIER."

"You're taking back the kill order on Rhapsodos, then?" Heidegger asked.

"Of course I am. If he can be salvaged, I want him back in the company. The man was brilliant, and even dying he's continuing to be massively motivational and charismatic," Rufus said. "Only an idiot would throw away an asset like that without doing everything he could to reel him in first. Hojo and Sephiroth have strict orders to bring him in, and I suspect Sephiroth is much more likely to listen to that. Bonus of not losing more irreplaceable SOLDIERS."

Heidegger scowled. "And how do you expect to trust him after he's sided with known terrorists?"

"Very simply, Heidegger, he's going to owe me everything," Rufus said simply. "Most notably his life. And people are funny about how much they'll do to live, haven't you noticed?"

"It'd be safer to just get rid of them all. They've gone rogue once, why risk it again?" He pressed.

"I'm very interested in hearing how exactly you think you'd even begin to take them all out," Lazard said. "You have superior numbers in the army, sure. A lot of good that did Wutai against my Firsts, and they weren't angry at the time."

"Gentlemen," Rufus interrupted, "we're not making an enemy out of SOLDIER. These are my assets and I am keeping them. This isn't up for debate. This isn't a democracy. This is my company, and it's under my control. The Shinra family still dominates our stock securely enough that I could force any
one of you out, assuming I was willing to be so polite about it. And if you'll take a moment to consider our last meeting, then maybe you'll realize that I prefer a much quicker method. I can always wash my hands after."

There was a long moment of stiff silence before Scarlet laughed, nails tapping the table. "You've been very clear, Mr. President. How is your father?"

"Dying, I'm afraid. Assassination attempt." Rufus glanced at Tseng. "Footage has been prepared for the press release of the unfortunate event, of course."

It hadn't taken much work at all to put together a convincing tape of 'evidence' - set Reeve up with the virtual reality room and they had 'footage' of the former President being shot while he'd been out for a walk. Of course, the Turks had rushed to help him, several bolting after the assassin before medics were called, but even in the forty second clip it was clear from how profusely he was bleeding that the odds of him surviving were extremely slim. "Of course, sir, we have yet to identify who was behind the assassination attempt."

"Of course." Rufus smiled, quite satisfied with the level of shock that the very convincing tape had created. "Well. I'm sure we'll all be in this together, and you'll all be supportive of my efforts to recover from this devastating loss. Anything less would just be…"

"Suspicious, sir," Tseng suggested. He didn't smile, but his dark eyes were sharp. "I would personally find anyone not soundly supporting you in your time of need very suspicious."

Rufus chuckled softly, nodding to him. "Well. I suppose you'd just have to investigate them, then. But it won't come to that, I'm sure. We're all on the same page now, aren't we?"

Nods all around, fervent or grim, it didn't matter. He'd most definitely made his point.

The executives scattered back to their offices after the meeting, mulling over the changes. Most of all, the new President, and how utterly ruthless he'd been replacing his father. No one doubted that he would have the Turks eliminate anyone else he felt was in the way of his ambitions. It was especially frustrating for Heidegger, because the Turks were watching them all, and him all the more since his failed power grab that had essentially led to the predicament.

He should have gotten it. He should have gotten SOLDIER, too, should have had that from the beginning instead of them having their special little department. Deusericus had proven he couldn't manage them, this whole fiasco had proven that. On his watch, that never would have happened. He'd have had Rhapsodos taken out even if he had to requisition some of Veld's assassins for it, not left it up to the other SOLDIERs who were clearly emotionally compromised. Loyalty amongst the ranks was all well and good, but he'd made an enemy of the company. And now Rufus was taking him back? That just wasn't good sense. He was catering to Sephiroth, that was what he was doing. Bad business, setting a precedent like that. Bad for the company.

Rufus had all sorts of ideas, but the fact was that he had no practical experience. Vice President had been a nice shiny title but it wasn't a department, he had no real practice running anything. The company needed a stronger hand, like his father had been. This just wasn't going to do.

There was a knock at the door, startling him out of his thoughts, and Heidegger frowned as Scarlet waltzed in. "What do you want, Scarlet?"
"Kya haa, is that any way to greet a lady, Heidegger?" Scarlet tsked, sauntering up to his desk and looking him over. "Look at that frown. Having a hard time with the Turks breathing down your neck?"

"They're watching everyone these days," he defended, scowling.

"Yes, but I heard how you got them stirred up." She shook her head, smirking. "Good ideas, terrible execution. At least you didn't pay the price for it. Might still, I suppose."

His scowl only turned darker. "If you're just here to rub it in, you can go. Some of us have work."

"Now, now, Heidegger, don't be so quick to turn me away. I might be the only ally you have left," she said lightly. "In fact, that's why I'm here. It seems to me you had some very interesting ideas."

"As you pointed out, the Turks were ready to put a swift end to that, and they seem to be happily teamed up with our new President," Heidegger observed sourly.

"Maybe. Maybe not." She smirked. "It seems to me, the biggest problem with the Turks is their senior operatives. Faraman is always a hurdle, Torvik too. But their little acting director... the kid's good, but his experience is minimal. He's bound to slip up."

"Hmph, how much are you willing to bet on that?" Heidegger asked. "Your life?"

"Mm, I don't know. As it stands, nothing. But with a little work..." Scarlet shrugged, painted red lips curved in a wicked smirk. "I think the mistake was being quite so straightforward. They're not going to go along with it so blatant. You need more subtlety around here."

"Oh really." Heidegger arched a brow. "And I suppose you have an idea."

"It's politics, and I've played my share." Scarlet chuckled. "They're expecting it from you now, of course. You've gone and gotten yourself a reputation. But me... that's different. Budget grab, sure, but what do I want with more people? Nothing. I've got manpower."

"You do. So what is it you want, then?" Heidegger asked, suspicious.

"What I want, Heidegger, is just what you want - a company that runs like a well-oiled machine, without the complications SOLDIER's making. Without the threat of Turks getting ideas," she said. "They're getting awfully independent. It's not good business."

"No, no it's not," he agreed, watching her as she swung the black canvas bag she had with her around. It landed heavy on his desk, and he leaned forward as she got into it, arching a brow at the sleek box she pulled out. "What's that?"

"It's been keeping nosy people from listening in." She smirked. "The way I see it, Heidegger, we've got an opportunity. And I'd like to discuss that."

"And the Turks?" He asked carefully.

"I wouldn't cross Veld, I'm not stupid," she said mildly, smirk widening. "But he's not here."
Interlude: Clarity

Chapter Summary

For the first time in years, his mind was clear; there was no hiding how he'd been the one to make himself a monster.

Chapter Notes

Quick warning: Genesis is extremely depressed here and contemplates suicide, though he doesn't follow through. Please, please watch your headspace before reading.

"Go then. Whether you receive mercy or execution will be her decision. Don't stop until you reach her shrine in the south."

Genesis flew without stopping, without rest despite a body that should have been too weak to push so hard. Some part of him knew he wasn't well enough, he shouldn't have had the stamina to keep going. But the being's words from the reactor echoed in his head and he flew, scenery blurring together as he traveled.

The world was a blur and he could hear little more than the sickly rattle of his breath and the pounding of his heart. His body was on fire, aches bone deep, worse than anything he'd ever suffered before, even on the war front. He burned with fever, and when he reached a point of awareness again it was because he'd hit the ground.

There was lush grass beneath him, thick as he curled his fingers in it. He could hear the crash of waves - the ocean, he'd crossed the ocean - and felt the breeze like a blessing on his skin. Panting, he was aware of how achingly dry his throat was, dehydrated to the point that his lips had begin to crack, and he coughed weakly. How far had he come? Where was he?

Genesis pushed himself over and let himself collapse onto the ground, wing flat on the grass at his side, staring blearily at the stars. Those constellations… those were the ones he was raised under. This was too close to the coast for Banora but… Mideel?

Gods, had he flown to Mideel? How?

The last thing he could clearly remember was the confrontation in the reactor. There had been some strange creature that intercepted his foolish trip, his terrible assumption that somehow he could have been blessed -

"Who do you pray to, little mortal? Who did you think was going to answer you?"

"The Goddess Minerva."

"And you think, Calamity's spawn, she would care for your worship?"

- and it wasn't a blessing, it was the curse of the taint, the infection of alien cells that was killing him.
That had made him this monster, fuck, how had he ever thought it could be the Goddess calling him so willingly? Him? After everything he'd done? After everything he'd become?

The laugh that bubbled up was harsh, his voice cracking with the dryness of his throat and utter exhaustion. "What am I doing?"

What was the point? There was no one listening. The only people who'd ever cared he'd left behind. Angeal I'm so sorry…

He felt ill, curling on his side with a choked sob, hands burying in his hair and clutching at his head. He couldn't hear Jenova anymore. Things were still quiet, different than how he'd been. There was a clarity that he hadn't felt for months, the atrocities he'd committed laid bare for him to look back on with disgust and mounting horror.

I'm a monster.

It wasn't even his genetics, something he could blame on the cells or the mutation, not his being. What he'd done... gods. He'd made himself as much a monster as Hollander had. Maybe more; it wasn't like he'd been a good man before. Now it was just… more obvious, like the nightmarish wing that had burst out of his back. Unnatural. Wicked.

Monster. You're a monster. Irredeemable.

Genesis drew in a ragged breath between sobs and choked, coughing. There was a heavy thickness to his chest now, an almost congested weight to his breathing. Maybe he was getting sick, weak enough that even his enhancements weren't enough to hold him above the mundane viruses. Of all the ways to die…

Or I could get it over with.

The thought was dreadfully clear in the quiet of his mind. It wasn't the first time it had crossed his mind, but the first time he'd let it linger. Mideel... there were mako flows in Mideel, where the Lifestream came to the surface.

It would be so easy...

Just walk to it and... let go. Take a step. Fall. Let himself sink into the abyss. It was infinitely more potent than the mako showers he'd endured alongside his shots. A mako flow would burn him to nothing. Or, if he survived, his mind would at least be at peace. That wouldn't be so bad, if he didn't have to know. As good as death, and certainly no more pitiable than he'd already become. Who would even mourn him?

Tears leaked from his eyes as he blinked tiredly, cheek pressed against the cool ground. There was a faint glow in the distance. Mako spring, had to be. He could make it that far, he thought.

Slowly, Genesis got himself to his feet, swaying as his head spun and rubbing his chest with another thick cough. He couldn't live like this... he was so tired, and waiting for death wasn't something he could stand much longer. Even if it was choosing when to die, at least he'd have a choice. That counted, didn't it? Let him have that much dignity.

"Pride is lost, wings stripped away... the end is nigh," he murmured tiredly, starting to pick a weaving path towards the glow and squinting when it seemed to move. Was he hallucinating? Did it matter, at this point? No one was there. No one was coming. He'd find his end one way or another.

Walking was an act of sheer willpower, pain so constant it was just shy of actually numbing him in
overload, but he did it. One foot in front of the other, the story of his pitiful existence for almost two years now. An existence that he was ready to face the end of.

The mako flow wasn't the widest he'd seen, a rolling strip coming off between a spring and a small pool. But he knew it would be deep enough. Just jump. Get it over with.

"Go then."

Genesis sneered at the deep voice echoing in his mind again, closing his eyes and flashing back to the demonic creature that had stopped him in Nibelheim.

"Whether you receive mercy or execution will be her decision."

He didn't deserve mercy. Why would the Goddess even lower herself to address him? It would be so much easier-

"Don't stop until you reach her shrine in the south."

Her shrine… the caverns, he had to mean. Genesis had found it as a boy, a place that ShinRa had defiled and left in ruins, but beyond there was a cavern with a statue. Even standing there had been breathtaking, the knowledge that what he was looking at had been something beyond his comprehension, beyond the doings of mere humans. The sheer size of the materia that was there… a brilliant crimson orb, like a summon. But far grander than any summon he'd ever seen. He suspected whatever memories it held, it was far beyond his reach.

Genesis looked at the mako flow again. He could feel the heat billowing off of it. It was just a jump away, even as weak as he was now. It would all be over.

"My soul, corrupted by vengeance, hath endured torment, to find the end of this journey," he recited quietly.

He was so very tired. It would be so easy to just jump. Let it go.

His feet stayed rooted.

And then he took a step back, breath hitching towards a breathless sob as he scrubbed at his face with shaking hands.

Since when had he ever taken the easy way out?

"The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

Only time would tell if it would strike him down. For now, he would go to the caverns.
An understanding of the past may be the only way to save the present.

Or it could just make everything worse.

Bugenhagen hadn't been happy to see him. Being honest, Veld could have done without needing to make the stop himself, but there was no point in letting that show.

"After all that's happened, you want my help?" Bugenhagen asked, shifting slightly on the floating orb he was using to travel now.

"Considering a terrorist group got their founding here, I'd say that's the nicest possible outcome for why I would come question you," Veld said mildly. "And I'd appreciate you not pretending they're anything less. Yes, we've got blood on our hands. Some of it's innocent. Most of theirs is. Working for ShinRa isn't a crime."

"The company has done a great deal of harm to the Planet," Bugenhagen observed.

"And if AVALANCHE had succeeded in blowing up any one of those reactors, the damages would be catastrophic. I don't need to be a scientist to know that phrases like 'radiation zones' and 'environmental contamination' aren't a step in the right direction. The death tolls in that moment would be huge, and they'd keep going for generations while ShinRa struggled to clean up the mess. Not that AVALANCHE cares." Veld shook his head. "It's a rush, thinking you're 'doing the right thing' - playing hero. But that's not the truth of it, and you know better. Don't tell me that their ideals justify the reality of what they're doing."

Bugenhagen was silent a long moment, looking at him. "I will tell you what I can, but I can't promise that's what you'll need. Yes, they started here, but Fuhito has long since ceased listening to me."

"You leave figuring out what to do with the information to me," Veld advised, gesturing for him to lead on. They headed for the observatory in silence, the weight of the moment dragging the silence to something almost oppressive.

Bugenhagen gave in to it first. "Fuhito came to me to learn about the Planet, and the Lifestream. He'd learned some from the work Gast had done, but there wasn't enough to sate his appetite for knowledge. I told him the truth about the Lifestream. About what the reactors are doing, what it means for our world in the long run. And he refused to see that future come to pass. He is… passionate, about his cause. About the well being of the Planet, and restoring it to health."

"Yeah, the word you're looking for is 'fanatic,'" Victor said, rolling his eyes when Veld gave him a reproving look for the interruption.

"How long did it take him to start talking about taking action, then?" Veld asked.

"He studied with me for years, coming and going. It wasn't my business where, though I was under the impression he continued his education in Junon for a time," Bugenhagen said. "There was a point when he found a girl, wandering up along the Nibel mountain range. He brought her here to be
nursed to health. As she recovered, she began to take interest in his cause. I suppose you could say that was the birth of AVALANCHE."

"What do you know of her?" Veld asked.

"She was one of Hojo's victims, and suffers from the fusion of an incomplete materia into her body," Bugenhagen said, frowning. "I could do nothing to remove it, but study suggested there were additional materia that could be gathered to stabilize her. At the time it wasn't considered a priority, but Fuhito has whatever information we gathered on likely locations."

Veld made a quiet sound of acknowledgment, frowning deeply. Nothing he didn't know, then. "Do you still have any of the information on the materia?"

"I may," Bugenhagen said slowly, watching him. "They're seeking the support materia now?"

"They've abandoned their practice of going after reactors to try and find those, so I consider it a matter worth investigation." Veld looked out the window a moment, not really seeing any of it despite the impressive view. "I'm going to need whatever information you have on the girl, the materia, and whatever Fuhito might think he can do with it. These kids are willing to wreck a lot more havoc than the company wants to. Eager, even. Say what you want about ShinRa, but right now we're the lesser evil."

Bugenhagen huffed, but floated over towards his bookshelves. "I suppose in this case I can't argue that. This is not what I would have told him to do."

"If I thought this was your doing, this conversation would have gone very differently," Veld assured him dryly.

"I'm sure." Bugenhagen gathered several sets of papers together with a book, leafing through it and then placing them inside. "It's heavy reading, for those unversed in the Lifestream and the matters of magic."

"You'd be surprised at the things that cross my desk," Veld said, accepting it. He opened the book carefully, taking a quick look through the papers, then handed it over to Victor.

Victor's paging through took several more minutes, just skimming it for the most part, but he nodded slightly as he finished. "It's more than we've had to go on yet. It'll take me some time to read it all."

"That's fine. It's a long flight to Nibelheim." Satisfied that they had actually made progress, Veld looked back to Bugenhagen and nodded slightly. "Thank you."

"Would that I could say it was my pleasure," he said.

Veld offered him a cool smile, making no attempt to keep it even vaguely friendly. "Well. I think we can both hope I won't have to come back. Let's go, Vic."

"They mean well, Veld," Bugenhagen said.

Veld snorted, arching a brow at him. "Yeah. So did Rupert."

The sense of time had completely abandoned Hollander. He had no idea how long he had lain on the
ground, panting and writhing at the burn of Genesis' cells in his system. How long agony had clawed at his insides. How long before fever started and how long it took to burn out of him.

He came back to himself slowly, the stone floor of the laboratory cold against his face. His arm throbbed, all the way up to his shoulder, and his mouth was so dry his tongue felt like paper. Sitting up slowly, he looked around, seeing nothing of his surroundings as his mind fixated on a sudden coolness that trickled down from his scalp. It soothed the sensitivity of his skin, an invisible salve that settled the pain at a bearable distance.

*He's gone.*

"That's right…" Genesis was gone now. There was nothing to be worried about.

*He won't be coming back. Ungrateful child.*

Hollander's lip curled in distaste. After all he'd done for the boy, this was how he'd been treated? Cast aside to die.

*You're better than that.*

He was. He was so much better than those boys or *Hojo* thought.

*They'll see. You can do better, can't you?*

Of course he could. He'd show them. He'd… he'd…

*Do better.*

He'd do better.

*Better than the boy. Start anew.*

Yes… yes, he could. Genesis may have spent the blood, but there were still tissue samples. He could start over, do *better.*

*Make more.*

Hollander rose unsteadily, glazed eyes looking back to the table. He had the building blocks, he just… he needed…

*What do you need?*

"Bodies… something to make the clones from…" he said distractedly. Where would he find bodies?

An image came to mind, a room with rows of specimen tanks. Older models, but still in working order. He'd never seen such a place, where…

Cold air on his skin. The dim, yellow-green light of all the old reactors.

*Of course.* The Nibelheim reactor was the first ever to be built, connected to this very manor by underground tunnels. Where better for Hojo to ship things off for long term keeping?

"If I could get to those…"

*Make more children?*
"Yes... yes, three more." Hollander nodded slowly, lips stretching in an unpleasant smile. He'd take everything he'd learned studying the past few years... they'd be better than any of the others. Better than Hojo's cherished Sephiroth.

Strength. Perfection.

"Yes... perfection."
Do or Die

Chapter Summary

There was no guarantee it would work, but they were running out of time.

It was an odd thing to pilot a ship following what someone was sensing, this unquantified measure that Cid really didn't want to trust. So far, it seemed that Genesis was still heading south - and it seemed like he was making a beeline for Mideel. But they hadn't seen him, and the pace that would require was unbelievable.

"Maybe he took a chocobo?" Zack suggested. "Get a good black, that would take him pretty far. Enough to get on a boat."

"Maybe." Sephiroth frowned, shaking his head. It didn't quite make sense, but it made more sense than thinking Genesis could possibly fly that long. If he'd been well, perhaps... Genesis had been known to do some truly incredible things before. But from Vincent's description he had trouble believing his friend still capable of such a feat of stamina.

"Desperation is an amazing fuel," Vincent said quietly. He hadn't spoken much, though he'd answered the few questions sent his way. Mostly he'd been inclined to watch Sephiroth and Hojo. Given they all tended to gather in the makeshift medical bay, it worked out easily enough.

Currently, Hojo was looking over his most recent test results, and periodically glancing at where Angeal was lying on one of the cots. The ailing First hadn't moved around much - trying to rest up for the upcoming confrontation with Genesis - but it was painfully clear he was continuing to get weaker. The unspoken truth loomed in the back of all their minds: if something wasn't done, he would continue to deteriorate.

Left unchecked, this would kill him.

Sephiroth followed Vincent's gaze to Hojo. "Have you made any progress?"

"Some. I may have a way to stabilize him, but that's not necessarily a cure," Hojo said, frowning. Working from a makeshift lab, even that much progress was significant. The mess Hollander had made of the boy's genetics was considerable, but he was doing what he could. "Using your genetic coding, however; nothing more from Jenova. That would only exacerbate the problem."

"Whatever I can do," Sephiroth said, "let me know."

"Hmph." Hojo shook his head slightly. "There may be additional stimulation methods that Ms. Faremis can employ, with the boost she's able to get from materia. I presume there's a mastered Restore on one of you?"

"I carry one," Zack said immediately, tapping his bracer. "But I gave her one too."

"Mastered?" Hojo asked, nodding when she made a sound of agreement. "Very well. We'll have to see if it helps or not, but there's a chance it could stimulate his immune system enough to take to the therapy better."
"Better than nothing," Zack said. "Does he have to be awake?"

"Not yet. It will take time to prepare; better that he spends the time resting," Hojo said, turning back to his equipment.

"Guess we're on standby," Zack said, tucking Aerith against him.

"Until I can help," she said quietly. "I wish it was as simple as a Cure."

"Yeah, 'magic fix' is not really all it's cracked up to be," Zack said dryly. "Pretty great stuff, but this is a little too deep."

"There were magics once that might have." There was a flare of gold to Vincent's eyes, and he shook his head slightly as if it could silence Chaos. He remained silent a moment, head tilted as he listened to a voice no one else could hear. "Things the Cetra used to fight the Calamity the first time."

"Would that work without killing Angeal, though?" Zack said. "Because we're trying to save him."

"I understand, it was merely an observation on Chaos' part." Vincent shrugged, glancing at Aerith. "He seems to believe you share some of the abilities."

Aerith arched a brow, managing a small smile. "Maybe I do, I don't really know. My mother didn't have time to teach me much, and there's no other way to learn unless he thinks he can teach me. As far as we know, I'm the last Ancient left."

Vincent frowned thoughtfully. "He doesn't strike me as much of an instructor. For now I'm simply pleased he's quiet."

"Yeah, glad he seems a little less eager to fight," Zack agreed. They had enough tension right now by far, and thousands of miles in the air was not where he wanted to hold a fight. Especially with a winged opponent.

Aerith was silent a moment, but she couldn't help turning Vincent's words over in her mind. "Did he say anything else? If there was something I could do…"

Vincent shook his head. "Nothing in detail, merely implications of old magics. Something he seemed to sense from you. I don't fully understand it."

"Oh." She sighed, absently twisting the end of her ribbon with her fingers, worrying at the fabric a moment before undoing the bow and slipping it off. The small white materia was still in its slot, and she smoothed her fingers over it. "From me, or… from this?"

Vincent glanced back at her, gaze dropping to the materia. "I don't know. What is it?"

"I don't know," she admitted, rubbing her thumb over the smooth surface. "My mother gave it to me, before she died. But I don't know how to use it, if I even can. It's not like other materia, where you can feel the spells and use them. It doesn't do anything. If I couldn't feel the magic in it, I'd think it was just a marble."

"Yeah, it feels kinda… different." Zack tapped it lightly. "Reminds me of a Restore a little bit. Maybe a little bit Blizzard, too. Cool, not quite cold. Refreshing."

"Which is interesting, but doesn't tell me how to use it." She looked at Vincent. "Chaos has nothing to say?"
"Not explicitly," Vincent said, frowning. "He has… interest in it, but has given me no detail. Something to look into, but that isn't my expertise."

"And unfortunately SOLDIER's resident materia expert is having some problems," Zack said dryly, rubbing a hand down Aerith's back. "We'll give it some thought. Maybe Chaos will say something, eventually."

"Maybe." She wasn't counting on it. "Professor? What will you need me to do?"

"Casting the highest level of Cure you can, both shortly before I begin the procedure, and at least once during," Hojo said. "There have been cases where the regenerative energies stimulated a higher level of responsiveness in the immune system, which does allow for a viable assist even though there isn't actual 'injury' as it would traditionally be used for."

"Most materia have nontraditional applications," Sephiroth said. "Though I'm surprised to find magic in your list of tools, Hojo."

"'Magic' is merely unexplained science," the professor said, giving him a brief look of disdain for the comment. "And it may not work, but at this point we have to try something."

"Agreed." Sephiroth's eyes tracked back to where Angeal was lying and frowned. He hadn't felt quite right himself since they'd felt the echoes of Jenova's encounter with Genesis, but it was Angeal who was taking it harder. Hopefully whatever Hojo had come up with would be enough.

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As Hojo had continued to work towards a solution, he had come to the clear conclusion that the problem with Hollander's work went back to the very beginning, with a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the samples he had been given to work with. He, like Gast, had looked at the DNA structure of the being that had been recovered from the crater, seen a viable precursor to humanity, and decided that it was a Cetra. Admittedly, to an extent that was correct; the body had certainly been a Cetra at one point, but most of its DNA had been changed in subtle, significant ways. At the time, of course, Hojo himself hadn't known what caused the changes, but he'd made note of the mutations that didn't quite fit. He examined them over the years through dozens of studies until he had an understanding of what he was working with, the differences between it and humanity as it stood now, before ever beginning his careful work on Project S.

Ifalna had shed light on it later, speaking of the Calamity and how it had come to the Planet and nearly destroyed the Cetra. What Gast had thought of that he'd never found out, nor particularly cared, but it was the missing piece to the puzzle that put things he'd noticed in perspective. He'd already known Jenova was different, was more than human - more than Cetra - but it was only with the understanding of the nature of the Calamity that things truly made sense. Decades later, he had even more proof in the clones that Genesis had made, presumably with the same sort of process Angeal had, which was likely the same or very similar to Jenova's own methods thousands of years ago.

Hollander had tried to merge Jenova's DNA wholesale; first into Gillian, and then mapping her altered genes on to Genesis. By the very nature of the cells' behavior, the method was doomed to failure. Had he used a more aggressive treatment at the time, the baby would have likely mutated and degraded from the very beginning. Instead, it was a slower process that had been unfolding in dozens of tiny ways over the years before the boy finally broke. Hollander had mirrored what he had seen,
and so the pair were just as corrupted as the body they'd taken cells from; even Angeal with his organically inherited alterations was flawed, because the method of enhancement was faulty.

That was not what Hojo had done. He'd taken the foundation he was given, examined it, compared it to what he knew of the human genome, and set about to improve it based on what he was seeing. Parts of Jenova's genetic code were taken, chosen with the utmost care and applied first to Lucrecia in order to merge completely into Sephiroth's own DNA from the moment of conception. He showed minor physical resemblances to Jenova - the silver hair, the mako green eyes and elongated pupils - but none of the instabilities that had corrupted the Cetra. The 'virus' portion that Jenova had given the Cetra had become a part of Sephiroth's own genetic code instead of existing separately and creating problems. While it was true that he had exposure to Jenova's cells just as the others, there was no longer an easily distinguished difference. Instead, where the other two had visibly copied portions of Jenova's DNA meshed clumsily in with their own, Sephiroth had developed strains unique to himself that Hojo labeled 'S cells.'

The S cells functioned as a bridge, having been created in a two-step process as Lucrecia was first directly exposed to Jenova's DNA over months, gradually assimilating the genes, and then Sephiroth inherited them alongside all the 'normal' human genes his parents passed along during conception. From the first moments of his existence, when he was a mere grouping of cells, it was a seamless part of him. Now, in the face of the war waged within the bodies of his comrades, the only possible hope was that the S cells could make a bridge for them. There were small, patchy sections of their own genes where their bodies had attempted something similar. If he could repair those, if he could bolster his system enough that Angeal's unique genes would be able to dominate the J cells, then there was a chance it could halt the degradation. It would be a dangerous limbo. His battered immune system would still be weak. But he wouldn't be actively dying, and that was a tremendous step to make.

And at this point, it was the only step they could take.

Hojo turned from his work station, glancing at the sleeping First. "Wake him up. It's time."
Hints in History

Chapter Summary

Even in its neglected state, Shinra Manor was full of secrets.

*Nibelheim.* One of the first towns in the history of ShinRa's rise to power. Home to the oldest reactor, and a neglected mansion that had once been the home of President Shinra before his rise to fame. What secrets would they find there? Fuhito was eager to know, stepping out into the chill mountain air and breathing it in. "Invigorating."

"Do you think Genesis and Hollander will still be here?" Elfé asked quietly, looking the area over.

"Perhaps. I doubt he will be a problem, even if he is," Fuhito said mildly. "He will have either continued to weaken and be desperately searching for his cure, or have recovered and be unconcerned with us."

"Do you think there is a cure to be found for him?" She asked.

Fuhito considered it, shrugging. "Perhaps. But I do not believe it would undo the harm to his body. The degradation will most likely be the death of him."

Elfé nodded slightly, frowning; it seemed a shame for such a fierce warrior to die like that. But it wasn't her business. "I will assign the teams to spread out and keep an eye on the town while we investigate the manor."

"Fufu, go ahead." Fuhito waved her off and started towards the looming building, noting that the gates had a heavy chain and padlock hanging from the open door. Genesis and Hollander had undoubtedly been there, might even still be, but he wasn't concerned; whatever threat Genesis was well enough to be would not be aimed at them.

"They've been here recently, I saw a light on in one of the windows upstairs." Elfé rejoined him quickly after splitting the others up, examining the various plants that had overgrown the walkway, some of them disturbed by passing feet. "I don't think they've left yet."

"There is no cause for alarm, Ms. Elfé." Fuhito pushed the heavy front doors open, listening to them creak with age. The air was thick and stale, dust coating everything in layers, marked only by two sets of footprints. "They will be easy to find, should we need to. But let us look through the rest of the building before seeking them, hm?"

"You don't think they might know the location of the materia?" She asked.

"Perhaps they may have run across it, but this was Professor Hojo's place of operation, not the good doctor's. I would not expect him to have known, or care even if he came across it." They had the old blueprints, of course, but even if they were entirely accurate it didn't say for certain where on the many floors and many rooms they would find what they were looking for. "Spread out. Bring any materia or files of interest to me. Any viable supplies can be readied for transport back to our caravan."
Elfé parted ways from Fuhito, investigating several rooms on her own and cutting down the few monsters she came across. Now and then she heard the report of Fuhito's pistol, but when it wasn't followed by a shout for assistance she continued her search; he had one of his Ravens with him, after all. It was unlikely there would be something both stronger and smarter there that they would run into, unless the SOLDIER was in fact still present.

Given no one was coming to investigate the gunfire, she very seriously doubted it.

The manor gave her an uneasy feeling; it was clearly abandoned, but it felt like it had been a hasty move. Personal effects were still scattered about, a woman's things in one of the bedrooms, a mostly full container of disposable gloves in the kitchen, books of all kinds lying about. The lights still worked, another oddity to have remaining after all this time. Perhaps it wasn't truly abandoned? Or it had never been entirely cut off. Water sat stale in the pipes, but it did run when she tried it on a whim in the outdated kitchen.

*How very strange.*

Eventually she came across a room with yet another towering bookshelf spread across the back wall, but this one also contained a wealth of manila folders in with the books. Mundane in appearance, the odds were still better that they might contain some of the works of the scientists who had once called this place home and she pulled several out to inspect. Scientific papers, largely, which was no surprise. Some were about the reactor, others related to the upkeep of the manor. Some random papers were stuffed into a folder as if someone had needed to rapidly clean a surface and forgotten about them. And… hn.

There was a collection of folders kept together, marked up with dates and letters but no understandable headers. She chose one at the end, opening it to take a look at the report inside. It was thick, several dozen pages - some of them with photos, but most of it paragraph after paragraph of dry text. It looked like it was a report of a bombing, and from the opening lines it appeared that it was unintentional. How, exactly, that would happen was beyond her. ShinRa's carelessness, obviously. The town was Kalm… which made her pause, frowning. She'd been to Kalm, hadn't she? It felt familiar, but no… no she hadn't gone out there. They hadn't gone any further east than Midgar, had been too busy to make a pointless sightseeing stop out at the little town.

*Maybe I've been there before?*

She tensed slightly at the thought, quiet and as sharp as the edge of a blade. She was aware there was time missing. She didn't remember anything before the age of twelve, everything before that was a blank space, but she'd had a history. She'd had a *life*.

*It doesn't matter.*

She stuffed the report back into the folder, taking in a deep breath. It was irrelevant. She had a life now, with Fuhito and AVALANCHE. She had goals, and a purpose, which was more than could be said for most people.

*I don't care.*

She didn't. What was done was done, only the here and now mattered.

Still… she opened another folder, slimmer, filled with a couple reports, medical charts and a few pictures. There was a diagram of what looked like a metal arm, some kind of prosthetic capable of
equipping materia; so very ShinRa, everything had to be a weapon. She glanced at the pictures briefly, shots of injuries to a young man, extensive burns and stages leading to an amputated arm, which was eventually replaced with the modeled prosthetic. There was one later that showed him at rest, finally a full shot, and she stared for a long moment. *That face*...

Pain came sharp and hot, like a knife through her skull, and she dropped the folder, hands going to brace her head with a shallow gasp. There was an image, there and gone before she could grasp it, the phantom feel of a large hand on her shoulder. *What's going on? What is this? I can't...*

"Ms. Elfé?"

She straightened at the sound of her name, grabbing at the familiar voice to anchor her in the moment and letting out a hard breath. "…Fuhito."

He watched her a moment in silence, assessing, before inclining his head. "I found indication that there may be things of interest in the basement. Perhaps you should join me."

Elfé nodded, rubbing the back of her neck. The pain was fading, but she wasn't eager to see if it could be triggered twice. "Sure, let's go."

She followed him out, the folder left on the ground behind them.

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The basement setup was odd, going to the second floor to access a massive spiral of stairs leading down to an area that appeared more to be carved right out of the ground than built like a proper basement. The blueprints said there was actually a sewer system down there that connected to the reactor, but it was unlikely they would need it.

Further down, they came across a door that had been blown off its hinges, the aged metal twisted from the force of it and the center splintered as if it had received a solid blow from the inside. Curious, Elfé peeked into the room and stared a long moment at the coffins inside. The one in the center had the top ripped off, a careful glance showing it had ended up across the room, five long gouges like a dragged hand print on the inside. The implications that something had been trapped in there - something that had gotten out by incredible force - made her uneasy. Just what had Professor Hojo done in this place?

"There are lights on down the hall," Fuhito observed, not having bothered to step fully into the room. "We may see Doctor Hollander and his SOLDIER after all."

She made a quiet sound of agreement, turning away from the unsettling scene. "Forward, then. Stay close to the Ravens and let me take point. I don't trust this place."

"Fufufu, as you say, Ms. Elfé. But I do not believe we are in danger from the specters of the past."

He stepped back into the hall, gesturing for her to take the lead.

"I'm not worried about what *was* here." The present had its own concerns. Something was prickling at her senses, not unlike the feeling she had around SOLDIERs. But it wasn't quite the same, and wasn't as strong as it had been around Genesis. She frowned slightly, uncertain of what it meant. Something to be wary of, at the least.

Coming to the room at the end of the hall, they stepped into what appeared to be some sort of
laboratory. There was equipment sitting out, and some of the containers that Hollander had been traveling with.

"Well well, if it isn't AVALANCHE." The man in question came through another doorway, pausing to look them over with a small smile. His appearance had changed, a hint of gray to his hair and his skin had gained a sickly pallor that reminded her of Genesis. When she met his eyes, the sense of wrongness increased; there was something not quite right in his gaze, some sort of distance and hollowness. Like he wasn't truly in the moment, not quite together. Even his voice had a strange flatness to it. She didn't know what it was, but it set her on edge, made her instincts flare up so strongly she almost reached for her blade. He noticed the twitch, eyes tracking to her hand, and his smile widened. "So very tense. How goes your search?"

"That is the reason we are here, doctor," Fuhito said, seeming unbothered by the changes Hollander had undergone. "There is reason to believe one of the support materia can be found in this manor."

"That's a lot of rooms to search," Hollander observed, tilting his head slightly. "But I may be able to help. I came across some case files relevant to your interests, the goal of the summon and details on what Hojo did to Elfé."

"That would likely be quite useful, yes." Fuhito hummed, watching him shrewdly. "I suspect you would ask something in return, however."

"I have a request, yes." Hollander looked to the Ravens with them, his smile turning hard as his eyes gleamed. "I have to travel to the reactor. The monsters weren't a problem when Genesis was here, but he's left to follow his own whims. It leaves me in need of an escort."

"A shame that he has left you in such a predicament yes." Fuhito glanced at the two Ravens with him, making a thoughtful sound. "I suppose I could spare my Ravens in return for your help; I am certainly safe enough with the aid of Ms. Elfé. When will you be leaving?"

"I can leave at any time. My supplies are easy enough to gather." Hollander gestured to the cases on the table, already prepared to be moved.

"Then by all means, take them with you." Fuhito turned to the pair, waving to Hollander. "Escort the doctor to his destination and see that he is unharmed. I suspect we will be here long enough for you to return. There is much research here to learn from, after all."

The Ravens nodded, moving to flank Hollander as he gathered his things up, including a thick file that he passed over to Fuhito. "I'm sure there's more information to be found, but this should be a solid start for now."

"Fufu, thank you, doctor. We shall look through the rest of the area while you handle your business in the reactor." Fuhito nodded slightly to him, opening the file to skim the first of the reports within. A small smile spread over his lips at the contents. "Yes... this will be quite enlightening indeed..."

"Do enjoy." Hollander smiled, then turned to leave, the Ravens at his back.

Elfé couldn't help the sense of foreboding, but there was nothing to be done for it. He was leaving, and they had work to do.
The Unknown Threat

Chapter Summary

He was killing himself anyway, how much trouble could Hollander be?

The reactor was exactly as Hollander had envisioned it, the entry chamber filled from one side to the other with the old model mako chambers, closed pods still in working order. Climbing the stairs, he peered into one of the view ports and made a thoughtful sound at the sight. He'd seen creatures of this sort before, listed as makonoids in the files, but he hadn't worked with them much personally. On the one hand, these were no longer genetically pure humans; the mako based solution they'd been sitting in had caused severe mutations. But on the other… they'd proven that their bodies were capable of sustaining such extreme changes. What was one more?

These will do.

Now he just had to choose which ones would be best, walking along the rows and checking for variances. Not knowing for certain where Hojo had gotten his subjects meant relying on visual cues, unfortunately, but he was noticing some differences in size that were promising.

Children?

The younger the better, obviously. Enhancements always took better before puberty, their greatest successes had been with prenatal alterations. With the almost alien features of these makonoids, it was hard to gauge their ages, but they had come from humans. Length of limb and their sizes overall gave a reference point, especially in comparison to each other. Eventually he found three that would work, probably teenagers at this point.

Only three?

It was better to start small. He only had so many genetic samples to work with, after all. Better to get solid results on a smaller group than to have several mediocre outcomes that he couldn't really use. Besides, three was fitting; a perfect number of replacements. And if that worked, he could always clone them.

Impressive.

He was. And he would show the world in time. They'd all see.

Ungrateful children. These will know better. They'll serve.

Hollander smiled slightly, examining the tanks before setting one to drain. He readied his equipment, dividing Sephiroth's blood samples up first and preparing the hypodermic. When the pod finally hissed open, letting the makonoid slump out onto the lid, he got a better view at just how changed it was. Would the blood be enough to overcome the changes? The mutations didn't necessarily imply exposure to Jenova cells…

That can be changed.

He paused, eyes slowly tracking to the sign above the door. Jenova.
Yes.

Well. Wasn't _that_ handy? If he had access to pure Jenova cells…

_They will be strong._

Yes, yes they would be.

_Come to me._

"Yes…"

Vincent watched the SOLDIERs in silence, Sephiroth and Zack flanking Angeal as he received his treatments. There had been no immediate rejection of the treatment, but there was still time for things to go wrong. Unfortunately, while he could follow some of the science of it, the bulk of the process went over his head. All he could hope was that Hojo was truly as invested in success as he appeared.

"Something to say, Valentine, or have you gotten lost in your head again?" Hojo asked, glancing his way.

He frowned slightly, shaking his head. "Not precisely."

Hojo crossed his arms, assessing him. "Well there's obviously something."

Vincent shrugged. "The situation warrants consideration. Science may not be my forte, but I believe I'm allowed concern."

Hojo watched him a moment before his lips curled in the faintest smile. "I suppose you are."

There was a moment of surprisingly comfortable silence, for all that had passed between them. "Do you think this will be enough for Genesis?"

"Frankly, Valentine, I'm not certain it will be enough for Angeal," Hojo said. "I'm doing what I can. Hollander had them on the road to death from infancy. I'm trying to undo a lifetime of damages, on a genetic level. The best scenario I can imagine _realistically_ is that this halts the degradation, and I may be able to undo some of the damages over time with further therapy. I don't think either of them will ever regain what they were before this."

Vincent nodded slightly. It made sense, with what had been explained so far and what little he knew of biology. Honestly, the fact that Hojo was managing this much was impressive. Hopefully it would-

Sudden pain struck, pressure squeezing his chest until it burned as Chaos' presence surged. Gasping, he staggered back until he hit the wall, clutching his chest and panting.

'_Chaos, stop!_'

'_The Calamity has taken another pawn,'_ the demi-WEAPON snarled. _'The one left behind is in her thrall. He must be eliminated.'_

'_He can't be that much of a threat,'_ Vincent protested, fighting to keep himself coherent as he rode
through the pain of Chaos' battering against his control. 'Stop, we're not going anywhere!'

'He is a threat.'

'He is a lesser threat than the ones we're with and the one we're going after.' His vision was starting to waver, breath coming in short, sharp gasps as he fought against the strength of the demi-WEAPON's will. It was stronger this time, he was stronger, having taken the time to rest much as Vincent himself had. 'Stop, I'm not letting you do this. We're staying here.'

'You cannot contain the herald to Omega, Valentine.'

'I can, I have, and I will.' It was his body, he refused to allow anyone else to take charge without his permission. Chaos was little more than raging thoughts and rogue energy; if he could influence Vincent's own, then surely it had to work in reverse. And in a matter of willpower, his own intent stubbornness was an advantage that served him well.


"-tine?"

Slowly, the rest of the world began to filter back in. There was pressure on his shoulder, the weight of a hand drawing him from his mental battle. Something to focus on beyond the way Chaos was fighting him. Something to anchor him in the moment.

He pried his eyes open, blinking blearily and watching as the room slowly came into focus. It was Zack who had come to him, a gloved hand resting on his shoulder and concern clear in his bright eyes. "Hey, there you go. You alright, man? You don't look so hot."

"Chaos wanted control," he explained quietly, pressing his fingers to his temple as it throbbed. He could still feel his headmate's rage at being denied, but he'd suppressed him enough that it was dull background noise.

"Ech." Zack made a face, offering him a water bottle. "What set him off?"

"He seemed to sense something from Jenova." Vincent took the bottle, cracking it open and taking a long drink. "I'm under the impression that the scientist is now somehow under Its control."

"...well shit." Zack glanced back at Hojo. "Did we know that could happen?"

"There was no reason to suspect he could be vulnerable to Jenova's influence, considering he shouldn't have any of Its cells." Hojo scowled. "He had no enhancements, to my knowledge. There were certainly no signs. What, precisely, did Chaos say?"

"The Calamity has taken another pawn,"' Vincent repeated, frowning. "He said that 'the one left behind' was a threat that needed eliminated."

"No offense to Chaos, but Hollander wasn't exactly in great shape." Zack said. "Even with whatever Jenova's got planned, I can't see him being that big a threat."

"One reason of many that he wouldn't take enhancements now - his body wouldn't tolerate it, even if he had the solution that we'd worked out for SOLDIER with him to use." Hojo shook his head. "He'd make a terrible candidate anyway: weak willed, mediocre health, and far past the cutoff point for when you can start enhancements and have them take with anything like success. At the very latest, a male could only be in their early twenties; anything after that, the body is too set into its development to accept the changes, and all you get is mutation and death."
"What options are there for what he could have done, given the supplies we've guessed he has?"
Sefrioth asked.

Hojo frowned, considering it. "He doesn't have anything for a proper enhancement, but mere
exposure to Jenova cells is possible. He had blood samples from all three of you, enough to create a
reaction. It would be a temporary matter, however; he's not going to tolerate it. It would kill him, he
has to know that."

"So I guess the big question is how much trouble can he cause before he dies from whatever he did,"
Zack said.

"I would say 'significantly less than Genesis' at the moment," Hojo said. "Even if he suddenly had
more abilities, he has no understanding of how to use them."

"My thoughts were similar," Vincent said. "I can't see him presenting a threat worth turning around
for, not with Genesis to deal with. And the Turks are heading that way. So long as Veld knows, I
don't see need for us to do anything."

"Oh he's gonna love that call," Zack muttered, shaking his head. "Alright. Who does it?"

"That pleasure will be Valentine's. I have matters to continue here, monitoring how Angeal's system
takes to the treatment," Hojo said. "Which I can update him on if necessary over the phone, but I
intend to stay here."

Vincent hummed in quiet agreement, sighing. "I'll speak with him."

"I'll set you up on the video call," Zack offered, gesturing for him to follow as he headed back for the
bridge. "Hey Captain, we're gonna call up the Turks."

"You do that, kid," Cid said, glancing at him. "No changes in direction?"

"Neither of the guys said anything different, so I'm gonna guess not," he said, going to get the
camera and microphone set up. "I can double check after we're done if you want, but I'm sure
Sefrioth would have spoken up immediately if there was a change."

"Wouldn't hurt t' be sure." The pilot nodded. "Thanks, kid."

"You got it." Zack nodded, then waved Vincent over. "Alright, I'm gonna call the Director now."

Vincent nodded slightly, watching the screen and smiling faintly when the call connected. Veld had
a few of his subtler signs of stress, in the tense set of his shoulders and a shadow to his eyes, but his
smile when their eyes met was genuine. "Veld."

"Vincent." He glanced at Zack, nodding in acknowledgment and doing a quick scan that doubtlessly
noted the lack of the others. "What's going on? Somehow I doubt this is a social call."

"Unfortunately not," Vincent admitted. "Chaos believes something happened to Hollander to have
made him vulnerable to Jenova's influence. According to the processes that Hojo is familiar with,
anything he could have done should actually kill him before he has time to do much of anything, but
it seemed wise to warn you regardless."

"Right." Veld frowned, considering that. "Alright. We're going to be in Nibelheim in less than two
hours, so we'll search him out and find out what's going on. We may run into AVALANCHE as
well, depending on how quickly they find what they're looking for; there was a lot of information left
in the manor that might catch their interest."
"I'll let you know if Chaos shares any more information." Vincent sighed quietly. "He's not quite appeased that you're going instead of us, but I think it helped some."

"Well you just remind him that I am very, very good at putting people down." Veld smiled tightly. Vincent returned the smile, a touch of amusement to it. "I'm sure. You always were."

"Some things just get better with time." Veld watched him a moment, then shook his head slightly. "Alright, thanks for the heads up. I'll let you know how things go. Keep in touch."

"Of course." Vincent nodded, waiting a moment until the video feed cut out before he sighed, looking away. That had settled Chaos somewhat, at least.

"Better now?" Zack asked, watching him while he put the equipment back.

"Somewhat. He's not happy, but he's not fighting me either." And that was a relief, even if it didn't cure the headache he'd gotten from it.

"Hey, take any improvement as it comes," Zack said. "Seriously, there's not nearly enough of that right now."

"I've noticed." He was silent a moment, then glanced back at Cid. "Captain, assuming our destination does end up being Mideel, how soon will we arrive?"

"Got a few hours yet," Cid said, gesturing to the map up on the side console. "We're makin' good time though. Pretty much been a straight shot there."

"I see." Vincent frowned slightly, nodding in acknowledgment. Hopefully they would catch up to Genesis at last on arrival, and finally be able to capture him. He wasn't sure of the odds that he could be saved, from what Hojo had said, but it certainly wasn't getting any better as time went on.

"Time for us to find out if Angeal's gonna stabilize or not," Zack said, frowning a little.

"Hopefully," was all Vincent could think to say. They could hope. He just wasn't sure how much was warranted.

"Yeah." Zack sighed, running a hand back through his hair. "Alright. Might as well head back, let everybody know we got in touch with Director Faraman."

Vincent nodded slightly, and headed back. There really wasn't much else to do, for now. How ironic he would leave his slumber to end up waiting even longer.
Chapter Summary

A pawn can change very quickly to a much bigger threat if allowed to complete its goal.

Fuhito spent several hours combing through all three stories and the basement of Shinra Manor with Elfé's assistance, and it still wasn't quite enough time to explore every bit of the building in detail. He suspected a thorough investigation of the labs and library alone would take a full team several days, which they simply didn't have time for. For now, it was enough to have recovered the files on Elfé and the third support materia. He had also found some more information on the Zirconiade summon that would be useful to at least get a look at.

Now they simply needed the final materia, currently in possession of the Turks.

"The Ravens haven't returned," Elfé observed, glancing off towards the mountains and the reactor where Hollander had planned to go.

"Let the doctor keep them. Soon they will be unnecessary," Fuhito said, leading the way back to the vans. "I will speak with the Vice President about obtaining the final materia. For now, return and inform the others we will be moving out soon."

"Very well." She nodded slightly, moving past him to do so.

Fuhito lingered on the edge of the town a moment before getting his phone out and checking reception. There was a signal for once, so he put in a call to their benefactor. "Vice President."

"Fuhito. I take it you've finished in Nibelheim?" Rufus said.

"We have," he confirmed. "Have you come to a decision on how we may be able to get the final materia from the Turks?"

"It's going to be a very delicate procedure, but I have an inside operative who I believe can be trusted to get it," Rufus said. "But the window of time I can keep it in Costa del Sol will be minimal. I need to know when you can be there, as exact timing as possible. The director is away, but that makes the rest of his team no less dangerous."

"Of course, Vice President, I understand your concern. You have to be mindful in your position, I am sure," Fuhito said. "I would not wish you the harm of being discovered. How much advanced warning do you need? You must understand, traveling through the mountains is not an 'exact' process."

"A day in advance, minimum. I need time to get the operative sent from Junon to Costa, make sure he has the materia, and make sure that there's time to meet with you and get him out of there," Rufus said. "Unfortunately, they're going to have to take a fall for the cause unless you make it look like they had it stolen. Even then, they'll be investigated for having moved it."

"We can arrange for a believable mugging," Fuhito said. Not that it would be of much importance; as soon as they had the final materia, they would be ready to summon Zirconiade. Such petty concerns
as ShinRa's retribution would be unimportant then. "Do not worry. We should be able to let you know when we're within a day of our arrival in Costa del Sol."

"That would work fine, then. I'll start arrangements on my end," Rufus said. "How many days at best will it be until you arrive? If everything went smoothly."

"Three, I should think," he decided. "But it may be four. The weather in this region is treacherous."

"Understood, of course. I'll be on alert for your call," Rufus said. "Keep in touch, Fuhito."

"Of course, Vice President. I await our next communication eagerly. Goodbye."

Fuhito hung up, a small, pleased smile on his lips. Things were coming together. Soon, he would have the final materia and would be able to summon the mighty Zirconiad. Soon, the Planet's suffering would end.

"Fufufu… perfect."

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Tseng contacted Veld as soon as Rufus was off the phone with Fuhito. "Sir, AVALANCHE is leaving Nibelheim. They're on track to try and go through with a set up Rufus has arranged to get the last of the support materia in Costa del Sol, in roughly three days."

"Good, forward me a transcript of the conversation," Veld instructed. "It turns out we have to go to Nibelheim anyway, but it should be a fairly short trip and we can still get ahead of them."

"Is there a problem, sir?" Tseng asked.

"Possibly. Vincent's passenger is apparently convinced something is going down between Hollander and the Jenova specimen, and as much as I'd love for him to be wrong, I'm not going to bank on it," Veld said. "So we're going to check out the reactor, where it's being kept, under the assumption that's where he'd have to be."

"I see. I assume by now you're closing in on the area then?" Tseng said.

"We'll be touching down at the reactor in about ten minutes. Not sure how long business there will take, it depends on what the idiot's done. No one seems to have any concrete idea about what's going on beyond it being a bad thing."

"Of course it is." Tseng resisted a sigh, certain his mentor felt much the same. "I suspect I'll be in office still when you finish, if you have updates."

"I'll let you know how things end up when we're finished." Veld offered a small smile. "I imagine by then you'll have some more details for me yourself."

"Likely so," Tseng agreed. "I'll speak with you then, Director."

"Mm. Take care, Tseng." The screen went dark and Veld let himself sigh quietly.

"At least things are wrappin' up, huh?" Victor said, watching him.

"Yeah, something like that." Having to make a detour to wrangle Hollander when there had been a
team here already who should have dealt with the scientist was frustrating, but things hadn't gone the way he wanted in a long time. "We'll get Hollander in line and go from there. Probably overshoot AVALANCHE's caravan and wait for them in Costa."

"Get a solid camp in the area, talk to the operative so they know what they're up against…" Victor nodded. "Sounds like a good idea. Need to lure them out of the city proper, though. Or at least have something in place, because they've still got a lot of people on their side. More than we've got here."

"I know. We may call in some backup along with whatever operative Tseng chooses for the job." Veld sighed, running a hand back through his hair. "You should stay here with the kids. Reno, Rude, you're with me. Katana, you keep an eye on the chopper. Army, you're coming to stand guard outside the reactor. Cissnei, take Cait Sith to check out the reactor itself just in case anything happened."

"Yessir!"

"Sure, boss." Cissnei nodded, patting the cat where he was settled on her lap.

"I'll speak with Reeve about it, Director, an' he can get a proper look for ye," Cait offered.

"You do that, we'll be landing just outside the reactor soon." Veld glanced up front. "ETA, red?"

"Just a couple minutes, chief, you can look out an' see me bring us down right now," Reno said, gesturing to the side.

"Good." Veld handed the tablet over to Victor. "Here. In case Tseng calls while I'm out."

"Sure thing, Veld." Victor nodded. "Be careful. No telling what he's shot himself up with, but he's probably gone off his rocker by now."

"I know." Veld smiled mirthlessly, dark eyes hard. "He may not be coming back with us."

"I had a feeling." Victor shook his head, settling back in his seat as Reno brought them down and giving Veld a salute as he left.

"I'll take the lead," Veld said, gesturing for Reno and Rude to fall into step behind him. He didn't draw his pistol yet, not needing it with the materia slotted into his prosthetic; it wouldn't take more than a moment to draw it if he needed to.

The trio made their way up the front stairs, Cissnei and Cait Sith following behind them as the troops fanned out to stand guard. The heavy doors were already unlocked and opened at a push into the front chamber. The first of the reactors was built differently than the rest, but the sight of rows and rows of mako chambers made Veld halt a moment, baffled.

"Door's open up top," Reno said quietly, pointing with his mag rod.

"…yeah, I see." Veld nodded, starting up the next set of stairs and pausing briefly to peer in one of the pods. His eyes widened at the sight of the mutated humanoid within, stunned. What the hell… It was Hojo's work, had to be, but what was it? What had he done?

"Chief?" Reno prompted.

Veld nodded, starting up the stairs. It was something to look into later. If Hollander was messing with the Jenova specimen, they needed to stop him. Especially if it really was alive enough to cause trouble. "Cover me."
"You got it."

The door was wide open, leading to a small platform flanked by odd machinery and a long tube leading up to a smaller platform, where Hollander was standing, adjusting something with the Jenova specimen's containment tube. It could have been a trick of the light, but for a second Veld could have sworn something gleamed inside it. He rolled his shoulders against a chill of unease, flexing his hands. "Hollander."

"Veld." There was something distinctly wrong with his tone, something not-quite-there that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "Genesis isn't here."

"Genesis is Hojo's problem, Doctor." Veld eyed the thick tubing leading up to where Hollander was standing, and looked down over the edges. It looked like there was another surface before the mako pit, but it didn't look very stable, and getting back up would be difficult.

"Hojo doesn't care what happens; I was your only chance to save him." Hollander still didn't turn, fixated on whatever he was doing to the tube. "He's long gone, and will be dead soon enough. He's lost his chance on a fool's quest for divine aid. Of course, in a way he was on the right track, coming here. But he wouldn't even listen to his mother, foolish child."

"He killed his parents back in Banora, Hollander; my man found the bodies." The sense of wrong was increasing rapidly, and the air in the room was starting to feel heavier, thick in a way he couldn't explain. Instinct wanted him out of there, but he held his ground, taking another step in.

"Chief." There was a note in Reno's voice that had him turning immediately, and his eyes widened to see two of AVALANCHE's Ravens slumped on the floor.

Their bodies were twisted unnaturally, faces frozen in pained grimaces, necks at awkward angles. "Why are there Ravens here, Hollander?"

"A gift from Fuhito, in exchange for some information he needed," Hollander said, finally turning back to them. "They were helpful, but I don't need them now."

Veld's breath caught quietly as he stared. Hollander's skin tone was off, a sickly sort of paleness and bruised under the eyes, but it was the eyes themselves that were the most damning proof he'd done something - overly bright, mako bright, and a vibrant acidic green. The pupils were constricted at first, narrow slits in an exaggerated mirror of Sephiroth's, then rounded out again. "You idiot, what have you done?"

"Oh this?" His smile stretched unpleasantly as he gestured to his face. "Genesis' little gift before he left. Don't worry. I'll be fine. Unlike him, I have accepted the changes fully. And Jenova's help."

"That thing is supposed to be dead," Veld said, fighting back the urge to go for his gun. Not yet, don't spook him. Not until he knew what Hollander was capable of now. "And it's sure as hell not something you want to make deals with."

"Why Director, are you worried?" Hollander laughed. "Don't be. I'm doing what Gast and Hojo only dreamed of doing. There's going to be true success at last, breaking free of the chains of humanity."

"Hoo boy, Doc's lost it," Reno muttered.

Veld couldn't really disagree. There was something very, very wrong here. "I'm going to need some more detail on that, Hollander. What did you do?"
"Now, you wouldn't be thinking of interfering would you, Veld?" Hollander asked, walking down the pipe with an almost fluid grace he'd never been capable of before. "You know I can't allow that. I've been pushed aside enough. It's my turn now."

"Answer the question, Doctor," Veld said calmly. Every instinct was saying to just shoot him, and he flexed his hands again. Not yet.

"I'm fixing things," Hollander said, smile nearly serene. "What I've done, Veld, outpaces anything you've ever seen from Hojo. You'll see what a mistake it was giving him the department lead."

"That was never my call," he pointed out. "You can take that up with the President if you've got a problem."

"Hnn… no, I don't think that will be necessary. There's no reason for me to come back." Hollander shook his head slowly. "You can just turn back around. I'm done with ShinRa. And I think it's done with me, isn't it? Are you here to bring me back, or retire me?"

"I'd have preferred to bring you in," he said, not really sure that was still true. "But if you won't cooperate with me, that limits my options."

"No executive decisions to turn the other way, hm? I guess that's just for terrorists." There was a cruel edge to his smile, and he laughed softly at the glare it earned him. "Touchy, aren't you? You should leave, hurry after them. She didn't look well."

Whether Hollander was telling the truth or just baiting him, he couldn't know. But it didn't matter, didn't change their situation here and now. "I'm going to need you to stand down, Hollander, and come with me."

"Mmm… no."

It was sheer instinct that had Veld raising his hand and summoning fire from his equipped materia, a stream of flame lashing out just as Hollander launched at them and throwing him back over the edge of the platform on impact. He pulled his gun as the flames dispersed into the air, hurrying to the edge and looking over.

"Is he dead?" Reno asked.

Veld frowned, looking at the awkward sprawl he'd landed in; Hollander wasn't even twitching, so far as he could tell, but better to be safe than sorry. He clicked the safety off his pistol and took a few strategic shots. "See if you can find a way down there. I'd rather have a body."

"Yeah, sure chief." Reno edged around the side, heading up the pipe to get a better look. "Looks like there's an access ladder back here I can take."

"If it's safe, then go ahead." Veld nodded, moving to keep an eye on him, though his gun was still trained on Hollander's body.

"Looks safe enough, yeah." Reno edged around the mako tube, heading for the ladder.

"We've got movement," Rude said abruptly.

"Reno, wait," Veld ordered, watching as Hollander started to tremble, violently enough to see even at their distance. Seizures, he thought, and shivered at a sudden unnatural chill spreading through the room. "Get back up here, Reno."
"You got it, yo." Reno was already clambering back up fast, rushing as much as he dared, light on his feet as he skirted around the mako tube containing the Jenova specimen and coming back to their side.

Veld watched as Hollander shook, then started to swell, bloating up at an unnatural pace. His coat ripped under the strain, tearing down the back as something tore through the fabric of his shirt, flopping loosely to the side before attempting to stretch out - a wing, another of the Jenova mutations, like Angeal and Genesis, though his was significantly smaller. A rattling groan echoed up and his back arched, joints popping loudly as his body began to contort. Something snapped, clothes continuing to tear as his limbs stretched out, swelling and shifting into something elongated and beastly. Whatever he was turning into, it wasn't human. And Veld sure as hell wasn't waiting to find out what it was.

Green light glowed from active materia under his sleeve as he charged up a spell, holding it until it built to full strength. Not fire, not with the mako pit only so many meters below the clear floor, this time a mass of ice formed in the air with the full power of a Blizzaga and dropped. If the sheer weight of it wasn't enough, the jagged edges would have finished the job, dozens of spears slicing into soft tissue. Slowly, blood began to seep out from it, no further sound or movement from Hollander.

Veld sighed, feeling tension leech from his shoulders, and started to tell Reno he could go back down, before there was a sudden, echoing crack and the floor shattered like glass.

Large sections began to break away slowly, but everything around the chunk of ice impaling Hollander gave way to gravity's pull and plummeted into the mako pit immediately.

"Holy shit," Reno breathed, staring down after it.

Veld watched the mako swallow everything up, slowly holstering his pistol. "Well. I'd say Hollander is no longer a problem."

Reno snorted, shaking his head. "Uh, yeah. Yeah I think we're good here. He ain't gonna be causin' nobody trouble now."

"Right." Veld shook his head slightly. "We'll check in with Cait and Reeve, make sure he didn't do anything earlier. If that's good, we're out of here."

"Hell yeah. Let's go."
Warnings of What's to Come

Chapter Summary

On the verge of finally catching up to Genesis, the SOLDIERs are presented with another threat.

Chapter Notes

I'd like to announce that this month I worked on this for NaNoWriMo, so I now have significant buffer, enough to promise that there won't be a lag in updates in the future. The story is almost completely written now!

If you're interested in seeing how I did on NaNo, the link is here and I've been discussing it on this Tumblr tag.

Veld sent an abbreviated report on the situation with Hollander - dead, and likely dissolved into the concentrated mako in the reactor - with a promise of more detail once they'd gotten moving and made arrangements with Rufus for dealing with AVALANCHE. It was enough for them to know the scientist wasn't a problem anymore.

Most of them, anyway.

Chaos stirred once more, though he didn't fight Vincent for control. Instead, his presence was merely a low pressure in the back of his mind, insistent on getting his attention.

'The Planet is not pleased.'

Vincent bit back a sigh, closing his eyes reflexively to concentrate. 'You heard Veld's report. Hollander is gone. Jenova doesn't have anyone else to take control of.'

'It doesn't matter. The Calamity has awakened, and the WEAPONS have risen at the Planet's call. There will be consequences for humanity.'

Vincent tensed slightly. 'For humanity. Why?'

'The WEAPONS aren't versed in subtleties of motivation. They won't care what was meant, they won't care that not all of the people in one area are equally responsible for things being done. They will strike out at perceived threats. And it will not end well.'

Images of the reactors came to mind and he frowned. 'They're coming because of Jenova. Why attack anything else?'

'The Calamity may be the ultimate threat, but they are unable to prioritize by potential. Now that it lays dormant they'll come for the immediately active threats. The reactors, and those with the Calamity's cells,' Chaos said, a sense of agreement echoing between them as Vincent opened his eyes and looked at the SOLDIERs.
'How many WEAPONs are there?'

'There are six made to defend the Planet; they have risen from their slumber in the North and are making their way south,' Chaos said. 'They will make their way to whatever threats they perceive most urgent. The cities with reactors and the changed humans will be definite targets.'

Midgar and Junon came to mind immediately, places that also had significant civilian populations. Even if they could somehow be fully evacuated, the destruction of a reactor would create an unheard of disaster zone that would be causing damage for generations. He remembered seeing the projections of what could happen if there was ever a meltdown, and this… this could be even worse.

'What would they do? How do they attack?' Vincent asked urgently, pushing off the wall he'd been leaning on and pacing down the hall to try to placate his restless nerves. Someone said something behind him and he waved them off.

'With sheer physical force and energy.'

Images came to mind of different creatures, one after the other until he'd seen the six of them, monsters in every sense - enormous, ugly, hulking creatures. Coming to destroy what they believed to be the threats to the Planet.

'They're not wrong. The Planet would be better off without humanity.'

'That's not their choice to make.' He was aware someone had followed him and stopped, turning quickly and sighing to see Sephiroth.

The SOLDIER watched him a long moment in silence. "Chaos, I presume?"

Vincent nodded, frowning behind the high collar of his mantle. "He says the Planet has deployed its other WEAPONS in response to Jenova's awakening."

"Aerith had suspected something similar earlier," Sephiroth said, considering that. "Did he supply any more information?"

"Information on size, number and minimal note of attack ability," he said. "But more importantly, that they don't have the intelligence to actually go after Jenova,"

Sephiroth frowned. "I don't understand."

"The Planet called to the WEAPONS out of concern of Jenova apparently being active in some way, presumably also because of Genesis' proximity and whatever nearly happened with Hollander," Vincent said. "But Genesis isn't there, Hollander is dead, and Jenova is back to being merely a potential danger that needs someone else to really be an active threat. They are apparently not smart enough to go after It anyway, so they're refocusing on what they see as the next threat."

Sephiroth considered that a long moment in silence. "The three of us next, then. The ones with the highest concentration of Jenova cells."

"Not just the three of you, he's implied all of SOLDIER is in danger, for the changes they've undergone," Vincent said. "And beyond that, the reactors register as a threat as well."

"So anywhere with reactors, or a concentration of SOLDIER." Sephiroth frowned. "There are five cities with reactors - Nibelheim, Gongaga, Corel, Junon and Midgar. Attacking any single reactor would be devastating, but there's eight in Midgar. What sort of combatant are we talking about?"
"Big enough to physically deliver successful blows to the reactors, from the images Chaos shared with me," Vincent said. "And apparently capable of energy attacks, though I'm not certain what that entails."

"By nature, one would assume ranged," Sephiroth said. "So they could start attacking before they ever got in our striking range. That's going to require some careful strategy. Come back with me, we'll brainstorm with Angeal and Zack."

Vincent nodded slightly, gesturing for him to lead the way back.

Zack looked over at them immediately, taking in their expressions. "So. What's the bad news from the big guy this time?"

"The Planet has sent out WEAPONs, and there's reason to think they're going to target SOLDIER and the reactors instead of going directly after Jenova," Sephiroth said. "We can assume that anywhere that has both SOLDIER and reactors is an especially tempting target."

"Great." Zack sighed, crossing his arms. "Alright, what about us? Because you guys are full of enough of those cells that Chaos wanted to take you out, and we're about to have the three of you at a single location."

"Also a target, I'm sure," Sephiroth admitted. "They're coming from the 'north' however, so there's also judgments to be made on if we're considered dangerous enough to pass up other locations just to go after us. With eight reactors and half of the total number of SOLDIERs stationed at headquarters, Midgar may be the more immediate target."

"Nine reactors, there's one in the core of the city, beneath ShinRa tower," Hojo corrected. "And it definitely has the highest percentage of enhanced. But there's still a bigger presence of Jenova cells in the three of you than the rest of them."

"So it might come down to if they're still more upset over Jenova's presence, or what they think about the reactors," Angeal said. "Either way, we're in for some fights. How many are there? What do we know about them?"

"There are six, most bigger than a reactor, all capable of direct physical combat and what we assume to be ranged energy attacks," Vincent said. "They're not intelligent, so they can't be reasoned with. They're going to attack until they believe they've finished their objectives."

"Okay so definitely going to have to fight them," Zack said. "At least one, probably a couple at a time. Do we know how strong they are compared to like... I don't know, summons? I've fought summons. They're tough, but they're not impossible to beat."

"Stronger by default," Vincent said, certain of it even before getting Chaos' confirmation. "A summon relies on the strength of the summoner, and even the best mage has limits. If you have the stamina, it's possible to wait them out. You can't do that here, they're not bound by human limitations."

"And at that size even them falling over dead could cause some damage." Zack shook his head. "Whoo. Okay. Well if they're going after SOLDIER, though, these are people trained to fight. Big groups. They come after us, we've still got people who can fight. The problem is going to be places like Nibelheim and Gongaga, where you've just got civilians in a bunch of hard terrain. There's not even anywhere to run in Nibelheim, and if that reactor blows it's taking a whole chunk of the mountain with it. Same with Gongaga; that one blows at this time of year, the forest would go up in flames until it burned to the ground. And as close as the reactor is, it would take the whole village
“What if we can redirect them?” Aerith suggested. "They were sent out because of Jenova, but because Jenova settled down, they're not going after it. What if we could make some of the other targets seem nonthreatening? Can we shut any of the reactors down?"

There was a long pause of consideration. Zack nodded thoughtfully. "If we could shut them down, they should be in the same sort of category Jenova's in, right? No longer active, so no longer an active threat that they need to go after."

Vincent turned the concept over in his mind, nodding as well. "That would make sense logically. They'd no longer register as something to sense in whatever way they're being detected, and if they're not smart enough to remember Jenova should be the threat, then it follows that they wouldn't think to go after them. But you can't shut down the ones in Midgar, unless things have changed drastically."

"No, the city is even more dependent on the reactors now," Hojo said, shaking his head. "Not just lights or the railways. Without the power from the reactors, you're losing power to hospitals, anything in any sort of cold storage would go bad, security systems would fail, communications would go out almost entirely…"

"So that's something we can't really afford," Sephiroth said. "Unless there's some overlooked backup. You would think hospitals would have generators in case of emergency situations."

"Oh to some extent, I'm sure, but those only last so long. And that still doesn't remove SOLDIER from the equation," he pointed out.

"Right, so we can't shut Midgar down, but we could shut down Gongaga and Corel, maybe Nibelheim." Zack said. "I know there's generators in Gongaga where you really need it, because you can't count on the power from the reactor during monsoon season. Nibelheim probably has stuff for when blizzards hit too. And the one in Corel isn't even fully working yet, right?"

"It's still a work in process, as far as I know," Sephiroth agreed. "Which leaves Junon still targeted for the SOLDIERs at the academy and military base."

"Yeah but just Junon and Midgar are much, much more defendable, especially as close as they are," Zack said. "And Junon has the Mako Cannon. It's operational now, isn't it? They had a whole press event with the President around the time of the attack when AVALANCHE tried to take it over."

"You're correct, it is operational." Sephiroth said. "Which does make Junon somewhat easier to defend. Built into the coast the way it is will help cut down on where the attacks can come from as well, and the reactor is a ways off under water. But if they destroy it, that's going to contaminate the ocean."

"And spread everywhere from the current and make things radioactive and kill them, yeah." Zack shivered at the thought of the long term consequences of tainted water circulating through the ocean. "Okay well… maybe they can shut it down or put it to a lower activity. Can we call Director Tuesti? That's his specialty."

"He's the one we need to contact, agreed." Sephiroth nodded. "And then alert Midgar and Junon accordingly so they can prepare."

"Yeah." Zack rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe we'll get Genesis quick and be able to get back before the WEAPONs get there. Any idea how fast they're moving, Vincent?"
"Chaos didn't say." And was unfortunately not commenting any further now. Part of him wondered if the demi-WEAPON wouldn't prefer for his siblings to succeed. "But I would assume the sooner you can get the reactors shut down and people getting ready for them the better."

"Right. Okay, you guys want to talk to Director Tuesti?" Zack suggested. "And Lazard, I guess, to get SOLDIER together."

"Best to put a call in now," Sephiroth agreed. "We're almost to Mideel, so we have a time limit."

"Yeah… Genesis seemed to stop there?"

"For now it feels like it. At least taking a break to rest, whether or not he's exactly where he wants to be," Sephiroth said. "He has to be exhausted, even if he relied on something else to travel."

"Hey better for us, I'd just as soon we not have to fight," Zack said. Especially with Angeal still sick, even if he was looking a little better. It was such a small improvement he wasn't even certain it wasn't a placebo affect and positive thinking helping just put Angeal into a better head space. Whatever it was, though, he was grateful.

"We have sedatives, and I'm carrying a mastered Seal," Angeal said. "He's probably not up to resisting that level of a Sleep spell right now, and Silence will stop his magic, forcing him into closer combat. If he goes airborne, I can follow long enough to hit him with the Sleepeel."

"A sound plan," Sephiroth said. "For now, though, rest. I'll go speak with Reeve and Lazard."

Angeal nodded. "Yeah. I'm going to get a quick nap, I think the captain said we had about an hour left."

"He did."

Hopefully it would be enough for them to get everything settled. Sephiroth watched his friend a moment in silence, then nodded slightly and went to make the call.
Interlude: Making Plans

Chapter Summary

It seemed far fetched, but the risk was too big to take.

The conversation with Sephiroth lasted for nearly forty five minutes, though Reeve was only present for the first fifteen to hear enough about the situation to know what had to be done on his end. Having had Cait Sith in contact with all three of the reactor systems on the central continent so recently allowed him to get back in remotely and ready things for a proper shutdown. He made sure to contact the locals in each location to let them know that the reactors would need to be temporarily shut down and assure them that he would have things running again as soon as possible. It was a gamble, not letting them know about the WEAPONS, but he felt that without their own military forces all it would do was cause a panic. He had to hope that the theory of being able to just make the locations no longer register as 'threats' to the WEAPONs was sound.

Then there was trying to prepare Midgar and Junon. Rufus was skeptical, but in the end decided that it couldn't hurt to try and arrange for better protection. If nothing else, AVALANCHE could potentially be about to become a much more serious problem, on the slim chance that the Turks fumbled the situation in Costa del Sol. There just wasn't enough information on the Zirconiade summon to be certain what they were getting into if Fuhito really did manage to summon it, but it had to be powerful to be granting Elfé strength worthy of a First Class SOLDIER even in an incomplete form.

The board meeting to start ironing out details was predictably a mess.

"You can't be serious about this," Heidegger said. "You're talking fairytale monsters, this doesn't happen. And you're going on the word of what, rogue SOLDIERs? What makes you think they don't just want us distracted from whatever they're doing? SOLDIER is notorious for trying to evade oversight, they've been slinking around acting independently for months now."

"I'll be frank with you, Heidegger, I'm skeptical myself," Rufus admitted, shrugging. "The source isn't one I'm particularly comfortable with, but in a world where anyone can summon monsters capable of devastating cities with oversized chunks of solid mako, I'm not going to risk it. I am going to send out some scouts to see about finding some solid proof, but in the meantime yes, we're going to step up security on Junon and Midgar. Reactor security has needed upgrading for years, and so long as AVALANCHE is still out there, we're targets. I'm not letting us get caught unprepared. And if you're not ready to step up to the level I'm demanding, I will find someone capable of doing the job. This is not optional."

"Kya ha ha, I'm sure Tuesti is pleased that he's going to be getting more support. But a good offense is our best defense." Scarlet tapped her fingers on the edge of the table, smile sharp enough to cut. "The Sister Ray is already ready to go in Junon, but I can turn out even more machines to give us ranged attacks. SOLDIER may have some of the most flexible brute force, but they're close combat fighters. If these things get that close, there's going to be collateral damages, and casualties we could have avoided."

"There's no reason we can't move forces out of the city to meet them before they ever get here," Lazard pointed out. "Something as big as these WEAPONs are supposed to be isn't going to be able
to sneak up on us. There was no mention of stealth abilities, as I understand it they're running on something close to instinct. We're not seeing strategy here, the problem is just sheer strength."

"Considerable strength. Just swinging part of whatever sort of body they have at that size could crush through the side of a reactor," Reeve said. "We have to do everything we can to protect them, the fallout from even one reactor being hit is going to be catastrophic. If you and Scarlet can keep them from reaching the city, that's ideal."

"Scarlet, what are the odds you can get heavier duty weaponry onto our helicopters?" Rufus asked. "I know there's some standard built-in guns on the ones the Turks use, but those aren't going to be enough. We need something bigger. Rockets, maybe. Whatever you can come up with."

"Oh I've definitely got rockets that can be repurposed," she agreed, humming thoughtfully. "I can outfit them and get in on the troop transports. They can drop off SOLDIERs and then stick around for air support."

"We've got a few materia specialists left that can do ranged too," Lazard said, writing down some of the names. "I put in a call to get my men back from Wutai as soon as you authorized it, but that's still going to take several hours."

"I can't picture something that big moving very fast. I mean, sure if it was some sort of… bipedal monster, it's stride would eat up tremendous distance, but I'm still thinking something moving out from the northern continent is going to take a while," Reeve said. "Longer than getting people in from Wutai."

"That's what I'm hoping." Lazard sighed. "I'm calling people back as quickly as possible. If Scarlet has Junon held down, I'll bring the bulk of them here."

"Don't count out the army," Heidegger said, scowling. "If there actually is a fight, you're going to need everyone, and I have the fullest ranks."

"Debatable," Scarlet said. "I've still got hundreds of machines that I can use. The Heli Gunners can be used for ranged and close combat regardless of any terrain, including the ocean around Junon, which none of your regular forces can handle. I can set up rows of Hauser Heads in front of whoever you do have for ranged so it's not a wall of breakable humans and they actually stand a chance of living long enough to do damage. Grab a group of Barrier Machines for extra defense, even harder to take out. Let my Launcher Machines take the high ground and they can rain down a solid hail of missiles."

"You need to make sure they hit the right target," Rufus said. "We're going to need every SOLDIER Lazard can get back here, and they don't have time to fight off friendly fire even if you could afford to waste the ammunition. Whatever it takes, get on it."

"Of course, President." Scarlet nodded, making some notes on her tablet. "I think we should still have them as the first wave. They're not going to tire out, and even SOLDIERs have limits. These WEAPONs are going to be fired at constantly until they can destroy them all; it will slow them down and leave them weaker for the next assault."

"That's a fair point," Lazard said. "We can do magic attacks from a distance, but especially in Junon she's probably got the better arrangement for the initial defense. It would be better for the army and SOLDIER to hang back, aside from any magic support they can offer."

"You forget that the army has a wide selection of ranged weaponry. I can back up Scarlet's machines with my riflemen," Heidegger said; he still didn't believe that this was actually going to happen, but
damned if he'd be left out. "And if she has rocket launchers that are used manually, we can use those too, as well as manning some of the modified transports."

"That all sounds good, but we can't be so certain that they'll be defeated before they can hit the cities that we can completely leave out some plan to minimize damages here," Reeve said earnestly. "I'm going to lower the power on the reactors as much as I can afford to, but we need a second plan in place if things don't go according to the original plan. These creatures are supposedly also capable of long distance attacks - with a target the size of Midgar, they don't need to get very close."

"Perhaps that is where my division would come in," Tseng suggested. As much as he'd wanted to rally forces around Veld, with the WEAPONs coming they'd agreed to limit the number of people coming to augment his team. With any luck, they'd settle things with AVALANCHE quickly and be able to return to Midgar with minimal delay, but better not to count on it.

"I don't suppose there's been any word from Veld on when he'll be back?" Scarlet asked. "Or the other SOLDIERs? Your best Firsts chose a terrible time to be away, Lazard."

"I know. They're closing in on Genesis as we speak, and there's reason to think at this point he won't be able to put up much resistance, so hopefully they'll be able to head back soon as well," Lazard said. There was no rushing Sephiroth, even for this. Not at the expense of Genesis.

"Veld's team should be engaging AVALANCHE's main forces soon," Tseng reported. "Once he's straightened that out, he'll return to Midgar, or wherever he ends up most needed. In the meantime, I will be handling things in coordination with Ms. Torvik at our Junon branch. If it came down to it, we would both be equipped to start evacuating either location but for now I think it would be better if we work together on securing things while Scarlet, Lazard and Heidegger work together on deciding what sort of offensive would be best to take. I'd also suggest tagging some of Palmer's pilots and sending them out as scouts. There's nothing to lose and everything to gain from finding these creatures on our own terms, maybe even enabling us to choose our battlefield."

"Agreed. Send out his pilots with some recording devices so we can get a look at these monsters," Heidegger said. "You can't make solid plans off of the sketchy details we've got. Get some real concrete intelligence, and we'll go from there."

"A good idea," Rufus agreed. "Palmer, as soon as this meeting is over, I want you to get your scout planes. I want either a Turk or infantry with each one to get some observations from a combatant's view, someone who could actually make qualified judgments."

"I can send scouts that are trained for this sort of thing," Heidegger said. "Leave that to me."

"Very well. We'll concentrate on arranging city defenses, alongside Reeve," Tseng suggested, nodding slightly when Rufus made a sound of agreement.

"I want all of you to keep in contact with me; report in regularly, especially before you make any movements," Rufus said. "No posturing, no infighting. If this isn't a real threat, it's still a good exercise. If it is, we're going to need everyone working together to survive. Understood?"

There were nods around the table and Rufus nodded back, standing. "Alright. Get to work."
The last time Zack had seen Banora it was an inferno, swirling ash and choking heat as bombs whistled down from the sky in a merciless barrage. Fire devoured everything it touched, licking the stone and wood of crumbled buildings and roaring through fields and orchards. Now all that was left was ruins, the blackened skeletal remains of buildings and bare fields of charred stumps.

Angeal hadn't known, hadn't seen it - he'd been gone well before the bombs ever dropped - and stared in mute horror at what had become of his childhood home. Then again, after what Genesis had done, it had already been a ghost town.

"They were very thorough," Hojo observed, looking it over from where they were standing at the front of the bridge to watch the island.

Angeal huffed a hard breath, lips pressed to a thin line as he took a moment to find his voice. "At least it'll make it easier to spot Genesis, if he's outside."

"There's not a whole lot of other alternatives left, at least in Banora," Zack pointed out.

"Depends if he made it to the caverns yet." Angeal shrugged. "I can feel him down there, though. He's close."

"Be wary, he'll know you're here," Vincent pointed out. "He shares the same senses, even in his degraded state."

"He knows we're here, and he's waiting," Sephiroth said quietly. "I think he's tired of running."

"Still, you guys be careful," Zack said, offering the Buster Sword back to Angeal. "You sure you're up for this?"

"No," he admitted, looking at the blade in silence for a long moment before accepting it back. "But we have to do this. I have to be there to talk with him too."

"You always were the mediator," Sephiroth said, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Maybe this time it will work again."

"We have to try." Angeal flipped his sword back onto its magnetic clip, sighing at the familiar weight on his back. He was feeling a little better, either from all the sleep or whatever Hojo had done, but it wasn't a cure. "If I had to bet, I'd say we'll find him by the caverns."

"I trust you know the way?" Sephiroth said, nodding at Angeal's agreement. "Then you'll lead. Captain, if you'll lower the ship slightly, we can make the jump."

"You're not gonna wait for me t' just land the damn thing?" Cid shook his head. "Whatever, SOLDIER. You do your thing. Head out, you know the way."
Zack followed them out of the bridge, frowning. "Sure you don't want backup?"

"Better that you stay here with the others," Sephiroth said. "Genesis doesn't know you. He may not be happy to see me, but we were friends once."

"Hopefully that'll make a difference." Zack nodded, patting his shoulder. "Good luck, guys."

"Thanks. We're going to need it."

Genesis had felt the others coming long before he'd heard the airship. Not the puppy being sent to hound him alone this time, Angeal had come as well, along with Sephiroth. He couldn't help but wonder what would bring that trio together after him. Angeal coming to 'reason' with him made sense. Zack being sent out one last time to finish things made sense. Sephiroth… he'd only seen him once. And considering Lazard had to have tried to send him out first, that spoke volumes of what he'd been willing to do.

Yet here he was right along with Angeal and Zack. All of them together.

Coming for him.

His smile was bitter, but he stopped walking, finding an outcropping to sit and wait for them. Exhaustion weighed heavily on him, leaden limbs desperately grateful for a pause in movement and his aching wing folded into his side. It was the kind of bone deep exhaustion that hurt, and left his eyes feeling heavy and gritty, but he still scanned the horizon, waiting. He could make out the airship in the distance, and saw two figures come from it.

Only two.

Angeal and Sephiroth, he could tell by his sense of them, familiar energy warm against his own. Deceptive comfort, considering their rejection. Somehow he doubted they were there to make amends and join him, not after the conversation they'd had back at headquarters.

They came into proper focus slowly, and not how he expected. Something was wrong. Deeply wrong. Tension wasn't uncalled for, but there was a weight to Sephiroth's shoulders that he hadn't seen in years, enough of a frown to be clear on his face even at a distance despite the fact that he always maintained a cultivated air of indifference. And Angeal…

No…

Just at a glance, he knew. He knew what the lightened streaks in his dark hair meant, knew about pale skin, bruised circles of exhaustion under eyes that burned with fever. He'd seen it in the mirror for years now. The degradation had hit Angeal mercilessly, and even if it wasn't as bad as Genesis' own, it was only a matter of time.

Genesis was moving without ever having planned to, hopping down and crossing the field to meet them. For a long moment there was silence as they looked at each other. "I guess Hojo isn't looking too hard for a cure after all."

He nearly winced. That wasn't what he'd meant to say.
"I've only had one treatment so far," Angeal said, always the one to take his cruelty in stride. "I can hold my sword and I'm here. That's already improvement."

"So you are." He wanted to ask what that meant, if this was improvement, how bad had it been? How far had his friend fallen while they were apart? But he couldn't make the words come, looking to Sephiroth instead. "I'm surprised you came."

"I should have been here sooner." His voice was softer than Genesis had expected, his frown edged with remorse. "It never should have been Zack, even if you wouldn't listen to me. I should have tried."

"A little late for that," Genesis said.

"It doesn't have to be, Gen," Angeal said. "We're not giving up. Not on me, or you. Hojo's got something he tried, with Sephiroth's genes instead of straight Jenova cells -"

"Spare me." Genesis held up a hand, scowling. "I'd rather die than turn myself over to Hojo's care."

"Well you're going to at this rate!" Angeal took a deep, steadying breath, trying to keep his tone level. "Genesis, please. I know it's a long shot for both of us, but I don't want it to end like this."

"That was never our choice to make, Angeal." Genesis looked away, not wanting to face the grief painted across his best friend's face.

"You're not giving up."

The level of certainty in Sephiroth's voice earned a curious look, and a bit of disdain. "What if I am? It's been years, Sephiroth. Even I get tired. Maybe I've had enough."

"You flew here like a man possessed from Nibelheim," Sephiroth said, looking him over. "You shouldn't have even been capable of that. Something was driving you. There was something important."

"Maybe I just wanted to die at home," Genesis suggested, gesturing to ruins with a grim smile. "Rather poetic, isn't it? Fitting, even. What right do I have to do what I've done and carry on?"

Angeal was silent a moment, clearly conflicted. "Gen, you weren't…"

"Sane?" Genesis laughed, a short bark of sound. "Oh I know. Things are much clearer now, I'm very aware of how far I've fallen. My friend, the fates are cruel. There are no dreams, no honor remains. The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

"Is that why you're here?" Sephiroth asked, refusing to be derailed by the quote. "For your goddess?"

Genesis watched him a moment. "And if I am? What do you care?"

Sephiroth took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I care. I've always cared."

"Oh, have you really?" Genesis scoffed. "Really. Sure we're not playing another round of 'humor the madman'? Some new tactic to make me see things your way?"

"I'm not playing games, Genesis." Sephiroth frowned deeply, watching him. "This is a matter of life and death. If you've found a solution, then tell us."

"Infinite in mystery... maybe I have, maybe I haven't. I could be going to my death." Genesis smiled...
mirthlessly, looking away. "At this point I don't care."

"Liar," Sephiroth accused. "You're not ready to die. If you wanted to be dead, you'd have found a way. You've had plenty of opportunities from ShinRa's efforts alone."

"ShinRa does not get to finish me off so easily," Genesis said sharply, glaring at him. "They've done all the damages they get to."

"ShinRa doesn't matter right now, okay?" Angeal said, taking a step forward and making a frustrated sound when Genesis took a step back. "Things have changed, anyway. It's not the way it was."

"Oh do tell, what managed to change the President's mind?" Genesis asked. "I helped AVALANCHE, Angeal. I stole supplies and led a mass desertion in the middle of a war. I did hundreds of thousands of gil in damages, if not more. What could possibly have me on anything but his hit list?"

"He's dead." Sephiroth smiled slightly at his shock. "Rufus shot him and took over. He's already a part of the alliance we made to change things. Rufus, Lazard, Veld, Hojo, Reeve... we have a board majority. They may all have their own motivations, but in the end we're backing each other up. Even if you refuse to return to ShinRa, you can at least get help."

Genesis stared at them a long moment in silence. "You really believe that, don't you? You, of all people, think Hojo can save us."

"He knows the project better than anyone alive, Gen, he's our best chance," Angeal said. "Maybe our only chance now. I'm feeling more stable from what he's done. Is it a cure? I don't know. But it's buying us time."

Genesis huffed lightly, shaking his head. "I'm done being an experiment, Angeal. I'm done letting those madmen play god with me. Leave that to the true powers that be... maybe I'll be saved yet. Or at least die with some dignity."

"What do you think you're going to accomplish here?" Angeal asked. "What's going on?"

"You'll think I'm crazy." Genesis paused, chuckling darkly. "Crazier."

"Let me decide that," he insisted. "What are you trying to do here?"

Genesis debated telling him, whether it was worth it or not to try and get him to grasp the truth of it. "I went to Nibelheim, because someone had heard my prayers, and spoke to me. I'd thought it was the goddess I was praying to. It made sense at the time."

Angeal watched him as the silence stretched and he looked away. "It was Jenova, wasn't it? We felt something..."

"You felt it?" Genesis' head snapped back and he stared at them both, eyes widening when Sephiroth nodded. "Gods, I had no idea... what happened?"

"It knocked me out," Angeal admitted.

"I had an adverse reaction. Pain, and then urges to be violent." Sephiroth frowned slightly. "We're not certain why."

"I don't think she cared for the creature's interruption," Genesis muttered, frowning still. "You had to have still been a way's away... what happened when you went into Nibelheim?"
"We didn't." Sephiroth gestured back towards the airship. "We met your 'creature' - he's a demi-WEAPON of the Planet by the name of Chaos. He wanted to fight us, but things were a bit complicated on that front and he was unable to."

"I know the name." He hadn't studied extensively into WEAPONs, much more interested in Cetran history and the application to materia science, but it had come up. "That's…"

"Pretty incredible," Angeal said. "The Planet's in an uproar about Jenova; he says it's released the other WEAPONs. But they're going to be coming for people, too."

"For us," Genesis said, sneering. "Jenova's spawn."

"We are not Jenova's spawn," Angeal said firmly. "But we do have It's cells."

"Tell that to the WEAPONs. Even Chaos said as much." Genesis shook his head. "I'm not waiting for that. I'm going to make my appeal to Minerva. My soul, corrupted by vengeance, hath endured torment, to find the end of the journey. The Goddess can decide my fate, and no other."

"You're going to the caverns," Angeal guessed. "It's dangerous in there, Genesis."

"You're hardly in any condition to assist me," Genesis sighed, smiling faintly. "Always trying to be the protector. We've chosen our paths, old friend, and you walked away."

"I did a lot of things I shouldn't have, alright, I admit that." Angeal took two quick steps over, resting a hand on his friend's uninjured shoulder, wanting to ground him with the familiar contact.

The reaction was immediate, like lightning shooting up his arm, pain spreading through his chest as he made a strangled sound.

"Angeal?" Sephiroth came over quickly as he collapsed against Genesis. "What's going on?"

"Stay back!" Genesis ordered, feeling dizzy with a rush of sensation. Dimly, he could hear whispering that he couldn't quite make out. A familiar woman's voice that gave him chills. Not again. No… no please not again.

Sephiroth hesitated to make contact, watching them and seeing the familiar ring of mako green covering into the normal blue of Genesis' eyes. "Break contact, that's making it worse."

Genesis nodded, pushing Angeal away and panting softly. The voice cut out, but his arms were tingling with goosebumps, a chill running down his spine. "That's what happened to you?"

"Similar," Sephiroth confirmed. "It's not constant. I didn't anticipate it happening now. It must be-"

"Wait." Genesis frowned, narrowing his eyes. There was something else, niggling at the edge of his senses. Familiar. "Do you feel that?"

Sephiroth frowned, focusing his senses and turning back towards the ruins of Banora. "Something's coming."

"Lots of somethings," Genesis agreed, stepping around where Angeal was recovering on the ground and taking a defensive stance. There were at least a dozen energies pinging his senses, strangely familiar. He should know what they were. He'd felt that before. It had been a while, but- "No."

"What? What is it?" Sephiroth looked at him quickly before going back to scanning the area. There was something coming in the sky. Several somethings. People?
"Clones," Genesis said.

Well over a dozen of his own clones, coming in to land and watch them with bright green eyes.
Chapter Summary

Chaos refused to wait and see if the trio could fight off Jenova's influence again.

There was no warning.

Vincent had sensed the clones coming - seen them pouring out of the ruins from the vantage point of the airship's bridge, and the way they started to make a rush for the three SOLDIERS - and heard Zack identify them. *Genesis copies,* he'd said. And then things had suddenly shifted.

Pain shot through him like fire in his veins, sudden pressure from Chaos well beyond anything he'd tried yet. It drove him to his knees, his breath forced out in a wheezing cry. Dimly he was aware of something being said - multiple somethings, his name amongst it - but he didn't dare shift his focus away from the WEAPON prying at his control.

"Chaos stop!"

The pressure increased, his chest burning and his back starting to spasm along the shoulder blades.

"Chaos don't do this."

"Jenova reaches for her children, even now. She cannot be allowed control,' Chaos said.

"They'll fight it. They've all fought it, every time."

"Relying on the strength of dying men is a risk I refuse to take.' With a final push, Chaos forced the transformation, taking over Vincent's form once more. He stretched, wings expanding wide, then promptly headed for the exit.

"Chaos!"

He didn't stop for the little Cetra's call. Her attachment to the Jenova-infected humans could not be allowed to compromise his mission.

"Chaos wait!"

He continued without pause, getting to the exit and leaping over the side rail. Flight was easy and natural, gliding around towards the concentration of the Calamity's extended presence. He'd stopped once, at the bidding of others. But the Calamity had reached out once more, and he was not going to allow it to get a grip into these humans.

He arrived in time to see two of them launch into a coordinated attack, blurs of black and crimson lashing out, blades gleaming in glowing red and shining silver as they attacked the mindless clones. Whatever they had in speed and strength was hindered by empty minds, instinct not enough to bridge the gap against seasoned warriors. It was clear they would win, but the additional presence of Jenova within the clones was only increasing the resonance between them all. Chaos was not of a mind to wait and allow that to build any more than it already had.
Bound to the flesh of a mortal, his power was severely restricted, but not so much so that he couldn't access his power at all. Even in the unnaturally twisted mirrors of Genesis, he could feel the burn of their souls and reached. Herald of the end of times, squire to Omega, it was his nature to extinguish all life when the time had come. While it was not yet time to extend his reach across the Planet, it was easy to reach for these weak abominations that the Calamity had possessed, snuffing out their dull spirits in a rush of power. They collapsed one by one, dead, and when they had all fallen between the three of them silence descended on the battlefield.

Sephiroth turned to face him first. "Chaos."

Chaos inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment, flexing his hand and calling forth the massive gun that echoed back to the one his host carried. Even the weakest of these three had too strong a spirit to simply snuff out like the clones.

"I take it you've changed your mind about fighting us," he observed, flicking his nodachi out to the side, the long blade gleaming in the sunlight.

"Jenova has reached for you. The infection is active and needs to be removed," Chaos said simply. "You are a threat."

"Here I thought you were leaving that up to the Goddess," Genesis said, stepping up to Sephiroth's side. "No such mercy, I see."

"I told you not to stop until you reached her shrine," Chaos reminded him. "You have stopped. Had you not, you would not be here, and you would escape this moment."

"I see."

"I told you not to stop until you reached her shrine," Chaos reminded him. "You have stopped. Had you not, you would not be here, and you would escape this moment."

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"I see."

"I can't say we've ever had anyone try to take the both of us on in battle. This should be interesting."

"Agreed." Sephiroth's smile was small and grim, but he couldn't deny his curiosity about the demi-WEAPON's power.

"I suspect you won't be at your best," Chaos said, gesturing to where Angeal was just starting to sit up. "You have a weakness. I do not."

Sephiroth glanced to the side, frowning, then looked back to Chaos. "Genesis, get Angeal to safety."

"What?" Genesis glanced sharply at him, scowling. "You're not going to beat him alone, Sephiroth."

"I don't have to beat him. I just have to hold out until his human host takes over again." Sephiroth smirked, flicking his blade at his side. "Go on. I can handle this, as long as you two are safe."

Genesis watched him a moment, then nodded slightly, kneeling to try and help Angeal up. There was another staticky feel of connection but it was bearable this time. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

"Hnngh?" Angeal shivered, stumbling upright and clinging to Genesis. "I can hear…"

"I know, ignore it," Genesis urged.

Chaos raised his gun, expressionless, and trained it on them, smiling faintly when Genesis' wing flared out to cup protectively around Angeal. "It's not going to make a difference."

"That's where I come in." Sephiroth didn't say anything further, promptly launching at the WEAPON with his sword at the ready. They had come too far to give up now.
"He was just biding his time…" Aerith shook her head slowly, staring out the view port with wide eyes.

"He's in for a nasty surprise if he expects Sephiroth to be defeated easily," Hojo said. "He's proven that he will fight to defend them, and this is one he's trained for."

"Yeah… still not sure I want to take that chance," Zack muttered, frowning. "Unless you think Vincent can flip control back in his favor really fast, it might be better to get some backup in there. Sephiroth is the best SOLDIER's got, he might even be the best humanity's got, but Chaos' literal existence is to take out the whole world, without resistance."

"And you think you'll make that much difference?" Hojo asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I've got to try. You guys stay safe here."

"Be careful!" Aerith watched him go, turning back slowly to the windows to watch the dark blurs and flashes of light that was Sephiroth and Chaos fighting. "You hear about how strong Sephiroth is, but it's different, seeing it."

"He's never met his match on the battle field," Hojo said quietly. "He has the best chance out of any of them to defeat Chaos. Unfortunately, he's going into the battle with his emotions leading over good sense. That may slow him down."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," she disagreed. "He has something to fight for. When something really matters, that's when you see people's real strength."

They could see Zack running for the fight now, rushing full tilt across the field. Hojo wouldn't have bet the boy wasn't rushing headlong to his own death; he was turning into an impressive SOLDIER, but he was nowhere near Sephiroth's level. If Sephiroth couldn't do this, their only remaining hope was that Valentine could scrape the will together to take over. He did also have the motivation; he'd stopped Chaos once already to spare Lucrecia's son. No doubt he was fighting to do so a second time.

"I suppose we'll see," he said at last.

"I just wish I could do something more than wait here." Aerith pressed her hand to the curved glass, worrying at her lip. She'd meant what she'd said to Chaos, about wanting to fight for the SOLDIERs. But how?

"I very much doubt he'd be in the mood to talk it over with you," Hojo said dryly. "Your magic isn't strong enough to fight against him, and even if it was, you don't have the experience to manage this sort of combat. Noble as your intentions were, you're not actually going to be able to do anything."

"No… there has to be something," she insisted, mind racing. What good was being special if she couldn't use it for anything? Sure, she could hear the Planet, but if she couldn't make herself heard then it was pointless.

*Maybe I can.*

The Planet's voice was louder here, away from all the reactors, the Lifestream flowing so close to the
Sephiroth had fought gunmen before. It was always an odd dance - they needed range, he needed to be close even if Masamune's length gave him a little more reach than most. Until now, there had always been the addition that his enhanced speed and agility allowed for him to weave through the hail of bullets to reach his opponent with little difficulty. No matter how impressive the gun or its wielder, his most challenging opponents had always proven to be other melee combatants.

With Chaos, everything changed.

The demi-WEAPON brought his own superhuman skill and strength to the fight, and even being bound to a human wasn't enough to hold him back. At range, he had a gun with more power than Sephiroth had ever seen, large bullets that would gouge and leave behind deep wounds if they ever hit directly. Close range he kicked out with armored feet and shins and slashed with the claw of his free hand, the same gun's massive barrels capable of blocking his sword without so much as a scratch.

Metal screeched on metal more than once, gunshots and the hiss of energy filling the air as they tried to find a weakness in each other. Their speed matched in each clash. Their strength matched with each blow. Chaos' aim was perfect, but Sephiroth's agility made him a nearly impossible target. Weapons to their own purpose, they were far more evenly matched than Chaos had expected.

The change came when Zack arrived.

Chaos flapped his wings hard, buffeting Sephiroth back and hurrying the pull of gravity against the SOLDIER. He didn't wait to watch Sephiroth's descent, diving towards the new arrival. A red aura started to glow around him, bright enough to blind. But one sense gone was not enough to shake a SOLDIER. Power coiled at Zack's call before the thick, vibrant ropes of Thundaga's power lashed out, lightning making up for the distance between them and forcing Chaos to slow.

It wasn't enough to stop the energy attack Chaos had prepared, the ground shaking beneath Zack's feet, rolling like a Quake and knocking him over. He kept moving with trained reflex, rolling out of the way of another onslaught of bullets and getting to his feet in one smooth motion. He swung his sword just as Chaos flew in for a close strike, forcing him to back off, veering away with a snarl of frustration.

Sephiroth had been poised to take advantage as soon as he saw an opening, and Masamune sang with a sharp strike, energy dancing on the edge and arching out in a deadly blue beam. Chaos interrupted it with another flare of his energy but didn't pause to engage, spiraling into the sky. It gave him a moment to think, out of range of his two largely ground-bound opponents; even with the superhuman jumps they were capable of, gravity would still prevail.

The first shot was a test - Zack moved out of the way without hesitation, too much time afforded by the distance the bullets had to travel. It would be the same for Sephiroth, doubtlessly. From their quickly traded glances it was clear they were working out the puzzle of how to reach him on their
own end. He couldn't wait for their solution, he needed a distraction, *now*. Something to compromise them.

"He's up to something," Zack muttered, spinning his sword in his hand.

"Naturally." Sephiroth said, frowning. "He needs to take one of us out."

"Not gonna happen."

"Mm." Sephiroth kept his eyes locked on Chaos, waiting for something, anything, a single telegraphed motion to act off of. He could reach for him in a jump, but there was nothing to launch off of but the ground - it was a single jump, and then he would be stuck dropping until he was back on the ground.

The sudden return of his aura suggested another energy attack, and they braced themselves, watching warily as the glow increased. But Chaos didn't send it at them. He raised a hand slowly, and made a sharp gesture off to the side.

There was the sudden sound of the ground giving way, the scent of mako thick in the air as the Lifestream suddenly erupted behind them.

Then a scream, just as it dawned on them that they hadn't been the targets at all. Angeal's shout could be heard just above the gushing mako.

"*Genesis!*"
Chapter Summary

Redemption is not given, it is earned.

There was no warning. Genesis had been in a loose crouch beside Angeal, ready to defend him if he had to and watching the fight when Chaos had suddenly called up power from the Planet itself. The ground around them broke, a mako flow gushing up through it and gaining power quickly until it finally curved over like a cresting wave. He pushed Angeal out of the way, but there was no time to do more than scramble to his feet before it washed over him.

Everything went black, and he was falling.

Floating.

He expected it to hurt. Everything had been pain for so long.

Nothing hurt.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, staring a long moment into the spiraling threads of green and white. There was no direction, even though he stood on his feet, everything else was still black. Where am I?

'This is the Lifestream.'

The soft voice made him startle, looking around, and he froze as his eyes locked on the figure of a tall woman. Blonde hair and pale blue eyes were noticed in passing, his attention taken by her ornate shield and staff, the combination of a dress and armor. And he knew. Somehow, deep down he knew.

'Of course you do. You've been searching a very long time.' She inclined her head. 'You were so close.'

"I tried," he whispered, words almost sticking in his throat. "I tried, I thought…"

She waited a long moment before prompting him. 'Tell me.'

Genesis took in a deep, steadying breath, feeling himself tremble as he tried desperately to do as he was told, his voice refusing to cooperate until he cleared his throat. "I know what I am. What I've done, and what ShinRa did, I know… I know, with Jenova… I just… I hoped…"

'What did you hope for?'

"Mercy," he admitted, eyes burning with unshed tears. "I'd hoped that there was something left worth your mercy."

'And what do you think now?' She asked. 'Do you still hope?'

Did he still hope? He managed a weak laugh, wiping his eyes. "I don't know. What I've done…"
The silence stretched painfully between them and he bowed his head.

'You've been hurt so badly, and yet you've held on for so long,' she said. 'Do you think that faith should not see reward?'

"I... don't think it's my place to say." He glanced up tentatively, and felt his chest squeeze at the tenderness of her expression. I don't deserve that.

'You cannot say it isn't your place to judge and pass judgment in the same breath, child of mine,' she said gently.

He winced, looking away again. "I'm sorry, I-"

A violent shudder rippled through the area, the idle waves of green and white shaking like a large rock dropped into a pool and nearly unbalancing him.

'They're still fighting,' Minerva said quietly. 'The whole Planet feels the Squire's efforts against the Calamity's heir.'

"He's not." Genesis swallowed hard, going pale at nearly snapping at the goddess.

By some miracle, she merely arched a brow, making a sweeping gesture out to the side. The darkness seemed to part and they could suddenly see the fight once more. There was a level of viciousness in Sephiroth's attack that he hadn't seen in a long time, Zack hanging back in wide-eyed awe, unable to keep up with the speed and force of the assault. 'What would you call him then?'

He hesitated to answer, watching his old rival - his old friend, before bridges had burned, who had come back and tried to fix things - and thought of all the names that had been given to him. In the end, Sephiroth had been hero or demon with little else considered. Certainly never what he thought about it. "He's just... a man."

Funny how it took this to see it.

'Omega's Squire thinks differently,' she observed.

"I respectfully disagree with him," Genesis said carefully. "He's no saint, but he's no Jenova."

'Even with all the blood on his blade?' Her tone was neutral, a simple question. 'Is he not just as much a killer?'

Genesis was silent, watching the fight. There was no arguing Sephiroth was a killer - they all were. But... "It's what he was made to do. I don't think it's the life he'd have chosen, but it was never a choice."

'No, it was not,' she agreed.

The fight was getting more heated. There was a new fire to Sephiroth's battle, some of his cold calculation giving way to unexpected anger, something fierce that pulled power deep enough that the faintest blue light of a limit break was starting to gleam around him.

'He believes the Squire killed you."

It was like a punch to the gut, the sudden revelation making everything click. There was no fear in Sephiroth's actions. He wasn't afraid of what the demi-WEAPON could do, even after such a spectacular show of power. This was sheer anger. Anger and grief. "Sephiroth..."
"He's not entirely wrong." Minerva's expression remained neutral when he looked at her sharply. 'No mortal should be allowed to this place, unless the Powers will it, and you are not so powerful that the exposure to so much of the Lifestream would have left you unaffected.'

"I… I see." He swallowed hard, wetting his lips anxiously. "Then… you wanted me here."

'There aren't many that follow the old ways. Fewer still that choose me as their patron,' she said. 'You called. And I heard you.'

He bowed his head, uncertain of what to say to that, finally managing a quiet, "thank you."

'Do you still seek redemption?'

He considered that, silent a long moment. "I… don't know if I deserve it."

'You do not, yet,' she said. 'Redemption must be earned. Will you work for it?'

Somehow, the thought was better than just being given it, something to do to balance the scales. "Yes. If there's some way I can make amends…"

'You have already turned away from the Calamity's efforts to claim you, a battle your brothers in arms have yet to face. But its essence runs through you as if you were its child. As you are, the Planet will not accept you, or the others.'

Genesis considered that. "Is there a way to change that? You said redemption must be earned - can it be? Can I?"

'Perhaps. It depends on what actions you are willing to take.' She tilted her head, watching him. 'What sacrifices you would make.'

"I suppose I can't know until you ask," he said, pausing to take that in. Part of him wanted to say anything, but clarity brought back a measure of restraint he'd lost for a time. Anything was an awfully large promise to make.

He was distracted by a sudden flare of light, the same blinding red that Chaos had called before, this time aimed sharply at Sephiroth as he dove forward in a perfect lunge. The force of the impact with the energy sent him spinning back, landing hard in a crouch and spending a moment in the position before rising slowly.

There was a thin line of blood dribbling down from his mouth, and he wiped it away with his wrist without visible reaction. When was the last time he'd seen someone manage to draw blood on him? Had it been his own doing?

'You worry for him.' Minerva watched him calmly, inclining her head towards the fight. 'Despite your feud, you still worry.'

Genesis was silent a moment, then nodded. "I suppose I do."

'The Squire will kill him.'

"Hn."

'You do not believe he is capable of it?'

The silence stretched between them as Genesis fought for an honest answer. "It's hard to imagine anyone killing Sephiroth."
'You do not wish to imagine it.'

Genesis smiled tightly, *that* answer coming quicker than he liked to admit. "No." Even in his madness and rage, as much *pain* as he wished on his rival, he had never wished for his *death*.

Could Chaos kill him? Genesis would have bet on Sephiroth against any other human, but this was a *WEAPON* of the Planet. He wanted to say he was sure. Sephiroth had never been defeated, he of all people was *very* aware of the fact. But deep down, he wasn't sure.

It almost seemed as if things slowed down. Chaos was on the offensive, but it took a moment to process that Sephiroth was actually *retreating*.

*Something's wrong.*

'*He's tiring. The force Chaos WEAPON is capable of is beyond his usual opponent.*' Minerva glanced at him. *'And he will lose. It's only a matter of how long it takes.'*

"Damn it," he whispered, taking a half step on reflex before catching himself.

'*You would fight if you could, wouldn't you?*' She watched him quietly a moment. *'You would come to his defense, even after everything between you.'*

"Yes," he breathed, swallowing hard. "Yes I would."

'*So much has happened. You nearly gave up, but in the end you continue to fight.*' This time she turned to face him fully. *'Against all odds. Against any opponent. Against a death sentence itself, you fight without rest.'*

"I've always been stubborn," he muttered, for lack of knowing what else to say. "Never did know when to give up."

'*The world is going to need that.*' She was silent, watching him. Weighing him. *'Chaos is not the only WEAPON to rise. Six more are coming. They rose at the Calamity's threat, but it has fallen silent. Now they come for humanity.'*

Genesis stared, stunned. "…what?"

The image changed from the fight, the view suddenly full of six massive creatures lumbering through the ocean. Monstrous things, dozens of stories high, wading through the ocean like it was a shallow pool.

"Where are they going?"

'*To the cities that are draining the Planet most.*'

Genesis thought it over quickly. Midgar. It had to be. And… Junon? "What are they going to do? Just… attack the city? There's people there! Civilians who haven't done *anything.*"

'*They deem it a threat. Humanity is small and less a concern than the wellbeing of the rest of the Planet,'* she said. *'Without the Planet, there is no humanity. If humanity has to perish for the Planet to survive, the WEAPONs will see it so.'*

"That's…* not fair,* he wanted to say. But who was he to argue? *Human - if that.* *Nothing* on the grand scale of things.

'*Have faith yet, child of mine, you are not here to face your end.'* The image faded, leaving them
alone. 'Humanity has many flaws, but I do not want to see the end of it so soon. These WEAPONS cannot be reasoned with. Perhaps Chaos can. If he is met with an equal.'

He stared at her blankly, comprehension tingling on the edge of his mind. "What are you saying?"

'Become my WEAPON, child, and you will have your chance to be a hero.'
A Weapon's Battle

Chapter Summary

They were both created to be weapons.

Sephiroth had honed his limit break as little more than a child, barely a teenager and under the pressures of Hojo's demanding training before he would be deployed to Wutai. It was learned and practiced over and over until he could bring it on at will, not restrained by need for stress on his body or emotions.

This time, it burned through him without a thought. It poured through him like the irresistible rush of a river after a hard rain, manifesting in a blue light as he tried to process the fact that after coming so close, finally getting him to talk, Genesis was just... gone. He didn't have words for the emotion flowing through him, but it shook him to the core until he could feel his limit pressing at him. Power and urgency made him breathless and he ripped his sword up, forcing Chaos to retreat into the sky once more. This time, it wouldn't be enough.

Octoslash didn't have the flashiness of Genesis' Apocalypse, but the rapid strikes came with the full force of his strength, blows coming in a crisscross of slashes. Some of it was blocked, but he couldn't stop all of it. Blood welled on silver skin as Chaos' bodysuit tore and Sephiroth's smile was full of vicious satisfaction as he started to drive the demi-WEAPON back.

The red of Chaos' own energy began to swell again, but even once his limit was spent Sephiroth barely paused. He was made to fight. And this time, it mattered.

Zack had bowed out of the fight after Chaos had lashed out at Genesis, dragging the former SOLDIER down into what was now a gaping crack in the ground with a thick flow of mako starting to pool up. He'd helped Angeal move, even though his distraught mentor had protested. "There's no getting him out of that, 'geal, you're just gonna hurt yourself. And you can't afford that right now."

"He can't be gone," Angeal whispered, staring in wide-eyed shock at where Genesis had been. "We were so close… he was talking to us, Zack. He was listening to us. We were making progress!"

"I know, but there's nothing you can do for him now," Zack said, keeping an arm around him. Angeal was starting to shake against him, breathing getting unsteady and rough. "Easy. Just breathe. When Sephiroth beats him, we'll see if we can find... something. We're not giving up on Genesis, okay? But right now there's nothing we can do."

The words were so soft he almost missed them. "I don't know if Sephiroth can."

Zack was silent a moment, trying to process that. "What? Of course he will, what do you even-"

"He's slowing down." Angeal shifted as much as he could, pointing. "He's faster than that. He started faster than that. He's still just as smooth, but he's not as fast as he was. And Chaos hasn't slowed down at all."

"Maybe it's on purpose," Zack suggested, squinting at the pair of them. At the speed they were going it was almost impossible to tell a difference for him, but Angeal had seen Sephiroth in action before
in real fights. So far, Zack had never seen him against an opponent that took him more than a couple blows to defeat.

"No, it's not. He's taken some serious hits. Almost anybody else would have had to change hands by now; there's cuts into his jacket, on his sword arm, and you can bet it goes through to the skin at best," Angeal pointed out. "And he's bleeding."

"So is Chaos."

"Chaos hasn't slowed down at all, though. He's injured, but he's not acting like it." Angeal shook his head. "It's taking a while, but he's wearing Seph down."

"Crap." He didn't want to believe him, didn't want to contemplate the thought that Sephiroth might lose, but they didn't get to pick how things went. "What can I do?"

"You're not fast enough to keep up with that." Angeal frowned deeply. "Right now, neither am I."

"Well we can't just sit it out! If he's going to lose anyway, then our only chance is to try something." Zack shook his head. "Will you be alright if I go?"

"Nothing you can do for me anyway," Angeal pointed out, smiling tensely. "Take the Buster Sword."

"Yeah, okay." Zack set down his standard issue sword and took up his mentor's broadsword, hefting it carefully before giving it a quick spin to the side. He hadn't used it much, but he'd used broadswords before. And it wasn't like he had speed on his side anyway, not compared to Sephiroth and Chaos. "I'll think of something."

"Be careful," Angeal warned. "And stay focused. If Chaos can take down Sephiroth…"

"Yeah, I know." Zack nodded. "But I've gotta try, even if all I can do is buy him time to catch his breath."

"Good luck." You're going to need it.

'Slowing down' for Sephiroth was still incredibly fast, though the exchanges came in quick bursts. Chaos' use of his gun had become reserved for forcing him to move back or abort one of his attacks. Without wings of his own, it also made for a waste of energy as Sephiroth was forced to make more jumps to go after his airborne opponent. When they clashed in the air, it was starting to change to close combat fighting, Masamune locking against the four barreled gun in a spray of sparks while they traded blows with legs and their free arms.

He was landing again as Zack returned, glancing at him briefly. "Welcome back."

"Figured you could use a hand." Zack grinned. "I've got an idea. You keep busy up there. I'll just… distract."

Sephiroth looked back to him again, hearing the crackle of energy and seeing sparks around his closed fist. A small smile touched his lips. "I see. I'll keep an eye out."

"You got it."

Sephiroth launched back into the air, Masamune singing again with powerful swings as he unleashed a series of energy strikes with long blue beams. From below, there was the booming crack, Zack's Thundaga released and soaring past Sephiroth to block Chaos' retreat.
Not having expected the magic attack, Chaos twisted in the air, unable to return an attack while he had to evade. Chaos' energy started to collect again as gravity forced Sephiroth to descend, making a dive towards him for another slew of physical attacks. This time Sephiroth was able to get the better grip, starting to force him down.

Zack watched them closely, wary of sending another attack with Sephiroth so close. Chaos kicked out with sharp sabatons, but most of Sephiroth's legs were protected by thick thigh high leather boots and it wasn't enough to make him let go, using gravity to his best advantage to try and drag Chaos down to the ground with him. He was making progress, all the moreso when he shifted and shoved with his left arm, Masamune shrieking against Cerberus and pushing it further away.

Zack eyed the angle they were coming in at, easily in range for a jump he could make, and took off for them.

Chaos registered the angle first, a small smirk on his lips as he wrenched his arm back. Masamune sheared down the side, cutting into his wrist, but he accepted the price and fired twice just as Zack lunged in, far too close to evade the spray of bullets. He jerked back with the impact, going down hard.

"Zack!"

"'M fine," Zack gasped, hitting the ground on his knees and panting. He'd been shot before. Somehow this hurt more than any other time. "Just clipped my side."

Sephiroth snarled and twisted, head butting the WEAPON hard enough to hear and reaching a hand for his throat, gripping tight even when Chaos tried to pull it away. His eyes glowed brighter in a SOLDIER's warning of creeping rage. "Valentine, you either get your act together, or you're both going to die."

"I will live so long as the Planet does," Chaos hissed, trying to drive his knee up only to finally hit the ground. He bared sharp teeth, far from intimidated by the SOLDIER's threat. "You, however, are on borrowed time."

"Overconfidence will destroy you." He attempted to use his grip to slam Chaos' head back against the ground, only to have one powerful wing curl up to smack against his side. Combined with another wrenching pull, Chaos got free of the grip around his neck, bringing his legs up sharply and finally hitting at an angle that the sharp armored plates at his knees drove into Sephiroth's thick belt, the tips piercing through to his abdomen.

Sephiroth gasped, jerking back with a sharp, steadying breath. It was time enough for Chaos to escape, form blurring slightly as he promptly took back to the air, firing from close range.

Sparks flew as the Buster Sword was suddenly in the way, slamming down between Sephiroth and the bullets. Zack was on his feet again, still panting but too stubborn to stay down. He went after Chaos with a shout, blade raised and taking to the air in a sharp jump. He spun for momentum, angling his strike away from where the demi-WEAPON expected and going after one of the massive wings instead of center mass. It was too large to pull away entirely, the blade leaving a sharp scrape before Chaos managed to wheel away again.

But even injured, he didn't retreat. Chaos sensed his weakening, saw Zack panting through the strain from the injuries slowly leaving a dark patch on his shirt. He dove after him, gravity pulling the SOLDIER down and limiting his ability to move out of the way when shots were fired again. The first set missed.
The second didn't.

Large rounds buried deep and knocking him back with the force, the final few feet to the ground crossed as he landed hard on his back.

This time Zack didn't get up.

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Aerith had watched the fight breathlessly from the Highwind's bridge. The loss of Genesis had been a shock, and it only got worse from there. Sephiroth was faltering, and then Zack…

Zack…

"I have to go down there."

"If they can't defeat Chaos, you stand no chance," Hojo said. "You're throwing your life away."

"I have to try," she insisted, grabbing her staff. Her mind still buzzed with the chatter from the Planet, but her eyes burned with unshed tears. "I have to do something."

"Alright, hold yer 'bos girlie," Cid insisted, turning around and getting a spear down from its wall mount and a med kit from one of the cabinets that he tossed to her. "The professor's got a good point. Ya don't have the strength t' match this guy. But maybe we can get you some time t' do some healin' an' you can try t' talk to 'im."

"Anything, please."

"Come on. You idjits keep us in the air, we'll put down a rope. I got a radio t' call back. You see about some place t' move these guys if we do get 'em back, alright Professor?"

"I clearly can't stop you." Hojo shook his head, eyes fixed on where Sephiroth was fighting Chaos once more. Angeal was making his way over carefully, though it took some doing to get around the seething pool of Lifestream. "See if you can get to Valentine. It may be the one thing you can do."

Aerith nodded, hurrying out with Cid to get down. He was faster, far faster than she expected, scooping her up and making the jump down without hesitation, barely a pause to get his feet under him when he landed before he was taking off again.

Angeal was cradling Zack, his own uniform top sacrificed to try and stem the bleeding. He startled when he saw them coming, torn between concern and relief. "Aerith…"

"Let me see," she breathed, dropping down at Zack's side as soon as Cid released her. "Zack? Zack, can you hear me?"

"Gotta… gotta help Seph," he managed, coughing wetly but kept from jerking by Angeal's careful hold. "Please. He needs… he needs help."

"Kid, if he can't do this we're outta luck," Cid said frankly, kneeling and getting the emergency medical kit open. "Right now, the best we can do is help you out. What're we lookin' at Hewley?"

"Most of the bullets went through, but they've all done more damage than most guns would for the sheer size of them. I'm worried one of them clipped something," Angeal said.
"Alright, well looks like you got things as bandaged as yer gonna right now," Cid said. "Tell ya what, Aerith. You have some words with the big guy up there, toss some healin' at Sephiroth. I'll do what I can here. Took some classes on field medicine myself, between Hewley an' me we'll get him settled."

Aerith looked between them, nervous but desperate to believe, and nodded. "Okay… okay, I'll do what I can."

"Atta girl."

She stared at Zack a long moment, too pale and still with blood on his lips and thick, heavy breathing, then made herself turn around. Her hands tightened around her staff and she reached for her magic, feeling the bracer cool and weighted with materia against her skin. The Blizzard was just a breath away, her magic threading through it, and she raised her staff. "CHAOS!"

It was hard to say what startled the demi-WEAPON more, the sudden shrill cry of his name or having a barrage of ice shards suddenly aimed his way, so sharply that they still came dangerously close to striking even when he spiraled out of the way.

A few strong flaps of powerful wings took him higher than Sephiroth's descending path, but he didn't pursue the SOLDIER yet. "You should not be here, little Cetra."

"I told you I would stop you, if you came after them," she said, raising her staff as the end glowed with powered materia. "Did you think I was kidding? They're on our side!"

"They are the Calamity's heirs, and a threat to the Planet," he said. "Murderers on a mass scale even by humanity's limited perspective. Do not let your personal sentiment confuse you into believing they are innocent."

She couldn't argue that, she'd known that about SOLDIER before she'd ever known them, but still… "It's not your place to judge. You don't get to decide who should live or die, and you don't care about humanity! They've chosen not to join Jenova, even when she reached for them. They're not a threat to the Planet."

Sephiroth landed lightly beside her, taking a careful step in front of her and waiting. "While I appreciate the sentiment, Aerith, you shouldn't be here."

"I'm not staying behind and watching this happen," she said fiercely, still glaring at Chaos. "You didn't do anything."

"He's not wrong about some of the things we have done," Sephiroth pointed out, smiling tightly. "An entire nation calls me a demon for a reason."

"I don't care. Not now. Not like this. He'd done horrible things, he felt terrible on her senses, but there was so much more than that. I'm not standing by. Not when I could do something."

"Little one, if I choose to kill him, nothing you do will make a difference," Chaos said, gun lowered for now but still at the ready.

"Well you haven't succeeded yet." She reached for her magic again, this time for the cool reassurance of the mastered Restore, and turned her attention to Sephiroth. She could feel his injuries, dark stains in his aura that spoke of deep pain even though he behaved as if nothing was wrong. It was there that she focused, a deep cut into his sword arm and shallow punctures in his abdomen where Chaos' armor had stabbed even through the thick belt guard at his waist.
Green energy gleamed, swirling bright through the air and sparkling over the wounds. It sank in slowly, and she saw a line of tension ease from his frame, a certain looseness coming back to his stance. Blood was left behind, a damning reminder, but the wounds were healed. He didn't dare take his eyes off Chaos, but he inclined his head slightly to her. "My thanks."

Chaos huffed quietly, a hint of a smile on his lips. "You're stubborn, little one. But no amount of arguing changes what they are, or the threat they represent."

"I don't care what you think they could do. They're our allies. They chose not to join Jenova," she insisted. "That has to count for something!"

"I refuse to wait and allow them to become a problem. Their nature demands it. A preemptive strike is wise." Chaos tilted his head. "I would not have struck the boy, but he placed himself in my path. His loss is regrettable."

"Loss?" Aerith froze, senses reaching out abruptly. She'd had a sense of Zack, but she hadn't been paying close attention, too fixated on Chaos and Sephiroth, on stepping in like he'd asked her to.

He was always so vibrant, down to his very energy, a bright spark of infectious zeal for life even when he was having a hard time. Quick with a smile and a laugh, clinging to the positives even when times got dark. Only it wasn't like that now. His energy had lost it's spark, fading to a sluggish pulse, dark and weak.

Dying.

"Zack!" She turned to face him, forgetting Sephiroth and Chaos in the shock of the moment and staring in horror. There was an ashen color to his skin now, and despite Angeal's efforts blood was pooling on the ground around him. "Nonono… Zack, no…"

Angeal offered her a pained attempt at a smile. "There's nothing we can do, Aerith."

"He can't," she breathed, feeling tears well in her eyes as she hurried over. "Zack, you can't."

"He can't hear ya," Cid said quietly, placing a hand on her wrist as her materia glowed. "Let 'im go, Aerith. Kid's suffered enough."

"He can't die," she insisted, cupping his face. "Zack? Zack please…"

"Even SOLDIERs aren't bulletproof," Angeal said quietly. "And Chaos' gun was more powerful than most."

"No…" She shook her head in denial, bringing her energy to bear and casting a Curaga, whimpering when the magic barely penetrated. "No, no, stay with me…"

There was a moment when he looked to her, head lolling her way and bright eyes struggling to focus. His lips twitched in the barest smile.

Then the light went out.

Dimly, Aerith heard herself scream, curling in on him and sobbing. Her energy burned, bright but ultimately useless. For all the hope she'd had to help, she couldn't even save Zack.

Crying as hard as she was, she didn't even notice when it began to rain.
Healing Rain

Chapter Summary

Death is defied once again, but is Aerith's miraculous healing rain the universal cure it appears to be?

Against all odds, Zack took a sudden, heaving breath, choking and coughing in Aerith's embrace. She sat up, scrubbing the tears from her eyes and staring in shock. "Zack? You're… you're alive. Gods, you're alive!"

"Ngh?" Dazed blue eyes opened, heavy lidded and unfocused, but unquestionably with the spark of life returned. "Aerith? What… what happened? I thought…"

"I don't know," she admitted, sniffing and wiping her eyes. "You died, but…"

"It's the rain," Chaos said quietly. "Her powers are significant, despite her human heritage, and his spirit did not have time to fully depart."


"I suspect there's more to it than that," Sephiroth observed, staring at his hands. Black mist was starting to rise off his skin, and even through his clothing, a sudden weakness washing over him.

"You are stained with Jenova's taint," Chaos said. "The purity of her power burns you."

"What?" Aerith looked up quickly, making a worried sound to see the way Angeal was bracing himself on his knees, panting hard as tendrils of smoky black mist rose up off of him. "Angeal? Sephiroth? What… what do we do? I don't know how I even started it!"

"Generally, limits don't last too long but…" Cid shook his head, watching as Sephiroth took a knee, starting to breathe visibly harder. "Shit, we need t' get 'em back t' the ship."

"I can't let you do that," Chaos said. He raised his gun once more, mere feet from Sephiroth, the click of the safety going off sounding unnaturally loud over the fall of the rain.

Sephiroth raised his head with a small, mirthless smile. He knew he was in no condition to defend himself now, energy drained quicker than he'd ever experienced. "Go on, then. Kill me."

Chaos returned the smile. "It's nothing personal."

"Oh I'm about to make it very personal." Red light flared, bright and blinding, but for once it wasn't from Chaos. "If anyone is going to defeat Sephiroth, it's going to be me."

The light began to clear slowly, leaving behind a very familiar figure. Genesis stood proud and restored; there wasn't a hint of white to be seen in vibrant red hair, fair skin without a crack and his eyes a calm, brilliant blue.

Sephiroth couldn't help a breathless, incredulous laugh to see him again. "Of course you would find
"Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess… but judgment has been passed." Genesis made a sweeping gesture with his blade before leveling it at Chaos. "Stand down or face me."

Chaos inclined his head, staring at him for a long moment. "What has she made of you?"

Genesis’ grin was sharp, all teeth and vicious pleasure as he walked in a slow arc, putting himself between the fallen SOLDIERs and the demi-WEAPON. "The Goddess' will is to see humanity continue, and I am her Crimson WEAPON. I will not allow you to kill my comrades."

Chaos huffed softly, but lowered his gun. "You are new to your power. Your victory isn't as assured as you think. But if that is truly the wish of Lady Minerva, then for now I will stand down. I would not be so quick to assume that is enough to save them, however."

"Sometimes a cure is painful." Genesis held a hand out, looking up at the rain. "It's cleansing them."

"Cleansing," Angeal repeated skeptically. "Gen… I can't even get up. I don't think it's helping."

"Have a little more faith, my friend; if I thought you were in such danger I'd be moving you immediately," Genesis insisted, turning to face him, looking to Sephiroth as well. "No, this will help."

"Well if it ain't gonna kill 'em maybe we should spend a minute on Zack, because he's lost a hell of a lot of blood," Cid reminded them.

"Yeah, but… I'm mostly healed," Zack said, sitting up carefully with a wince. "Still hurts but that's a lot better than dead. I… did die, didn't I?"

"Yeah, ya did." Cid frowned, squinting up at the rain. "That's what started all of this."

"Huh." Zack prodded his side, pulling his shirt apart and making a face at the shallow wound. "Damn."

"Don't poke that," Angeal said, shifting enough to tug his arm away before sitting back. He was feeling dizzy again. "Gen… I think we need to go."

Genesis frowned. "Captain, is there any way we can gather some of this water, before we go?"

"Uhh… yeah, yeah I got some containers we can gather up water in. Buckets an' shit." Cid nodded, wiping his hands off on his pants. "I'll radio the crew, get 'em puttin' stuff out t' start that. But Angeal's gonna need help walkin' over there, an' I have no idea how we'll get him up unless you can wait for me t' get my ass up an' land the damn thing."

"We can wait." Genesis nodded. "You go on ahead and get the ship landed."

Cid nodded, getting up and trotting off toward the Highwind while he dug his radio out of his pocket to call ahead.

Sephiroth watched him go for a moment, then turned his eyes to Chaos. "That simple? You're giving up?"

"Would you rather I kill you?" Chaos asked. "Until my appointed time comes, the will of any of the Powers are the authority I submit to. For now, I will stand aside. Should you become a threat, however, I do not believe she will continue to allow you such protection, no matter what her new
"WEAPON thinks."

Genesis hummed, waving dismissively. "Our only threat is to those who came after us first. The other WEAPONs advancing on Midgar will find themselves very much outnumbered and quickly defeated."

"Don't be so sure," Chaos said. "They may not be my caliber, but they're still a significant force, well above anything you've fought before."

"They're also stupid, and the ability to strategize can make all the difference," Genesis said. "But that's not our immediate concern. We need to get over to the ship, the captain is landing."

"I think I can get up…" Zack said, a little hesitant.

"Let me help," Aerith said quickly, bracing with her staff and offering him her hand.

"Might be too heavy for you," Zack pointed out, trying to take most of the weight on his own legs and immediately sitting back down. "Whoo, okay. Really dizzy. Think I need to stay put a minute."

"The blood loss would do that," Angeal said.

"We'll make trips," Genesis decided. "Zack in first, just in case he goes into shock."


Genesis helped Zack up, bracing him on one side with Aerith on the other. He spared a moment to look at Chaos, not speaking but letting his eyes carry his warning for him, then started the careful job of getting Zack back to the Highwind.

Left behind, Angeal slumped in on himself, coughing quietly. "I'm not sure he's right. I feel weaker."

Sephiroth made a quiet sound of agreement, watching his friend in concern. He didn't know the properties of this strange, apparently magical rain, only that it had restored Zack to life right before their eyes yet felt like watered down acid on his skin. It left no marks, but the wisps of black mist were thickening almost to a smoke and he could feel his own energy slipping away. Not so much that he couldn't get to his feet yet, but had Genesis been even a moment later he would have lost to Chaos. "Do you think if I help you, you might be able to walk?"

"Maybe?" Angeal frowned at him. "You're not looking too good either, Seph."

"I'm well enough." He shrugged, getting to his feet stiffly. His first steps were careful, mindful of his creeping weakness, but it leveled out and he made his way over to Angeal, offering him a hand up.

Angeal took it, forcing himself upright with Sephiroth's help and a wince as his muscles protested loudly, gripping the offered hand tighter as the world spun. A strong arm slipped around his shoulders and he leaned into Sephiroth with breathless thanks, trying to wait out the dizzy spell. It felt like ages passed, standing there in the rain, but finally it ebbed to a tolerable level. "…okay."

"Okay," Sephiroth murmured, waiting until his eyes were open and leading him back to the airship. It was an effort, admittedly, he didn't feel well either, but he was going into it in better condition than Angeal even considering his fight with Chaos. Aerith's healing had returned his stability for the most part, and healing magic always did refresh the system.

Genesis met them at the door, lips pursed in disapproval and a hint of concern in his eyes. "Come on, I'll take him. You look about ready to fall over yourself."
"It's fine," Sephiroth insisted, though he did allow Genesis to support Angeal from the other side. At this point it was rather mutual support, not that he'd say as much. But getting out of the rain was a relief, and he sighed quietly. "Hojo is working on Zack?"

"He's looking him over, but it doesn't look like there's anything for him to actually do. He wants the two of you to go in there to be checked out as soon as he's done checking him over," Genesis said, helping get them up to the main level and steering them towards the makeshift med bay.

Zack was stretched out on one of the cots, holding Aerith's hand as Hojo checked him over to be certain no action was needed. Hearing them coming in, Zack looked their way with a small smile, not moving more than his head. "Hey guys. A little better inside?"

"It helps." Angeal smiled tiredly.

"Perhaps we should change, if you're still occupied," Sephiroth suggested. "Given we're all rather soaked."

"Just make it quick. I'll be done with him soon, and I want to see exactly what's going on with the both of you," Hojo said.

"Actually I think I just need to sit," Angeal admitted. As much as he wanted to be dry, he was too exhausted to be sure he was up for drying off, changing and being up to whatever exam Hojo wanted to perform.

"Alright you sit, Sephiroth can go change." Genesis led Angeal over to the other cot, looking around at the equipment with a frown. "What exactly have you been doing?"

"I believe they've told you before - straightening out the mess Hollander made," Hojo said, finishing and making a beckoning gesture. "He's ready to finish healing."

"I've got it," Aerith said quietly, magic stretching out immediately with the force of her desperate want to help him, a powerful wash of green that flowed over him and sunk into his injuries, muscle starting to knit together immediately until he was left with only faint hints of pink once more. "Good?"

"Yeah, good. Just gotta let my brain catch up." He sat up and stretched carefully, testing the newly healed muscle. "Feels a lot better. And you know, the whole alive thing. Definitely a fan."

"That's a very intriguing limit break," Hojo observed. "I look forward to examining that water. Particularly if it ends up that it has had some effect on Angeal and Sephiroth."

"It did something," Angeal said, running a hand back through his hair. It was a relief to see Zack sitting up and doing okay, but he was feeling weak and shaky enough that he had to brace himself on his legs to keep sitting up.

"We'll start with examining a blood sample and see if I need tissue samples," Hojo said. "Where's Valentine? I would assume if his WEAPON has backed down he should be returning."

"I can go look for him," Zack offered.

"You stay put, I'll look for him," Aerith said firmly, leaning in and kissing his cheek. "Keep an eye on Angeal; I'll be back. Hopefully with Vincent."

"See that you do," Hojo said, washing his hands before heading to his other supplies.
"Alright, I'm gonna go clean up. Still pretty wet." Zack plucked at his pants. "And bloody. I'll be back in a bit. You steady, Angeal?"

"I'll be alright," Angeal assured him, waving him off. "Go clean up."

Zack nodded, giving him a thumbs up and heading off.

Genesis stepped up behind Angeal, resting his hands on his friend's broad shoulders in silent support. He arched a brow when Hojo paused, staring at him. "What?"

"I find myself a little suspicious of your sudden change of heart, actions so far considered," Hojo admitted, resuming collecting his supplies on a tray before setting up beside Angeal. "Blood sample first, give me your arm."

Genesis frowned, watching him as he debated a reply. "I'm not here for your help. And I'm not here to return to the company."

"Hn. Then why are you here?" Hojo asked. "If you're thinking you can just come and go as you please, I think you're going to find yourself disappointed."

That was a good question. Genesis sighed, shrugging. "I'm here because I was given the power to stop Chaos, and I refused to see him continue to defeat Sephiroth. I came because it was time."

"'It was time,'" Hojo repeated, scoffing as he got the blood sample from Angeal. "It was overdue, to be sure. How did you return from the Lifestream?"


"You expect me to believe you met some sort of higher power." Hojo gave him a flat look. "And that if you did, it decided to save you."

"I really don't care if you believe the cause," Genesis admitted. "But you can't deny I've been cured."

"To all appearances, yes," Hojo admitted, frowning. He let Angeal hold a cotton ball in place for a moment, going to start his analysis immediately. "Something I will have to examine as well, assuming you intend to cooperate."

"I suppose I might as well." Genesis shrugged. "See to Angeal and Sephiroth first. I'm looking forward to you proving my point."

"You act like it hasn't been my goal all along to cure the two of you," Hojo said.

"Has it truly been?" Genesis gave him a skeptical look. "The great Hojo, wanting to save Hollander's freak show? Truly? Why should I have ever believed that? You were amused by our plight."

"I never said it was for you," Hojo said.

"I asked." Sephiroth had returned, standing in the doorway and watching them a moment before coming in. "I take it you're just beginning your analysis?"

"I did have to finish up with the boy first," Hojo reminded him, turning to regard him while he let the sample process. "How do you feel?"

"Weaker than I should, considering I was healed earlier." Sephiroth came over to the free bed and sat when Hojo gestured to it, shrugging his jacket off to provide an arm for him to take a sample from.
'Elaborate,' Hojo prompted when he didn't continue.

Sephiroth frowned slightly, considering the way he felt. "Slightly dizzy. Tired. Not unlike being hit with a Drain spell. There's the beginning of what I suspect are going to be generalized body aches."

"I see. And you, Angeal?"

"The same, just… more of it." Angeal sighed, still sitting hunched over and braced against his legs. "My coordination isn't very good. I'm dizzy just shy of actual vertigo. My body just doesn't want to work with me."

"Hm." Hojo frowned, taking his new sample and going over to get it processing. The machine beeped and he turned to review the monitor, frowning deeply.

"What are the results?" Sephiroth asked. He knew more of Hojo's processes than he cared to admit, but this wasn't one he'd ever paid particular attention to.

"It's going to take a while to get an accurate in-depth analysis," Hojo said. "But the preliminary assessment suggests that the J cells are no longer actively doing anything. I'm seeing signs of the beginning of cell necrosis, which would explain an inflammatory response from the rest of his system."

Sephiroth ran the term through his mind briefly. "They're dying?"

"And bursting apart in a way that's going to have a toxic response." Hojo frowned. "It creates a different problem, even if it solves the initial problem of the J cells attacking the rest and causing degradation. I'm not certain this is a preferable outcome. If it continues, he's going to have a lot of waste in his system, not just his bloodstream but in the tissue as well."

Another beeping started up, Sephiroth's results having processed, and he compared the two sets of results. Hojo's sudden stillness didn't bode well. "What is it doing to me?"

Hojo's frown deepened as he looked over the results, a hand tightening slowly on the edge of the table. "Your S cells are beginning a slight mutation. It appears to be bringing them further from their relation to J cells."

"So they're both getting further from any connection to Jenova," Genesis said, pleased. "Eliminating that connection, perhaps."

"This is still a very early assessment," Hojo warned. "You can't get back full results this quickly. It's going to need a couple hours to completely process the sample. And while you may think this is a solution, it may only be one on the surface. Destroying the J cells sounds nice in theory, but it's not such a tidy fix. These cells have been a part of their genetic code since conception; there are going to be consequences. At the very least, the sudden massive waste being produced due to necrosis may be too much for Angeal to cope with, and this sudden mutation of Sephiroth's cells may not be stable."

"I have faith," Genesis said simply.

"Lovely. I have science," Hojo said, giving him a flat look. "And it's done more than your faith."

"Why don't you use that science to find out if that's true," Genesis suggested. "Examine me. Compare me to them and see what's occurred. Regardless of what you think of the methods, the results are clear."

Hojo scowled but didn't argue it. "Get that coat off and give me your arm."
Zack came back while Hojo was finishing with Genesis, looking around a moment with a frown. "Where's Aerith?"

"She went to locate Valentine," Hojo said. "Or the WEAPON, if he hasn't reverted yet."

"...and she's still gone?" Zack's frown deepened. "I'll look for her. You guys good here?"

"As good as we're going to be." Angeal shrugged. "Seems like mostly we just have to wait for the results right now."

"Alright. I'm gonna look for them," Zack said.

"If you pass by the bridge, tell the Captain that we'll be heading back to Midgar," Sephiroth said. "Or at least in that direction. If the other WEAPONs are half the threat that's been suggested, they're going to need us."

"Yeah, I'll say so." Zack nodded. "And I'll let you know about Vincent when I find him too."

Aerith had indeed found Chaos, the pair overseeing the gathering of the water as the rain began to taper off at last. She smiled at Zack, waving. "They got a lot of it. He had some big barrels. I'm not sure what Genesis thought we should do with it, but there it is."

"We'll ask." Zack eyed Chaos a long moment. "So. You're staying with us, huh?"

Chaos huffed softly, staring off into the distance for a long moment. "For now, he may as well lead. The body tires. But I will return."

There was no further discussion, no warning or preparation. Chaos inclined his head, the red light of his aura flaring bright for several seconds, and then there was a solid thump as Vincent collapsed to the ground.

"Whoa, easy there!" Zack hurried over, kneeling beside him. "Hey, you awake?"

A low groan was the only response, Vincent shifting slightly and panting, pale skin flushed an unhealthy red and hot to the touch when Zack quickly pulled off a glove to check. His eyes opened to slits of glowing red, features drawn with extreme exhaustion.

"Okay, I'm gonna guess where Chaos' constant energy came from," Zack muttered. "You think you... never mind, I doubt you can get up. I'm gonna carry you, okay? Get you inside to a proper bed and you can rest."

Vincent shook his head slightly, and managed to push himself up on shaking arms. "What... what did... he do?"

"Oh, uh... there was a fight. But we're all okay now," he promised, bracing Vincent's shoulder carefully. "Take it easy, alright? It looks like he drained you for some extra energy."

Vincent made a rough sound of agreement, blinking blearily but continuing until he was sitting up properly. His skin was starting to lose some of the redness, leaving a more mottled, feverish appearance behind. "I saw snatches but... no context or sound. Just brief images."

"Boy have I got a story to tell you, then." Zack shook his head. "Let's get you inside first, I can at least support you some. When we get moving this isn't gonna be a good place to be."

Vincent frowned, nodding slightly. "I can try."
Zack got up first, offering a hand. He was surprised how light the other man was, given he looked around Sephiroth's height and enhancements had a way of making you heavier than you should be. But it was hard to tell his build under his big red cloak. "Alright, in we go. Hojo's still getting a reading on everything, but he's got the samples going I guess. Next big thing is figuring out where we go from here."

Vincent nodded slightly. "We need to check in with Veld's team."

"Yeah, probably a good idea." Zack nodded. "Something to get on. And the WEAPONs, too. Let's see the others first."
Family Reunion

Chapter Summary

After all the run around, the Turks and AVALANCHE finally face off, revealing the tie between their leaders.

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to let you guys know, my laptop is being shipped out for repairs tomorrow so it's likely that there will not be an update next week. It shouldn't take more than a week, so we'll be back on track after.

Veld's team arrived in Costa del Sol a few hours ahead of AVALANCHE despite the stop to deal with Hollander, the helicopter and a straight shot through the sky giving them an advantage over the caravan of ground vehicles making their way down through mountain territory before they could get to the plains. Tseng had collected a small strike team of his own to send for backup, Nunchaku leaving Lazard's side and coming over with Gun from Midgar. A small team of SOLDIERs on their way back to Junon was detoured to add some additional firepower, uncertain of how many Ravens Fuhito might still have on hand.

The wait was tense, small teams settled in a variety of positions surrounding the building where Nunchaku was set up to supposedly hand over the last of the support materia. Veld had to hand it to the kid, as deadly as he was he still looked harmless, all big blue eyes and fluffy hair on a body that hadn't changed a whole lot since he was a teenager. It made jobs like this worlds easier, knowing he had a more seasoned operative in place instead of relying on an actual rookie.

Veld's phone chimed with an alert and he checked it, making a pleased sound. "AVALANCHE's caravan has been spotted. They should be in town within five minutes. Everybody be ready."

"Can't wait t' see the look on that bastard Fuhito's face," Shears said, having finally been let free even if he was still under watch. "If we can just get t' Elfé… maybe that materia'll help her. But bein' away from him sure as hell will. You gonna take him in?"

"I'd rather have him in custody, but it's not a requirement." Veld checked his gun, walking to look out the windows at the front of the building. He could see the vans coming in now. Soon…

There was a crackle in his ear piece, the radio silence broken abruptly from Nunchaku's end. "Chief, the materia just lit up like it's casting. I haven't done a thing and it's gone active."

Veld frowned, uneasy. His gut said that was a problem a lot bigger than it looked like, but he'd never been a materia expert. Could they activate without someone using them? Or was it possible that this was some strange auto reaction to the proximity of the others? That would explain why they'd been hidden separately instead of in one high security location. "Alright, put it back in the box, leave the box open and back away. I need eyes on Fuhito. Anyone have a visual?"
"I have eyes on him, chief," Gun reported immediately. "He's standing outside of the third van, looking at something inside it. I can't see what he's looking at."

"I've got the angle. He's got somethin' glowin' in there," Reno said. "I'm gonna bet he's got those other three materia. Elfé's with him, I can see her a lil' bit. Sittin' down, can't see her face yet."

"But she's upright." All things considered, Veld would take that as a better sign than the alternative. "Are they talking?"

"Nothin' I can pick up; if there is, it's just her so far."

"Alright. You in a position where you could get a better angle?" He asked.

"Yeah, maybe. Gimme a minute." There was silence as they waited, several moments passing before Reno keyed his mic again. "Alright they're havin' a conversation right now but the angle still ain't great for it. She doesn't look too hot… ahh shit. Boss, her materia's lit up. Ain't that a summon?"

"It is." Veld considered what he knew carefully; the summon materia had kept trying to activate all along, that was why it was draining Elfé's energy in the first place. If the proximity really was enough for the summon materia to be reacting to its support materia… they could be about to deal with a summon. "Alright, I want everybody armed and ready to move. If this comes down to a fight, we're mostly likely going in against a relatively unknown summon without the ability to just take out the caster."

"Any idea how much energy she's got, Chief?" Reno asked. "Cause Nunchaku could take that materia for a ride, he's got a bike."

"We'll keep the idea in mind, but for now I want everyone combat ready," Veld instructed. "Nunchaku, go out to meet them."

"You got it, boss, I'll leave my mic on," he said. "What about the materia?"

"Leave it. Cissnei, I want you where you can get that if I need you to."

"Got it boss."

"Good." Veld peered out at the vans again. "Alright, Nunchaku, engage."

He saw him leave the building, making the way out towards the vans at a quick, anxious pace that held up the illusion of some new kid Rufus had picked to 'betray' the team. As if he had any that would.

The mic picked up his voice immediately. "Fuhito?"

"Ahh, yes, you must be the courier, are you not?" Fuhito asked. "I believe you have something for me as per the request of the Vice President."


He could just picture the look on the kid's face, eyes a little too wide, instantly believable. "Yeah, I have the materia he sent but it's acting weird. I left it back in the safe house… hey, you okay lady?"

There was a breathy groan, something muttered and not quite heard, before Fuhito spoke again. "Do not be concerned, Turk. Ms. Elfé will be fine as soon as we receive the materia. I assume it is
behaving as these three are, yes? That is nothing for you to worry for, and quite natural."

"O-oh… alright, if you say so. You wanna come get it?" Nunchaku asked, playing up the uncertainty. "I mean since you know about what's up and all…"

"Fufufu, is it too much for one of the ShinRa's Turks to carry a materia? I had not expected such fearfulness," Fuhito said. "I will send my Ravens to escort you."

There was a pause, almost an unspoken boss? in the silence. Veld frowned, keying his mic. "Go get it solo, Nunchaku. Everyone else, be ready to move."

"That's gonna kill her if it summons," Shears hissed, growling when Veld held up a hand to silence him. "Not that you fuckin' care, you-"

"Enough," Veld said, a tone that had silenced entire rooms slipping out with his own frustration. "This is my team, my mission, don't forget you're here as a courtesy; we don't need you. You need us. So sit down, and shut up."

Shears bared his teeth in a silent snarl and stalked back into the other direction, pacing, but he was already dismissed to the back of Veld's mind. Used to multitasking as a way of life on operations, he'd picked up Nunchaku's confirmation that he had followed instructions and gone to pick up the materia. He was just now heading back. "Alright, people be ready to move, we've got an unknown variable likely about to be in play with that summon. Most take a minute to cast, or longer, but we can't count on time being on our side. Gun, just in case I want you laid out for a hit. Reno, Rude, you two are closest to the sides and likely to be the first ones on the scene if we have to move. Don't hesitate to take Fuhito or any of his Ravens out, aim to stun Elfé as necessary."

Confirmations came across the comms, quick and quiet, and Veld eyed his own distance to the vans. "Cissnei, go join Katana and the troopers. Cait, I want you as high up as you can get, be our eyes. The SOLDIERs and Shears will stick with me and we'll be cutting off this end."

"Delivery," Nunchaku announced, a little louder than necessary to catch their attention. "Fuhito?"

"Fufufu, thank you. I will be taking that," Fuhito said.

"Yeah, I - what's wrong with her?"

There was an edge of urgency, nearly dropping the charade, that made Veld's stomach go tight.

"That is nothing for you to concern yourself with, Turk," Fuhito said smoothly. "I suggest you leave the area. You would not wish to be blamed for whatever happens next, after all."

"She's levitating," it was half viable comment for Fuhito, and half report for the rest of them. "And glowing. That's not normal."

"Fufufu, no, all is going according to plan." Fuhito sounded so damned pleased it made Veld's pulse skip. "Leave us. This is none of your concern."

"Yeah, I'm a little more than concerned," Nunchaku muttered.

"Why are you not doing something?" Shears shouted.

Unfortunately, Veld had keyed his mic seconds before, broadcasting the shout.

For a moment, there was nothing. Then Fuhito chuckled. "Well. That is a voice I had not expected to
hear again. I should not be surprised that there are more of you here. I wonder, was that the doing of the Vice President himself, or was he caught at last? I suppose it doesn't matter. You're too late."

Veld gave Shears an acidic look, gesturing for the SOLDIERs to fall in line behind him. "Everybody move. Make sure Gun has a clear shot at Fuhito."

"I need Nunchaku to take about two steps to his right," she said.

"Guys, I'm pretty sure we have a bigger problem right now," Nunchaku said, stepping aside anyway. The glow was bright enough to be shining out of the back of the van, seen as a blazing red from any angle. "What's going on, Fuhito?"

"Yeah, c'mon man, give us one of your speeches," Reno goaded, sauntering over and absently tapping his EMR against his thigh. "Seems your girl's got somethin' up there."

"Don't just talk about it, do something!" Shears yelled, shooting past Veld despite orders. "Fuhito."

"Fufufu, I don't think so, Shears." Fuhito's smile widened, a chilling expression on him. "At last, mighty Zirconia is coming, but it is limited within her. She no longer has the strength to summon it fully, and so I must remove the materia. You will be free to have her when I am finished, of course."

"That's gonna kill her!" Shears tried to charge him, but Veld had caught up, catching him around the arm and hauling him backwards. "He's gonna kill her!"

"Settle down, kid," Veld said quietly, watching Fuhito. "What makes you think removing the materia will let you complete the summon?"

"Fufufu, I have done extensive research on the matter, Director. But that hardly matters to you, does it? You seek to stall me," he said. "As if that will aid you."

"Boss you say the word and I can make a headshot," Gun said quietly. "He's in my sights."

Veld was silent, still watching, but he was distracted abruptly when Elfé came stumbling out. She clung to the door of the van, a dim red glow casting an odd shade to her skin.

She looked around, eyes wide with disbelief, finally settling on them. "...Papa?"

"Papa?" Shears turned to stare at him, but he was ignored.

Veld smiled crookedly, nodding to her and swallowing against the ache in his throat. "Yeah. It's me."

"Well, isn't that interesting." Fuhito shook his head, watching her. "How interesting indeed, that you would be the daughter of the leader of the Turks. It explains a great deal about why they have allowed Shears to live, and been so careful in their pursuit. Unfortunately, I believe this reunion is going to be cut short. Perhaps you should say your goodbyes, Ms. Elfé."

"I..." Elfé gasped, bending nearly in half and gripping at the door as the glow from her materia increased. Inside the van, a golden light was shining from the four support materia before it abruptly shot outward.

Streaks of light shot into the sky, the cloudless blue beginning to darken to a threatening red around an enormous orb, the beginnings of a summon.

"Elfé!"
"Felicia!"

The calls fell on deaf ears as Elfé collapsed, barely catching herself on her hands and knees, the packed earth cracking under her fingertips as they dug in.

Fuhito hummed, watching her without concern. "You should not fuss so. In the end, it does not matter. Zirconiade will cleanse this world of humanity's taint, and it will be reborn at last. All of this is merely a temporary state."

"Yeah, that's what you think," Shears snarled, glaring back at Veld. "She's your kid? Then help her."

"Guys…" Nunchaku pitched his voice to carry, pointing. "New problem."

Against all odds, the materia shards were beginning to come loose, rising into the air and rejoining to form a fractured Summon orb.
Chapter Summary

Fuhito may not have been entirely sane, but he wasn't wrong.

The materia slowly came together, light seeping through the cracks but forming a mostly intact orb.

"What is this?" Fuhito breathed, taking a half step towards where Elfé had fallen and stopping as the materia flew towards him and the gleaming support materia. They flashed brief and bright, and he reached out, capturing the summon in his hand and staring with wide eyes. "This… this is surely a sign from Zirconia. \textit{I} shall be the one to usher it into the world. To offer everything for the rejuvenation of the Planet…"

"All in favor of gettin' that materia the fuck away from batshit over there?" Reno asked, tapping his rod against his thigh in an anxious beat.

"Are we even sure it'll summon? The materia isn't complete," Nunchaku said.

"Don't know, don't care, I've got a headshot lined up," Gun said. "Say the word, boss, and I'll take the shot."

Veld narrowed his eyes. At this point, Fuhito was far too dangerous to take the risk bringing him in. "Take the shot."

The moment she had the order, she fired.

Blue light flared, energy rippling out from the point of impact until there was a translucent blue shield enveloping Fuhito. It began to tinge green and shift, spreading upwards, just tendrils of light at first before spirals shot up into the air, taking over the red quickly until the sky was lit with a green to rival the glow of a mako pit. Fuhito laughed, pitched high with delight only to trail off into a groan and a hiss. His form started to glow until it was a brilliant outline without detail, beginning to stretch into an unnatural shape.

There were no words for what eventually resolved out of the light. Fuhito's features were somewhat recognizable in the sharp angles of his face – the monster, Veld wanted to say. His wiry body was largely intact, but there were long, scythe-like protrusions instead of arms, colored pitch black and trailing into a sickly orange with red ridges like bony fingers. Long hooks grew backward from where his elbow should have been, coming to the same wicked points. There were some sort of bone colored additions around the upper 'arm' that circled around and hung down in jagged extensions that he couldn't fathom the purpose of.

When he smiled, there were far too many sharp teeth.

There was a beat of silence before Reno glanced his way. "Chief?"

"SOLDIERs keep his focus on a close attack. The rest of you take range." Veld offered a grim smile. "Kill it."

The SOLDIERs rushed the mutated Fuhito and he leaped away from the caravan, likely wanting
more space to swing his newly changed limbs. It wasn't Veld's concern; he was away from the vans, away from Elfé, and he was going to get her out of there. He gripped Shears' arm tight and gave a tug before setting off at a run. From the sounds of it, the kid realized what he was doing.

Elfé was somehow conscious still, but shaking badly and so pale he worried about her going into shock. "P-papa?"

"Hey, I got you," he whispered, kneeling beside her and smoothing a hand over her hair. "I've got you now. It's gonna be alright."

"I didn't... I didn't know it was you until I heard your voice," she managed, swallowing and wetting dry lips. "I saw a picture... we were in Nibelheim... it hurt. Memories... they hurt my head sometimes. I can't remember clearly...."

"Trauma can do that," Veld said quietly. "We'll check you out, and I can help you remember. Right now, we've gotta get you out of here, alright? And I brought one of your friends, he can keep an eye on you while I help clean up this mess."

"Oh... I'm... I'm sorry," she said, brown eyes tracking sluggishly towards the fight.

"Not your fault. This one's on him." Veld got his arms around her, giving her a slight squeeze. "Alright, let's get you up on your feet, okay? See if you can stand."

"I don't know..."

"Just try, if you can't then I'll carry you." Veld helped her up carefully, murmuring encouragement, but she could only stay on her feet for a moment before falling against him. He scooped her up without hesitation, holding her close and pushing down the pain at how it was at once so familiar but not quite right. All that time lost... but he had her back. They just had to make it through this.

"Shears, with me; we'll get her back to the safe house and you can stand guard."

"You got it."

They made it back quickly, it wasn't far, though almost as soon as Veld was getting Elfé settled on the bed his phone was ringing. Frowning, he pulled it out, checking the number. "A little busy, Vic, I've got a summon to fight."

"I know, the thing lit up the sky enough to see from the coast," Victor said. "But I remembered who you had on house arrest out here and made a call back to Midgar. He says you've got a half dozen rocket launchers in the basement there, and a hell of a lot of bombs."

Veld tensed, resisting the urge to swear. "Of course he couldn't be bothered to mention we were sitting on a bed of explosives. Alright, I might get some use out of those. Anything else?"

"Sephiroth called, said they're going to come up this way and meet us, but they won't be in time to help with this," Victor said. "You let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Not yet. Sit tight with..." he paused, looking at Elfé. "...actually yeah. I need you to come get Felicia and Shears. If things go south, you all get out of here."

There was a pause, heavy with disapproval. "Veld."

There was no 'argument' for asking his friend to potentially leave him behind. Veld didn't try. "Please."
There was some quiet cursing on the other end, but not a no. "Bastard. You finish that summon off and come back, got it?"

"Sure bet, Vic." Veld ended the call, not wanting to drag it out, and looked to Shears. "You guard her with your life until Victor gets here. He'll get you both back to the helicopter."

Elfé struggled to sit up, pushing at Shears when he tried to stop her. "Papa, wait -"

"I've gotta go." He took her hand, squeezing tight before letting go. "I'll do everything I can to be back."

"Okay." She managed a small, tense smile and let go.

Veld nodded slightly and went to find those rocket launchers. He had a summon to take down.

In Veld's absence and with Tseng on another continent, Reno defaulted to head of operations. It wasn't a position he'd ever wanted, but he'd be damned if he ever failed to live up to Veld's trust.

They'd started off good, the initial setup Veld had left them with was solid. The SOLDIERs kept Fuhito busy, whaling away on him at close range and giving them a chance to get in a slew of ranged attacks without the unenhanced being in danger of getting attacked from the lengthy scythes that had replaced Fuhito's arms.

But then there was a shift, and the strange bony things around his upper arms spun, too quick to follow on a sudden motion they'd shown no ability for, catching one of the SOLDIERs in the chest and hurling him away. Training had him flipping in the air, landing on his feet and skidding a few meters from the force of it, a long tear in his uniform sweater beginning to darken with blood.

"Watch out!"

"Just full of tricks, huh?" Reno scowled. "Back off, Katana, Cissnei. I want every unenhanced on ranged combat only."

There was no way they'd take a hit that bloodied a SOLDIER Second and get back up that easy. He was trying to work out how to change things up when a sudden sparkle of green flared over the cut and he could see it start to knit up. "Yo! We got a healer here?"

"Standard in every team, sir!" Cloud reported, raising his arm and showing off the bangle equipped at his wrist. "I'm not the best, but I know my way around materia enough."

"Fantastic. You keep on that, prioritize it over takin' any shots alright? Keep those SOLDIER boys movin'," Reno ordered. "Anybody else? Katana, you got some materia on ya?"

"Just offensive," he admitted. "Enough to keep me in the fight though."

"Alright, you do that." Reno flicked his rod out to full length, feeling out the materia in its grip. Lightning, always his favorite element, and what he'd have to rely on now. The SOLDIERs were doing what they could to keep Fuhito focused on them, but those spinning parts were causing them to back up and regroup.

"Reno!"
"Chief?" Reno turned sharply, relieved to have the director back, and grinning to see what he had in hand. "Oh baby, tell me one's for me."

"I've got four." Veld grinned back, sharp and ruthlessly pleased as he handed out the four rocket launchers to his Turks on the ground level. "Have at."

"Hell yeah!"

The monster that had been Fuhito shrieked at them, furious when a barrage of rockets started. It gave the SOLDIERs a minute to step back, catch their breath before going back into the fray. Between the two sets they were keeping him busy enough that the best he could do was flail - effective in its own way, the jerky motions were impossible to predict and forceful enough to promise significant injury if they caught anyone. But they were making progress, visible injury starting to show.

Then Veld caught the beginnings of an ominous glow. The same green as the energy above, it was starting to gain in intensity, a pinpoint that suddenly started to expand in the center of the monster's chest. It didn't make any more sense than the rest of the creature, but he trusted his gut in a fight. "Ground team, get down!"

His Turks were on the ground in a breath, the SOLDIERs following just in time for the green point to expand at a rapid rate and shoot, hot energy slicing through the air with an ominous hiss, crackling like a live wire as it passed overhead. It was hot enough to thicken the air, oppressive pressure weighing down on them until suddenly it was over and they could breathe again.

Veld eased himself upright, looking around to take quick inventory, then froze as there was an explosion, the beam continuing on until it hit a house.

Reno twisted around to stare, incredulous. "Holy fuck, it's got lasers?"

Veld's first reaction was just as much shock as Reno's, utter disbelief even after seeing the proof that there had in fact just been a goddamn laser shot their way in the crumbled, burning building. His second thought was the chilling realization that it would have been just as easy - barely a few inches shifted in the monster's aim - for it to have hit the safe house. Leo's house, with a basement of potent explosives, enough to take out most of its neighbors and send debris raining down in a massive radius.

He couldn't let that happen. Especially not knowing if Victor had escaped with Shears and Elfé yet. "We can't let him shoot that way again."

Something must have shown in the urgency of his tone, because Reno gave him a sharp look and nodded, bright blue eyes calculating as he looked at their opponent. "Alright, let's get our SOLDIER boys t' help us spin 'im 'round then."

Veld nodded, tapping his ear piece. "SOLDIER team, we need him facing the other direction, as much as possible. There's too much potential collateral for another laser shot."

There was no confirmation, but the team started working for it quickly. It was in the way they shifted their own bodies, a different angle forcing the transformed Fuhito to twist to follow them. The scythe-like arms were in constant motion, slicing through the air while the bony spears continued to spin. It was starting to get harder for them to keep in close combat.

"He's barely slowed down," Reno muttered, scowling. "We need a new plan, chief."

"Thinking on it."
The air was getting thick and staticky again, the faintest green light starting up enough to see reflected off the SOLDIERS as they fought. Another energy attack, at least aimed away from the city, but if it hit anyone they were out of the fight, if not dead. "We need to stop that attack."

"Not sure we can stop it straight out," Reno said, looking around until he paused, looking thoughtfully at his launcher. "If we could knock 'im over, though… that'd go straight into the ground."

"And blow back in his face," Rude said, nodding.

"Yeah, hell yeah. Get a SOLDIER to knock 'im off balance, hit his back enough…" Reno nodded, looking to Veld. "I think it'd work."

"Worth a shot," Veld agreed. "SOLDIERS, try to get it off balance. Damage isn't as important, just get it destabilized. I want a hail of as many shots as the rest of you can pull off as soon as there's as much as a wobble."

The air was getting thicker, time counting down to seconds until the attack would hit, and it felt like everything slowed.

One of the SOLDIERS launched in a flurry of attacks at one of the scythes, followed immediately by another attacking the same side.

The monster wobbled.

"Now!"

There was a stream of attacks from all angles, rockets and bullets and materia strikes, and it was too much. Fuhito's mutated form collapsed forward, unable to maintain balance under the barrage, just as the laser attack was released. The blast went into the ground, making a crater and sending up an explosion of rock and dirt seconds before it threw the body back a good hundred or so feet away.

Trained against too many opponents that didn't know how to die, the SOLDIERS ran after it, violet blurs with slashes of silver as they pounced on the prone form. There was a brief, weak flail of limbs, and then it was still.

For a long moment there was silence. Veld tapped his earpiece. "SOLDIERS, report."

"It's dead, Director," one of the Seconds reported. "Dismembering just in case."

Well, he couldn't fault thoroughness. "Go ahead. Everyone else on standby until they're done. Rude, run back to the safe house and get me some explosives, I want to be sure this bastard's gone."

Rude nodded, taking off to do so.

"Whoo. I think we actually made it through that with no casualties." Reno looked around, nodding slowly. "Hell yeah. That's-"

The ground trembled. Just once, but a definite tremor.

Veld gave him a side-eye, but didn't comment, looking back to the supposed corpse. "SOLDIERS, do we have movement?"

"No movement, sir. He's also in ten pieces."

Veld nodded slightly, looking around. The air was starting to feel heavy again, some unseen pressure
bearing down on them. There was a faint, static crackle, followed by a distant rumble as the ground shook again. Something was happening.

"Boss, overhead!"

Veld looked up, seeing the massive ball of light was still there, shining a sickly green now. And getting bigger.

"Sir, the body is starting to disintegrate!" The SOLDIER reported.

Abruptly, he recalled Fuhito's words - *I shall be the one to usher it into the world*

*Well shit.*

"Alright, everybody restock your equipment and heal up. We've got a summon coming."
Chapter Summary

Ironically, it's with his death that Fuhito finally succeeds in summoning Zirconiade.

The sky brightened until you had to squint to see anything, the pressure increasing enough to make ears pop and breathing a struggle.

Then it faded, and nothing was the same.

Everything was bathed in the strange green light, but there was no sign of the vans or even the city. Just an endless stretch of ground that had turned a murky green, dry and cracked.

"The fuck is this," Reno breathed, looking around at the warped landscape. "Chief? Rude?"

"Still here." Veld stepped up beside him, looking around as well before keying his earpiece. "Everybody check in. SOLDIER team?"

"All three accounted for, still north of you, sir," Silva reported.

"Army?"

"Here, sir, all together," Cloud reported.

"Katana, Cissnei?"

"Here, with Cait Sith," Cissnei reported.

"Gun, Nunchaku?"

"We're here, but Chief you guys are gone," Gun said. "Absolutely gone. There's this seething sort of… energy something where you were. I can hear you over my earpiece but I have no idea where you are unless it's somehow inside that."

"No idea," he admitted. "Stay put. Tell me if anything changes."

"Yes sir."

"The rest of you come in on my location, we need to get a look at everything, see what we're dealing with." Veld frowned uneasily, looking around.

Rude came up beside Reno, the two of them flanking their director as the rest of the others all came back to center on their location. The strange feeling in the air persisted with a vague scent of ozone, though it wasn't quite as hard to breathe anymore.

"Odds are good that Fuhito's remaining energy was enough to bridge whatever gap there was keeping Zirconiade from summoning," Veld said. "Which means we're about to have a summon here. There's no living caster so that probably means it's much more limited than it would have been so if we can wait it out or run it down, there's no reason to think we won't win. If it's anything like what Fuhito turned into, I want the same sort of pattern. SOLDIERs keep it busy up front, the rest of
us work it over on a ranged assault. Everybody healed up?"

Murmurs of assent and confirmation went over the group. A glance showed nervousness - understandable - but they were ready all the same.

"Kinda low on ammo, since Rude didn't get t' go back," Reno said. "I got materia though."

"We can aim to try and get it knocked over the same as we did with Fuhito," Cissnei said. "If it's got lasers. But we might not have to worry about the city if we're really somewhere else now."

"Maybe we're where summons come from," Cloud suggested. "There's a lot of myths, it's not like anyone knows."

"Somethin' t' worry about later, yo," Reno said, pointing his rod up. "We got company."

The sky started to shift, the green clouds rolling like an oncoming storm before splitting and letting the summon through. It was easy to see the influence it had when Fuhito transformed before. There was still something vaguely human to it, a shape that tricked you into seeing a torso and a head in the midst of something that looked like it should have been some sort of carving instead of something organic. It was full of spikes, and a half dozen of those odd protrusions that had proven such a problem before.

"Fan out. Ranged, you get started the second you can hit it," Veld ordered, watching the summon's descent warily. It was massive, full of sharp parts ready to gut his small close-combat team, and could probably shoot the same building-destroying lasers Fuhito had.

Great.

Fighting Zirconiade wasn't too different than fighting Fuhito's lesser version of it in theory. It had most of the same parts, most of the same attacks. But there were far more of the spinning parts and even if he couldn't see the detail it was clear the summon got a few hits in. Nothing bad enough to take the SOLDIERs out of the fight, but it had to hurt. And since it seemed able to maintain a floating position, there was no knocking the damn thing over for a similar defeat to what they'd pulled with Fuhito.

This time, though, the ranged team was ready. There was a constant bombardment, bullets and rockets and the crash of fire and lightning shooting through the sky. It was bright and brutal and there was no relenting. It almost seemed like it was overwhelming to the summon, some of the attacks even jerking it back in the air, whatever force was keeping it aloft unable to completely resist the forces striking it.

There was a sudden crackle over the comms, and Silva was on. "Sir, I've got a limit break ready if I can get some space."

"You heard the man, fall back and give him some room," Veld ordered. "How much do you need?"

"Maybe a meter, just to be safe."

"Alright, when you've got it, go." Veld watched intently, seeing the start of a blue glow, though he didn't stop firing his own launcher until the SOLDIER was airborne. It was a simple limit, a series of strikes, but effective, starting to make Zirconiade fall back. "As soon as he's done, I want some synchronized hits and the most sustained materia attacks that can be mustered."

It didn't take long, barely longer than it took for Veld to give instructions. The SOLDIER fell back, the glow of his limit blinking out, and the ranged attacks began coming in all at once. There was a
faint glow, the start of a laser attack, but it flickered instead of growing to full strength. The air pressure increased slightly, but not enough to make him call for a retreat.

The assault was relentless, they'd caught their stride, and the summon suddenly went still, giving a much more forceful jerk away into the air.

The glow changed subtly, and there was a ground-shaking crack that echoed like thunder as it started to spread quickly, getting increasingly brighter. There was a creaking sound, a hard material straining, and realization hit almost too late.

"Everybody DOWN!"

The explosion was deafening, the force of it sending them all flying or rolling, depending on if they'd had time to get down on Veld's order. There was blessedly no debris, but the pressure was nearly as bad as when Zirconiade had first appeared.

And then it was over.

"Boss? Guys? You're back!" Gun's voice sounded oddly distant over the comms, echoing strangely.

It took a minute to realize that was a problem with his hearing when things abruptly came back into focus, ears popping when he swallowed. His throat felt dry and sore, eyes burning as he sat up, keying his mic. "Think we won that one. Call in. SOLDIER team?"

"Accounted for, sir," one reported in, sounding a little groggy himself. "Silva got knocked out, but his pulse is strong."

"Alright, keep an eye on him," Veld said. "Army?"

"A little scraped up, but we're all functional, sir," Cloud reported.

"Good. Katana?"

"Looking for Cait Sith, but Cissnei and I are fine," he reported.

"Little guy must have got tossed in the blast," Cissnei said.

Veld frowned; something that little would have likely been thrown. "Cait? Can you hear me?"

There was a moment of static, followed by some garbled squeaky noises before Cait managed to reply. "Aye, Director. I hit a van, motors aren't workin' quite right. Might need a pickup."

"I've got people moving your way, don't worry." He could see Cissnei making a beeline to check the vans, Katana not far behind. "Reno, Rude?"

"I got tossed but I think I'm alright," Reno said. "Superficial shit, at least. Rude lost his glasses."

"I'm fine." There was a note of fond exasperation there that was so familiar it made Veld huff a laugh.

"Alright. Gun, Nunchaku?"

"We're good. Permission to join you?" Gun asked.

"Granted. Everybody make your way over here." Veld sighed, getting to his feet and checking himself over. He'd definitely be feeling that for a while, but it seemed like they were all in pretty
good shape considering they'd just fought one of the most powerful summons he'd ever seen. It looked like the ones closest to the explosion had some first or second degree burns, but apparently their senses were too scrambled still to know. "I'm seeing some unacknowledged damages, everyone get a better look at your teammates, make sure there's no more injuries. Just because you can't feel it yet doesn't mean it's not there."

With the heads up to look closer, this time there were actual damages reported - burns were most common, followed by varying degrees of scrapes and a couple popped joints. The SOLDIERs had some sluggishly bleeding cuts and a couple smaller but deeper gashes, but it looked like nothing particularly dangerous so long as it was treated promptly. Adrenaline was still running high as a natural painkiller, though they couldn't count on that long term. "I'll radio our people in the helicopter to bring emergency supplies and meet us at the safe house. Everybody come back that way."

Victor picked up immediately. "Veld?"

"Don't sound so surprised, I don't die easy." Veld chuckled at his tone, though he couldn't begrudge him concern. "We won. People are in decent shape but there's some that need tended. Bring whatever medkits we've got to the safe house."

"You got it. I'll bring the girls, Shalua's good at first aid and Shelke can help me with Cait."

"You do that." Veld debated a moment on asking the next question, but he couldn't help himself. "How's Felicia?"

"Exhausted. Worried about you; it looked pretty bad from here even before something blew up," Victor said. "How'd it go?"

"No casualties on our side, some injuries sustained. Considering what happened, we're in phenomenal shape," Veld said. "Getting to the safe house now, going to check in with Tseng. I'll see you soon."

"You got it."

He took a minute to usher everyone in, getting the unconscious Second laying down and looking people over himself before putting in a call to his Second in Command.

Much like Victor, Tseng answered with the same speed of one expecting a call. "It's good to hear from you, sir."

"Glad to be putting in the call, believe me." There had been so much potential for things to go wrong, and he was very aware of it. "Fuhito's dead, and the Zirconiade summon has been taken out of the picture. We're going to have to scan the area to find what happened to the rest of AVALANCHE, but we have Elfé and Shears still."

"I see. And current status of the team?"

"Everyone came out intact, looks like some minor injuries. I'll file in detail later. Might have Reeve do whatever assessment he can on Cait or call in to work with Victor; he smacked into a van and it looks like he might've gotten damaged."

"It was hard to be sure, but it looked like the animatronic cat was definitely moving more stiffly. Whether that was just being careful, or being mindful of actual damages he didn't know. "All in all, good. I think Sephiroth's team was heading this way but I'll call to check after a bit before we see about moving anyone. Helicopters are faster than the Highwind so we may just move out, at least the ones in more questionable states."

"Understood, sir. I'll take your verbal report to Rufus myself, there's a board meeting scheduled this
"afternoon and it's better to have as many details as possible." Something they both knew well, of course. "I should be available to take further calls, things have been relatively quiet."

"Take it while it lasts," Veld advised. "I'd appreciate a report on what measures are being taken to prepare for those WEAPONs as well so I'm ready when I get back."

"Of course, sir. I have most of it written up already and I'll be sure to write up the rest and get it sent over shortly," Tseng said. "Anything else?"

"Not just yet. I'll let you know what we decide on moving out, shouldn't be too long." Veld headed to the door at the sharp, familiar knock, letting Victor in and smiling to see Elfé had apparently insisted on coming along. Exhaustion was written in the lines of her face and posture, but it was just as clear that she'd inherited his stubborn will to push through things. "I'll let you go for now, we're getting medical supplies in and I need to see everyone is taken care of."

"We'll speak later, then," Tseng said. "I'll get those reports."

"Thanks." Veld flipped his PHS shut, putting it back in his pocket. "We've got one man down, SOLDIERS need attention first, get those injuries cleaned and healed. The burns are unpleasant but only a few spots are bad enough to need treatment."

"Yeah, looks like stuff a quick Cure could handle," Victor said. "We'll prioritize, and then I'll look at Cait while the small stuff is sorted. Help me with the SOLDIERS, Lua."

Shalua nodded, following him over to where the group had settled.

Elfé made her way over after a moment taking the group in. "You're alright?"

"Just got knocked around a little, I'm good," he assured her, smiling faintly when she gave him an assessing look anyway. "You don't make it to my age in this job without learning how to honestly assess yourself."

"Fair," she said, seeming satisfied with her own examination. "Fuhito is dead?"

"Yeah, he tried to do something with that summon and we had to take him out." Not that Veld had any particular regrets about it, especially after how he'd tried to use his daughter. "The explosion was from defeating Zirconiaide itself. Definitely one of my more memorable targets."

"I can only imagine." She sighed, shaking her head. "What happens now?"

"Right now, we take care of our wounded and I check in with another team that's been handling a different problem, then we see if we need to go to Junon or if we can go all the way back to Midgar," Veld said. "Then we need to find out what happened to the rest of your people, there's been nothing but silence and empty vans. How many did you have with you?"

"About twenty. We've got others spread out, though." Elfé frowned absently rubbing her bandaged hand. "They'll answer to Shears and I, but I'm not sure how they'll take to orders to stand down. I don't know how I feel about it. I still believe the ShinRa are wrong but…"

"But you feel the same way about fighting me that I do fighting you," Veld said quietly, giving her an understanding look when she met his eyes. He could see the frustration there, the indecision. It made sense, she believed in her cause. "There's other ways to make a difference, Felicia. Ways that don't include actually causing more harm than good."

"I haven't been Felicia for a long time," she pointed out quietly, a bittersweet smile touching her lips.
at whatever she saw on his face at the comment. "This is all I've known. My memory… some of it is coming back. Especially once I saw you. But… it feels like another life. Another person."

"I understand." It hurt to say it, but he did. "We'll work it out together. For now, there's a lot going on that you need to know about. Things that have to take priority over any squabbles AVALANCHE might have with ShinRa. There's a bigger threat out there, and I'd rather we work together."

"Those WEAPONs you guys keep talkin' about," Shears said, frowning. "Never did get the detail."

"I'll let you sit in on the report when I update the rest of the team," Veld said. "For now, we've got clean up, and a moment to rest. Best to take those when you have them; we're not going to get much of a break once the next fight starts."
Chapter Summary

ShinRa needs a strong leader, and Heidegger is done waiting around.

The board was gathered within two hours of having gotten Veld's formal report, and Tseng was looking forward to no longer occupying the Director's seat. It was a position he would take with as much grace and competence as he brought to any task, but he much preferred having Veld running operations.

"It's been confirmed that both teams have been successful," Rufus announced. "Tseng, if you would start us on your director's report please."

"Of course, sir." Tseng nodded, tapping his papers lightly. "Director Faraman contacted me two hours ago with confirmation that AVALANCHE's leaders and two dozen of their operatives have been apprehended during the operation in Costa del Sol. In light of current circumstances, it has been suggested to see if they would be willing to cooperate in a joint effort to fight the incoming WEAPONs, but regardless of their cooperation the organization has effectively been disbanded. Fuhito has been killed, Elfé seems inclined to cooperate so long as certain conditions are met and Shears continues to follow her lead."

"And we're giving these terrorists conditions? That's ridiculous!" Heidegger said. "They're lucky to be alive! They should all be executed!"

"Circumstances what they are, the executive decision was made to see if we can work with them to our own benefit, Director," Tseng said. "Additional firepower will not be amiss in the oncoming fight, and they have an investment in the wellbeing of the Planet themselves."

"For now, I'll allow it," Rufus said, holding up a hand to stall further protests and giving Heidegger a quelling look when he grumbled loudly. "Continue, Tseng."

"There were no casualties on our side, but it's been noted that there were some injuries requiring medical attention. At this point, it's believed that they will be stopping in Junon to get them medical attention before returning to Midgar," Tseng said. "But there was also discussion that the teams may split up, I believe due to the SOLDIERs team taking time to rendezvous with them before their own return."

"I see. Well, either way we should be seeing them within the next twenty-four hours," Rufus said, humming when Tseng nodded. "Very good. Lazard, what did you hear from Hojo and Sephiroth?"

"I spoke with Sephiroth, Hojo is apparently occupied still on his studies," Lazard said. "They are planning to rendezvous with the Turk team, before returning to Midgar, and they're on their way back now. They are in fact returning with Genesis as they'd been meaning to, and -"

"You can't be serious," Heidegger interrupted. "Mr. President, I have to protest -"

"Will you let me finish?" Lazard said.

"No." Heidegger smacked his hand on the table, half rising out of his chair. "No, this is insane;
Genesis Rhapsodos is a threat, not an ally. He's a deserter who aided terrorists and started his own war against the company!

"I never said I trusted him," Rufus said dryly.

"Then why would you want this man back? At what point are you going to acknowledge that he is beyond redemption? How much damage does there have to be?" Heidegger demanded. "He is a war criminal and a terrorist -"

"He's useful," Rufus said, barely raising his voice but with the same steel tone his father had had. "He's not coming back because I trust him, he's coming back because he's one of the most powerful people in the world and there are six creatures about to attack my city -"

"We have no proof!" He protested immediately. "All our information is coming from SOLDIER. Who says they're not making it up for this exact response? If creatures like this existed, we would have found them back when Gast had his expedition to the Northern Continent. There was nothing."

"I'm not taking the risk," Rufus said. "And frankly I don't care what you think about it. I'm aware it sounds ridiculous. So does the fact that mako enhanced humans exist. So do summons. So does whatever Veld just fought in Costa del Sol. The world is full of impossible things, I'm not going to bet against it and be wrong."

"Mr. President -"

"Enough," Rufus said, staring the older man down a long moment. "I've made my decision. Either get on board, or step aside so I can find someone to fill your place. Because none of you are irreplaceable, do you understand?"

Heidegger tensed, giving Lazard a dark look before settling back in his chair. "Yes, Mr. President. I understand."

"Excellent." Rufus looked back to Lazard as well. "Continue, Director."

Lazard didn't look at Heidegger, much as he wanted to, continuing to address the President. "As I was saying, they've gotten Genesis to agree to come back, and he's no longer viewed as an active threat. He's wary of the company, particularly Hojo, but seems disinclined to fight Sephiroth and Angeal. As they're on our side, I don't see him being a problem at this time. As far as the issue of his and Angeal's health goes, I've been informed that there's been some sort of breakthrough and they both appear to be stable. I'm not clear on what happened, Hojo refused to comment, but Genesis looked well, though he still has the wing. You'll have to get those details from Hojo, unfortunately."

"Mm, something to worry about at another point. For now, it's enough to know they're recovering and planning to cooperate," Rufus said. "I understand your people from Wutai will be in soon?"

"Yes, they're returning shortly, I expect them around the same time Sephiroth's team comes in or a little earlier." Lazard nodded. "Most of the others are coming into Junon, so we should have fairly evenly distributed forces."

"Excellent." Rufus turned his attention to Reeve. "And how is shutting the reactors down going?"

"I've shut down the three on the Western Continent that we discussed," Reeve said. "And lowered the power slightly in Junon to test what the city can work with. There's room to lower it more, but we'll have to see. For now I'm collaborating with Scarlet to get some ships outfitted with cannons to sit over top of it and help defend from the ocean. We're also looking into mako-powered weaponry that we might be able to mount to individual reactors themselves, here in Midgar."
"Impressive." Rufus glanced at Scarlet, brows arched. "Do tell."

"Kya ha ha, they're as straightforward as they sound, President; they run on mako, so they'll be operational so long as the reactors are pumping," Scarlet said. "They can be mounted as soon as they're off the production line. I'm already expanding operations to meet goal production rates."

"That's what I like to hear, progress." Rufus nodded. "I've gotten your report on available ships, Palmer, those will be forwarded on. I imagine future meetings may be held in smaller groups until we're further along. Heidegger, Tseng, work something out about the scouts and get some planes combing the area to the North until we find these creatures. I want to get a better idea of what we're going to be dealing with."

"Of course, sir." Tseng nodded.

Rufus was silent a moment, looking over the table. "Alright. For now, that's enough. Everyone back to work. I want us ready. And Lazard, a word before you go."

Heidegger was done. He was done watching the SOLDIERs do as they pleased, he was done with their ridiculous scheme to convince the President there was a greater threat - Planet-borne WEAPONs? Really? - and that they were worth keeping around. SOLDIER should have been scrapped as soon as the war was over. He'd tried to tell Rupert as much, but the man had quit listening to him a long time ago. And now Rufus. He was barely a man playing at a job that was way over his head. ShinRa was an enormous, complex company and he just wasn't the strong leader it needed yet. How impulsively he'd gotten himself the position was proof of it.

A change was needed, and quickly, before he could do more damage. The sheer amount of gil being thrown around was insane, and without even confirming anything? No, this had to stop, and if no one else was going to step up than he would.

He knew the Turks had access to all the security cameras, but with their forces divided to join Veld, it was far more likely that the only people really paying attention were his own security forces. A quick check said that Rufus and Lazard were still talking, with only one Turk present and the doors to the President's office flanked by his own men. It was easy to get a hold of a couple of Scarlet's robots on the excuse of having an issue and wanting to bring it to the President's attention.

His secretary said that he would have to call ahead for an actual meeting, but he pushed by - there was nothing she could do to him. His troops stepped away, then resumed guard at the doorway.

Rufus looked up from the files that he was going over with the head of SOLDIER, brow creasing in annoyance. "Heidegger, I am certain we didn't have a scheduled… what are you doing?"

"Rufus, you mean well, but you're just not right for this company. You're still too young. Impulsive. You're spending gil like people breathe and it's going to run this company into the ground."

Heidegger patted one of the machines as the Turk went to move. "Ah ah. I think you'd rather everyone walk out of this room alive, wouldn't you? Don't want a repeat of the last President's fate, hm?"

Rufus grit his teeth, staring at the machines, each robot equipped with multiple barrels to shoot whatever projectiles Scarlet had dreamed up at the time. It wasn't something he wanted to chance. "Very well, Heidegger. Let's talk terms."
Executive Notification - at this time the company is changing hands, communications will temporarily be ceased while the situation is brought to a favorable conclusion. All department heads will now be reporting to Col. Andres Heidegger. Further details to follow.

-R Shinra

Reeve stared at the notification, wide-eyed. It was clear Tseng’s hands were tied, neither the Turks nor SOLDIER able - or at least unwilling - to chance Rufus or Lazard getting hurt, or worse. Right now, Midgar was firmly in Heidegger’s hands. Of course he’d only be so bold with Veld and the best of the Firsts away, but if he thought he’d truly be able to control communications he was going to get quite a surprise. There was, as far as Reeve could tell, nothing anyone had designed that could block his bond to Cait Sith. Even across the ocean, he could feel him, and he was already attached to help guide Victor through repairs.

Now, though, he reached out for controls. "Victor? I need to speak with Veld. We have a situation back at Headquarters."
Onward to Junon

Chapter Summary

The two teams are reunited, and set off to Junon to make plans about how to proceed.

Veld spoke with Reeve alone for several minutes, getting what updates the other director was able to give him with his limited information via Cait Sith. He had to hand it to Heidegger, if you were going to pull a stunt like this, now was the time; none of SOLDIER's higher officers were there to rally their forces while Lazard was tied up, and he was stuck on another continent with no way to hurry back. If Heidegger thought that was enough to stop him, however, he was in for a very unpleasant revelation.

His first call went in to Anya. "Have you spoken with Tseng?"

"Not since he passed on your initial report," she said. "What is going on?"

"Heidegger is holding the President hostage, and he's got Deusericus locked in with him," Veld said. "Without Sephiroth or Fair there, SOLDIER's in a stranglehold, and Tseng's not going to act with Rufus in danger."

"Of course he is." She was silent a moment. "What do you need of me?"

"Just hold Junon; do whatever you have to do to make sure the army doesn't take it over for him," Veld said. "We'll come back that way and see what we need to do about Midgar, but I've got wounded, and no promises on the SOLDIER team's status."

"Do you think he may back down, faced with all of you?" She asked.

"No, if he's got the guts to try and pull this, he's got plans and unfortunately, he has time to implement several before we can get back there." Veld shook his head, frowning. "We wouldn't have even known if Reeve hadn't been able to communicate via Cait Sith."

"Of course. He doesn't want to give you time to plan," Anya said. "Foolish as this is, he's not completely ignorant of who he's challenging."

"Doesn't do us much good now, but we'll see how it plays out." Heidegger definitely had the home advantage, but that wasn't nearly enough to count Veld or his team out, well before you considered the brute force he had at his disposal from SOLDIER. "Anyway, I wanted you on guard."

"Appreciated, of course."

"...there's one more thing," he said, because he couldn't in good conscience keep it from her. "Valentine's alive."

A sharp breath on her end was telling, a long moment of silence to process that he didn't interrupt. "Valentine… our Valentine. Vincent is alive."

"Said he's been in Nibelheim, the SOLDIER team picked him up." It wasn't getting any less surreal to say it. "He's been pretty cagey, but I'll get it out of him eventually. From the mako glow he's got
going, my bet is it's Hojo's doing."

"We had suspected as much," she said quietly. "You bring him back, yes?"

"Of course." Like he'd let his partner just up and vanish again. "And I'll get the details from him as soon as we have the time."

"It is not a short flight from Costa to Junon in an airship," Anya said. "You have time. I will work on Heidegger. You work on Valentine."

"We'll get it done." What they got done would remain to be seen, but she was right, it was a long flight and he'd be a fool not to take advantage.

"Hey Chief?" Reno came over, knocking on the side of the helicopter where he'd perched. "Highwind's been spotted, somethin' like twenty minutes out."

Veld nodded in acknowledgment, waving him off. "I've got to get my people together, Anya. I'll text you when we're on our way to Junon and put in a call when we're ten minutes out. Keep me updated if anything happens on your end."

"Naturally." She'd never have thought to do otherwise. "You may do well to have Sephiroth send commands into the city as well, even if you don't want to make a stir in Midgar yet."

"I'll look into it." Veld rose, eyes scanning the horizon as he walked away from the helicopter, finally spotting the dark shape of the airship. "Be safe."

"Hn. I will be."

He smirked at the implications. "I'll be in touch."

By the time the Highwind landed, they'd tended all their wounded and had decided on who would be taking the helicopters back and who would be joining the SOLDIER team. It was a unanimous decision that no one was heading back to Midgar yet, not without a better handle on what they were walking into, but so long as Anya continued to maintain control of Junon it was a safe stop to make and they could get better equipped for taking their city back.

Zack and Aerith were the first ones off the airship, looking around a moment at the damages left behind from the fight with Fuhito. "Looks like you guys had a party without us."

"You could say that," Veld said dryly, looking him over. The SOLDIER looked a little tired out himself, and he didn't think it was just stress. "Had a time of your own?"

Zack laughed a little, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Yeah, we had ourselves a little disagreement, but it's settled for now."

"For now?" He didn't like the sounds of that. They needed to have a united front.

"I'm not real worried about it at the moment," Zack said, shrugging. "So, who's coming with? Sephiroth's finishing up a conversation with Hojo."

"I'm going to need a word with him before we go," Veld said. "I'd sooner have everyone together for
that, instead of just whoever is on the airship."

"Yeah? Alright, I'll go get him." Zack squeezed Aerith's shoulder and headed back into the ship.

Veld's expectant look took less than two minutes to break her silence.

"Chaos attacked the SOLDIERs," Aerith admitted quietly. "It was bad."

"How bad?"

She took a deep, steadying breath. "Zack died. I... I hit a limit break and it brought him back. But it's done something to the other SOLDIERs, too. I'm not sure what, the professor wasn't very clear, but they seem weaker."

"I see." Just one more thing he needed details on. Of course, then he was distracted as Zack returned, not just with Sephiroth. "Vincent."

"Veld." There was a moment's silence as he paused, awkward, before stepping around Sephiroth and coming closer.

Veld didn't wait for more of an invitation, pulling him into a tight hug. "We are having words, you bastard."

That startled a laugh out of him, a little rough from disuse. "Oh, is that what we're doing?"

"We are," Veld said firmly, stepping back even though his hand stayed on Vincent's shoulder. Feeling the warmth of a real, living body under his strange getup.

He was real. Against all reason, decades after his death, Vincent was back.

"You've been missed," he finally said.

Vincent's head lowered in acknowledgment, regret clear in glowing crimson eyes. "I... have a lot to atone for, Veld."

"We've got a lot to talk about before any of that," Veld said, squeezing his shoulder. "I'm putting you right back to work."

Vincent arched a brow, but there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Making an awful lot of plans for me, Veld."

"That's what happens when you're late to work," he retorted, smirking at the huff of laughter that received. "Now say hi to Vic while I have a word with Sephiroth."

Sephiroth had been watching them in thoughtful silence, but whatever he was thinking went unsaid. "Director."

"I've had a very short update from Aerith," Veld said. "I'd appreciate more detail later. For now, we've had a situation developing in Midgar that's going to need addressed - Heidegger has taken over."

"Heidegger." Sephiroth's incredulity was clear, and not unwarranted. "He took over headquarters?"

"I don't have much detail, just what Reeve could get out to us via Cait Sith," Veld said. "But yes, he has. He's got the President as a hostage, and that ties up my Turks. Lazard was apparently with him, which has put a pinch on your department as well."
"I see." He frowned thoughtfully. "This is why you have us going to Junon, instead of Midgar."

"The primary reason. Some of my team could use medical attention sooner than later as well," Veld said. "I've spoken with the head of our Junon operations, and as we speak she's securing the city for us. Heidegger may have a significant army presence, but he's not ready to go head to head with her, and he knows it."

"Before you'd spoken, I wouldn't have said he'd have the gall to make a move for Midgar, either," Sephiroth pointed out.

"I know, but I wouldn't say he'd have made that move if either of us were back there." Certainly not if Veld himself had been. "We'll take the city back, it's just a matter of at what cost."

"You believe the army will continue to follow him, then," Sephiroth said.

"I believe there's enough anti-SOLDIER sentiment and general suspicion surrounding the Turks that they'd take a bit of a thrill in having an excuse to stand against both departments, yes," Veld said. "And there's no telling what he'll have made Rufus sign off on. The question is if he'll be stupid enough to believe I care about any of that."

That earned a small smile, and Sephiroth nodded slightly. "Regardless of our director's current predicament, you have SOLDIER's support, Director."

"Good."

"Director Faraman, sir!" Cloud jogged over, PHS in hand. "Sir, you need to see this. We just got orders…"

"Let me see that, trooper," Veld said, accepting his phone and reading the message. It was quick, and to the point. Heidegger was currently putting Midgar under martial law, and there was a lockdown of the base to be enforced by the army. All SOLDIERs were to head back to their barracks, all Turks to report to the President's office. "Son of a bitch… he wants to play like that, huh? Alright…"

"Sir?" Cloud said, unsure of what that meant.

"Don't worry about it, Strife. Just keep me appraised of any updates." Veld smiled tightly. "We've got to get to Junon before we can do anything. Gather everyone up. I'll give an update on the situation and we'll get going."
Interlude: Lockdown

Chapter Summary

Midgar has fallen to Heidegger, but not everyone is going easily.

Chapter Notes

So, little heads up for you guys, I have some things coming up over the next two weeks. I'm hoping to post, but if I can't don't worry. I'll get back to the story as soon as I can, you know I won't leave you hanging any longer than I can help it!

Anyone who had thought that ShinRa was just a company was deluding themselves, especially in Midgar. Sure, Domino filled the token position of 'Mayor' but the truth was that he was owned by ShinRa, just like the police force and the judges and every other position of power in the city. And right now, standing in the President's office with a seething Rufus, it was all under Heidegger's control. It was a heady feeling.

He knew better than to let it go to his head yet, though. There were too many loose ends to call it a done deal. But what he had to count on was that people - even SOLDIER - would stick to their training. They might not like operating under his authority, but if it appeared to be genuine, they would do it. The only remaining wild cards, of course, were the two teams that had yet to return. He had to make sure everything was secured before Sephiroth and Veld returned to Midgar.

Sephiroth shouldn't have been a problem. The man had been born and raised to serve ShinRa, but he'd been acting erratically lately. He was unreasonably attached to Genesis, despite the man's betrayal. Heidegger wasn't sure he'd count the actions of his team as entirely Hojo's fault, so much as he made a convenient excuse and had enjoyed near immunity in the eyes of the old President. But Heidegger wasn't nearly so attached to Hojo or the fantasy of Neo Midgar, he was a man who dealt in facts, and if Hojo was going to be a problem, he would be treated like one. The same would be applied across the board, including to Sephiroth despite his 'hero' status. The SOLDIER wasn't half so impressive as people had inflated his sense of self-importance to be, and was overdue for a rude awakening to reality. He didn't get to run off like this without consequences.

Frankly, he'd like to see the entire program scrapped completely, but if that wasn't possible he could at least hope that he could pull them in line by proving that their leaders weren't untouchable. And Lazard had to go, period. There was no sense having a civilian in charge of a branch of the military; he obviously wasn't going to listen to anyone who knew what they were talking about and his lax behavior towards SOLDIER was what had bred this contempt for authority to begin with. Things would never have gotten this bad on his watch.

For now, though, he was proving useful getting SOLDIER under control.

All SOLDIERs currently in Midgar had been ordered back to their barracks, the buildings all under guard of his troops and an array of Scarlet's machines. While there had been some grumbling and confusion, no one had acted out, which was promising for future cooperation.
Granted, that wasn't all the SOLDIERs. There were teams still due to come in, people stationed around the world - especially at the base in Junon - but that was doable. Having the bulk of SOLDIER under control already set a precedent, and made the rest more likely to give in without a fuss. For all the damage even a Third Class SOLDIER could wreck, that was safer.

There was also the matter of getting the city itself under control. Domino had folded like a house of cards, and he'd already had a grip on the slums through Don Corneo, but he still put out larger numbers of his troopers to patrol, and was watching every exit to the city. Despite explicit orders not to communicate with anyone outside Midgar, he doubted that the Turks would all obey, and he was braced for communications from Veld.

He hadn't expected the call to come in from Junon instead.

Anya waited with what she felt was admirable patience for Heidegger to come answer the video call she'd put in. She refused to play into his pretenses and contact Rufus, when the young President was currently being played for a puppet. No, she would go straight to the heart of the matter instead.

He finally came after making her wait a solid fifteen minutes, a snub that was irritating but failed to rile her. "Heidegger."

"Torvik." He watched her in silence a moment. "What's a Junon Turk got to say to me, hm?"

She smiled slowly, arching a brow. "A Turk is rarely limited by their environment, let alone their location. You would do well to remember this."

His eyes narrowed slightly, sensing a threat. "What are you getting at?"

"Did you truly think you could be so bold, and keep it a secret?" She asked, shaking her head, genuine amusement in her smile. "I told Rupert I would not follow you. Taking the President's chair changes nothing. Have Midgar, so long as you can hold it, but Junon is mine. This is not a call to negotiate, this is merely a call to let you know."

"You'll stand against a presidential order?" Heidegger arched a brow, crossing his arms with a satisfied smirk. "Sounds like you're going rogue, Turk. Are you trying to give me excuses to take Junon?"

"You assume you can." She shook her head slightly. "You think you're very impressive, don't you? You caught boys off guard, and you think that means the rest will be just as simple. As if I would simply roll over for you, and allow you to walk in and take my city."

"Don't mistake authority in the Turks for actual authority in the company, Torvik; you may be good at what you do, but you're not going to stand against the full force of the army if I turn it on Junon," Heidegger said.

"Your army has its place," she agreed, "but I am no monster to be fought with waves of brute force. I am a Turk. And I will not play by your rules of war."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" He asked. "All I'm hearing is empty talk about how special you are, and I've got news for you - Turks aren't bulletproof."
"You would have to get to me before you would be able to shoot me." There was a chime on her end and she smiled, slow and pleased. "You forget who runs security here."

"You don't have a monopoly on that," Heidegger said. "I've got people out there; if I decide to take Junon as well, you'd be better off not putting up resistance."

"We'll see." She reached forward to the controls, smile still in place. "I'd wish you luck, but at this point it's not going to do you any good."

Heidegger started to reply, but the call was cut off abruptly and he scowled. "Get her back on the line, I'm not done with her."

"Yes sir." The rookie Turk who had been managing communications tried to reconnect them and frowned. "…sir, I'm getting a notification that our codes are invalid."

"What? Let me see." Heidegger got up, going over to the console and putting in his director override. Nothing.

Dark eyes narrowed and he sneered, Anya's words coming back - you forget who runs security here. "She wants to play like that, does she? Alright. Get me Tseng and Director Tuesti. We'll see just who's in charge here."
The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

Midgar is still out of reach, but for now they've got bigger problems.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longer-than-expected wait, had some RL issues crop up, but it's getting better and we should hopefully be back on track now!

A quick call verified that Anya was in fact still in control of the city, so the Highwind and its passengers made a secure landing as soon as they arrived in Junon.

The senior Turk was waiting for them with a pair of Firsts, seemingly quite relaxed despite the current circumstances and greeting Veld with a slight nod. "Director."

"Ms. Torvik." Veld smiled faintly at the deliberate acknowledgment of his rank, coming off the ship with Vincent and Victor behind him. "Bit of a reunion."

"Quite." She eyed the pair with an arched brow, gaze lingering on Vincent a long moment until he looked away. "The others are coming, yes?"

"They are." Veld nodded, glancing back as the SOLDIERs began to disembark, followed by AVALANCHE. "Where's Hojo?"

"Gathering his notes," Sephiroth said, gesturing briefly behind before looking to the SOLDIERs that had come out. "The situation has changed, as per my earlier message."

"Yes sir," Nikolas said, nodding. "Pleasure to have you back, Commanders."

Angeal offered a tired smile, nodding. "It's good to be back."

"We should get in and start discussing the situation," Veld said. "The worst of the injured are already here in medical, but it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to just secure and gather up wherever Hojo needs to be to finish his work."

"The labs are already high security by default," Hojo said, finally exiting with the captain trailing behind. "But yes, a better equipped area to work would be ideal now that we have access to one."

"We will join you," Anya said. "Lead on."

Hojo nodded, starting in the correct direction. "I've called ahead so the equipment I've requested should be on hand and ready to be used. Once I can get some samples processing for the SOLDIERs I'll take a look at Elfé to see what can be done to stabilize her."

Veld glanced at his daughter, seeing nothing but determination despite her exhaustion. It looked like
Vincent could have used someone to look him over, but given what he suspected he wasn't even going to suggest Hojo be the one to do it. Whatever it was, it wasn't enough to keep him out of the unfolding events.

Then again, he had a glow to rival a First Class, even if it was a different color; odds were not much was going to manage to keep him down. Especially not if he was even half as stubborn as he used to be.

The Science Department's Junon facilities were large and well equipped, even if not quite as impressive as the ones Hojo maintained in Midgar. Chairs had been brought in, though he waved Elfé to one of the medical beds to sit on while he got some of the samples he'd taken from the SOLDIERs processing.

Veld kept close watch on the ongoings, but unfortunately business couldn't wait for him to finish. At least he could count on the fact that Shears would speak up in a heartbeat if anything seemed questionable. "Any further word from Heidegger?"

"No, but then I did revoke all of his access to the academy and the military base," Anya said mildly, smiling at his sharp look. "I warned him, this is my city. He can't have it."

"He never took too well t' warnings," Victor observed, smirking. "Bet he had a fit when you did that."

"I'm sure." Veld shook his head slightly, glancing over to where Shalua and Shelke had settled with Cait Sith. "Cait, any word from Reeve?"

"Not a word yet, no. Lotsa static. I think they're keepin' him busy, or maybe under guard," Cait reported.

"There any chance your signal is just jammed?" Veld asked. "I couldn't get a call in to my people either."

Cait shook his head. "No, we work on a different system. There shouldna be anythin' they can do ta really block our connection."

"Alright. Well, keep an ear out just in case." He looked to the SOLDIERs next. "I don't suppose there's anything going on on your end?"

"No, sir, we haven't been able to contact anyone from Midgar," Nikolas said. "But we've got contact everywhere else, including as many teams in the field as we could find record of off the mission board."

"It's up for debate if there's a larger force in Midgar or Junon," Sephiroth said. "Junon has more cadets, Midgar has more Thirds. Most of our Seconds were in the field, and there aren't many Firsts to begin with."

"I don't think there's any Firsts in Midgar right now," Zack said. "They're actually not in a great spot for trying to pin our department down. I mean, sure he's got a choke hold on the people there, but he doesn't really have the bulk of the department there. We could mount an assault and take it back. Genesis got AVALANCHE in, and that was just one person who knew the place."

"The question is what the cost of doing it will be," Angeal pointed out. "If he's willing to throw the army against us, how far will he go? People will die for this."

"A price that should have been understood as soon as anyone signed up," Sephiroth said. "You can't
care about your enemy's wellbeing. And if they stand against us, they've made themselves our enemies. You can't hide behind orders, not now. Not when so many are going to take a stand against them."

"He's right." Veld nodded. "It's not like there's no precedent of people saying no to this, you're not even asking them to be the first ones to stand up. It's just a matter of what people are willing to stand for, now."

"It gets even more complicated than that," Vincent said. "There's still the matter of the approaching WEAPONs."

"I'd love to say that would inspire 'enemy of my enemy' and clear things up, but I don't think we'll be so fortunate. Heidegger's not going to believe the threat until he sees it with his own eyes." Veld frowned. "I admit, I'd feel better having seen them myself."

"Last I heard, we'd got several good pilots heading up north t' try an' find 'em," Victor said. "We should know one way or another. Nothin' bigger than a reactor should be able t' hide."

"It would depend on how deep in the ocean they are," Vincent pointed out. "But ideally, no."

"So we've got two fronts we're going to be fighting on," Veld said. "The WEAPONs coming in, and the mess in Midgar. So long as Heidegger keeps that contained and doesn't come after Junon, though, I think the WEAPONs are going to have to take priority."

"Agreed." Sephiroth nodded.

There was a sudden soft set of beeps, and Anya pulled out her PHS, Veld doing the same a moment later.

There was a pause of heavy silence, then, quietly, "Shit."

"What?" Vincent asked, frowning at his partner's sudden stillness, the way his eyes had gone a touch wider in an unusual tell of shock.

"...we have our proof," Anya said quietly. "Images from the scouts. They've found the WEAPONs."

With confirmation of the WEAPONs, there was a renewed sense of urgency. It was one thing to be told about their size and potential power, but it was another to look at these lumbering giants that could physically destroy cities if they got close enough, without ever using their energy attacks. There was still no contacting Midgar, so they had to hope that the same reports had been copied over, and were creating the same sense of urgency despite Heidegger's earlier lack of support.

The groups were still in contact, but they'd split up to better take control of their own department's representatives, working with the local operatives who had familiarity of command.

Ironically, by and large the army seemed willing to fall in line with Anya's leadership, perhaps due to being so accustomed to having her as a constant authority even if she wasn't truly in their chain of command. It helped that Heidegger hadn't been able to be in contact, something she passed off as negligence - all too easy to believe, given how he tended to focus on the Midgar branch.
Now wasn't the time to be divided, little that they could do about Heidegger for now; everyone in Junon was mobilizing as quickly as possible. The strategies that Rufus had put into place originally had been passed from Tseng and Reeve to Veld, and he and Anya quickly began to adapt it to the people and resources they still had.

Scarlet's team of technicians and engineers were already in place, ready and able to put the Sister Ray to use as necessary, and several more ready to operate a variety of her machines on the front lines. Some would have to wait on the coast, but there were others that could even travel over the water. It was unanimously agreed that the more damage they could get in while keeping the WEAPONs at a distance from the cities, the better.

As it turned out, Captain Highwind had enough experience with a variety of the transports to help weaponize them, or at least see them better equipped to defend themselves after they made their drop offs. He set to work with the engineers, vanishing into the hangars and only giving reports when prodded.

SOLDIER had also gathered, quickly realizing a rare advantage - for once, all the remaining Firsts were in the same place. They were down to seven, six of the original ten that had started during the Wutai war years ago with Zack added on. It was an unexpected boon, allowing for multiple teams to have much more experienced leaders when they eventually spread out. If all the WEAPONs showed themselves, they could meet each one head on.

For now, with only two visible, they were preparing a team to go out ahead on the Highwind, hoping to stall them while the rest mobilized. Though they'd been weakened some, the original team were still a cut above the others. Even Zack had them beat in raw strength, regardless of his lesser experience. With an enemy that towered like the WEAPONs did, it wasn't going to be a matter of skill - this time, they had to beat them down with as much force as they could bring to bear.

Hopefully, it would be enough.
Interlude: Last Minute Plans

Chapter Summary

In the final moments before the battle, it's all they can do to brace themselves.

Everything was still a work in progress, and a good half of it was ultimately resting on Veld's shoulders even if he was able to delegate some authority back to Anya. Time was ticking, the WEAPONs would continue their approach whether they were ready or not, so they had to be ready. There was no other acceptable outcome.

Then there was the mess in Midgar. He had to trust Tseng would be able to keep their people together and as safe as possible while Heidegger was trying his little coup, because right now he couldn't be there, even as much as he wanted to. The WEAPONs needed taken down.

In the meantime, there was a waiting game, getting things ready. Anya had most of it in hand at the moment, which gave him time to look into a couple more personal things, checking on his daughter and his partner. Felicia - Elfé, he had to remind himself - was being seen to by Hojo, and everything seemed above the board on it. Then again, Hojo wasn't stupid enough to try something with her twice, not with him right there.

Which left finding Vincent, because they had a very limited window of time to have a very needed discussion. Thankfully, the PHS Victor had shoved in his hand earlier had a tracking chip, so it wasn't near the task it could have been to track him down.

Vincent was on the roof of the base, near one of the helipads, because the man always had to make this sort of thing difficult. He didn't turn when Veld came up, though his head tilted at the sound of the door opening and closing.

"Valentine."

A quiet huff of laughter carried over to him. "I could always tell you were pissed off when you called me that off the clock."

"I'm beginning to suspect there's reason to be," Veld said, walking in a slow arc until he was in his partner's line of sight, keeping his distance for both their sakes. "Hojo said you'd had a choice, staying away all these years."

"...he's not entirely wrong," Vincent admitted quietly. "Though it didn't seem that way at the time. Funny what a little perspective will do."

"I'm not laughing."

Vincent sighed, turning to face him properly. "Does it look like I am? There's no good way to tell you this, Veld. I panicked, alright? They'd... done things to me. Chaos isn't the only burden I bear, there's others, even if they're not as able to take over. I'm dangerous-"

"You were always dangerous," Veld interrupted, jaw set and eyes narrowed as he watched him. "Always. So don't throw that out there as an excuse and hope I'll buy it."
"There's a difference between being danger I'm in control of, and danger that I'm not," Vincent said, glaring at him. "You want it to be easy, for there to be set blame, cut and dried. It's not."

"Seems pretty clear cut so far," Veld said, sliding right back into old habits, the rapid back and forth painfully familiar. "Because the second Lucrecia's kid is involved, you were suddenly able t' get right back up."

"Chaos got up," Vincent hissed, red eyes flaring brighter. "Did I stay? Yes, yes I did. But no, that wasn't my choice. I didn't choose to be their experiment, I didn't choose to have these monsters put inside of me, I didn't choose to become this. The only choice I could make -"

"Was to give up and hide for twenty years?"

"I died!" The sharp words almost echoed between them. Had Veld still been the kid Vincent had known, he might have flinched from the raw emotion they carried. As it was, Vincent was the one to look away first, shaking his head. "I died, Veld. I died for her, and they both used me. Are you really going to blame me for not being able to face the world after that?"

The silence stretched between them a long, uncomfortable moment before Veld spoke. "I want to."

There was a sharp look for that, the slightest bit of tension leaching from Vincent's lean frame, and no one alive could read him so well. "But?"

"It's been over two decades, Vincent," Veld said quietly. "And I've lost too much t' push you away. Just don't get it in your head that you get t' walk off again."

Vincent finally smiled. "I wouldn't dare."

"Good. We've got work t' do."

The meeting SOLDIER held didn't last long, there wasn't much strategy to be had against the lumbering behemoth WEAPONs coming towards them. They had notes on the summon that the Turks had fought, had ideas - but those were only concepts until they were close enough to take action. To Sephiroth, it felt like everything was tortuously slow as they waited to be cleared to move. He never liked sending his men into something he'd not faced before himself, it felt too close to sending them in blind, never mind that they had three other competent Firsts ready to lead. They were good men, and they'd earned their ranks, but they weren't on his level.

For the moment, they were stuck in the labs as Hojo worked with Elfé; he'd finally resorted to enhancing her properly, evening out her reeling senses and stabilizing her, for the moment.

"I make no promises that you'll be able to engage in combat successfully," he warned, watching her move around with increasing confidence. "This is a temporary fix. When the crisis has passed, you're going to need more work."

"I understand." Elfé nodded, expression somber. "But the world is in danger, and if I can make any difference at all, I need to try."

Hojo made a dismissive gesture, looking to the door as it opened. "Faraman, Valentine."
The pair nodded, Vincent staying a step behind Veld as the Director looked his daughter over, then gave the SOLDIERs a quick glance. "Who's going to be able to fight?"

"We're all going," Sephiroth said. "How long any one of us lasts… we'll see. Genesis is the only one of us who seems to be at full strength, unfortunately."

"The irony isn't lost on me, I assure you," Genesis said dryly. "But even at less than your best, you remain a formidable combatant. Better than most."

Sephiroth wasn't quite sure what to do with that vote of confidence, merely nodding to acknowledge the truth of it. "Agreed. We still represent the best SOLDIER has to offer. We need to be there."

"Well, let's hope by the time we're there, you all will stabilize," Veld said. They needed SOLDIER's power, if Chaos was even remotely right about the strength of these creatures. He wasn't going to chance it. "Anya made a suggestion of gathering up all the ranged fighters and splitting them between four to six of our transports, try to flank these creatures as best as we can. If they're in the ocean, you're not going to be able to stand and fight normally."

"We have three winged combatants," Vincent pointed out, nodding to Genesis and Angeal. He smiled tightly at Veld's sharp look. "I can take Chaos' form, if I have to."

"…alright." Veld nodded. "If you can do it without making yourself a liability, then by all means."

"Aerial combat is something I have experience with, despite my lack of wings," Sephiroth said. "If I have jump points, I'll be fine."

"We can always give you a lift," Angeal said.

"Four people who can get up close and personal with these uglies, then," Zack said. "Good. I've got a good hand with materia, I'll stay with one of the teams doing that. Seems like anyone with Thunder has the advantage, anyway - they're standing in water."

"Good point. We'll see as many people equipped to take advantage of that as possible," Genesis said. "If they're organic, it should have an effect."

"They are." Vincent's gaze grew distant, focusing on Chaos' brief share of knowledge. "It's a viable strategy."

"Great, we'll go with that for a base strategy, until we get a feel for what we're dealing with," Zack said.

"Smart. We'll fit everyone with earpieces or headsets tuned to the correct frequency to receive orders," Veld said. "Collaboration will be important between our groups so there's minimal friendly fire."

"At least it shouldn't be hard to lock on our targets," Zack said. "Not as big as they are."

"True." Sephiroth nodded. "We need to move out as soon as we can."

"Agreed," Veld said. "As soon as you're all stable, finish finalizing the teams. We'll leave some here to guard Junon, and get going."
Assault Over the Ocean

Chapter Summary

The battle with the WEAPONs begins.

It was one thing to get the reports about the WEAPONs, even to see the pictures taken from the scouting planes. It was entirely different to be approaching them themselves. Even before they were close enough to attack, they could see the massive creatures looming in the distance, slogging through the ocean like a kiddie pool, marching relentlessly on their vulnerable targets.

There was still no contact with Midgar, making for a low coil of anxiety between the SOLDIERS and Turks that had to be pushed aside. Hopefully, the others would be enough to take care of things. But they couldn't afford to worry about it now. Now, there was a battle of their own to be fought.

One of the creatures was flying, marginally faster than the two slogging through the ocean. It was ahead enough that they needed to address it first.

The WEAPON was massive like all the others, with a centaur's outline, a head and torso with two arms blending down into a body with four legs and a thick tail. It's hide was a dusky violet gray with a strange crimson circle on its chest, glowing, in a way that made Sephiroth wonder about energy attacks like the lasers from the summon the Turks had fought. He tapped his headset. "Approaching the first of the WEAPONs. No one is to engage until the other teams are ready for backup."

"Copy that," Zack said. As much as he'd wanted to stay by his friends, he knew the best he could do would be leading the materia forces on the sidelines. Zack didn't have experience in this kind of combat - hadn't even known 'aerial combat' was a thing people did. If circumstances weren't so grim, he'd have been excited to watch. As it was, he suspected he was going to be glued to the actions of his own team instead. They couldn't afford for any of the WEAPONs to make it inland. Midgar was a massive, impressive beast of a city, but creatures this big could bring it collapsing in on itself without trouble. "Bring us around to the sides, but make sure it can't just stretch out an arm and swat us out of the sky."

"Yes, sir."

"It's flying, if it wants us, it's gonna get us," Silva said, shaking his head. "We just gotta hope that the Firsts keep it too busy to care."

The helicopters were the more obvious threat - the only obvious threat, with the air team waiting to make their jumps - but apparently so long as they didn't attack, the WEAPONs didn't seem to care. They just continued forward at their slow, relentless pace, fixated on their goals.

Waiting to attack felt like forever. Each team slowly taking their place, moving around these uncaring titans. Knowing what was coming next, and waiting.

And then it was time, Veld's voice coming out over the comm channel. "Aerial combatants you are clear to launch."

"That's our cue." Angeal took the Buster Sword off its harness, spinning it in his hand and offering
his friends a somber smile as the back hatch of the transport opened, wind whistling into the compartment where the three of them were waiting.

"And so we go." Genesis saluted them with a flourish, smile far fiercer. "An entire nation fell to its knees before us, my friends. We won't be stopped here."

"Hn." Sephiroth considered the airborne WEAPON as he called Masamune to hand. "Let's go."

They made the jump together, animosity forgotten in the face of such a fierce enemy.

It must have known, somehow, that despite their size they were a threat worth notice, maybe sensing the Jenova cells still inside two of them. The WEAPON reared back just as Sephiroth landed on its broad back and was confronted immediately by the eye-catching flare of fire Genesis unleashed. It roared, deafening even over the sound of the helicopters and transports, and lurched forwards. Angeal was there just in time to dig the Buster into its thick hide. It wasn't enough to do more than leave a mark, but it made the creature flail back, shaking its body side to side in an attempt to dislodge him. It very nearly shook Sephiroth off, but he drove his blade solidly into the creature's back and held on.

From the sides, materia attacks streamed in, thick ropes of lightning, streams of fire and spears of ice fired relentlessly from the transports. The roar of missile launchers and the staccato beat of automatic weapons filled the air, and the second WEAPON rose. Water sluiced off its body, a silver humanoid form with an odd extension over the backs of its legs like a cloak. It had similar bulk to the first, equally restricted from quick movement, but also had a glowing point in the center of its chest.

It didn't wait to fire, not content to merely flail around as it was assaulted from afar. The energy attack ripped through the air with undeniable force, strong enough that the shock waves that followed through the air sent one of the transports reeling, nearly spilling a number of operatives over the railing.

The second blast came before they'd straightened out, and this time some of the troopers jumped, trying to save themselves as the transport burst into a flaming ruin, trailing thick smoke as it dropped from the sky. They ended up falling into the end of the beam, screams cut off in a roar of superheated air of the energy attack blazing by.

They'd known the possibility, but it was a different thing to experience it. To watch, helpless, as an entire unit was wiped out in seconds.

"Get it together," Veld ordered, voice clear and commanding over the channel.

There was no time to mourn. All that could be done was to learn from their mistake. When another attack was readied, the priority was immediately shifted from attack to defense, rising out of the way and keeping the sharper movement. Desperate to be faster than the attacks could come, to avoid being the next casualty.

Then the third WEAPON rose from the ocean, a lanky red thing with tremendous reach they hadn't accounted for, and it slammed one massively clawed hand into the side of one of the helicopters, rending it in half. Bodies fell to gravity's pull, but there was no telling if anyone had made it out alive. There was no time for a rescue. The WEAPON was still in motion, faster than its bulkier counterparts as it swung long arms, driving the helicopters and transports back.

It wasn't a problem for the missiles, rockets and even the bullets slicing through the air and hitting true on their targets. But the materia attacks only ranged so far, and if they couldn't zoom in closer there were entire teams from SOLDIER and AVALANCHE rendered useless.
Zack had never had the patience to stay on the sidelines long.

"Okay look, all our guys with the launchers and guns, hit from higher up - draw their attention up," Zack said. "The materia teams will go in low, hit up the water with lightning, get at their legs."

"Mind the tail on this one," Sephiroth warned. It was slow, everything about it moved slowly, but it was also undeniably powerful, and a hit from it would not be easily recovered from, if at all.

"You got it." Zack waved to their pilot. "Get us down there!"

"Yes, sir!"

Only two of the WEAPONs were still standing in the water - one had taken to the air - but it was enough. Even taking down one of them would be a tremendous advantage.

The sudden assault ranging from higher up succeeded in drawing the WEAPONs' attention, unwieldy limbs aimed at the helicopters as they circled, too fast to easily catch. They were leaving behind signs of success, score marks and burns on the creatures' thick hides as they continued their relentless assault. The second the transports were in range for the materia team to join in, they did. Dozens of Thundagas roared through the air and hit the water, brilliant gold lines spidering out immediately from the points of contact. It didn't go deep, but it didn't have to, trailing across the water and making contact with the WEAPONs' thick legs, still soaked and perfectly ready to conduct further.

At first, there wasn't a reaction. Then, a shudder.

A stumble.

A pause.

The two WEAPONs that had been walking ceased their advance and turned their attention on the lower transports that were carrying the spell casters. The red WEAPON raised a leg but it didn't have the length of its arms, splashing back down into the water ineffectively before it struck out again with a wide sweep of its arm. The transport veered out of the way, but its occupants had hit their stride. Encouraged by the response, they continued the materia attacks. From above, the helicopters continued to circle, the barrage of projectiles continuing relentlessly. The creatures didn't have the facial structure to cringe, but it was clear that the attacks were doing damage, to the point they could no longer be ignored. More than that, there was no coordinated strike back, no prioritized attack, no strategy; for all their size and strength, these WEAPONs lacked the intelligence that had made Chaos such a formidable foe. They simply were unable to cope with such a coordinated set of strike teams.

The silver WEAPON fell first, far too big to move with any sort of flexibility or speed, crashing into the ocean and sending up drenching spray and high waves before it sunk out of sight. A round of cheers went up, and the air forces closed around the red WEAPON, eager to take it down.

Maybe it was that eagerness that made them careless.

A stray Thundaga went wide as the transport swerved, seeking a target in the air.

It found Angeal, hitting him hard. Alone, it wouldn't have been enough to take him out, he'd had worse. But he'd been diving out of the range of the WEAPON's tail.

Stunned, precious seconds were wasted, and it slammed full force into his side.

"ANGEAL!"
No response.

"Genesis-"

"I'm going!" Genesis dove down, wing flapping hard as he tried to catch up with his falling friend. "Angeal, answer me! Goddess damn it, Angeal-"

He hit the water, Genesis several desperate seconds behind. After all they'd been through, he refused to lose his best friend.

"Hey! Keep those WEAPONs busy!" Veld ordered. He knew the feeling, knew there was no talking Genesis out of his attempted rescue just as much as he knew the rest of them couldn't afford to stop for one man.

They were trained. His Turks never stopped their barrage, even when some had to pause to reload. The SOLDIERs continued their materia strikes.

And Sephiroth, alone and furious at his inability to help, took to the air with the sudden promising gleam of a limit break.
The Battle Rages On

Chapter Summary

The fight against the WEAPONs continues.

Genesis plunged into the water without hesitation, wing tucked against his back as he finally caught up to Angeal, a grasping hand clutching at his harness and stopping his descent. Reversing their momentum was hard, the churning water working against them, but he managed to at least get them upright and moving again.

That was when he saw it. At first he thought it was the fallen WEAPON that the strike teams had already taken down. It was just as massive. But it was green.

Instinct was all that saved him from choking, and he started kicking for the surface, breaching it with a gasp and reaching for his ear piece. "There's another WEAPON!"

"Valentine, can you get them?" Veld asked, looking to his partner. He didn't know why the man had hung back, but whatever he was waiting for had apparently passed, a red light almost blinding him for a few seconds as he transformed and leapt out of the helicopter, diving for the pair. "Bring them back here! The rest of you, stay on your targets."

He couldn't spare another thought for the matter until Vincent brought them back, the only sign of any strain the quiet grunt when he dumped Angeal into the passenger cabin, skirting around to get in himself. He reached out, steadying Genesis as he made an awkward landing. "Another WEAPON?"

"Green. Easily as big as the one we just took out, it's just skimming the bottom of the ocean." He wiped water from his face, shaking his head. "Moving slow, but we won't be able to reach it with anything we've got."

"Then we take out what WEAPONs we can while we try to plan for it," Veld said. "Can you fight?"

"Of course." Genesis got himself up, getting steadier by the moment. "Take care of Angeal."

Veld nodded, shifting. "Medic, take a look at the SOLDIER."

One of the troopers with him lowered their gun and ducked back around. "Yes sir."

Satisfied, Genesis nodded and turned, launching back out of the helicopter and diving down to back Sephiroth up.

Veld glanced at his partner. "You going to join us?"

It was hard to say if he'd gotten a lightning quick smile or a twitch for the comment, but Vincent nodded, stepping ahead of him. "He's right. There's a fourth WEAPON down there."

"Any ideas on luring it up here where we can fight it?" Veld asked.

"Maybe." He frowned, head tilted as if listening. "I'll do what I can. Continue your fight."
Like there was any other choice. Veld huffed at him and waved him off, stepping back up and getting the high powered rifle he'd been using. He had a job to do.

Sephiroth had been limited in what he could do without risking falling into the water himself while Genesis and Angeal were out of the picture, but his limit break had still managed to do significant damage, leaving eight long gashes in the WEAPON's hide. Still, he was all too happy to take Genesis' hand when he flew by, getting some much needed breathing room for a moment.

"Angeal's safe," Genesis said, swooping up to get them some more altitude. "How are you?"

"I've been worse." He was nowhere near unable to fight, and at the moment that was all that mattered to him, far more than the low burn of exertion. "The WEAPON is slowing down."

"I should hope so." Genesis stopped at a decent height, squeezing his hand. "Together?"

"Of course." Sephiroth squeezed back, offering a tight smile, and let go. He twisted in the air promptly, reorienting himself and shifting to pick up speed as he descended on the WEAPON.

Genesis followed his dive down, sword flaring bright as the runes lit up with a pass of his hand. He aimed for where the Octoslash strikes had crisscrossed, hoping for a weakened spot in the WEAPON's hard hide, and struck deep when he finally made his piercing blow. The impact was jarring, but there was a promising crack! and the WEAPON let out a bellowing cry. Encouraged, he gripped the hilt with both hands and channeled energy down the blade, the level that he'd developed to match Masamune blow-for-blow.

The energy lit through the gashes, lighting up in a promising flare, building - building -

"Genesis, move!" Sephiroth snapped.

He'd recognized what was happening in the same moment, tugging his sword free and taking to the air, making a quick grab for Sephiroth on his way and flying past a familiar shape in red and black. "Get out of there, Valentine!"

Vincent didn't respond, instead aiming at the pulsing light as the WEAPON began to writhe in the air, shooting at the center point before flipping back and flying away.

The explosion ripped through the air and buffeted against the three of them, the death grip the two SOLDIERs had on each other all that kept them together, and still swinging them enough to send an ache up into Genesis' shoulder. But they held, and when it faded, the WEAPON was falling.

Two down.

Two to go.

Not all of the WEAPONs had taken the path down for Midgar. With four WEAPONs marching on ShinRa's capital, there were still two unaccounted for.
These two had made a beeline for Junon, one by air and one by sea.

Moving fast.

The one in the air had been spotted, they’d had time to prepare for it. The Sister Ray was charged to full strength, aimed at the airborne WEAPON. It fired, the mako powered laser cutting through the air and driving the WEAPON back as it ripped through one side and tanked it into the ocean below where the ships in place to guard the reactor immediately opened fire. Even though it had clearly been designed to fly, the WEAPON's fixation on its objective seemed to override all else. It continued an attempt to advance, flailing desperately in the water, causing waves that threatened to overturn the boats. Helicopters flew by, but it was too far to reach for anything stuck waiting on shore.

Anyone who had wished for a closer shot changed their mind within a moment, as suddenly the second WEAPON rose from the sea and it was all they could do to fire on it as it closed in on the city.

It took a blow from the Sister Ray like a slap to the face, turning its head before turning back with a deafening roar.

Within the city, large metal plates rose over the closest buildings, and the promenade split open to allow the rise of several massive turrets, all aimed for the WEAPON. What had once been deemed a frivolous expense, a paranoid protection against a war that would never get that far, was suddenly one of the greatest chances for their survival.

The blue WEAPON sliced through the water like a monster out of sailors' nightmares, spikes gleaming as it came nearer and nearer. The speed it moved at was tremendous.

It wasn't going to stop.

It couldn't.

The WEAPON slammed headfirst into the base of the Sister Ray Complex, the building shuddering massively on impact, then drew back. It rose slowly back on itself, balanced in the water and rising like a serpent ready to strike.

Inside the complex, the remaining coordinators of Junon's defenses came to the window, unable to look away.

"How soon can we fire the cannon again?" Anya asked, glancing to the chief engineer Scarlet had left in charge. As much as their personalities clashed, she wished the other woman had been there.

"We need a few minutes," he said. "It's not instant."

She nodded, eyeing their massive enemy. "Alright, keep the turrets fixed on it. And someone get -"

"Torvik, we've got a glow going on right now that looks familiar to me," Katana said. "Zirconiaide did that same thing before it unleashed its energy attacks."

Anxious murmurs broke out in the room and she whistled sharply to get everyone's attention. "Raise any remaining shields, get people away from the windows in case they blow out. We're just going to have to take the hit. But you aim that cannon, and the second you can? Go for its mouth."

"Yes'm!"
"Get going," she ordered, grabbing up her tablet and hurrying back from the windows as a bright light shined in the distance like a warning flare. "Everybody *move!*"

The WEAPON's laser wasn't as thick as the Sister Ray's but it was hitting at a closer distance and tore through the top of the complex. They could feel the intense heat, brilliant blue light blinding even through closed eyes and leaving an afterimage still to blink away. The *sound* of it was almost a roar, leaving ears ringing before they all regained their senses.

Miraculously, they were alive. Many were burnt just from the proximity of the laser, but they were *alive*, and for Anya that was what counted. Slowly, she got to her feet, staring out just as another laser was released, this time moving in a deadly streak across the city beyond them. She couldn't hear the screaming over the laser's deafening thrum, but she knew there would be. Not everyone was so lucky to be hidden away in reinforced buildings. Not everyone would have obeyed the order to hide. But she couldn't focus on that.

"I need the cannon firing as soon as humanly possible," she shouted, not sure it was enough to be heard but *hoping*… it was their only chance. The turrets weren't more than an annoyance to it.

Blessedly, as sound came back again she could hear the gears of the cannon whirring, readying it to fire again. Another laser's warning glow had started in the WEAPON's mouth, aimed straight at the Sister Ray. It started to fire just as the cannon did.

The beams met head on, a moment's struggle ended in a massive explosion that threw billowing fire in every direction. Before it even cleared, the WEAPON was crashing forwards into the complex, its weight enough to cave in even the reinforced walls. Still, a cheer went up, elated relief sweeping through them. They'd *survived*, and while the losses were yet to be counted, there was a justified moment of triumph.

Then there was a sudden creaking that quickly escalated to a tortured squeal of metal, an ominous rumbling and a fiery crackle filling the air.

"What the hell…?" Anya turned, eyes raising to the cannon in time to see as the first of a chain of explosions started down the barrel.

Coming their way.

There would be no time to evacuate the building.

All they could do was watch.
Out of the Frying Pan

Chapter Summary

The WEAPONs were not the only enemy left to face.

Chapter Notes

So, last Thursday my hard drive died, and this was the last chapter I had backed up. I may be able to write fast enough to stay on track, but realistically you might expect a pause before we get going. Sorry to do this when the story is nearly done, but I don't have a choice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Amid all the chaos of the battle going on over the ocean, the initial scout planes that had found the WEAPONs to start with still circled, reporting back to Junon and Midgar. Faced with hard proof, even Heidegger wasn't going to turn a blind eye - he sent transports full of Scarlet's war machines out to the northern shore with two companies worth of his own men and several squads of SOLDIERs. If the WEAPONs made it inland, they would be met by the best resistance they could offer.

The fight that the renegade SOLDIERs and Turks were putting up was more impressive than he'd have admitted, tanking two WEAPONs and then circling around a third. The attack was relentless, never letting up on the constant assault. When the third WEAPON went down, cheers went up throughout headquarters.

"About damn time they pull their weight," Heidegger said, heaving a sigh and running a hand back over his hair.

"They're not breaking formation," Lazard said quietly, watching the shaky feed from one of the scouts who had managed to rig up a camera. "Have them get a better look at what everyone else is doing."

"What?" Heidegger looked at him, scoffing. "Maybe they just learned how to behave like professionals for once."

"No, something's wrong," Lazard insisted. He knew his men, and they weren't acting like the battle was over with. If anything, they had the air of trying to catch a second wind. "Have the scouts look around more."

"It won't hurt anything to do it," Scarlet pointed out.

"Fine," Heidegger muttered, getting back on the comms. "Scout Party Two, investigate the movements of the forces around you."

There was a moment of silence, then static back through the radio. "This is Party Two, sir, it appears they're regrouping. Should we attempt communication?"
"Not yet, just keep an eye on them," Heidegger said. "They may be planning to attack our forces on the shoreline."

"Wrong formation for that kind of attack," Lazard insisted, leaning forward a little and frowning at the screen. "Wait, what's that?"

"What's what?" Heidegger snapped, tired of his interruptions.

"In the water, look." Lazard got up and moved around the table, going to the screen. "Down here, look."

"Something's surfacing," Rufus said, realization hitting as soon as he spoke. "There's a fourth WEAPON."

The last WEAPON finally surfaced, not ten miles from the northern shore. It was a massive green beast that didn't seem at all concerned when the air strike began. Bullets, missiles, rockets - it didn't matter, the WEAPON continued unhindered to slog its way towards shore.

But this time, they weren't alone.

Dozens of Scarlet's machines hovered over the water, moving fast and opening attack with their own missiles. From the shoreline, the troopers and remaining land bound machines let loose with a barrage of rockets. Combined, the assault finally had a visible effect. The WEAPON started to slow, before finally stopping in the water. Then the red point in its core began to glow, and it shot a laser, not unlike the other WEAPONs had before it.

Unlike the others, it was no longer miles out into the ocean. The laser went straight for Midgar. Even at a distance, they could see the explosion as it impacted with the side of the Plate.

"It missed the reactor," Veld said. "But we can't count on that again. Concentrate your attacks to the upper half, leave the legs to the machines. It's top heavy, we should be able to knock it over."

"You heard the man, guys, everybody hit up top!" Zack said.

The helicopters and transports began the shift around to the back of the WEAPON. Without arms, it lacked a way to strike at them so long as they maintained position, allowing them to fire freely.

"We've got another glow startin' chief," Reno reported, last to bring his helicopter around.

"All we can do is try to take it down."

And pray that it would be enough.

The WEAPON was starting to topple when it managed to get off one last shot, the laser going wide. This time it hit a reactor, and the explosion sent shock waves through the Plate. ShinRa Tower shook
where it stood tall in the center, the force of the explosion rippling through the Plate like an earthquake. They could only watch through the windows as the reactor transformed into a ball of fire, plumes of toxic smoke billowing into the air as the mako burned.

"My god," Reeve whispered, horrified as his mind calculated the damages. Not in gil, but in sheer loss of life as the fire quickly spread, the cloud of oily smoke spreading over the side of the Plate. Fiery debris undoubtedly broke off, falling to the Slums below. Entire blocks full of innocent civilians had just been wiped out like they were nothing.

It was hard to feel like they'd just had a victory, silence thick in the boardroom as they all stared.

Heidegger's heavy sigh broke the silence, drawing attention to him as he straightened, hands flat on the table a moment. "Well then. They seem to be breaking ranks now, Deusericus. We've won."

"We've survived," Reeve said. You couldn't call it a win, not with so many dead.

"There's just one thing left to do," Heidegger said. He reached for the radio again, switching the channels onto a broader range, wanting to catch the rogue vessels as well. "Veld, Sephiroth, it's time you return to Midgar. You've had your fun."

There was a crackle of static a moment, before the head of the Turks addressed them. "Are you ordering me, Heidegger?"

"I don't think it needs to come to that," Heidegger said. "You've got common sense."

"Common sense would have me flying back to Junon," Veld said.

"You can try," Heidegger said. "But I don't think you've got the fuel. Do you?"

There was damning silence instead of a ready argument.

"Gya haa haa haa! You can't even come back to Midgar, can you? Don't you worry, my men are fresh. They'll pick you up just as soon as you land." Heidegger grinned, cold satisfaction in his eyes. "We'll see you soon. Oh, and don't do anything foolish. I'd hate for you to have to be subdued before we got a chance to talk."

Veld was silent a long moment, switching off channels. Unfortunately, this once Heidegger was right. They'd pushed their transports to the limits and they were running low on fuel. They could make it to Midgar or Kalm, but not Junon. And with Heidegger's forces fresh and ready to go, it was just putting off the inevitable to try and run.

"Chief?" Reno prompted, wary.

"…everybody head for shore, and touch down," Veld said quietly. "Don't give them an excuse to attack."

"Seriously?" Zack demanded. "He hates us, I wouldn't put it past the guy to want to take us out!"

"He'll want to put a show on first," Veld said. "Show off how powerful he thinks he is, brag a little. It's a bad habit. We've got time to think of what we're going to do about his little coup."
"I don't know that we're a full match against the forces he has remaining," Sephiroth admitted quietly. "I believe for now I have to agree with the Director."

"For now," Veld agreed. "We'll play along."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Ten of To Be Human: On the Side is available now and takes place right after the WEAPON attack hits Midgar.
Chapter Summary

Heidegger raises the stakes, but he doesn't have all the cards.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the long wait. As you guys know, I lost a lot when my hard drive died, but the pause paid off. I've finished the story, which will be wrapping up in the next few chapters. Expect weekly updates once more until we're done.

There were too many people for Heidegger to just cart them back to Midgar on his own securely. At the same time, there were also too many vehicles to easily bring them in all at once on base; Midgar had never been designed to deal with so many deployments, and their air transports and helicopters had all been from Junon. Instead, it was arranged for them to land in the wastes outside Midgar, where armored vehicles were lining up to carry them back into the city.

Having taken significant damage, Midgar was in a state of controlled chaos at the moment, and no one questioned the caravan of armored transports as they made their way back to base. One of the largest buildings had been cleared out, and was quickly filled with the 'rebel forces' that had been gathered up.

Heidegger wisely did not meet them in person, instead having had a monitor set up and streaming video in real time. He waited without comment for the leaders of the groups to come forward. "Well now, it's been a long time."

"Skip the pleasantries, Heidegger," Veld said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Gya haa haa haa, always down to business, aren't you? I like that about you, Veld." Heidegger smiled, far too at ease for any of their comfort. "The thing is, we both know Rufus just doesn't have the experience or the personality to be the strong leader that ShinRa needs, especially right now."

"Especially now, huh." Veld crossed his arms. "So, you think that ShinRa needs you?"

"It really doesn't matter what you think, I'm not asking for your permission." Heidegger's smile hardened. "It's about time you all answer for what you've done. And yes, I'm aware of the belief you SOLDIERs have that you'll be able to just fight your way out of anything. Bullet proof warriors, immune to anything the world throws at you. But your allies aren't, and I don't think the newer SOLDIERs are either."

Veld held up a hand, hearing a low rumble of sound from one of the SOLDIERs. He didn't bother to look back. "What did you do?"

"They're all quarantined in their barracks, waiting for orders," Heidegger explained. "Locked in and under automated guard. And if the SOLDIERs decide to give me trouble, I'll gas them all. We'll see
just how far immunity goes."

"You expect us to trust you won't turn around and do it anyway if we comply?" Genesis asked. "Do you think we're idiots?"

"I think you're a lot of things, Rhapsodos. The question here is whether you're willing to take that chance." He watched them in silence for a long moment. "Make no mistake, I'll do it if you cause me trouble. Dozens of your men, dead or dying, to your fault. Just what are you willing to sacrifice here?"

"And what cooperation are you asking of us?" Sephiroth asked, before Genesis could speak up again.

"You will allow yourselves to be escorted to individual confinement chambers," Heidegger said. "You, Rhapsodos, Hewley, and Fair. Veld and Hojo will be disarmed and restrained before they're brought to me, where they will make a case for where we go from here. I'm a reasonable man, gentlemen, but there are rules, and you've all been trampling all over them. We can't have that kind of precedent, especially in a force like SOLDIER. There's going to be discipline. If you cooperate, however, that may not be the end of it."

"This is ridiculous, you dare-"

"Cooperate, or your men die," Heidegger said. "It's that simple. Maybe I'll do it anyway, you don't know. But you know I will for certain if you try anything. If you cooperate, they have a chance."

There was a heavy silence, before Veld reached into his jacket, removing two pistols and dropping them. "Fine."

Sephiroth frowned, but nodded slowly. "We will cooperate."

For now.

Heidegger watched with grim satisfaction as his soldiers set about taking the other two executives into custody, the SOLDIERs put in single file with a heavy guard and marched out to the reinforced prison cells. The threat seemed to have done its job, though he'd had moments of doubt before making it. It was going to hinge on Rhapsodos, he figured; the most volatile of the four by far, he'd already proven himself willing to strike down SOLDIERs to get what he wanted. For now, he would have to hope that Sephiroth would be enough to restrain him.

He'd be lying if he said that seeing the head of the Turks in chains wasn't a secret pleasure. Both he and Hojo had gotten far too secure in their power. Thought they were above the law.

No more.

He was going to put an end to it. Hojo might still be useful, of course, especially in reining in the SOLDIERs, but Veld? Veld knew far too much. He was a liability that Heidegger wouldn't stand. The Turks had their place, and he'd stepped too far out of line. Besides, his little Wutain protege was more than ready to step up - he'd been handling things ever since Veld had left, and was much more agreeable. Whether or not he would be without Rufus' life on the line remained to be seen, but for now it didn't matter.
"Tseng."

"Yes, sir?" The first sound or movement from the man since he'd brought him in to watch the video call; he'd been standing still and mute just out of sight for the duration, no reaction to Heidegger's threats or his director's surrender to be seen.

"Gather the board. We'll do this properly."

"Yes, sir."

Heidegger watched him go, smiling tightly. No arguments, just good old fashioned obedience. The boy clearly knew which way the wind was blowing these days. He'd made a wise choice. Maybe there were some other operatives to be salvaged from Veld's ranks as well…

For now, he turned and regarded the other men in the room, the two scheming Shinra sons. They would also be removed from power in due time. "Well, boys, I'll have you escorted down to the meeting room and we'll get this all squared away properly, hm?"

"You can't expect this to work, Heidegger," Lazard said. "There's too many people against you."

"You underestimate what I'm willing to do to assure my success." Heidegger smiled. "Your men knew better than to try and call my bluff."

"Then you really do intend to gas the SOLDIERs." Rufus' expression gave no reaction away; there was no guessing, either. He was his father's son, after all.

"If necessary." Heidegger shrugged. "That's up to them, isn't it? It's time they learned there are consequences. They can't go on doing whatever they damn well please, and if it takes a hard lesson for that to sink in… well, that's their choice."

"I wonder how well that will work out?" Rufus mused. "If you do gas them, you lose your leverage, after all. That was Father's problem, when he ordered Rhapsodos killed - he lost his leverage over Sephiroth."

"You just leave them to me," Heidegger said. "I know what I'm doing."

"That would be a first," Lazard said, blue eyes near gleaming with loathing.

Heidegger chuckled. "Say what you like, Deusericus. You're not the one in charge. Gya haa haa! Take them down to the boardroom, men!"

"Sir!"

Veld allowed himself to be put in chains like a common criminal without complaint, rolling his wrists in their cuffs and absently testing the tightness. There was a chance his prosthctic would be enough to break the chain, but he would wait for a better opening. He knew that even with the SOLDIERs locked up, there would be one.

After all, Heidegger didn't know about Valentine.
Interlude: It's Always the Quiet Ones

Chapter Summary

The figureheads lead a revolution, but it's the little people that get things done.

Vincent hadn't needed Veld to tell him to make himself scarce when they had been essentially captured. He didn't know all the political nuances of the day - it had been over twenty years - but it was clear that they weren't returning to a warm welcome.

He watched in silence as they were rounded up, close enough to hear the conversation.

The threat.

The surrender, however temporary.

Gritting his teeth, he slunk back into the shadows of the room when the others were gone, bypassing the security forces and slinking over to the corner where Victor had ushered his nieces. "Vic."

"Valentine," he greeted softly. "You have an idea?"

"I do." Vincent nodded slightly, looking to Shelke - more importantly, to the little animatronic she was still carrying. Cait Sith had gone limp, a doll to all appearances, but he knew better. "He has a line to Tuesti?"


Vincent accepted the feline, nodding. "Be ready."


Vincent nodded back, and quickly vanished in a whisper of crimson fabric. He skimmed over the ground, keeping to the shadows, until he was able to find a blind spot to settle into. "Cait?"

"Aye, Mr. Valentine?" He lifted his head, coming to life once more.

"I need to speak to Tuesti," Vincent said.

"Ach, he cannae talk ta ya in person, they've got 'im goin' ta a meetin' right now," Cait said. "But I can be a go-between! Just talk ta me an' I'll make sure he hears ya."

Vincent wasn't entirely certain what to make of that, but nodded slightly. "I need to know how to stop whatever he's going to use to gas the SOLDIERs, and I need to know where Sephiroth and the others are being held."

Cait nodded. "Alright, give us a minute."

Vincent nodded, pressing further into the shadows and sweeping the area with his gaze. No camera coverage should mean there were patrols, but for the moment they appeared safe. Not that he couldn't move quickly if necessary, but better to be safe to begin with.
"Alright, he doesn't know what Heidegger is plannin' ta use, but he expects it's gonna have ta filter through the ventilation systems in the barracks," Cait explained. "There's an area that'd be the best, but he could get it in several places from the way it's laid out."

"I see." He frowned deeply, thinking it over. "We need to make sure the SOLDIERs can escape, in the event that he attempts this."

"They cannae just leave," Cait said. "There's armed guards that'll shoot 'em down, an' I don't think they'll hesitate. There's a lotta anti-SOLDIER sentiment he's tapped into in the army."

"Hn." Vincent considered it, silent a long moment, until he registered a tug on his mantle. Glancing down at Cait, he arched a brow. "Yes?"

"We've got an idea. But I'm gonna need ya ta take me in there."

They all knew something was wrong. It was obvious something was wrong, the only question was what it was. SOLDIER had been herded up and stuffed in the Third Class barracks like sardines. If you were lucky, you knew someone and went to their quarters, but most of them were stuck in the mess or the gym. And it wasn't that they didn't get along, not exactly - there was a feeling of brotherhood, even, especially after everything that had happened so far - but SOLDIERs had a lot of energy, and having that many of them in one space without anything to do but wait... that wasn't going to end well, for anyone.

The ominous feeling only increased as time passed without further word. There were guards outside - they were surrounded by the army and some of Scarlet's machines patrolled the actual exits. Enforcing the quarantine, sure, but just what were they authorized to do for it? Somehow, he didn't think those were tranquilizer guns. They sure weren't tranquilizer missiles.

Kunsel sighed and paced back away, only to turn when he heard a sudden ripple of confused voices. A few quick steps took him over to the corner where a tall figure draped in a ratty crimson cloak was staring down the SOLDIERs. How did he get in? was a thought barely formed before he recognized what he was holding. "Cait Sith?"

"Hey, you know this guy, Kunsel?" Essai asked. The group stood down, looking to him.

"Kunsel!" Cait squirmed out of the man's hold, hopping down to another burst of murmuring, this time in surprise. "Lad, we're gonna need your help. Things're bad."

"Yeah, I'd guessed that." Kunsel picked him up, still keeping an eye on the stranger. "Who's your friend?"

"Vincent Valentine, he's with us," Cait assured him. "He's the one that got me in here past the guard. But he can't get everybody out on his own, an' we might need ta. Heidegger is keepin' the Firsts in line by threatenin' ta gas the place."

"He what?"
"That coward!"

"Son of a bitch thinks he can keep us as leverage?"

"Guys, whoa, calm down," Kunsel said, raising his voice to carry over the sudden chatter. "Alright, look, you wouldn't be here if you didn't have a plan, right? What can we do?"

"What are the odds you can break yourselves outta here?" Cait asked.

"The building is pretty reinforced, but I don't think it's going to hold up against more than two SOLDIERs going at it with intent to get out," Kunsel said. "The problem is the guards they've got out there."

"Right. Ya need allies," Cait said. "Or some way ta get word out ta SOLDIER sympathizers."

"Sympathizers…" Kunsel was silent a moment, thinking. "Yeah, I think I've got an idea. But I'm going to need online to pull this off."

"There should be a pretty hefty setup in the officer's quarters," Essai suggested.

"Alright, yeah, let me get up there. You guys try and get some organization - get the word out that we're gonna be on the move soon. I want everyone ready for orders." Kunsel hesitated a moment, then gestured to Cait and Vincent. "Come on, you two, we need to get upstairs."

They followed Kunsel out of the gym, heading up the stairs quickly. There was no telling how much time they had, something they were all painfully aware of.

"What're ya gonna do?" Cait asked, scooped up once more by Vincent to make their travel quicker.

"Well, I don't have a list of SOLDIER 'sympathizers' but I know a pretty surefire way to get to their fans." Kunsel broke into a jog when they hit the second floor, heading down to the officer's quarters and knocking a minute until the door was answered. "Kythe, I need your help."

The Second arched a brow, but stepped aside, flicking his gaze over Vincent and Cait. "What's up?"

"I need to use your computer. Heidegger's got the Firsts locked up and I've got it on good authority that he's trying to use us as hostages." Kunsel grinned at the senior SOLDIER's low rumble of displeasure. "Right. So, we can bust out but we need a hand to deal with the infantry and Weapon Development's robots, right? I've got an idea on that."

"Do tell." He took a moment to type in his access code, then stepped aside to let Kunsel get at it. "How're you going to find any army that support us?"

"Easy." Kunsel typed quickly, bringing up his email with a smug smile. "We send a shoutout to their fans."

Zack startled when he got five mails in quick succession, sitting up from where he'd sprawled out on the thin cot in his cell. He looked up at the camera in the corner, but no one came in to take it so he pulled it out to check.

From: Keepers of Honor - Attention!
Baffled, he clicked through the messages, one at a time, reading them as a smile slowly began to spread across his face. Each one was an urgent plea to the fans on behalf of their "beloved SOLDIER" in their "time of need" - a thinly veiled battle cry to the masses, exposing the threats Heidegger had made and insisting he planned to execute them all. Someone had to have leaked the information, but he wasn't sure what good it would do for civilians, unless-

There was a murmur in the halls, and another five rapid alerts. This time, all the messages were the same.

*Members, we must make ready for a call to action! Set our differences aside and join together, for just this once we are needed. Our inside sources will be providing instructions shortly for what we can do. For now, we must send our fighting spirit to those within the walls of ShinRa. This atrocity will not stand. Save our heroes!*

Zack read the message twice.

*Those within the walls of ShinRa.*

Maybe there was a chance of salvaging this after all.
Veld had walked into the boardroom hundreds of times. He'd been with ShinRa for over thirty years now, longer than any other living member of the board. He'd come in as a rookie guard, a seasoned Turk, a Director in his own right.

Never as a criminal. He was cuffed like some common thug, not that he couldn't wrench free with the strength from his prosthetic, but the gesture…

Laughter greeted them, Heidegger's boisterous guffaw grating on his nerves now more than ever, and he raised his eyes. For a moment, he caught Tseng's - he was composed as ever, but there was a tightness that spoke of stress - but he moved on to the man who thought he was in charge.

"Heidegger."

"Faraman." Heidegger smiled, slow and satisfied as he rose from the president's chair. "And Hojo. Good of you two to finally join us. It's been a while."

"Was this really necessary?" Hojo asked, jingling his own handcuffs with a thoroughly unimpressed expression.

"I like to be safe. Consider it a compliment, you're dangerous men." Heidegger smirked, and Veld badly wanted to break his handcuffs just to see the look on his face. "Now, why don't you two take a seat and we'll get started, hm?"

"I'll stand, thanks." Veld shifted his stance slightly, legs braced, and stared down the infantry that had taken a half step towards him. Apparently enough of his feelings about the situation bled through to his expression to give pause.

"Gya haa haa haa, let him stand." Heidegger waved dismissively, unconcerned. "It doesn't matter, this isn't going to take long."

"I appreciate being spared the pretense of a real trial going on," Veld said dryly. "What do you think you're going to do with us?"

"I've had plenty of time to think about that, Veld. You've been with this company a long time. You're a good leader for your Turks. A good strategist. And I can see why it would be tempting to put Rufus in the President's chair, Rupert didn't appreciate all you'd done. Better to have a new leader, someone you could shape, hm? But we don't have time for that." Heidegger shook his head. "He's just a kid, Veld. You may not be a politician or a military man, but you know the ins and outs of this company. You have to know we need a strong hand, to keep everyone in line."

"And you think that's you." Veld arched a brow, not bothering to hide how unimpressed he was.

Heidegger pursed his lips, staring him down a long moment. "I run the largest force in ShinRa, I know what it takes to command people. This is a man's job, not something to pass on to someone barely into his twenties with no leadership experience. The world can't afford for ShinRa to falter,
you have to know that. You know that better than most, I'd dare say."

"And yet you're tearing the company apart," Veld said.

"Even the mightiest trees can need pruned to flourish," Heidegger said. "We've got a toxic environment growing, where people quit listening to authority, and take matters into their own hands. No one can be above the law, Veld. And you can't tell me that the thought of SOLDIER running wild sits well with you."

It was Veld's turn to be silent a long moment, staring him down. "What do you want from me?"

"In light of your years of service to the company, I'm willing to overlook a lot," Heidegger said. "I'll give you your Turks back, safe and sound. All I want is for you to do your job. None of this running around, none of these conspiracies. You know better. It's time you act like it."

"And if I refuse?" He asked.

"Then you're a part of the problem that I'm going to need to remove," Heidegger said simply. "You've trained your second well. He may have a lot to learn yet, but he'll do just fine. He's done well in your absence."

Veld smiled tightly, inclining his head in acknowledgment. "I suppose my hands are tied, then."

"I was hoping you'd cooperate," Heidegger said. "Now… Hojo."

The professor arched a brow, just as openly unimpressed with the proceedings as Veld himself had been.

"You've made SOLDIER what it is today," Heidegger said, ignoring the glare he got from Lazard. "Your work has put them on their pedestals, but they've forgotten who they owe their power to. It's time we rein them in."

"And how, exactly, do you expect to do that?" Hojo asked. "Sephiroth is unstoppable."

"No one is unstoppable, Hojo. He has his weaknesses." Heidegger smiled. "He submitted to custody to protect his men, as a good leader should. There's promise there yet that he'll fall into line, with proper motivation."

"You can't plan to keep SOLDIER hostage for long," Hojo said. "Not all in one place. And if you do gas them, you're signing your own death warrant."

"There are methods to control the enhanced," Heidegger said, ignoring his warning. "Methods that have been tested and proven. I want those SOLDIERs chipped, and you will make me the one they answer to."

Hojo's eyes widened slightly. "You can't be serious."

"Oh I'm very serious. SOLDIER will either submit to the procedure, or they will also be eliminated." Heidegger arched a brow. "It's possible. You've done it."

Hojo stared at him. "And if I refuse? You have no replacement for me."

"Hollander knows the process. He'll do." Heidegger shrugged. "I don't care about the Promised Land you'd dangled in front of Rupert, Hojo. You're no longer indispensable, and it would do you well to remember that."
"I see." Hojo clasped his hands loosely, thoughtful. "This will take time and great care. SOLDIER was not designed to work this way. They were chosen specifically for their willpower, and sense of self."

"Oh I have faith you'll succeed." Heidegger smiled thinly. "Or, as I said, Hollander can. Just remember, the moment you cease to be useful to me, you're gone. I'm not keeping any dead weight around. The company is overdue to clean house, and I'll see it done."

"Hn." Hojo's lips twisted into a vague resemblance to a smile. "Hollander is a hack. If you want it done, if you want this to work, I'm your only option."

"Then you'll cooperate." Heidegger's smile widened. "Good, good. I knew you two would be reasonable. We'll get things settled soon, and we won't have to worry about a rebellion from SOLDIER. It's for the best. You can't have people that powerful getting it into their heads that they can take control for themselves. It's addictive, that illusion of being able to take charge for themselves. They won't stop with what they've done so far, not now that they've gotten a taste for it. We need to bring them back in line, for the good of the company. Anarchy will destroy us."

"As you say," Hojo said quietly.

"Gya haa haa haa, that's what I like to hear!" Heidegger smacked his hands down on the table, smiling smugly. "Alright. We'll be keeping SOLDIER and your little team of rebels in quarantine for now, but I don't expect I'll need to take any drastic measures. We'll get our house back in order, and everything will run smoothly. I think you'll appreciate the outcome. For now… dismissed. I'll be in my office."

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The first messages from the fanclubs had put everyone on alert, waiting. Wondering. The thought that SOLDIER could possibly need rescued, that their heroes could need saved… it was mindblowing. But Cloud knew it was true. He'd seen them lead off the four Firsts, heard the threats. So long as the rest of SOLDIER was confined and vulnerable, their hands were tied.

It felt like forever, waiting for the second message.

*All available infantry units, please report in on the forums to receive your instructions.*

Nervously, he did so, counting the moments until he received a reply. Still in full uniform, he made his way to ground level, meeting up with several squads. Thank god for his helmet, hiding the nerves thrumming through him. They were doing the right thing, he repeated to himself over and over. But it would be so easy for something to go wrong. For them to get busted. Everything hinged on the anti-SOLDIER army believing their lie.

They marched out to the barracks where the SOLDIERs were being kept, heading for the leading captains. Hopefully Lieutenant Avery wouldn't be questioned.

"Hold it, this area is off limits," the captain said, raising a hand.

"We're your relief crew. Boss wants to keep the guard fresh, in case the SOLDIERs get out of hand," the Lieutenant said, gesturing back to the squads he'd brought along. "You don't want any weak links against these guys."
The captain relaxed, snorting. "Yeah, I hear you. Alright."

"Hey, I didn't hear any orders," one of the other captains said, lips twisted in a scowl.

"Private channel. Can't afford to broadcast what we're doing with the Turks still under investigation," the Lieutenant said easily.

"Sounds reasonable; take it easy, Dawson." He shrugged. "Not like anyone wants to be stuck with this job anyway. You all be careful; you're authorized to open fire if anyone steps out without permission."

"Good to know."

It took a minute to really get the other officer to back off, but eventually he had to give in to the higher rank. They watched the groups switch in silence, falling in place with a collective breath of relief. Now all they had to worry about were the machines Weapons Development had stationed around.

"Everyone, hold position until we get another update," Avery said, receiving a collection of scattered 'sir's in acknowledgment.

All they could do now was wait.
Retaking Midgar

Chapter Summary

Never underestimate how hard someone will fight to defend what is theirs.

Heidegger retreated to the President's office, smug and confident in his plans. He hadn't been certain on Veld, to be honest - he still wasn't, the man lied like he breathed, but he had to count on his practicality, and the fact that Turks rarely concerned themselves with the well being of anyone who wasn't one of their own. It made the most sense that he'd be practical about this. Cold logic was the best way to go, you wouldn't threaten and get anywhere. Not with him. But this… this would work. And he had to see the reason of it, that there was nothing left to do but call SOLDIER to heel. They were too powerful to stay unchecked. Expanding the Deepground protocol was just good sense.

Hojo… well, Hojo had been a tossup too, but so long as his precious Sephiroth was largely unharmed he doubted the scientist cared one way or the other. He'd made SOLDIER, but he had no attachment to it. He wasn't sure Hojo had the ability to have emotional attachments at this point. Not that it mattered, so long as he performed the procedure.

As for SOLDIER itself… that would be tricky, of course, getting them to agree to it. It would have to be under the table, something they didn't fully understand unless he could simply pressure them into it. Some of them, sure, but not all. But he had faith that they would work it out. Slowly.

Hojo had done it before, after all. There was precedent. If anything, it would have been harder to work in Deepground. This should be considerably easier once they got past getting everyone to keep in place. The idiots had agreed to having mako pumped into their systems to live out their power fantasies, they'd go along with whatever excuse Hojo came up with to perform the procedure. And then life would be much, much simpler for everyone.

Heidegger hummed, walking to the window and looking out over the Plate. There was still smoke curling up in the distance from Sector Eight, but Tuesti was handling that. Things were falling into place, slowly but surely. It just took the right man at the helm.

A sudden flash below caught his eye, and he stepped up to the glass, trying to look down. That… that was from the barracks he'd quarantined the SOLDIERs in. What was going on?

They were done waiting.

Tseng sent a message to Reeve that went straight to Cait and to Kusel, and SOLDIER was done. They weren't going to wait and see what method of persuasion was thought up to get them to go along with Heidegger's new plans. It was time to take back their base, their home.

Three well placed Firagas blew out the side of the building. The doors opened. They flooded out.

Immediately, Scarlet's machines opened fire, unerringly targeting the SOLDIERs as they poured out
of the building with a relentless hail of bullets. Missiles whistled through the air, fired directly into the dense crowds. What one man might have deflected from himself was quickly sent into the path of his comrade. It was clear this wasn't going to work.

"Spread out before they blast us apart!" Kythe called.

The SOLDIERS scattered quickly, enhanced speed put to good use and helping make it a little harder to take them out. Unfortunately, it didn't help with how difficult it was to take out the machines while they were so close to the infantry.

"Friendlies get out of here," Kunsel shouted. "We can't fight the robots with you there!"

Some of the infantry fell back immediately, the ones close enough able to hear him, but the others remained, trying to help take down the robots as well.

SOLDIERS were not generally trained to deliver the level of force required to take out the hostile machines with the level of precision required to keep from injuring the unenhanced infantry who were in close proximity. Keeping a movement that powerful, that small, just wasn't working. The infantry were in the way, and either they had to go or someone was going to get mowed down. And it didn't look like it would be the robots.

"Guys you need to run!" Kunsel tried again, pitching his voice as loud as he could.

Nothing. They couldn't hear him over the din.

And then it happened, right before his eyes - one of the Thirds had made a charge, blade at the ready, working up momentum with a spin. He either didn't see the infantry, or completely misjudged his strike. The troop went to move, but it was too late by the time he realized the Third was coming.

The scream was brief, but it threw the Third off.

Robots didn't care about screaming.

He took a missile to the chest and was sent flying. Kunsel didn't have time to see if he got back up. Some of the others had clued in to the problem, and were switching to materia - big, flashy attacks that telegraphed clearly for human eyes. Bolts fried wires faster than any of their blades could cut them, and ate up the distance like it was nothing.

There were still too many bodies on the ground.

He heard an echoing shout and looked up reflexively, eyes going wide behind his visor as he realized there were troopers streaming out of ShinRa tower.

Somehow, he didn't think they were their reinforcements.

Cloud watched the flood of infantry coming at them and knew, immediately, that they'd just lost any chance of SOLDIER helping them with this. There was no visual difference, no cue to tell who was friend or foe. Not for anybody. The only ones who were obviously different were SOLDIER.

We have to do something.
But what?

What could they possibly do?

*We have to take them out.*

Attacking his fellow infantry went against every bit of training he'd had, but it was obvious *they* didn't care. There was no negotiation, not even a command to stand down. They were shooting as soon as they were in range to make it count, no hesitation.

He couldn't afford to hesitate either.

Cloud turned, ducking down behind one of the machines a moment and frantically scanning the area. Other people had seen the oncoming infantry, but there was a lag in SOLDIER's response - they had to have realized the same thing he had. But no one seemed to know what to do about it, except the newcomers who were *shooting at them.*

The radios were silent. There were no orders, just chaos.

*They'll kill us.*

He couldn't let that happen.

"Guys!" He fumbled for his mic, keying it on. "Guys, SOLDIER can't attack them, we've got to take over. Let them get the machines, alright?"

There was a moment of static before the Lieutenant's voice was clear through the channel. "Point made, Strife. Regroup away from the machines and let's take these traitors down!"

With official orders, the group moved as one. They were outnumbered, but not about to give any ground. They'd committed to this alliance, and they *would see* it through, no matter the cost.

But no one was bullet proof. The SOLDIERs seemed *resistant,* always had, but they weren't just going after the SOLDIERS. And there were only so many hits an unenhanced person could take before they went down. Only now, it wasn't one-sided. Now, they were *fighting back.*

The battlefield was almost deafening, the report of rifles mingled with the rattle of automated machines and the whistle of missiles through the air. Fire roared in great gouts alongside the *crack-boom* of lightning bolts tearing through the air. The explosion of the war machines meeting their sudden, violent ends left your ears ringing and still wasn't enough to drown out shouting and screaming as dozens of attacks hit home at any given moment.

In the chaos, Cloud's vision threatened to tunnel in as he realized that the other group of infantry was far too coordinated. Far more than they were. Someone somewhere was guiding them over their mics, and so long as that connection was still in place they were going to keep their advantage. Probably someone with a better view, maybe from a sniper's position. Not someone he could take out, but…

His eyes zeroed in on the captain, hanging back behind the others - not that it mattered for his attacks, but that wasn't what he was so vital for. *That* was where the orders would ultimately issue from.

He was moving before he'd even fully thought it through, plastering himself against one of the trucks and attempting to edge around.
The sudden appearance of the strange man draped in red that had been traveling with the SOLDIERs almost made him attack on reflex, gun jerking up only to be grasped firmly by a gauntleted hand and pushed away. "What are you doing?"

"I…" Cloud swallowed thickly, gesturing ahead. "I need to take out their captain, interrupt the flow of orders and mess up their coordination. There's too many too organized right now."

The red eyed man hummed thoughtfully, glancing back. "Which one?"

"Uh, the one in the red bandana," Cloud said, giving his green one a tug.

"And you believe this will give the necessary advantage?" He asked.

"Best idea I've got," Cloud said. "We've got to do something."

"Agreed." He was silent a moment, then holstered a truly impressive gun and reached for Cloud's arm with a far more normal hand. "Don't scream."

The world blurred, flashes of color through a haze of red as they moved with dizzying speed.

And then they were behind enemy ranks.

Cloud didn't ask how, he didn't question anything. He just brought his rifle down, reeling but used to dealing with motion sickness by now, and fired.

The captain went down, and so did the next three he got and the four his strange assistant took out, gun like a hand cannon making a deep, echoing boom with each shot.

The tide turned.

There was a tangible shift in the air as the enemy infantry went down at last, and the remains of their team came running. In the absence of any unenhanced to worry about, the SOLDIER's cut loose, surging in a tide of blue and violet, flashes of silver cutting through the air as swords were at last brought out again. Scarlet's machines fell like dominoes under their combined might.

As the last explosion faded, there was silence, barely broken by the periodic clatter of machinery as it fell apart. People were looking around, cautious.

"Is it over?" Someone asked.

Cloud laughed, tugging his helmet off. "Yeah… we won."

"Great." Kunsel gave him a thumbs up across the field, pitching his voice to carry. "Now let's go get our leaders!"

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The fact that no one had thought to take their phones away baffled Zack, but he was grateful to catch the updates. When his phone chimed again, it was from Cissnei, letting him know that the SOLDIERs had broken free. Which meant there was no reason they had to stay locked up. Of course, all their weapons had been taken. But then, what was a little reinforced cell to a SOLDIER?

"Hey guys," Zack called. "You hear me?"
A moment's pause, before Sephiroth's voice carried over, muffled, but audible. "Yes?"

"No talking!" One of the guards yelled, banging on the door.

"Oh *I'm sorry*, I just thought they'd like to know our SOLDIER boys broke out," Zack said, grinning fiercely. He walked up to the door, examining it. Smooth, no knob or handle. Similar to the sliding doors they had everywhere else, but doubtlessly reinforced. "Y'know. Since that's the only reason we're staying here."

There was utter silence on the other side of the door, then some hurried whispering he couldn't be bothered to decipher. Zack kicked off the floor and *spun*, foot slamming into the door. The metal crumpled. A second kick and the door buckled. A third, and it broke away entirely, just in time to watch a roar of fire into the hallway.

Someone opened fire, and he ducked back into the room, arching a brow. "Buddy, you've only got so many bullets and I *promise* you, it's not enough to stop all of us."

"Agreed. It would be wisest if you leave." There was the familiar sweet singing of Masamune, and he could almost *hear* Sephiroth's little smile as they sputtered. "Consider it a tactical retreat."

Someone took him up on it, boots thudding down the hall in a frantic beat. After a moment more of firing, it seemed that the other guard gave in as well, rushing out.

"I believe it's safe now," Sephiroth said, appearing in front of the doorway.

"Yeah? Great… thought they took that?" Zack said.

"They did," Sephiroth agreed, and that time he *did* smile. "I merely neglected to inform them I can summon it at will."

"We'll need *our* weapons back," Genesis said, flicking his hair irritably and walking to the final room. "Angeal?"

"Figured I'd just… let you three have fun," Angeal said. He was still sitting on the cot when Genesis keyed the door open.

"Not doing well, are you?" Genesis asked quietly.

"He took quite a hit from the WEAPON," Sephiroth said. "And you were both under water for an extended period of time."

"Let's just say I'm going to have a very long nap later," Angeal said, getting up with a grunt. "Any idea where our weapons would be?"

"Yeah, I did patrol duty here when I was new," Zack said. "I know where they keep the valuables and stuff. This way."

"We should hurry. They're not going to give up for good," Angeal said, following him down the hall. He winced when Zack kicked the door in on finding it was locked. "Really?"

"I can't pick electronic locks, Angeal." Zack made a pleased sound when the door was pushed aside, going in and getting his sword off the table. "Perfect."

"A sight for sore eyes indeed," Genesis said, picking Rapier up and examining it a moment.

"I'm honestly surprised they had anyone to carry the Buster," Zack admitted, watching Angeal
critically as he picked it up. No wince… hopefully no strain. "We good to go?"

"Oh yes." Genesis grinned. "Let's go see our new president."

The SOLDIERs had broken quarantine. There were also apparently traitors in the army, but the ultimate, immediate problem was that the SOLDIERs were loose. And not just the ones he'd had in the barracks, no.

Sephiroth had broken out of his cell with the others. The dogs had snapped their leashes at long last.

Heidegger shuddered, staring out the window a long moment then made quick strides back to the desk. If Sephiroth was willing to break out, then he knew that the other SOLDIERs were free… there was a leak inside. Turks, probably. He should have kept them under a tighter grip. But it was too late for that now. He wasn't staying around for whatever they thought was justice for what he'd had to do to try and clean up the train wreck this company was becoming.

No, no he wouldn't be staying for that. Let them have things their way, for now.

Heidegger felt under the desk a moment, fingers searching. Rupert had made such a fuss over it, but… ah. He found the button, and pushed.

By the time the Turks burst into the President's office, the room was empty, and the escape hatch still wide open.
As the Dust Settles

Chapter Summary

Victory has been a long time in coming, and it's not without a price to pay. The consequences of every action will be felt for a long time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was going into evening by the time all the fighting had finally stopped, medical busy with dozens of SOLDIERs and infantry - the lucky ones. Later, there would be a full count of the casualties. Later, they would have to address the fact that two parts of the same company had turned on each other without hesitation. Killed each other.

Later.

For now, Rufus was back in his office, staring blankly down the emergency exit. "Gods, his father had actually put in the escape route he'd suggested. After laughing at him for it. "That son of a bitch always had to have the last word."

Veld snorted, because of course he knew, but whatever he was thinking he was kind enough to keep to himself. "It comes out in the Slums. I've got people looking into it."

"Hn." Rufus didn't look up, watching his shoes instead, out of the corner of his eye. "And if he escapes?"

"If Heidegger went quietly into the night, I wouldn't complain," Veld said. "If he escapes?"

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"If Heidegger went quietly into the night, I wouldn't complain," Veld said. "If he escapes?"

Rufus glanced at him then. "You don't think he will."

"No, I do not," Veld agreed. "I think this is just the beginning of one hell of a mess."

"Naturally." Rufus pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers a moment, then ran his hand back through his hair. "I refuse to watch my company self destruct. He doesn't get to take that from me, Veld."

"Then you're going to have to fight for it," Veld said. He met Rufus' eyes and held them for a long moment. "The company is rotting, Rufus. It has been for a long time. If you want to clean it up and salvage it, you're going to have to put in a hell of a lot of work."

"So be it, then," Rufus said. "It's mine. I will not lose my inheritance to the incompetence and stupidity of the past."

"Good. That's the kind of attitude we're going to need." Veld was quiet a moment, thoughtful. "He'll be back, as soon as he figures out an angle he can take. Right now, we're especially vulnerable with the shakeup between SOLDIER and the army."

"I doubt your Turks are especially pleased either," Rufus said.
Veld waved it off, shaking his head. "They'll do their jobs. We don't have to work in large groups with either, and SOLDIER have remained solid supporters."

"So it's the army that's our problem, is what I'm hearing," Rufus said. "The toxic culture that Heidegger promoted that allowed for this mess to begin with."

"It's the biggest problem. Aside from having nearly an eighth of the Plate in a state of emergency," Veld agreed.

"Reeve's got that under control," Rufus said. "I'll make sure he has what he needs to get things running again, but that's his to manage. Right now, I have enough problems with the army and the remains of AVALANCHE. I'm also down a director. Sorting out the company is my priority."

"As it should probably be, given Tuesti has a handle on the city," Veld said. "Thoughts on that?"

Rufus considered it. "I need to call a board meeting. I'm going to need to replace Heidegger, as well as putting out a warrant for his arrest. I also need to make it public that I've taken over as the president. And do something about the army and AVALANCHE."

"Busy man," Veld said. "Well, no sense putting it off."

"No," Rufus agreed. "Call the others. I'll be down shortly."

The board room was quiet when Rufus came in, everyone still reeling a little from the past few days. The only changes of note beyond Heidegger's absence were that Lazard had been accompanied by Sephiroth, and Cait Sith was perched on the table in front of Reeve's conspicuously empty seat.

"Director Tuesti couldn't be pried from the action, I take it?" Rufus asked, eyeing the animatronic cat a moment.

"Here by proxy, sir." Reeve's voice came clearly through Cait, who turned a little to face Rufus better. "But things in Sector Eight are urgent, and I couldn't afford to leave things with any less supervision than possible."

"Understood." Rufus nodded. "Continue to see that things are taken care of, that's your priority. I'll expect regular reports as soon as you can get them together."

"Yes sir," Reeve said. "I'll keep you informed."

"Good." Rufus looked over the group a moment, lips pressed in a thin line. His voice was quiet, but carried easily. "Heidegger nearly tore our company apart today, in his misguided efforts to control things. We've got people dead, destruction of company property, and severe damage to trust between departments. But one man is not going to ruin ShinRa. We will overcome these damages, and we will be strong again.

"I've given it some thought... for the moment, I will be handing the army over to the control of Director Deusericus," Rufus said slowly, watching surprise register on the man's face. "And SOLDIER to Sephiroth."

"You're making me a director," Sephiroth said, though there was a hint of question in it.
"For reasons we'll not get into here, I think that would be the best decision for the stability of SOLDIER going forwards," Rufus said. "The war is over, and I intend to attempt to make amends with Wutai. Your skills are needed in a different way now, and you've proven able to rally the men to your cause with or without Lazard's aid."

Sephiroth nodded, expression thoughtful. "Very well, sir."

"Any questions on your assignment, Lazard?" Rufus asked.

Lazard shook his head. "No, I can manage that."

"Good." Rufus glanced at Scarlet. "I want you to work with Reeve. Repurpose whatever you need to, but we need to stabilize Sector Eight and Junon is going to need a tremendous amount of work. There were two WEAPONs that managed to come around and assault the city before they were taken out."

"I've read the initial damage reports, they're outside of my usual operations," she said. "But I'll do what I can."

"See that you do, I trust your creativity to make things work," Rufus said, looking back to Palmer. "I want your pilots working with them, ferrying supplies and personnel as needed. I refuse to leave either city permanently damaged in any way. Is that clear?"

A chorus of yes sir's around the table earned a small, tight smile from him. "Veld? I want my father's murder pinned on Heidegger. And we will be putting out a warrant for his arrest. Worldwide. I'll do a publicly televised announcement when you have things ready."

Veld arched a brow, nodding slightly. "Consider it done."

"Good." Rufus tapped his fingers on the table. "Hojo, I will want a full evaluation on Hewley and Rhapsodos, physical and psychological. I'll also want a statement from you, Sephiroth. I need to know who I can count on going forward."

"I don't foresee an immediate threat or problem from Rhapsodos or Hewley, if that's what you're asking," Hojo said. "But I'll see about their current condition as far as what they're now capable of."

"I'm not certain Genesis will stay with the company," Sephiroth said. "But he's not against us now. I'll speak with them both and see what they plan on doing… assuming retirement is on the table?"

"I'd rather not lose two of our strongest SOLDIERs," Rufus admitted. "But I'd rather they retire than fight them on it. I'm willing to speak with them personally, if necessary, to make arrangements."

"I'll let them know," Sephiroth said.

"Good." Rufus let himself sigh then, a breath of sound without the weight he could feel settling over him. This wasn't how he'd imagined things would go, but he would make due. This was his company, and he would see it to glory once more. "Questions?"

"Did you have a particular way you wanted the situation with the army handled?" Lazard asked.

"I'd rather avoid mass firings or incarcerations, given the level of scandal that would bring, but I know you can only salvage so much." Rufus shrugged. "See what options you can come up with, and we'll talk before you move forward on it."

"Alright." Lazard nodded thoughtfully.
"Anything else?" Rufus asked, waiting a beat before smiling tightly. "You all have your assignments, then. Keep in touch. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

He rose from his seat, not waiting for anyone else, gesturing for Veld to follow him. They had work to do.

Rufus drove a hard bargain. AVALANCHE either had to face trials for their crimes, or work with ShinRa under a particular contract until their 'debt to society' for their damages were considered paid. In the end, without Fuhito's seething fury pushing them to conflict, most of them were willing to follow Elfé's lead and reform into a ShinRa-affiliate that advocated environmentally friendly solutions. Currently, they were working with Reeve as he finally had the full support of the company behind his efforts to clean up Midgar and Junon.

The fans that had not been actively involved in the SOLDIER vs army fiasco were stirred up and only placated when their heroes came out to speak in person.

There were a surprising number of army that showed up, not just for Sephiroth, but for Zack. With the shift in SOLDIER's leadership, there were rumors that the youngest of the Firsts might find his rank going up the final step. Odds were good it would depend in part on whether or not Genesis was willing to stay with the company. At the moment, the fiery First was just catching his breath. It had been a long, bitter fight, and he hadn't honestly expected to make it out alive. Neither had Angeal. Now, they had a future they'd quit planning for ahead.

And life… life went on, like nothing had happened.

The Turks settled back down, secure under Veld's leadership even though Tseng ended up going to Junon to step in for Anya. The WEAPON's attack had collapsed the building, and it was luck and sheer willpower that had kept her alive. Veld had gone to see her in the hospital, and brought Vincent and Victor; neither man seemed eager to leave this time, though they hadn't precisely promised to rejoin the ranks either.

They'd put together the 'footage' Rufus had requested, just one more dirty secret kept by the board as the President's assassination at Heidegger's hands became common knowledge, as well as the reward should anyone find him and turn him in.

His reputation was further destroyed within the company as Lazard dug into his new department and quickly uncovered a seething mass of embezzled funds, bribery and blackmail. SOLDIER had had its problems, but he'd never tolerated the culture of bullying and intolerance that he found everywhere he turned. For all the vitriol they'd spewed towards SOLDIER, there was easily as much in their own ranks between separate squads that had been pushed to rivalry in some twisted effort to better themselves.

There would have to be changes, big changes for some, and yet it was manageable.

They'd fought the Planet itself and won. Whatever came next… they would be ready.

Chapter End Notes
At long last, we come to the end of the story. I want to thank you all for your support, without which there were times I might have given up. This has been an extensive labor of love that means the world to me, and I'm so grateful that it was so well received and that I could share it with all of you.

While *To Be Human* is finished, there will be a sequel coming out some time in 2018-2019, by the title of *The Price of Freedom*. While I'm marking this story as "complete" I will eventually post up a teaser at the end of this, so feel free to stay subscribed or subscribe to the series so you're sure not to miss it. There are multiple loose ends, such as what happens to Heidegger, that will be addressed in the upcoming fic.

I look forward to seeing you all there.

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**End Notes**

Subscribe to keep track of weekly updates and comment to let me know what you think; it always fuels my motivation, and if there are questions I will do my best to answer any that don't require spoilers.

Also feel free to track me down on fanworks Tumblr, ladykf-writes - I'm always happy to have discussions!

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**Works inspired by this one:**

[To Be Human: On The Side](/works/12345) by LadyKF

Please [drop by the archive and comment](/works/12345) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!