N7 SOLDIER

by ScreamingViking

Summary


The Crucible dumps Shepard on Gaia. The first human Spectre becomes the first female SOLDIER as well as their first elite Sniper. Her uncanny ability to bring reason to unreasonable situations will alter the fate of the entire planet, but especially that of her three First Class friends.

"You can pay a soldier to fire a gun. You can pay him to charge the enemy and take a hill. But you can't pay him to believe."
Landing

Shepard's head was pounding.

Noise was happening somewhere. She cracked her eyes open, her vision swam, all she could make out was a vague orange haze. She couldn't feel her limbs. What had happened?

"The created will always rebel against their creators… the result is conflict, destruction, chaos. It is inevitable…"

The memories flickered through her mind's haze. She would have cringed if she'd had the strength.

"You're taking away our future! Without a future, we have no hope. Without hope, we might as well be machines, programmed to do what we're told."

She had fought against the Reapers for so long. So much was at stake and she had given her all. The cause had consumed her; the need to save as many as possible, to stop the harvest, to end the cycle.

An end, once and for all.

We find a new solution

An entire galaxy united: a chance for survival bought by the sacrifice of billions. And it all ended with the placid speeches of a mad AI.

The paths are open

Was this victory?

You have to choose.

…Now what?

"Ma'am? This is a restricted area, you can't stay here. How did you even get up here?"

She must have passed out again. Where was she? She slowly opened her eyes and was greeted with a lovely orange sunset over a perfectly still ocean. How pretty.

But wasn't she on the citadel? There weren't any oceans on the citadel. Unless you counted the lakes on the presidium, but they couldn't be oceans, they didn't even have fish.

Shepard suspected she was slightly delirious. Her thoughts usually made a little more sense. It was probably shock and exhaustion then. Alongside a generous helping of blood loss and probably even organ rupture and implant failure. How was she still alive?

Were the Reapers still alive?

"Ma'am. I can't let you stay here."

Blinking, Shepard looked for whoever was speaking. She was sitting on a ledge and leaning against a girder. Beneath the ledge was some kind of tiered urban area, gradually descending into the ocean. How the hell did she get up here?
She was in the shade of a massive metal structure far above her and sticking out over the city and the ocean. It almost looked like some kind of cannon, but that was stupid, why would anybody waste time with artillery fixed at a horizontal angle?

Next to her was a human soldier wearing a uniform she didn't recognize. His eyes were hidden by a bulky helmet with three forward facing red lights on it. It looked a little like the ancient night vision goggles earth's militaries once used. He must have been the one who had spoken.

"How long have I been here?" she asked, twisting her neck, trying to find any angle that didn't hurt like a hit from a thresher maw.

"I don't know," he said "I'm on patrol in this area. You need to leave."

"Right. I'll get out of your way." She carefully started climbing to her feet, staggering at the explosion of agony that lit up every nerve ending. She gasped and almost fell to her knees but caught herself just in time. Gritting her teeth, she pulled herself up to her full height, refusing to be knocked over by the pain. She was pretty sure even death itself hadn't been this painful. She could almost feel her damaged cybernetic implants straining to fix all her injuries. The soldier held out a hand to steady her but drew back at her sharp look.

"I'm alright," she said, taking a deep breath and willing it to be true. "I just need you to point me to the nearest Alliance office."

"Uh, what alliance office, ma'am?"

"The Systems Alliance." She examined her omni-tool. Broken. Of course it was. And her suit was all out of medi-gel. At least her rifle was still on her back.

She looked up to see the soldier giving her a puzzled look.

"System's… Alliance?" he repeated dumbly.

What was wrong with this guy?

"Yes. The Systems Alliance," she said slowly. This was probably Earth; there was no way he didn't know what the Alliance was, especially after the war effort.

"Given the size of this place they must have an office, probably even a base somewhere. If you could direct me. Please." She was not in the mood for this nonsense; she needed to find out if the crucible had worked correctly, where was the Normandy, was her crew all right? Were the Reapers dead? Was it truly over?

"Systems, systems… Hang on; are you with the tech guys? I think the server rooms are back through the other way." He scratched the back of his neck while obviously looking her over, "heh, didn't know you needed armour to fix computers. Or have they started fighting back?" He laughed at his little joke.

Shepard punched him.

Nearly ten minutes later she sat slouched in a little bar and trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

After punching the idiot infantryman the whole situation had only become more baffling.
Once off the ledge, she'd realised that she was actually on the edge of a busy airfield. She was lucky no one had seen her or the infantryman currently passed out on the ground.

The airfield was both familiar and completely foreign. Its military efficiency was a soothing comfort, and yet utterly surreal because the tarmac was filled with planes.

Actual planes. Not replicas, not ships with wings added for aerodynamic purposes when re-entering atmo, actual old school aeroplanes. With spinning rotors and rickety wings and everything. And people were using them. It was as bustling as any military runway she'd seen, and nearly 200 years out of date.

Her mind turned back to the giant canon pointing over the city. Fixed at a horizontal angle and pointed over the ocean, as though its designers had never even heard of orbital bombardment.

But then, no, they probably hadn't because… planes.

The exhaustion and mounting confusion had finally gotten to her and she'd taken refuge in the closest public place she could find. A slew of other infantrymen looked at her and the gun on her back suspiciously as she limped through what was clearly a restricted area.

And that was how she ended up here. It was a nearly empty little pub with tacky plastic seats and a grimy bar that reflected up a distorted picture of her. The whole place smelt of disinfectant and whatever foul mess it had failed to sterilize. The only other people there were a man and a woman sitting at the far end of the bar and wearing old blue suits, the sort that went with an old fashioned tie. They kept throwing her curious looks.

She slouched on the barstool, resting her head in her hands and her elbows on the bar. Dried blood flaked off of her cracked gauntlets.

Her state of semi delirium was getting worse. Her body was beyond dire straits and she knew it, but her mind wasn't quite operating well enough for her to know what to do. Her eyes skimmed a nearby newspaper (made of actual paper) and felt her confusion grow all the greater.

No mention of Reapers. Instead it was all about some power company and growing unemployment levels. It belatedly occurred to her that the wildly out of date airstrip hadn't shown any sign of the war effort. What did it all mean? What was happening?

Where the hell was she?

Maybe she was dead. It wasn't quite how she'd pictured it. A mixture of hope and dread filled her at the thought.

A bitter laugh welled up inside her. This wasn't death. She should know. Wherever Thane's spirit had gone, it wasn't here.

Perhaps she was actually in a coma in a hospital on earth, with Garrus and Tali weeping beside her bed.

Screaming from outside drew her attention from the crushing tail spin her thoughts had fallen into.

She spun around at the same time as the two suits in the bar, searching out the source. Outside the window civilians ran past yelling in terror. An inhuman screech broke through the air and threatened to break the windows. A woman ran by clutching her bleeding arm while a man staggered as best he could while covered in blistering burns.
Shepard leapt up, her instincts kicking in. Her body was sluggish and screaming in pain but her mind honed in on the sounds of carnage. The steady focus she felt in combat stilled her thoughts before she could wonder at the absolute folly of what she was doing.

She charged out of the bar, her rifle extending from its compact state on her back, she lifted it and swung the heavy Black Widow rifle around to a ready position.

Outside the bar she was met with a baffling sight. Some kind of bird was the centre of all the carnage and it was on fire. It didn't seem to be burning up though; it almost looked like it was made of fire. As she took in the situation the creature flicked a long stream of flames at those nearest it.

Snapping into action, she raised her rifle and lined up her shot. A deafening bang sounded and the familiar recoil slammed solidly against her shoulder.

The flaming creature only seemed to soak up the shot. It trilled loudly and focused in on Shepard, fire still raging in its wake.

The repeating clack of much smaller firearms sounded next to her. The man and woman from the bar were shooting from handguns that made no more difference then her own.

Behind the bird and all of its havoc there was a man screaming and waving around a small red ball of some kind. The creature didn't attack him; instead it moved wherever he pointed the ball.

He was yelling about 'Shinra taking everything', whatever that meant, and something about energy and the planet that didn't mean anything to Shepard either. What she did understand was that this man was attacking civilians.

The bird soared closer and Shepard rolled out of the way, taking cover behind a car (with actual wheels). The man and woman dove in the opposite direction.

The clack of ineffective pistols sounded again, drawing the creature's focus. Her biotics flared and she leapt up and threw a biotic warp at the creature, the sudden rush of gravitational fields tearing it apart at a molecular level. As the bird fell back with a deafening screech, flailing its wings in pain, Shepard spun with her rifle and found the man with the red orb in the cross hairs.

She fired.

His arm exploded and he fell with a scream. The red orb bounced away from him.

The bird stilled; it's screeching halting instantly. The flames writhed wildly around it for a moment and then the whole thing disintegrated into ash.

Silence filled the street, the soft crackle of small fires the only sound. The air stank of burning rubber.

"The hell was that?" Shepard muttered, lowering her rifle. The man and woman from the bar were staring at her.

The rush of adrenaline she'd felt at the small fight was swiftly draining out of her again and she felt light headed. Her body took that moment to remind her that she was severely, catastrophically, injured and her gun was damn heavy. Unwilling to drop such an old friend she went to return the now collapsed gun to its place on her back.

Her vision started to swim and she was on the ground before she knew that her legs had given out. The last thing she saw before her consciousness fled was the man from the bar running towards her.
Shepard woke to the sterile smell of antiseptic and the sickening lemony stench of high grade surface cleaner. Nearby a machine was beeping.

Someone pulled one of her eyes open and waved a pen light into her pupil.

She moved to brush it away only to find her hands were bound at her sides. She was on her back and completely immobile.

Her eyes snapped open and the unmistakable sight of a lab coat filled most of her vision, the hard press of the operation table she was on suddenly cold beneath her and far too familiar.

Her Biotics flared instantly, thoughts of Cerberus stitching her up for their own use, manipulating her, playing her, shot through her mind.

_Not this time._

The blue glow flooded into the room and gravitational fields surged. Her restraints snapped and then several things happened at once. A fat and bearded man in a lab coat gasped and staggered back, dropping the penlight and knocking a tray of surgical equipment to the floor on his way down.

Shepard leapt to her feet, standing atop the operating table. She was in a large but otherwise standard old fashioned hospital room.

Several voices cried out, calls of "she's awake!" and "stand down!" chorusing around the room.

The pulsing glow of her biotics surged wildly around her at the sight of nearly a dozen infantrymen lining the walls, all pointing their bulky rifles at her. It was obvious now that they weren't Cerberus, but then of course they weren't; she'd already destroyed The Illusive Man and the last of his organization. She didn't recognize the red diamond shaped logo on the wall.

Suddenly there was a rush of air to her side and before she could so much as turn her head a blade was being held against her throat.

"Stand down," a deep voice ordered from beside her.

Shepard instinctively cast stasis. She saw the corresponding glow on the blade stretching away to her left and knew she'd hit her target. Out of the corner of her eye she could see what looked like a leather coat and strands of long silver hair freeze mid-air in the stasis field.

A horrified silence fell, followed by the echoing click of guns cocking all around the room. Now the infantrymen weren't just holding their guns at the ready, they were aiming at her. Had they never seen biotics before? Many of them looked at the frozen silver haired man nervously; she could see the way some had started trembling, one or two even took an unconscious step back.

"Please calm down. We're not here to hurt you," a voice interrupted the tense silence.

The one who had spoken stepped through the line of infantrymen. He was the man in the suit from the bar, as Shepard vaguely recalled, the same one who had briefly fought beside her against the flaming bird.

He was of average height and build, Asian, well dressed, and probably in his mid twenties. And
packing heat, she noted with a wry smile. He stood forward from all the troopers, his hands held up in a pacifying gesture. A slight lump in the breast pocket of his old fashioned jacket gave away the hidden pistol he had, but he resolutely didn't reach for it. His hand did twitch in that direction though.

"Who are you, where am I, and why was I tied down?" she demanded.

"Please release the general," he answered with enviable calm, "then we can discuss the situation."

A general? She turned slightly, looking at the man still trapped in her stasis field but keeping the other in her peripheral vision. The general didn't look anything like one, not by Alliance standards at least. He was tall and pale, with long silver hair and unnaturally green eyes. It was impossible to tell how old he was, but she'd guess early-twenties. He wore a long leather coat with no shirt under it and was holding a sword of all things. He looked back at her through narrowed eyes. His gaze was measured and assessing, despite being paralyzed for the moment. His hand and the unreasonably long sword he held were still frozen under her biotic hold.

Nobody moved. There were nearly a dozen guns trained on her and the stasis field wouldn't last much longer.

She looked back to the man in the suit. His hand was trailing towards his concealed handgun.

Suppressing a frustrated sigh, she released her biotics. The blue glow died and the sword was immediately held closer to her throat. Half the infantry breathed quiet sighs of relief.

"I let go, general, as instructed," she said quietly, careful not to move her neck too much.

He looked up at her for a moment with a face that gave away nothing, then drew back. The sword was lowered but not sheathed.

"That does not mean you are not a threat," he said.

She tilted her head in acknowledgement. Disarming a Biotic was like disarming a Krogan: nothing more than wishful thinking.

But she had let him go on purpose and she didn't intend to resort to force again unless they pushed her to it. Despite what many had said about her over the years she was perfectly capable of diplomacy. When necessary.

She had relented because she could deal with the military. No matter what species or creed, they had a sort of honour that was bred through the rigors of respect and regulations. Even when they made the wrong call, they spoke her language. The man with the hidden gun was straightening his suit and looking perfectly unassuming while pretending not to study her. She was pretty sure she spoke that language as well.

"Wait outside," the general said to one of the infantrymen, one with a red scarf instead of the blue the others all wore. They filed out on his order.

"You as well, Hollander," he said to the scientist who was still on the floor and trying not to draw any attention to himself. Hollander did not require further encouragement and promptly scrambled out of the room, only stopping to give Shepard a glare once he was standing behind someone.

Shepard got down from the operating table and stood on the ground, suddenly feeling exposed. She wasn't in her armour; instead she was wearing draughty hospital garb. She had no idea where her gun was and that made her uncomfortable. Only the general and the man in the suit were left in the room now and there was no doubt they were the most dangerous people she'd met since this whole
debacle had started.

The two men moved to a table on the other side of the room and pulled out chairs.

"Sit." The general drew out a chair for her in a manner that implied it wasn't a suggestion.

"I'd rather stand."

He didn't push the issue but he didn't sit either.

"You asked who we are," the man in the suit began, "I am Tseng, of Shinra's Administrative Research Department."

She wondered if everyone in Administrative Research carried hidden firearms. Her eyes drifted curiously to the general, awaiting the rest of the introduction. She didn't catch Tseng's small smile, as though he'd just confirmed a suspicion.

"That's General Sephiroth, of Shinra's SOLDIER division," Tseng continued, "and you are?"

"Commander Shepard," she said quietly, wondering what sort of reaction she'd get.

He tilted his head. "Shepard…?"

She looked down at herself. Her dog tags were missing.

"I'm sure you already know," she said, frustration leaking into her voice. She hated not understanding the situation and right now all she knew was that she wasn't the one holding the cards. That didn't mean she had to give away information for free.

"Why don't you tell us anyway, then we can see what we can do to help," Tseng said with an inoffensive smile that couldn't have been more artificial.

She crossed her arms and waited silently.

"Alright then, I'll tell you." He reached over to a drawer in the table and pulled out her Alliance dog tags, the flickering form of her malfunctioning Omni-tool, and one of her rifle's spare heat sinks. He deposited each item on the table with a dull thud.

She kept her mouth shut.

"ID, issued by an army which doesn't exist on Gaia. Hologram technology, more advanced than anything Shinra has designed, and ammunition for a gun which doesn't shoot bullets," he said quietly.

"Would you care to offer an explanation, commander?" said Sephiroth, "Or do you prefer Spectre?"

"Commander will do," she said, trying to get the most of what they'd just told her. This planet was called Gaia, and they hadn't heard of the Alliance. Just how far off the grid were they? The way the General said 'Spectre' told her he didn't know what it really meant, beside the label on her dog tags. They can't have heard of the citadel then, either. She remembered the planes. They probably didn't know about anything beyond their own atmosphere.

Which meant this was, somehow, first contact. She frowned in confusion.

"You aren't from this planet," Tseng said, when it became obvious she wasn't going to say anything. "You're not even entirely human."
She looked up sharply at the mention of her questionable claim to humanity and fixed him with a stare. They had her full attention, though she doubted they could begin to imagine why. The implants that kept her going were based on Reaper technology, and she'd welcome death long before she risked anyone ever getting their hands on that.

"I'm Commander Shepard of The System's Alliance, as well as a Spectre for the Citadel Council," she said, squaring her shoulders and looking them in the eye. "My arrival here was an accident. We have no quarrel with your people." But they would have more than just a quarrel if they wanted to start poking at her implants.

"How did you end up in the middle of a secure military base by accident?" asked Sephiroth.

"Do you understand the workings of Faster Than Light travel?" she asked replied. He shook his head. "Then you'll have to take my word for it that it's complicated and easy to get wrong."

"Regardless of what brought you here, you are here now," Tseng said, "and we would like you make you an offer."

"I'm listening."

"It's clear that you're powerful, and given your reaction to the Phoenix on the streets, you jump to help people. That's admirable."

She got the feeling he was buttering her up for something.

"We'd like to hire you."

"What? Just like that?" she asked, startled at their leap in logic. "I already have a job. And a rank."

"This agreement would only for the duration of your stay of course. You'd be doing exactly what you voluntarily did in Junon, killing monsters that are a danger to the populace. The only difference is that we'd be paying you for it."

"And I'd be wearing your uniform," she noted dryly.

"You're welcome to wear you own armour if it makes you feel more comfortable."

She watched them both for a moment, trying to decide what she thought of this development. Out of habit she stretched her shoulder, the one she kept her rifle on. It didn't hurt.

But she had been close to dead last time she was awake. Had they provided her with medical attention? She'd just assumed they were going to cut her open for nefarious reasons of their own. Perhaps she was being too paranoid.

"Who is this 'we' exactly?" she asked. "Who would I be working for?"

"The Shinra Electric Power Company," Tseng said. "We have a vested interest in the welfare of Gaia and often hire people to that end."

"I see," she replied, thinking the offer over. She didn't actually have any idea what to do, being on a human planet inexplicably separate from Earth and the Alliance.

Her first priority was getting back.

"I could well be retrieved by my men tomorrow. They might be scanning the atmosphere for me right now."
"You'll be free to return as soon as it is possible for you to do so," said Sephiroth, "In the meantime, you are a representative of a foreign state's military we know nothing about. This is an offer of good will on our part."

"I have conditions. What you know about me, the medical data that says I'm not entirely human? Destroy it." The two men shared a glance at her blatant demand. This was too important for her to keep quiet about.

"I have numerous implants which are beneficial to me, but any replicas of them would be incredibly dangerous, to everyone on your planet," she continued. "They are currently benign, but even the smallest tampering can cause more damage than you can imagine. If you want my co-operation you'll have to get rid of any information you have regarding my physiology."

"Do you have control over these implants?" Sephiroth asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I do," she said with a decisive nod.

"What if we don't agree to your conditions?" Tseng asked.

Her biotics flared, the shimmering power arcing across her skin. Both men immediately reacted, their hands flying to their weapons.

"I'm not going to let your curiosity destroy an entire planet," she said calmly. She let the glow subside when they didn't move further.

The both watched her cautiously, before letting their hands fall away from their weapons again.

"Alright," Tseng said after a long silent moment of contemplation. "We can agree to your conditions. Do we have a deal Commander?"

"You're very eager. Why the insistence?" She asked, watching him carefully.

"You're obviously very capable and I believe we can both benefit from an arrangement," he said smoothly.

"Yeah, but what's your rush?" she pressed, her hand resting on her hip. "Forgive me for thinking that this is all very suspicious."

Tseng shared a look with Sephiroth and then he reached back and held up a remote to the TV suspended from the ceiling. It was a heavy box of a thing though the screen itself was quite small. With a low whine it flicked on.

Some sort of news show was on, with two reporters excitedly discussing something.

"-Appeared out of nowhere and took down the Anti-Shinra terrorist! Her powers are unlike anything we've ever seen, Carol," exclaimed a man with heavily styled hair and a wide plastic smile.

In the bottom corner of the screen a grainy picture of Shepard appeared, she was wreathed in her biotics and attacking the flaming bird.

"You're telling me, Dan," a female reported replied from underneath thick makeup and an equally enduring smile. "Rumours have it that she's working for Shinra, she may even be a new type of SOLDIER, sent in specifically to protect civilians."

The picture in the corner changed over to one of Shepard aiming her rifle with Tseng standing
behind her.

"Other sources claim that she was actually in Junon for a secret mission for SOLDIER and only blew her cover to save people," said the first reporter.

"We are still waiting for an official statement from Shinra, but all we've heard so far practically confirms this mystery hero was one of theirs," Carol said, "If so, then it's great to see the famed Energy Company taking such an active interest in public safety."

Tseng turned the TV off again.

Shepard didn't know whether to laugh at the absurdity or scowl at the presumption. It seemed the media were the same no matter what planet you were on.

Still, now she could see why this Shinra was so eager to have her on board. They had a reputation to consider.

"One question, before I agree to anything," she said, "What exactly do they mean by SOLDIER?"

Tseng gave Sephiroth a sidelong look. "General?"

Sephiroth gave her one last look through narrowed eyes.

Several hours later Sephiroth and Tseng stepped onto the roof of Shinra's Junon Medical Centre. Shepard had been sent off at her own insistence to check that her weapons and armour hadn't been tampered with. Sephiroth couldn't blame her; his own weapon was always within his reach. There was nobody in all of Shinra foolish enough to try and handle his sword without explicit permission.

Beside him Tseng stepped into the cool air of early evening. His expression was almost completely blank, only the slight crinkle in his forehead betrayed his thoughtfulness. Tseng was a hard man to read, as any Turk ought to be, especially such a high ranking one, but Sephiroth had learnt the trick of it.

Shepard put Tseng completely to shame.

Whether she was entrapped or being praised to the sky by the absurd claims of the media her expression had remained a hard mask that shifted only to become harder. The eerie red glow that occasionally shined out from behind her eyes otherwise green eyes and through the cracked scars in her face only made it more difficult.

There was no doubting that she was the Commander her dog tags had named her. Her movements were all economical and precise and she spoke expecting to be heard. She gave information in the same tone of voice one would give orders and it had been years since Sephiroth had felt such a strong urge to salute when someone marched out of the room.

He hadn't of course but it was embarrassing that he had even thought it.

The entire interview had felt like pulling teeth and Sephiroth was frustrated to have left still knowing so very little about the alien who was still somehow mostly human.

"Are you sure this was wise, Sephiroth?" Tseng asked after a minute or so of just enjoying the quiet above the city.

"We had to do something," he replied. "She's too dangerous to be left independent of the company."
Tseng leant against the waist high ledge and crossed his arms.

"Given the publicity of this case we did need a quick solution," he agreed in a voice too mild to reveal any genuine opinion on the subject.

"For her to disappear from the public eye now would be disastrous for Shinra's reputation," Sephiroth said.

"Of course."

"And she may well be important in her own military's hierarchy. Until we know more about their capabilities, to treat her with anything less than respect could be a critical strategic error."

"Naturally," Tseng said, "giving her a place in the most elite division on the planet without so much as a background check is the only reasonable response."

Sephiroth narrowed his eyes at him. Most people were too nervous around the Turk to realise the man was actually scathingly sarcastic. The two of them had known each other far too long now for such misunderstandings. It was part of why they worked so well together.

"What's your point?" Sephiroth asked, irritation leaking into his voice. Some days he appreciated that Tseng was bold enough to point out weaknesses and flaws in his plans. Other days he did not.

Tseng looked back, completely unperturbed.

"Hojo is going to throw a fit when he realises what we've done," he said.

"Professor Hojo has enough specimens to cut up," Sephiroth replied. This time not a hint of his irritation escaped him. He would never drop his composure over Hojo, no matter what was at stake. "He doesn't need this one."

"She's the only one," Tseng pointed out.

"Which is why she'll be fighting alongside my men, in the most elite division on the planet," Sephiroth said with a small smile of satisfaction. "If you want to go tell her that you've changed your mind and you'll be handing her over to the science department then be my guest."

Tseng gave him the dry look that was as close as he came to rolling his eyes.

"Am I to choose between that and telling Hojo he won't be getting his hands on the super powered alien who can immobilise his strongest SOLDIER?"

"I'm sure you can simply fail to mention it," Sephiroth replied. "Isn't that the usual protocol when ignoring Hojo's orders?"

Tseng's ever so slightly amused expression instantly dropped. The solid mask of professionalism took over. "I have no idea what you mean," he said, as mildly as ever.

"Of course you don't." Sephiroth knew that was the end of the conversation.

He looked out over the city. The identical blocks of Shinra's facilities, followed by identical blocks of apartments, descended in marching rows down the slope towards the perfectly still ocean.

With strange satisfaction, he relished the thought that he had just invited an alien into Shinra's halls.
Shepard sat in the backseat of a car and rethought her life choices.

After a night in Junon, she'd been shuffled out of coastal city and put on route to Shinra's main headquarters in the Capital city of Midgar. Her armour and weaponry had been returned to her after she agreed to work with them. It was in absolutely appalling condition, but that was harbinger's fault, not Shinra's.

Steep cliffs jutted up around the road, many crumbling with no plant life to hold them together. It was late afternoon but they were driving in the gloomy shade of a cliff now. The barren wasteland rivaled Tuchunka for the most desolate place in the galaxy where people still insisted on living.

A Turk, which turned out to be the informal name for members of the 'Administrative Research department' drove the company vehicle. He had black skin, a bald head, and the standard uniform suit. The woman who had been with Tseng at the bar sat in the passenger seat. She was a short woman, with a friendly face and frizzy brown hair that had been coerced into being merely curly. She called herself Cissnei and she couldn't have been any older than 19.

They obviously knew Shepard was from off-world, even if they didn't say it in so many words. Having given it some thought Shepard was wondering how they had all figured it out so quickly. It was hardly an obvious conclusion to jump to. It hadn't occurred to her at the time, but Tseng and Sephiroth had accepted the 'I'm from outer space' explanation very quickly. And then they'd enlisted her with highly suspicious swiftness. She fully intended to ask someone about that.

Cissnei was making a solid effort at dragging Shepard into conversation, the sort that included a lot of open ended questions and encouraged extensive answers. The driver listened silently. It was a good attempt at getting information but the young Turk's inexperience gave her away and Shepard deflected all her questions.

It was probably all in her head, but everything from the lab she'd woken up in to the loudly declared interest in public safety seemed so suspicious. And what kind of Power Company needed its own army?

It wasn't that she didn't like them, the whole thing just reminded her too much of Cerberus. She had no reason to trust them and she was privy to far too many Alliance and Council secrets to let herself talk freely.

When Cissnei had finally given up she'd turned on the radio which had consisted solely of talk-back shows. The current presenter droned on in a voice that sounded a lot like the noise the Mako had made when its engines were on fire. Five minutes later Shepard was desperately wishing she'd just bought into the conversation.

The only topic the radio presenters wanted to talk about was the Phoenix attack on Junon and the woman now dubbed "Shinra's first female SOLDIER". Shinra had released an official statement claiming Shepard as one of theirs and the whole world was apparently buzzing with the news. Of course there was no mention of the fact that she hadn't actually been an employee at the time of the event.

Hearing news items about herself had long since lost its appeal, now it was mostly just embarrassing. Having the world speculate on her private life however, like the radio presenter currently wondering if she had a boyfriend, was borderline painful.
Shepard didn't recall helping people normally being this much of a hassle.

Thoughts of the state of the galaxy beyond this little planet plagued her. What had happened to the Reapers? Where was the Normandy? Had her crew survived? How much of what the catalyst had said was true, were the Mass Relays really down? She had no way of finding anything out, not until her omni-tool was fixed at least. The sensation of uselessness and inactivity buzzed in her head like a bee and gave her a headache. For now co-operating with the locals was the best course of action, no matter how much she wanted to either focus on searching for answers, or just scream furiously at the sky. She could scream later, right now it was time for a stint in a foreign military.

The things Sephiroth had said about the SOLDIER division had been both encouraging and very off putting. He described them as an elite group of warriors who used their enhanced strength to fight off dangerous wildlife and protect the populace. The enhancements came from some kind of chemical and surgical tampering that he had given very few details about. From what she had gathered, a SOLDIER's strength was based on exposure to a certain substance, similar to Biotics and Element Zero.

She had demanded to know what made them think her physiology would react the way the people of Gaia's did. They were completely delusional if they thought she was going to consent to whatever bizarre and hopelessly out of date surgery they had planned. That wasn't even getting into the whole Reaper-tech-cybernetic-implant thing.

She hadn't phrased it that way of course, but the point was made.

In the end they had come to an agreement, one she wasn't altogether happy with.

For now, she would remain as she was. Her biotics would just have to be enough, while the tests Hollander had started running were completed. It was too late to stop them now, regardless of her terms and conditions; they would simply have to wait them out. Once returned the results would tell whether or not she could withstand the surgery. If the verdict was favourable, the choice would be hers.

Both Tseng and Sephiroth had sworn all the returned medical data on her would be destroyed. Only time would tell whether or not they could be trusted.

Tseng had also been of the opinion that once she had seen what the other SOLDIERs could do she would want the enhancements. She very much doubted it. She was barely human as it was, the last thing she needed was more tampering.

The car turned a sharp corner around a bank and the golden light of late afternoon flooded through the windows. Outside it was dry and dusty; specks of grit were flung into the air by the wheels and shone briefly in the sun's last rays as they danced back to the ground. The radio seemed to drone on even louder.

She felt the dull mechanical grind of her optic feeds readjusting to the sharper lighting. The eyeballs Cerberus had rebuilt her with did that sometimes. Nobody else seemed to notice but whenever the light changed dramatically she could hear the faint whine of shifting implants. It wasn't painful, just kind of annoying. Something she'd simply learned to live with. Cerberus had rebuilt her well, much of her body was indistinguishable from the original but it was the little things that gave away the illusion. She knew this wasn't the body that had gone down with the Normandy SR1. Too much was ever so slightly off kilter. Of course the knowledge that she was rebuilt using salvaged Reaper tech from Sovereign explained why she felt so different. Nothing like a bit of ancient genocidal AI technology to shake things up.
The radio voices grated on and she was sure almost certain it was getting louder. Were the people of this planet all hard of hearing?

"Hey Cissnei," she called, desperately needing to interrupt. "Am I really the first female SOLDIER?"

Cissnei leaned forward and turned off the radio. Shepard briefly caught sight of a self-satisfied smile in the rear-view mirror. The little rat.

"That's right. SOLDIER usually recruits from the regular infantry, and women aren't considered capable enough to enlist." She turned in her seat to look back at her. "You look pretty comfortable in your uniform though."

It was gallingly narrow-minded view of women, but at least they weren't expecting her to adhere to their 'boys only' rules.

"You can't always afford to be picky," she replied. The asari commandos had been the final nail in the coffin of that sort of discussion on Earth.

"I guess not," said Cissnei. "Still, I bet you're going to be quite the role model. You're certainly famous enough." She offered Shepard a smile that reminded her of Kasumi when she knew she'd gotten away with something.

"But what about you, Cissnei? Don't they look up to a public figure like yourself?" Shepard asked dryly.

The driver gave a dry cough.

"I'm just in admin," she replied, shuffling awkwardly in her seat to hide the shape of the pistol they both knew was in her jacket pocket.

"Yeah, me too," Shepard said, leaning back and letting her hand rest on the black widow rifle resting across her lap. A sharp smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "And this is my instrument of administration."

Cissnei laughed.

"It is an impressive weapon."

Shepard lovingly ran her hand over the nicks and scratches it had collected back in London. Most of it looked superficial but she really needed to pull it apart and make sure. She'd have to do something about ammo as well. She only had three heat sinks and she was stuck on a planet that was still using gun powder. As to her armour, she wasn't currently wearing it. It was in no condition to be worn, not since taking an almost direct hit from Harbinger. Whatever Shinra's people had used to pry it off of her had not helped matters. She was wearing civilian clothes and plotting out exactly what she'd do to get her N7 armour back in working order.

"You should come down to the firing range some time," the driver said, not taking his eyes off the road. "Show the rest of us how it's done." His voice was deep and calm which made it very hard to tell whether he was joking, mocking, or completely serious. Shepard assumed a mixture of all three.

"Given the little pop guns you're using I don't think any amount of demonstration will help."

The driver snorted. Cissnei narrowed her eyes at Shepard.
"You hear that, Rude? 'pop guns,'" She said to the driver. "I don't need a gun the size of the continent to get the job done." She crossed her arms with largely fake indignation.

"The job must be a lot easier than," Shepard said, looking out the window at the rocky earth that spread out in every direction. "You don't have thresher maws here?"

"What's a thresher maw?" Rude asked.

"Something that can laugh off a carpet bombing and then flatten a fleet of armoured vehicles." Or a Reaper, on a good day.

"And you can take one of them down with just that gun?" Cissnei asked skeptically.

"Not by a long shot, it takes a whole squad working together to even hope to knock one over."

"We don't have any of those here," said Rude, "as far as I know."

"Trust me, if you had them, you'd know."

Cissnei hummed in thought, still eyeing her rifle curiously.

"Do you think you could take down a dragon?"

She replied with a bark of laughter. "What kind of question is that?"

"You've never fought one before?"

"Wait, what?" Shepard asked, looking between the two Turks. "You're having me on. Dragons aren't real."

"Of course they are," Cissnei said, looking confused. "There aren't really any on this continent but the Nibel Mountain range has hundreds of them." Rude nodded in silent agreement.

"Actual dragons? With wings and scales and fire and everything?"

"Not just fire, there are ice and electrical ones too. You've already seen a Phoenix and they're much rarer," she said, before a sly smile glinting in her eyes. "Though I noticed that you couldn't kill that either."

"Neither could you," Shepard replied, trying not to sound petulant. She was getting a general impression of amusement from the otherwise unreadable Rude and Cissnei gave a tiny snicker.

As they had been talking the city had slowly approached, the sea of brittle grey giving way to a looming monstrosity of concrete and steel. Shepard silently took in the towering silhouette ahead of them.

"Welcome to Midgar," Cissnei said quietly.

Sephiroth was already in Midgar. At the top of the Shinra building, he'd just finished a meeting with the company's director of SOLDIER, Heidgger. The gruff overweight and inept executive fancied himself an expert on all things military, much to the General's frustration. Heidigger's tactics had all the subtlety of a Tsunami, and were about as productive. With a bit of careful manoeuvring however, Sephiroth could usually keep him from interfering too much.

He was leaving his office now having just explained the mundane details of their newest SOLDIER
and how entirely under control the situation was. Heidegger took his word for it and that was the end of the Director's interest in the subject.

If only everyone else could be so accepting.

"What is this?" demanded Professor Hojo, waving a document in his face.

The scientist was rarely seen on the SOLDIER levels of the building, usually preferring to make people come to him, down in the depths of the science department. Whenever something truly outraged him though, he might be seen venturing out, a hunched figure in a white lab coat with two beady eyes and a fixed scowl. Few were bold enough to get in his way and even Sephiroth's imposing presence didn't cause as much fear as Hojo's did.

Sephiroth looked down calmly at the paper being shoved under his nose. He recognized it as the memo he had gotten Tseng to send, informing Hojo that Shepard was exempt from all the protocols the science department carried out on the rest of SOLDIER. He doubted she knew how fortunate she was.

"I'm sure you are capable of reading paperwork on your own, professor," he replied.

"No SOLDIER has exemption from my protocols. Certainly not this woman with…" he held up the paper and read in a scathing tone, "*naturally occurring enhancements due to high levels of Mako exposure in her hometown of Mideel*. Am I supposed to believe this? I know what Mako exposure looks like; if you think you can fool me into-"

"It was verified by Professor Hollander," Sephiroth said. "For medical reasons, she is to remain out of the science department." The plausibility of the cover story didn't matter, only whether or not Hojo was bold enough to challenge it.

"On whose authority?" he barked.

"Heidegger's, and my own."

"You don't command me, boy." He said, managing to look down his nose at Sephiroth despite being over a foot shorter then him.

"She is a SOLDIER; therefore she is under my jurisdiction. There's nothing more to be said." He might not have understood the sciences like Hojo did, but he had mastered the art of Shinra's politics. Nothing made the good doctor angry quite like realising that his pet SOLDIER had carved out his own fortress of impenetrable bureaucracy amidst the policy makers.

"Don't let your rank get to your head, Sephiroth. I won't stand for this," Hojo said, scrunching up the paper and dropping it on the floor. "You can't get away with blocking me out, I won't let you. The company won't let you.

"Really."

"SOLDIER is only as strong as I make it. That includes you and all your little friends. The President knows it, and so do you. You owe me," he hissed like a self satisfied snake. "And if I won't treating our newest SOLDIER, I will expect you down in my lab promptly tomorrow morning, to fill the time I set aside."

Sephiroth's jaw clenched. He didn't have the authority to say no, so he said nothing at all. Hojo would almost certainly make whatever tests he ran more unpleasant than normal just out of spite. Sephiroth refused to be moved. Shepard was his secret weapon, not Hojos.
Hojo's head tilted at his silence. "You're being awfully protective. Attractive, is she?" he asked with a mocking tone. His beady eyes watched him like a hawk.

"Don't be absurd." Deciding the conversation was over, Sephiroth turned and started to walk away.

"And Tseng helped bring her in." Hojo said, as though talking to himself. "From... Mideel." His voice held a strange note that Sephiroth couldn't identify. He paused and looked back at the scientist. Hojo had a peculiar look on his face and his head angled down. He looked like a vulture waiting for something to finish dying.

"What of it?" Sephiroth asked impatiently.

He didn't answer. He gave a smile that conceded no happiness and started to walk away.

"Good day, General." He called as he shuffled away.

Midgar was what the Turian government would have described as 'Everything wrong with humanity.'

A sprawling mess of slums decomposed beneath a giant metal platform that held up the wealthy and thriving districts on top of the huge plate. The upper streets and suburbs were quite pleasant. They were expensive looking and well lit, with only the slightest stench of the slums seeping up from below.

In the centre of it all was an oddly shaped skyscraper that dominated the skyline. Shinra's headquarters. To Shepard's eyes the city looked like a chunk of Omega that someone had tried to cover up with a slice of Ilium.

With a steely gaze and squared shoulders she marched into the foyer, determined to began her career as a SOLDIER, as opposed to her days as the non-capitalised version.

Excited people over ten years younger than her milled around the part of the foyer labelled 'enlistment', all clamouring for their chance at fame and glory. It made her downright nostalgic.

When was the last time she had heard anyone talking about war with so much hope in their voice? Here the prospect of an upcoming war, which Sephiroth and Tseng had pointedly failed to mention she now realised, was something exciting and promising.

She could almost envy their obliviousness.

Cissnei pointed her in the right direction, up to the 49th floor.

The upper floors were much quieter. The walls were carpeted and had tasteful wooden edging that she almost didn't realise were patterned plastic.

A weathered old SOLDIER met her just outside the elevator with crossed arms and a scowl. He looked like a less tattooed version of Zaeed, and introduced himself as Sergeant Guzzard. He stank of cheap cigars and his nose was crooked from one too many breaks but he wore his uniform well, his back was straight and his eyes alert.

"So you're Shepard," he said in a thick gravelly voice.

"Yes sir," she replied. She so was relieved to see someone who actually looked like they belonged in an army, she instinctively snapped off the salute she'd completely forgotten around Sephiroth. All these kids running around playing at war were making her feel old. She'd been an N7 for so long;
she'd almost forgotten what it was like to be a young hopeful at the bottom of the pile.

"Don't think we've ever had a woman before." He eyed her suspiciously.

She didn't reply.

"Still, you look more capable then the eager young bucks all scrambling for a beating, that's something. You might actually be able to take a hit or two."

"More than two, sir."

"That's what I'm here to find out." He turned and led her down one of the corridors. "The General wants to run you through a whole mess of training sims to see if you're any good. Then we'll slap you with a uniform and you can march in line with the rest of us."

Several hours later, after a slew of standard physical exercises and tests, she stood in a surprisingly advanced virtual reality room. She was wearing borrowed combat gear and strapping to her back the gun she'd chosen from a rack of weapons. It was an old rifle, clunky and rudimentary with no targeting system beyond a glass scope. The ammo was cumbersome and she could only carry eight shots. She'd just have to make them count.

"No sword?" Guzzard asked, his voice projected out from a control booth.

"Not my style," she called back with a slight smile.

"Suit yourself. Don't know what Sephiroth's thinking..." she heard him mutter before he turned off the microphone.

The simulation solidified around her, the virtual reality almost flawless.

She stood in the undergrowth of a rainforest. It was hot and humid and humming with life. Between the leaves she caught glimpses of a tall building off to her right. She could probably get a decent vantage point from up there.

The goal of the mission was simple: survive, and kill three 'Rapps,' whatever they were. The way Guzzard had said 'three' gave her the distinct impression there were at least four of these creatures running around.

She had asked him what they were. He said she'd know 'em when she saw 'em, which wasn't much use at all.

She started jogging towards the building, purposefully making noise and leaving a trail. Some of the birds stopped singing, tiny lizards skittered out of the way and the jungle grew quieter in her wake.

Perfect.

She didn't come across anything big enough to be a threat. It didn't seem likely that they put her here to hunt parrots. Whatever the Rapps were, they might take a bit more patience to find.

She skidded to a halt when she got a good view of the building. It was… a pagoda? That was unexpected, but then no less likely than finding English speaking humans on an undiscovered planet.

Shrugging it off, she checked the doors. All locked. It didn't matter really; she was hunting wildlife, not Taoism.

She turned and started climbing up the side.
There was a brief twinge of her conscience at brazenly scaling the side of what might have been a religious building, but it was just a simulation. And it wasn't like she hadn't already had a gun fight in the temple of Athame.

The elaborately carved red pillars made for excellent handholds. She swiftly shimmied up the first three levels. Now she was paused for a moment just beneath the upturned corner of the last level's roof.

She was thinking through the most convenient way to haul herself up when she heard a shriek and a snap of large wings. For a split second she grimaced because of course it would turn out to be a flying creature. Tossing convenience to the wind she swung herself up onto the roof and drew out the gun in one movement.

A sinewy creature with yellow and red scales streaked past, its jaws snapping loudly at where she’d been half a second earlier. Its ragged wings were almost translucent as it flew past, not a hair's breadth from her face. She instantly pulled the trigger, hitting the centre of its chest. It shrieked dreadfully, wings jerking wildly in its death throes before it fell from the sky.

One down.

A second screech sounded from the inside the forest canopy beneath her. She turned in that direction only for another call to respond from the other side of the building. And then a third from the opposite side of the forest. Soon choruses of the piercing shrieks were sounding from every direction, the cacophony nearly deafening.

She reloaded.

The shrieking was joined by the sound of dozens of pairs of wings starting to flap. Then the long bony creatures were taking to the sky, countless streaks of yellow and green shooting up from the canopy and then stretching their wings to catch the air currents around the pagoda. Most had wing spans of about four metres.

Shepard took aim at the biggest one and fired. The recoil was weak and the weight of the rifle not nearly as heavy as she felt it ought to be, but the shot was a good one. The Rapp's head suddenly had a hole through it and it fell back to the ground silently. The others screamed all the louder at the sound of the gunshot and flew at her in a frenzy.

She leapt back and tossed a biotic throw at them. The blue explosion of power shoved them all back violently and she immediately raised the gun again.

Three shots. Three Rapps fell. She darted backwards and forwards on the roof to avoid getting dive bombed or pushed off.

She'd met the first requirement, kill three of the things. But the simulation hadn't ended and she only had three bullets left. Over a dozen of them were still screeching around her. Several were making swooping passes at her, and she suspected their breath was poisonous because she was feeling oddly faint. Two more landed on the edge of the roof, the claws at the end of their wings long and sharp as they dug into the clay baked tiles.

She threw up a biotic barrier and aimed at the one about to swoop passed her. She shot it and the one behind it in quick succession, then turned and used her last bullet on the closest one climbing up behind her.

Its friend leapt in to take its place. She skidded back on loose tiles, barely dodging its teeth but not
the barbed tail. Her feet were knocked out from under her and the creature darted forward, its teeth flashing. She smacked it in the face with the butt of the rifle, and then jumped to her feet and followed it up with biotic punch. It's screeching halted with a wet crunch and its heavy body collapsed back off the roof.

Now out of ammo, she dropped the gun and raised her arms with a deep breath. Her biotics surged around her.

She hung a swirling singularity overhead and half the creatures were caught in it. Her hand kept snaking towards her wrist where her omni tool usually rested. It wasn't there of course, it was still broken, and she tried to refocus. She'd just have to fight without her tactical cloak and overload. The loss of her omni-blade was maddening.

The remaining Rapps weren't keeping their distance anymore and she tore them apart with countless warps and shockwaves that made it impossible for them to fly. She jumped back and forth on the roof, her hands outstretched and power pulsing in her minds grip.

Gravity betrayed them, fluxing in the air without warning. Wings were shredded and the long gangly bodies were violently impaled on the trees below as they suddenly found their weight quadrupled.

Finally the last Rapp staggered onto the Pagoda roof before her. Its wings were in tatters and blood was pouring from its fang filled mouth. It gave a bloody shriek of pain and outrage and then charged.

She charged as well, her biotics surging around her.

The force on impact was crushing and the creatures rocketed back off the roof. Its twisted limbs didn't even twitch as it fell back to the forest.

Shepard gave a quiet sigh and checked around her once last time that nothing was sneaking up on her.

The simulation finally halted around her. The forest and Pagoda turned pixelated for a moment before descending into plain metal walls again.

Guzzard stomped down from the control booth, heavy combat boots clanking on the steps. When he got to her level he gave her a considering stare for a moment.

"Welcome to SOLDIER," he said finally. "I'm promoting you to Second Class."

"What does that mean?" she asked. Hadn't she already been accepted into SOLDIER?

"Means you're good. Damn good. No point wasting everyone's time giving you Third Class missions. Hell, you aren't even enhanced yet."

"If I can keep up, does it really matter?"

"Not yet maybe but it will if they promote you. You get given stronger enhancements every time you go up a Class, since by then we know you're strong enough to handle it and you should have a high enough tolerance."

"I'll cross that bridge when I get there."

"Fair enough," he said with a shrug. She understood now why he had been assigned to sorting her out. He had a remarkable ability to just accept whatever was happening and not ask any inconvenient questions. He barely even blinked at her biotic display.
"So, here's your ID and key-cards, your uniform will be delivered to your quarters by the end of the day." He looked at her figure doubtfully. "We don't make 'em to be all... shapey, but it ought to be serviceable at least."

"I'll wear it with pride," she said, eyeing the black sweater and metal pauldrons he was wearing and wondering if hers would be similar.

"You'd better. That's a very prestigious rank I just gave you, SOLDIER."

"Thank you, sir."

"Looking forward to working with you, Shepad."

"Likewise." She smiled back.
The sun set on Shepard's first day in Midgar and she sat on the narrow bed in her new living quarters. The room was tiny, with no windows, thin walls, and a low roof. It wasn't anywhere near the Second Class barracks and she shared her bathroom with a horde of accountants during the day and the army of janitors at night. She had a suspicion that whoever was in charge of this sort of thing had not anticipated having to house a woman and simply settled for the most convenient closet.

It was more spacious than what any new recruit would get on an Alliance cruiser, so she couldn't complain too loudly. No fish tank though.

Was Traynor still feeding her fish, she wondered, or the little tropical fish all died in the Crucible blast. Had Traynor survived the blast? ...had anyone?

She collapsed back onto the narrow bed. She shouldn't be worrying about her team; they could take care of themselves. It was a disservice to them to act as though they needed her constant supervision.

She just wished she knew if they'd survived. Just knowing if they were alive would be enough. Was the Normandy still flying? She didn't miss earth, her ship was her home. Tali tinkering in Engineering, Joker at the helm, and Chakwas telling her to get some sleep already. A smile ghosted across her face as she thought of her beloved stealth frigate, sleek ablative plating glinting in the starlight, and a perfectly calibrated Thanix cannon.

It had been crewed by the best the Galaxy had to offer. Before the ranks began to thin. They hadn't lost anyone going through the Omega 4 relay, but Ashley had already fallen. And then Mordin sacrificed himself. Legion.

Thane.

His green face and soulful black eyes flickered through her mind's eye, that barely perceptible smile tugging at his lips. She gave a quiet sigh. Life was for living, but there was so much loss. Who could blame her for wanting to look back? She didn't want to be stuck in the past, but there wasn't all that much left in the present.

Even Anderson was gone.

She hadn't seen all that much of Anderson over the past few years. They both had their own careers and the Alliance sent them wherever they were needed, but he had once taken Shepard under his wing and ushered her into a world she would thrive in. He hadn't blinked at her biotics or the suspicious circumstances of her enlistment; he'd just seen a woman with potential and helped her reach it. He always had.

Right up until that moment as they sat together in the citadel, both dying, the remainders of sword fleet silently battling the Reapers before them.

Moisture collected in her eyes. She brushed it away with a frustrated scowl.

_Sufficient._

She got up, marched to the cramped bathroom, and splashed some water on her face. Then she sat down at the tiny desk and dumped her Omni tool in front of her.

There was work to be done.
Determination kept her focused on the ‘tool, tinkering with the hardware. There wasn’t time to wallow in despair. The thought that, really, she had all the time in the world was pointedly cut off. Her brow furrowed and she worked diligently.

The Omni tool's interface kept flickering, but wouldn't responding to any commands yet.

She wasn’t a technical expert, but she did have a passing interest in the workings of all her devices. It had started due to sheer pragmatism but been egged on by Tali’s insistence on over explaining all these things.

Using the small toolkit that she kept in her armour, she tinkered away and wondered why it was trying to project at all. She couldn't have left it on, she had used it at the Crucible controls. After the blast it was miraculous that it hadn't just been completely fried. As it was, the battery was still working and the hardware had sustained minimal damage.

It flickered again; she could barely make out the projection as an error message. She recognized the error number, and her brow pulled down in confusion. That didn’t sound right.

She kept working and her mind drifted back to the day before, when she'd woken up on this strange, impossible, little planet.

A couple of things didn't stack up. Besides all the immediately obvious things.

How had they known, so confidently, that she was from off world? If they were truly so cut off from the rest of the galaxy then how could they possibly have seen a mostly normal human being in funny armour and immediately connected the dots?

They didn't have biotics, perhaps that clued them in. That said they did have their own combat powers. She'd read Shinra's policy on Materia use and had no idea what to make of it. Surely it would make more sense for them to assume she'd just found a rare Materia type, or had some kind of strange mutation, or was a rogue experiment in human enhancement?

Of all the possible explanations 'Alien' just seemed like the most contrived, no matter how accurate it was in this case.

Then again, maybe this was a common occurrence. There could be a whole slew of Off-Worlders all working for Shinra and pretending to be locals.

Her Omni tool flickered again, brighter this time. It looked like it had definitely been tampered with. It was probably from whatever inept attempts at using it Shinra had made when they first found her. There was no way they'd have been able to navigate it.

The picture solidified. The tool whirled and the glowing interface around her arm projected out a diagram. That definitely wasn't what she'd left it doing. Her eyes narrowed.

The diagram showed a 3D map of the Sol System with details of the final deployment plans for the Sword fleets. The data must have been corrupted because as the plan progressed it kept glitching at the Turian and Quarian fleets and then restarting.

Well now, that explained how they knew she wasn't from around town. But it opened up a wealth of much more pressing questions.

How could they have known how to use it at all? It hadn't been going when she'd woken up in the city, though she didn't know how much damage it had suffered at the time.
Even if it was working, how did they hack into it? You needed the appropriate microchip either in your fingers or gloves for the haptics to recognize your touch. These plans weren't just sitting there unguarded for everyone to see, this was top secret intel for the Reaper War. It wasn't even human technology! Her Omni tool had been upgraded with Geth tech, something Legion had helped make for her. It didn't have any similarities to Gaia's computing systems whatsoever.

She depowered the device and hauled her rifle onto the table, a scowl still lining her face.

Someone here knew more than they were letting on. And they were hoping she'd just play along.

She started taking the black widow apart, every piece methodically broken down, cleaned, and then reassembled. Soon the heavy anti-material rifle was in perfect working order and glistening before her.

If the people here knew so very much, you'd think they'd be a little more cautious about letting her roam their halls.

She could be an infiltrator. A war criminal.

Or a Spectre.

Shepard walked through Shinra headquarters wearing their uniform but with her own weapon strapped to her back. Her armour would take a lot longer to fix, her Omni tool's fabricator was small and would take its own sweet time, not to mention she didn't have a lot of resources to work with just yet. In the meantime she didn't mind letting everyone see her in the proper uniform like a good little soldier.

By the time she donned the N7 armour again they would know that it meant something.

The morning had been filled with learning the ropes of what was supposed to be her new routine. She'd been issued what looked like a clunky old cell phone that everyone insisted on calling a PHS that her missions would be emailed to.

SOLDIER functioned like an elite black ops squad. She wasn't expected to fold her bed and salute and do guard duty. All she had was her own missions. They would come with some parameters but for the most part they could be completed however she saw fit. Sometimes she might have several infantrymen working under her command, or she might be called to work with one or two other SOLDIERs. Beyond that, she didn't know what anyone else was doing and they didn't know what she was doing.

It was very clandestine for a unit supposedly designed to kill wildlife.

It also meant there was little camaraderie between the SOLDIERs. There was a uniting pride in the SOLDIER name, but as they all did their own missions independently there was more competition then loyalty between the rank and file.

She entered the SOLDIER mess; it was filled with the buzz of conversation and the smell of burnt food and sweaty men. There were about 60 of them, all SOLDIERs, and many were staring at her. She supposed she did look a bit different. They all had glowing blue eyes and most had swords on their backs, while she had a sniper rifle and artificial optic feeds that reflected unnaturally in the light. The looks she was getting ranged from angry to curious to leering.

Ignoring them all, she collected a tray of food, sat at an empty table, and stared down lunch. She had no idea what it was supposed to be, but it looked like it was mere seconds away from developing
sentience. She fancied it could be a distant cousin of the Thorian.

She hazarded a glance at the closest table. It was populated by Second Classes enthusiastically eating the slurry. Most looked about twenty years old. Some were older, thankfully, but most were not. The Thirds at the next table were even younger than that.

Shepard was thirty one.

She suppressed a sigh and dug into her gloopy lunch.

Chewing on something with a slightly crunchier texture then the rest of her meal, she absently wondered what Garrus might be up to.

"Get lost on the way to the Turk floor, did you?"

She looked up.

A tall, scrawny kid in a Third Class uniform stood in front of her table with his arms crossed. He spoke loudly, like he was trying to catch an audience. A few others turned to look.

"Because you sure as hell aren't a SOLDIER."

What was this, hazing? She hadn't seen that in ages. Alliance academies didn't stand for it, and nobody had been dumb enough to pick on her at N school. Given how thrilled he was looking at the attention, the Third Class was trying to prove how big and tough he was. He was going to be quite disappointed.

"Did you need something?" she asked blandly.

"Me? No. But you look like you do. Like, say, a real weapon." He let his hand brush the hilt of the sword on his back and gave her his best sneer. "And some actual enhancements. Not whatever the hell you got stuck with."

"Really," she replied. More people were looking now, but the Third was getting frustrated at her lack of reaction. Maybe he wanted her to get up and yell, but she hadn't negotiated numerous ceasefires as well as humanity's place on the Citadel by screaming every time someone insulted her.

"You haven't earned that uniform. If you were any kind of SOLDIER you would get up and fight like one. I bet I could break you like a twig." He rolled his shoulders and stepped back. "You think you can stack up to a real SOLDIER?"

They had quite an audience now, mostly other Third and Second classes, all waiting to see what she would do. There was a bit of jeering from the crowd but most were just there for the show.

She leaned back in her seat and considered him. He was nineteen, at most, and not as bulky as most of the others muscle bound SOLDIERs. Instead he was wiry with dirty blond hair and had a desperate look in his eye that said he had something to prove.

"I don't beat up kids," she said. If she took him up on the challenge, he'd just be an angry, broken kid. A couple of SOLDIERs laughed.

"Who do you think you are, bitch?" he snapped, stepped forward.

"Got a name, soldier?" she asked, refusing to stand. She wasn't going to be the one getting angry and making of a fool of themselves.
"Peterson," he said, re-crossing his arms.

"Tell me, Third Class Peterson, do you frequently mouth off to your superiors?" she asked. "Looking to get charged with insubordination?" She fixed him with a steely gaze that he didn't know how to react to. "Or maybe you just don't have enough to do."

His bravado wavered under her scrutiny. He stepped back.

"I've got plenty to do," he said nervously, eyeing the exit.

"Then I suggest you get to it, soldier."

"Uh, yeah…" He made to walk off towards another group of Third Classes.

She pointedly cleared her throat and he froze.

"Yes…?"

He winced and his shoulders slumped.

"Yes, ma'am."

Their audience snickered. She shot them a sharp look as well and most looked away. These were the elite, huh?

She returned her attention to her lunch, silently dismissing the Third. Peterson slunk away, presumably to nurse his wounded pride back to health somewhere. The other SOLDIERs went back to whatever it was they were doing, a couple still sending her sly looks. Some looked disappointed that nobody had punched anyone.

Someone else sat themselves down in the seat opposite her. She looked up to see Guzzard, giving her a crooked smile. In this light his eyes glowed a lot stronger than she'd noticed the previous day. Now that she had more context for the situation, she realised his black uniform signified him as a First Class.

"Shepard," he greeted, placing his own lunch down on the table.

"Afternoon, Guzzard," she said, nodding respectfully.

"Acclimatized then?" he asked, giving an amused look to the other end of the hall where Peterson had disappeared to, shoving a spoonful into his mouth.

"Oh yes," she said, glad someone was in on the joke.

Fortunately there was a reason she was in the SOLDIER cafeteria and it wasn't to pull rank on rookies or even the intriguing mix of slimy and crunchy that the stew had achieved. Given a recent burst of promotions through the enhanced ranks, they were all meant to be in the mess hall to hear a speech by the General.

Despite having been in Midgar for barely a day, Shepard had already been bombarded with tales of Sephiroth. Apparently he was quite the legend.

It wasn't long before the much lauded General appeared. An awed silence descended.

He looked the same as he did when she'd met him in the Junon hospital. His sword was sheathed but he didn't look any more relaxed than when he'd been seconds away from running her through.
According to Shinra's large glossy posters this was the most powerful SOLDIER in existence, with the quickest rise through the ranks in history, and a dozen other such claims.

It all sounded very impressive but SOLDIER itself wasn't even thirty years old. And he had the quickest rise through the ranks in Shinra's history, which was about half a century. Maybe she was being overly critical but after fighting alongside warriors like Wrex and Samara who each had about a thousand years of combat experience; her standards were rather high. They had to be; Reapers didn't much care for propaganda.

His long untied hair and no shirt/leather jacket combo would never be permitted in the Alliance high command regardless of how skilled he was. Shepard wasn't one to get caught up in regulations though. He was closer to standard regs then Jack had ever been, and she had more than proven her mettle.

He looked 25, at most. This unparalleled skill he apparently wielded was something she had to see for herself. And he had better be as tremendously talented as everybody said, because they were asking her to put her life and the lives of the people under her in his hands. His barely 25 year old hands.

She supposed this was how centuries old Asari felt when humans started demanding everyone take them seriously.

She scolded herself for making assumptions. Grunt made an excellent leader and technically he was barely two years old, although extensive genetic manipulation was responsible there. Semantics. She had no reason to assume Sephiroth couldn't be a perfectly capable General. She would just have to wait and see.

While she mused over the situation, he spoke to the seated hall of SOLDIERs. It was a very standard 'Congratulations, work hard and we'll throw medals at you' affair. Everyone around her was drinking in his every word as though he was commending them individually for existing. Guzzard was apparently immune, but the younger ones especially were in awe.

Was she missing something? He was reasonably charismatic and he had an imposing look definitely but he was still just a reserved man who looked like he'd already made this speech a few dozen times already.

Having said his piece he swept out again. The entire room seemed to sigh with disappointed as he left.

This level of hero worship wasn't healthy. She was distinctly reminded of Conrad Verner. Surely this wasn't an entire army of Conrads. Fate wouldn't be that cruel.

Would it?
Healthy Competition

Chapter 5

Shepard’s Omni-tool was perched on her desk, propped up by a rickety frame of things she'd pieced together in the vain hope that they might boost the signal.

She was standing off to the side, holding up the hopelessly outdated radio she'd butchered, with its long antenna bumping against the roof. The modified radio was partly attached to the Omni-tool, and partly a mess of wires haphazardly spilling out everywhere (she'd never realised just how many wires old fashioned tech used). Whether or not it would make even the slightest difference she had no idea.

She was working on the vague hope that there might be a com-buoy in the system or even a passing ship. On its own the device's signal wasn't going to be strong enough to reach anything beyond the atmosphere though so she'd need a signal booster. The training she'd gotten at N school had included how to jerry-rig an Omni-tool to reach the local system's com-buoy but most of that had consisted of breaking down other electronics. The bits and pieces she was working with here weren't made from the same primary components and weren't even slightly compatible. It had taken a lot of improvising and refabricating to get them to even connect.

But on the off chance that there was a com-buoy in the system that had somehow survived the Reapers, it was worth any amount of effort.

She held up the radio's antenna and leaned over to check the 'tool.

"Come on…” she mumbled to herself while it searched for a connection again.

It gave a plaintive little 'beep.'

No signal.

Her shoulders drooped and she dropped the radio on the table with a frustrated sigh.

Giving up entirely for the moment she re-attached the Omni-tool, scooped up her gun, and made for the door. She'd spent over four hours trying to get something, anything, from the communicator and found nothing but silence. It was time for a break.

She stalked down Shinra's corridors, still feeling uncomfortable in the scratchy purple uniform. It wasn't exactly terrible but she felt almost incomplete without her plate armour these days, the N7 logo proudly displayed on her chest.

The fabricator on her Omni tool was still working overtime trying to crank out all the missing pieces of her armour, as well as more heat sinks, as fast as possible. It wasn't nearly fast enough.

As for the heat sinks, she hadn't figured out a viable solution for her limited supply problem. The Widow line of rifles hadn't been designed until after the shift from automatic cooling to the heat sink system. The Widow's design was just too demanding for the old system. Hell, it was almost too demanding for the new system. So for now she was stuck just collecting all her used heat sinks at the end of every mission and waiting for them to cool.

Altogether she had four heat sinks, so that was twelve shots.

So far, the most she had used on any Shinra mission was two.
She felt distinctly underutilised.

Admittedly she'd been among Shinra's ranks for barely a week now, but they'd sent her out on four missions. Each appallingly easy, all hunting the sort of wildlife that an aggressive stomp could probably handle.

It was understandable, they didn't know what she was capable of yet or whether or not she could really be trusted. It was simply pragmatism.

It was also insulting and starting to get on her nerves.

They could kill their own damn razor-weed. This was not what she'd joined the armed forces for.

Turning down the corridors that Guzzard had shown her on that first day, she made her way to the VR training room. Second Classes were permitted to run virtual practice missions in their down time and she was keen to put the system through its paces.

Ever since the little incident in the cafeteria she had largely been left alone by the others. Many of Third Classes seemed to resent her for skipping straight to second but they kept their complaints to themselves. The Firsts and other Seconds only regarded her with either indifference or passing curiosity.

The door slid open to the control booth only to reveal two SOLDIERs already there.

They wore the same uniform she did. The closest one had black hair and a solid square jawline. The other had red hair and much sharper features. They were both tall and muscled and carried regulation swords on their backs.

Neither them had turned around when the door opened, both too focused on the control desk.

"You're late." The black haired one called over his shoulder, still not looking at her.

"Excuse me?" She asked.

"Oh, sorry," He said, turning around at her voice and then looking quite embarrassed. "I thought you were… somebody else. Shepard right?"

Now that they were facing her she could see the tell-tale glow in their eye. They both looked like they were in their mid-twenties. The black haired one regarded her with curiosity and the red head with suspicion.

"Yeah, Comma- …uh, just Shepard." She corrected herself awkwardly before she claimed a rank she didn't hold on this planet. That would take a lot of getting used to. "Sorry if I interrupted, I didn't know this room was in use." She said.

"Don't worry about it; it can be pretty hard to find a free VR room this time of day." said the black haired SOLDIER.

Dammit. She really wanted to shoot something.

"You can train with us if you like," offered the red head, "Assuming you can keep up." He finished, looking at her with narrowed eyes.

His friend rolled his eyes at him.

"I'm Angeal," he said, before gesturing at the red head who was still deciding if he was going to be
friendly or hostile. "And this is Genesis."

"Nice to meet you." She stuck her hand out and Angeal shook it.

"If you don't mind my asking," Genesis began, in a manner that implied she almost certainly would
mind, "During the phoenix attack on Junon, what was that attack you used?"

"Bullets." She replied.

He gave her a frustrated look, Angeal just chuckled. She wanted to wait and see what people thought
of her Biotics before she gave any explanation.

"I meant against the phoenix itself." Genesis said, sounding aggravated. "We saw the footage and
that definitely wasn't materia. If it wasn't for whatever spell that was, both you and your oversized
gun would have been splattered against the sidewalk."

Now it was Shepard's turn to narrow her eyes. She'd been enduring snide insults to her fighting style
all week and frankly she was sick of it. She didn't need validation for her ability to kill things, but a
basic degree of respect would have been nice.

"I think you underestimate me and my oversized gun." She said with an edge in her tone.

"I doubt that." Genesis replied, flicking his almost-too-long-for-regulation hair out of his eyes and
crossing his arms.

"It's a hell of a lot more useful than waving around a metal stick." She said, taking undue satisfaction
from the scandalised expressions she received.

"Hey!" Angeal cried. His hand instinctively moved to his blade's hilt as though to protect it from her
nasty words.

"Metal stick." Genesis repeated in disgust, sounding like he was building up to a rant.
"Swordsmanship is an art! To fight with a blade is to be bold and courageous, standing face to face
with your enemy and-"

"-And just begging to get your head ventilated. There is no good reason to close with an enemy
when you can get the job done at range." She'd had this argument countless times with Thane. He
had preferred hand to hand but she didn't see the point when you had a perfectly good rifle and a
sniper nest. Why snap necks when you can explode heads?

"Now hang on, you have better control of the fight from close range." Angeal said, abandoning his
offence at the subject in favour of critical analysis.

"But a better view of the battle field from a distance." She replied. "Not to mention less chance of
getting impaled or having your head cut off."

"That would depend entirely on the skill of the swordsman." Genesis said, sounding offended by the
entire conversation.

"If there's a sniper watching then he wouldn't last long enough for it to even be a factor." Shepard
said. She should know. Many of Cerberus' Phantom troopers had been efficiently removed from the
equation before they even drew their blades. She had made a point of it.

Angeal looked thoughtful but Genesis was getting riled up. Way too easy to goad, that one. She'd
have to remember that.
"Care to put your boasts to the test?" He asked, nodding towards the simulation room before them.

Was he kidding?

"My weapon isn't exactly conducive to sparring." She said.

"Wait a minute, Genesis-" Began Angeal but he was swiftly interrupted.

"She came here to fight, didn't you?" Genesis said, directing the last part at her. "And you do have that mystery attack of yours, whatever it is."

She gave him an assessing look and wondered, not for the first time, what exactly an enhanced SOLDIER was capable of.

He was obviously spoiling for a fight. But then, she was too. And she had come here looking for some combat practise; she may as well show them how it was done.

"Alright." She said, a sharp smile briefly crossing her face. "Did you want to set any conditions? How much should I pull my punches?"

He scoffed. "*All that awaits you is a sombre morrow, no matter where the winds may blow.*"

She blinked and Angeal just gave a resigned sigh.

"What?" she asked.

"Ugh, uncultured too." Genesis said, drawing his sword and opening the door to the simulation room.

"Do you actually know how to use that thing or are you just here to talk?" She commented, following him out and drawing her rifle.

Sephiroth took the last corner to the VR room.

He was late.

This was not a position he often found himself in, but he wasn't about to run. He was hardly to be blamed that the meeting had run late, they would simply have to wait for him.

It irritated him that he felt guilty about it.

Angeal probably wouldn't mind. Genesis almost certainly would. But then the melodramatic Second could get angry over almost anything.

Sephiroth didn't understand what the two friends thought they were doing. He hadn't known them very long and they weren't close but still they insisted on bothering him. Most people were afraid of fighting him. The bold might try once, but nobody dared try a second time. He had lost count of the number of times Genesis and Angeal had challenged him to a fight.

Genesis had first challenged him to a duel about a year ago and he'd warily accepted. He'd won, of course, by a landslide.

He had expected that to be the end of it but the determined man insisted on repeating the challenge, even though he clearly had no chance against the First Class General. Sephiroth eventually accepted the renewed challenge if only to make him go away but was then surprised to find Genesis actually
adapting to his fighting style. He still didn't stand a chance of course, but no one could deny that he was improving. At an alarmingly fast rate in fact. Not that Sephiroth would ever tell him that, the contentious would-be-poet was irritating enough without further encouragement.

Angeal on the other had would fight if asked but he wasn't driven by the competition like his friend was. He just seemed to want to… talk. He would ask what Sephiroth was getting up to, where was he going afterwards, what he thought about the latest recruits, and endless other harmless things. He wasn't nagging; he was simply 'friendly'. For no apparent reason.

There didn't appear to be any power grab at play, and now that the initial wonderment has worn off they weren't even all that awed by him. What could they possibly want?

Sephiroth was baffled.

Angeal was alone in the control booth when he arrived. In the simulation room before them Genesis was gleefully throwing fireballs at someone in an industrial complex. A sliver of irritation slid across Sephiroth's expression. He hadn't been endlessly nagged into sparring against Genesis, again, for him to just lose interest before he even arrived.

"Hope you don't mind we started without you." Angeal said, giving him an apologetic look before focusing on the fight again.

"Who is he fighting?" Sephiroth asked.

A second later the fire exploded out, flinging Genesis halfway across an open concrete area.

Shepard stepped out of a burning halo, completely untouched inside a glowing blue barrier.

Most of his irritation leaked away in favour of curiosity. He'd reviewed the footage of her against the Rapps in the pagoda. How would the unenhanced SOLDIER fare against a high calibre melee opponent?

The glow of her barrier lost its shape and swirled in around her hands. A second later she sent it rocketed towards Genesis, picking him up and sending him slamming back down onto the concrete.

Genesis kept his head enough to send an electrical spell at her, even while suspended in mid-air. The descent was swift and brutal though.

He recovered quickly, leaping back to his feet, even if his balance was shaken. Falling back on his materia he showered her in lightning bolts and fireballs.

She dove out of the way, responding with her own fire and electrical bursts sent from the device on her arm. Every time Genesis tried to approach and force the fight into a melee she would sent him hurtling back with her blue power. Even his materia, undoubtedly his greatest strength, wasn't getting through her solid defences.

Whatever the power was it appeared to be centred around telekinesis and it was frustrating Genesis to no end.

Sephiroth supressed a smirk at that. Genesis was frequently infuriated when he couldn't force a fight to his advantage and Sephiroth had come to find it very amusing.

Shepard picked him up with her mind and flung him across the area again.

He regained control quicker this time and landed on his feet. He held his sword at the ready but his
opponent was suddenly nowhere to be seen.

Sephiroth blinked in confusion. She had been there a second ago. He scanned the area, searching the grey concrete slabs, the rusting chains, and steel girders. Where was she?

Genesis spun around in search of his opponent, a look of concentration on his face and his materia glowing fiercely on his bracer.

Shepard appeared again on the top of a skeletal tower, her rifle raised.

Genesis barely caught sight of her in time for the deafening *Bang* that was loud even in the control booth.

Sephiroth's curiosity immediately evaporated in favour of alarm. He'd seen footage of what that rifle could do and Genesis' shields weren't nearly as strong as he thought they were. His hand snapped to the control panel before him.

The first shot tore through Genesis' shield and the second threw him back, but strangely there was no blood. Instead Sephiroth's attention was drawn to the wealth of purpling bruises he had.

"'Concussive rounds' apparently." Angeal said, still watching with his arms crossed. "She said it won't kill him, but it still looks pretty painful."

It did look painful, but Genesis still leaped back to his feet. He was never one to stay down; the ambitious Second just didn't know when to stop.

A third shot sounded and his sword flew out of his hand. Sephiroth grudgingly admitted it was a very good shot. And that Genesis was never going to live this down.

He would have preferred she just get completely flattened. SOLDIER was the best Gaia had to offer, seeing one of his own men so easily pummelled by this alien woman was getting embarrassing.

Genesis snarled in outrage and flung his hand towards her, his materia crackling in response. Shepard dove out of the way as a burst of electricity raced towards her and suddenly she was falling from the tower, a fall too tall for a normal human to survive.

She didn't scream, there wasn't a flicker of panic on her face. Barely three meters from the ground her blue power swelled around her again drastically slowing her descent. Her plummet went from an uncontrolled fall to a graceful landing in less than a second.

Genesis saw the fight wasn't over and was moving already. His sword was swept back up and he sprinted at her, ready to force and ending. At the last possible moment the device on her arm came to life. So fast even Sephiroth could barely see what had happened the orange hologram extended out with a short blade.

She spun and deflected Genesis' sword, sending him staggering back. Before he could recover Shepard had disappeared again, and then she was suddenly in front of him, her blade held to his throat.

Genesis froze. Then he gave a frustrated sigh and threw his sword down.

"I thought you didn't fight close range!" He demanded, trying to look like he wasn't breathing hard.

"I don't like to," Shepard said with a sharp smile, "that doesn't mean I can't."
Friendly Interrogations

Shepard sat perfectly still, her eye fixed to the scope.

The sector seven slums stretched out before her, unaware of the Spectre perched atop the tallest building she could find. It was an abandoned hotel that had since been taken over by squatters who had abandoned it in turn after being driven away by wildlife. Shepard made quick work of the bizarre wolves living in the area and then set up a comfortable nest on the roof.

She hadn't moved since.

"You know, most SOLDIERs would go to the target." Cissnei said from beside her, diligently polishing a large four pointed shuriken.

Shepard just smiled. Nearly a mile away the train graveyard was in her sights. She watched the smashed window of the seventh carriage on a derelict train.

The young Turk had shown up halfway through her vigil and politely asked if she could watch.

At least she'd had the decency to ask. It was more than could be said of the other Turks who had tried shadowing her. She wondered if it had anything to do with her already claiming the highest vantage point in the Sector, short of the plate itself. Cissnei had waited patiently while Shepard remained frozen in the same position for what felt like hours. Boredom eventually set in and she'd taken out her shuriken and checked it for nicks and scratches.

There was movement in the train. Dust was kicked up, but nothing Shepard couldn't aim through. All the lighting beneath the plate was dim, but even more so in the train graveyard. Thankfully there was no wind down here and no artificial gravity fields to throw off her aim.

She took a steady breath in, and then slowly let it out.

The bulky form of the eligor passed the window, its misshapen head in her sights half a second later.

*BANG*

The creature collapsed before the echoes of her shot had subsided.

With a small smile she leaned back. Then she started folding up her rifle. Mission accomplished, job well done, time to go home.

"Nice shot." Cissnei said absently, swinging her shuriken onto her back. "I wish we'd recruited you into the Turks."

"It's not like we're on different sides. We are working for the same people you know." Shepard replied, not for the first time wondering what exactly the Turks were after. She could handle the surveillance, but she liked to have a little more context for it the situation. Was it simply judicious caution that had them watching her, or was there something more to it?

"Yeah but you're wasted amoung those muscle bound jar-heads. They've got you hunting eligor for goodness sake."

"Oh? Is this beneath your Turk dignity?" she asked with a wry smile.

"It's beneath my Turk paygrade." Cissnei responded with a smile of her own.
Shepard snorted.

"Come on. Are you going back to HQ?" She asked.

Cissnei shook her head. "Want to get something to eat first? There's a place in Sector 6 that's usually pretty good."

"Sure. Why not."

Cissnei had been fishing for conversation all afternoon. Clearly she wasn't going to let her go until she had something to show for it.

Shepard didn't exactly mind talking to her. She made for pleasant enough company, but she could practically see the Turk's mind storing away every stray comment for full analysis later. However, Shepard knew it was in her interest to let them think they knew her, to let them compile a bulging folder full of useless information that sounded relevant. It would make them more comfortable and let her work without all the surveillance. Every now and again though Cissnei would stumble upon a subject Shepard wasn't prepared to discuss. Like the injuries she'd had back in Junon, or if she had a special someone waiting for her back in space.

When she'd asked what the N7 logo on her armour meant Shepard had only smiled and assured her that she'd figure it out soon enough.

They climbed down the rickety stairs of the old hotel and emerged onto the streets of the Sector 7 slums. Cissnei led the way.

The streets were cracked and covered in graffiti. With neither wind nor rain to clear away refuse, trash had piled up in every available corner.

The whole place stank. Everything was in a shade of brown or grey, lit only by glaring neon lights broadcasting their jarring colours in the countdown till they blew or the power was cut.

No matter what planet or moon or asteroid you were on, almost every slum felt the same. It didn't even matter what species it was. This may as well have been Omega, under the crushing weight of the warring gangs and Aria's indifferent rule.

Or it could have been the hard-won territory of the Tenth Street Reds.

That wasn't a train of thought worth pursuing and Shepard's mind turned to the list of things she needed to do when she got back to HQ. She might not be organizing a galaxy wide war effort anymore but she still worked with the efficiency that had gotten her through one.

Cissnei directed them through the giant gate into Sector 6. Shepard hadn't spent much time down in the slums yet, but she'd already picked up that this Sector was one of the rougher ones. It was home to both an infamous and theoretically illegal brothel and a bustling market of over-priced goods, most of which had clearly fallen of the back of a truck at some point.

As they walked by people carefully avoided eye contact. The sight of a SOLDIER and a Turk walking side by side had half the locals remembering something fascinating they needed to attend elsewhere. The very few that didn't immediately try to leave or look busy were the armed gang members that considered whatever street they were in home ground. But even they looked away and cause no trouble.

It said far more about Shinra then the reams of promotional material had.
"Hey Shepard," Cissnei began after minutes of silent walking. "You know that thresher thing you mentioned the other day?"

They left the bigger roads behind and ducked into an alley.

"Thresher maws? What about them?"

"Have you ever seen one?" she asked.

"More than one." Shepard replied. She still had the footage of Kalros crushing the Reaper ship on her Omni-tool. She watched it when she was feeling down.

"Would you tell me about it?" She asked with the sort of curious enthusiasm that was typical of a girl in her late teenage years. From the sort of spy that Cissnei so obviously was, it was suspicious.

It was also convenient.

Life was like a court case, everyone was looking to find a motive. When it came to dealing with an employer it was best to provide one. Nobody trusted what they didn't understand.

If they wanted a backstory she would give them one.

"I was actually among the first humans to ever fight one." She said, subconsciously measuring her breathe the way she did when blocking out the chaos of combat and lining up a shot. Resurrecting this piece of personal history always awoke the part of her that demanded absolute control and focused solely on survival. When facing down a target there was no room for regret.

"What happened?" Cissnei asked.

"It was my first command. My men and I were investigating a distress call." She spoke in a neutral tone.

"Yeah?" she said, urging her to go on.

Steady breath in, steady breath out.

"I was the only one to walk away." She said softly.

"Oh… I'm so sorry." Cissnei said, pausing in her stride.

"Don't be. It was years ago. And it will never happen again." Shepard said, strength returning to her voice. "I won't let it. I will never let my men down like that, not again." She said; her voice quiet but driven and powerful. "Never again."

"I'm sure you came away stronger for it then." Cissnei said quietly after a moment of silence.

Shepard didn't say anything.

What she had said was true, she would move heaven and earth to bring her team back safe and sound, but she had skipped one of the most important parts of the tale.

The distress call that lured them within the thresher's reach had been planted.

She hadn't learnt about it till years later but her team's destruction had been orchestrated by Cerberus. It hadn't been meant for them specifically of course; just whatever fools fell into the trap first. The entire thing was an experiment to study the weaponized potential of the creatures. To Cerberus'
single minded scientists, her men were nothing but collateral damage.

The Illusive Man's noble claim to fight for humanity had all been overshadowed by that. She'd seen the depths he would gladly sink to and there were some things she did not forgive.

She wouldn't be telling Shinra about that part.

Cissnei walked on beside her, carefully musing over Shepard's story.

The next day there was no Turk watching Shepard on her latest mission. As she boarded the train back to headquarters with no eyes on her except the curious civilians, she felt distinctly like she'd passed some sort of test.

Her upcoming missions were still insultingly easy though. The afternoon of inactivity dragged on and she found her way to the SOLDIER gym.

Rows of tread mills and punching bags and assorted weights were arranged throughout the large room. Several other SOLDIERs were working out and everybody was minding their own business.

Perfect.

She picked a floor length punching bag and fell into the easy flow of an imagined fistfight. It wasn't long before she was warmed up and the bag was a screaming husk in her mind's eye.

The bag was made to survive the extremes of SOLDIER enhancements so she didn't need to worry about her own implants being too much for it. It was way sturdier then a husk.

The Illusive Man then?

With a bitter smile she dealt a vicious upper cut. That wouldn't do, she would have wiped the floor with him by now. His horrifically mutated face would be shattered; his self-inflicted Reaper enhancements useless in the end.

"I hope you offered that punching bag a chance to beg for forgiveness."

She looked up to find Angeal giving her an amused look while claiming the bag next to hers.

"I'm afraid it left me with no choice." She said solemnly, throwing another hit.

Angeal just chuckled and settled into his own practise. She return to hers as well, but not before noting that the man definitely knew how to throw a punch.

She had seen him only in passing since that day in the VR room, but he'd greeted her with a smile since. Even Genesis, who had not taken losing with much grace, had apparently decided that if she was good enough to beat him then she was good enough for his respect.

It was some time before Angeal spoke again. Some of the others had left the gym and it was quieter now. The dull thud of fists impacting on stretched leather continued on.

"Why'd you enlist, Shepard?" He asked, not taking his eyes from his punching bag.

"Shinra made me a good offer." she said.

"That's all?" He asked, sounding puzzled.
She shrugged between taking swings.

"If there is a way to protect people I see no reason not to."

"That's very honourable of you." He said, sparing her a glance.

"Not really." She kicked the bag and then spun into another punch. No husk would still be alive by now, but a Brute or an experience Krogan might. "I kill things for a living, Angeal. Frequently people."

"SOLDIER focuses on monsters and rogue wildlife." He said with a frown, stopping to look at her. "And when we do have to kill people it's because they left us with no other choice."

It seemed a terrible waste of an enhanced military unit to her. And what kind of pest control required a General?

"Perhaps. I have every intention of leaving this world in better state then I found it," She said and she meant it too. "But that won't help the corpses left in my wake."

"You're a very dour woman." He shook his head and returned to his punching bag. She got the feeling he thought she was just being dramatic.

"So I've heard." She said. "What did you sign up?"

The thud of his fists smacking against the punching bag came quicker and sounded like each hit carried more weight.

"Fame and glory." He said, giving his stuffed opponent a very serious frown. "Isn't that what everyone's after?"

"Really?" She asked, "You don't seem the type."

"There's nothing wrong with it. Why else would anyone join?"

"Hey, you don't have to explain yourself to me." She said, glancing at him curiously. "Your reasons are your own and I'm sure they're perfectly valid."

He gave a barely audible sigh and they both returned to their punching.

"I signed up for the money." He said after several minutes of silence.

"That is what jobs are for after all." She replied. Working for the Alliance was great, but eighteen year old Shepard hadn't signed up out of the goodness of her heart. She hadn't even been sure she had one at the time.

"You don't think that's mercenary of me?" He asked, pointedly still focusing on his practice.

"Everyone's got to eat." She rolled her shoulders and stepped back from her punching bag. "Bills don't pay themselves."

He stopped as well but he still wasn't looking at her.

"Most here regard the money as an afterthought."

"Lucky bastards." She said, starting to unwrap the tape on her hands. "Where did you say you were from?"
"Banora." That drew a smile from him. "It's a sleepy little town. Genesis is from there as well."

"You called?" Said a red headed in question, approaching from the door.

"We're talking about Banora." Angeal said.

"Ah, my beautiful Banora, home to the sweetest apples in the world." Genesis said, gesturing grandly as he joined them. "How I miss it."

"Then why bother leaving?" Shepard asked.

"For the prestige of being a SOLDIER, of course." He said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "It's very hard to become famous while presiding over apple orchards, no matter how bountiful."

Suddenly Angeal's reticence on the subject of wages made perfect sense.

"Childhood friends, huh?" she asked.

"Quite so." Replied Genesis, leaning his arm on Angeal's shoulder and having it immediately brushed off.

"Where are you from, Shepard?" Angeal asked, ignoring his friend's irritated look with an amused smile.

"Mideel." She said, belatedly hoping that was the correct way to pronounce the hometown of her cover story. She had fully intended to look it up and ensure she could at least answer passing questions on the subject. Instead she'd spent all her time trying to fix her armour and improve the range on her Omni-tool. She'd just have to improvise.

"Really?" Genesis said with raised eyebrows. He looked her over once, a curious look on his face and Shepard wondered what she had missed. "I've always been curious about those jungles. I believe there's a mission to Mideel available right now. You could probably sign up for it if you wanted."

"I'd rather not." She said, her expression closed off.

"Why not?" Genesis demanded in confusion.

"Don't you have family there?" Angeal asked.

"Not anymore." She replied, looking away and wondering what story she should invent to get them to stop asking questions. She didn't know anything about this Mideel. But then wasn't that why Sephiroth had chosen it for her cover story? Nobody knew anything about Mideel.

"What happened? If you don't mind us asking." Angeal said.

"They were killed." She said, all sombre dignity. "...by pyjaks."

"I'm so sorry." Angeal said and her expression closed off even further, not a flicker of her amusement leaking out. She would have picked a native monster but she didn't know any and a story that couldn't be disproven was just as good as a proven one.

"What's a pyjak?" Genesis asked cautiously.

"Pray you never find out." She said quietly, not making eye contact, stubbornly keeping her snickering from ruining her tragic backstory.
Later that evening Shepard was alone in the SOLDIER lounge leafing through a tourist's guidebook on Mideel.

The good news was that its unchartered rainforests were filled with endless undiscovered creatures so nobody could prove that there weren't any giant killer pyjaks. With a wry smile she returned to her Omni-tool. She was updating the codex, adding in entries on Gaia and trying to compile the information into anything useful.

There was nobody else in the lounge. It was approaching midnight and the other SOLDIERs were all either sleeping or out on the town. She had no interest in either and there was still much work to be done. There were curfews for the infantry but not for SOLDIER. The rank came with plenty of convenient perks, like the really quite fancy leather couches she was relaxed on.

She examined the schematics for her armour repairs. With the unusual set of scavenged materials to work with, she'd have to improvise somewhat. The plating itself wasn't going to be an issue but the structure was currently compromised. Her targeting visor was in a dreadful state and she was having trouble finding the last few materials to fabricate repairs for it. There weren't likely to be any Banshees peaking over the horizon any time soon but she liked to be prepared for any eventuality.

The door swung open. She looked up to see Sephiroth walk in and make straight for the coffee machine. A scowl covered his face until he looked up and noticed she was there, pausing awkwardly half way to his destination. Apparently he had expected the room to be empty.

"The coffee machine in my office is broken." He said, looking oddly self-conscious. She raised an eyebrow and then he just looked irritated for having explained himself in the first place and continued on to the machine.

She still had no idea what to make of him. He was as regimented as a Turian and wore his armour as comfortable as one.

He'd seen her fighting Genesis and afterwards had only said 'You fight well, Shepard.' Angeal and Genesis had taken turns between peppering her with questions and complaining about the ethics of turning invisible or shooting your opponent in the back. Sephiroth on the other hand apparently saw the necessity of seizing every opening your enemy gave you. It was a comforting thought; honour was admirable but hardly priority in a life or death situation. It was good that the young General already knew that.

"Burning the night oil, General?" She asked.

He ran a hand down his face while the machine spat out a burnt smelling black coffee.

"Pointless bureaucracy is Shinra's primary attack." He replied.

"Losing the battle?"

"No." he said indignantly, scowling at his drink.

She took that as a yes.

He leaned back against the counter and took a sip of his coffee. She returned her attention to the Omni-tool. She hadn't had a chance yet to map any stars to triangulate her position but it was on her to-do list. The stars weren't visible in Midgar so she'd either wait until she got an out of town mission or just take a couple of days leave.
"It's a computer?" Sephiroth asked, studying the glowing orange gauntlet.

"Omni-tool." She held it up and rotated her wrist. "It's like a computer but far more versatile."

"Where does the blade come from?"

She smiled and said nothing. Things like a flash-forging mini-fabricator were tricks she preferred to leave unexplained.

"Are they rare?" He asked when it became obvious she wouldn't elaborate on the weapon.

"Standard issue. Mine's fancier than most, but only because I added my own upgrades." The advantage of travelling width and breadth of the known galaxy, she got the pick of the technological crop.

He nodded and returned to his drink.

Talk of her Omni-tool had gotten her thinking though. The mystery of who had activated it while she was in Junon was nagging at her. Their reaction to it was just as bizarre and she wanted answers.

"Why did you recruit me, Sephiroth?" she asked plainly after several minutes of undisturbed quiet. Sometimes the direct approach was best.

"I thought that would be self-evident," he said, cocking an eyebrow at her, "Especially given the beating you gave Genesis the other day."

"You didn't know anything about me at the time. You still don't. Why risk this?" she asked, studying him closely. He had one hell of a poker face but his eyes were expressive and currently calculating.

"It's obvious that you're capable and you were prepared to risk yourself for the people of Junon. Given what I've seen, I made the right call." He sounded very diplomatic.

She crossed her arms. If he wouldn't talk openly she'd just have to force his hand.

"I'd have expected you to be put off by the information you got from my Omni-tool."

"Information?" he asked in a neutral tone.

She lifted the device in question and activated the file that had been trying to play when she fixed it. The forces of sword fleet swarmed to life before reaching the corrupted point and then starting again. It played on loop several times before he responded.

"Your point?" he asked, still maintaining a carefully unreadable expression.

"For technology that apparently doesn't exist on this planet you navigated it very well." She observed, her voice calm and only slightly accusing. "Well enough to access highly sensitive Alliance Navy intel. My point is what do you intend to do with it?"

The calculating look in his eyes returned full force. He studied her in silence and she returned the scrutiny. He was no longer leaning against the counter but standing at his full height while she was still sitting relaxed on the couch. She waited out his silence.

"I don't intend to do anything with it." He said finally. "This information is meaningless to Shinra. As far as they are concerned you are just another SOLDIER."

"But you know better."
There was another long bout of silence. He was choosing his words carefully and watching her like a hawk. She kept her expression cold and unmoved. Realising that height was not to his advantage while answering to the woman calmly sitting and asking him to explain himself, he sat on the couch opposite her.

"You're carrying battle plans." He said, leaning back and crossing his arms. "Not for infantry but for fleets of space ships that number in the thousands."

"Tens of thousands." She corrected dispassionately. The combined force of every remaining fleet in the galaxy was nothing to be trifled with.

"Tens of thousands then." He said, "All of which can fight from beyond the atmosphere and travel at the speed of light." Obviously he had given the plans more than a passing glance then. He watched her with narrowed eyes. "We cannot hope to challenge that." He said finally in a low voice and with a clenched jaw.

It wasn't an easy concession to make but it was accurate.

"No. You can't." she said.

"Obviously this Alliance of yours, for all its fleets and firepower, is already embroiled in a war of its own." He said, watching for a reaction she didn't' give. "Regardless of the outcome I know my strengths and that of my SOLDIERs and I know it will not be enough."

"You want to stay on the Alliance's good side." She observed.

"I am not prepared to risk my men in a war they cannot win."

"What makes you think we want a war with you at all?" she asked, still pinning him with a scrutinizing stare that he returned.

"I don't. I don't know anything about you Shepard, not for certain. You could be a criminal with stolen battle plans, or maybe a just mad woman. Or you could be a respected officer from a foreign military that has Shinra completely outclassed. If it is either of the first two, then I will find out and I will act accordingly. But if the latter is true then I won't risk making you an enemy."

"So this is insurance." She said, gesturing at the SOLDIER uniform she wore.

"Consider it damage control." He said lightly, finally relinquishing his scrutiny of her.

"Fair enough." She said. Not wanting to needlessly endanger your men was something she could understand. That it also came with the added advantage of a powerful new SOLDIER supposedly under their control was an added bonus. What was the saying? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?

Very close in this case, she thought, observing the General not two metres away.

"That doesn't explain how you got my 'tool to work at all though." She said, running her thumb over the controls of the device. "It's nothing like your computing systems." The recorded keystrokes used had been lost in the repairs.

His brow furrowed in confusion.

"I didn't touch it; Hollander was the one to…" He trailed off and then his eyes narrowed again, it wasn't at her this time.
"The scientist." She said, her mind racing through what that meant. "He must be very clever." She drawled, deactivating the Omni-tool and crossing her arms again. For reasons she would never explain she had a very hard time trusting Shinra’s science department. Science in and of itself was not inherently good or bad and frequently vital but there was so much potential for tragedy if ambitions weren't kept in check.

"Not nearly as clever as he thinks." Sephiroth said darkly. He got up and threw his now empty paper cup into the rubbish bin.

"Problem, General?" she asked, leaning her chin on her fist. At her comment his agitation immediately evaporated and he stood composed once again, as though their conversation had never happened.

"Nothing you need concern yourself with, SOLDIER." He said dismissively before turning and sweeping out of the room.

He was delusional if he truly thought she was going to let it go.
Chapter 7

Shepard sat in the passenger seat of military truck. Guzzard was driving and there were two infantrymen in the back.

The road away from Midgar sped by on the way to their mission. Low hanging clouds, heavy laden with impending rain, blocked out the morning sun and promised a sodden return trip.

It had only been a matter of week since she'd arrived but Shepard was thrilled to be getting out of the city, even if it was just for one short mission to a swamp. It was probably going to be a tough fight as well, given the line-up Shinra was sending. Two SOLDIERs, one a First Class, with two regular troopers as back up. That was this world's version of hedging your bets. She hadn't been given any information on what this 'Midgar zolom' creature was, or how she was supposed to kill one, but she was betting on something monstrous. The corner of her mouth tipped up in a smile at the thought.

"You look pretty damn happy for someone who might be about to drown in a bog." Guzzard said, barely sparing a glance from the road.

"Better than drowning in trash." She observed.

"Midgar lost its charm already, huh?" he gave a bark of laughter. "Didn't think it'd take so long."

"I'm the enduring sort." She said with a wry grin. "I'm hoping for as many long distance missions as possible." Reportedly this planet had a wide range of climates and landscapes all of which sounded far more exciting than the grey capital. She hadn't left the squalor of her childhood home just to get stuck trawling through identical slums on a different planet.

"I usually get stuck with the local missions, where there's nobody to impress." Guzzard said, a resigned sigh intruding on his gruff drawl, "I don't make a good impression for the company apparently. The PR punters think I look too rugged and dangerous."

"Almost like you're in some kind of military unit." She replied archly. The human media hadn't much cared for her either, always marching around in her combat gear and armed to the teeth. 'Too confrontational' they said. What did they think Spectres did, host tea parties?

"Heh. These days it's all pretty boys in leather coats." He scoffed, before realising what he'd just said. "Uh, don't mention I said that, would ya?"

She just chuckled at him and shook her head.

"So where are you from, Guzzard?"

"Rocket Town originally." He said, "Haven't been back in years."

"What's it like?" She actually knew where that place was; it was on the next continent over according to the map she'd studied.

"Ah it's great. Whole place smells of engine oil." He smiled at the thought.

"That… sounds charming, Guzzard." Maybe he was part Quarian.
He snorted. "You either love it or ya hate it. It's mostly engineers and mechanics there nowadays, working on the giant space rocket. My old Lady was one of the first. She helped design the original Hardy Daytona engine if you can believe it."

Shepard had no idea what that was. He took pride in it, whatever it was, so she'd just assume it was something impressive.

"What about your father?" she asked. Outside the clouds had broken and large raindrops were splattering against the windscreen.

"He's still there, running the inn. Doesn't much care for SOLDIER, he thinks it's unnatural." He said in a voice that was more resigned than anything else. "What about you?"

"Mideel." She said tonelessly.

"Oh yeah, that's right, Mideel. No family though?"

"Not really. I never knew my father. And my mother... well, I think I'd have preferred not knowing her either."

"Sorry to hear it." He said, not insulting her with feigned sympathy just simple acknowledgment.

"Yeah, life's pretty hard all round." She said with the sort of bittersweet grin that came to her all too easily these days.

"Sure is." He said giving his own crooked grin that pulled at the faded scars on the side of his face.

They left the gravel road and soon the marshes came into sight. The mission parameters had only said they were to hunt and kill zoloms. There had been complaints from the surrounding towns that people were disappearing on the way to the nearby mine. It wasn't a lot of information to go on but she'd worked with less.

The truck came to a stop. The rain had only gotten heavier.

The both got out, Shepard examining her Widow and Guzzard lugging out his sword. It wasn't the standard issue SOLDIER blade; rather it was a massive claymore that Shepard was pretty sure belonged in fifteenth century Scotland.

"Ever fought one of these before?" She asked, looking out across the stinking marsh.

"A couple in the VR rooms." He swung his sword onto his back.

"What about the troopers?" She could see the two of them carefully getting out of the back of the truck, their bulky assault rifles swinging from their shoulders.

"We'll be lucky if they don't soil themselves at the sight of it." Guzzard said, shaking his head at them. The shorter one looked like he was trying to avoid getting wet from the driving rain, holding his hand above his head as though it'd make any difference at all. Shepard was already drenched, her hair plastered to her forehead and they hadn't even gotten into the marsh yet.

"Loving your optimism, Guzzard." She brushed her hair out of the way and they began the trek to find the zolom.

It didn't take very long.
"Move!" Shepard shouted at the taller trooper, the swell of the approaching zolom speeding in his direction. Behind her Guzzard was holding off a larger zolom. The creatures' corrosive breath was poison in the air, shortening their breath and stinging their eyes. They moved so fast and so unpredictably under water that it was nearly impossible to hit anything vital and Shepard didn't have ammo to spare.

The trooper dropped his rifle and sprinted away. The swell sped up and then burst from the water. A giant green serpent head reared up meters above the water with an air rending shriek and lunged for the fleeing trooper.

Shepard had it in her crosshairs as soon as it left the water and its head was slammed back from the force of her shot. A burst of red exploded into the air and it collapsed back into the water, its fifteen meter long body jerking sluggishly.

That left the bigger one.

She spun to give Guzzard support just as the tail of the creature whipped through the water and knocked them all off their feet.

They all scrambled back up, any grace or speed completely destroyed by the muddy water that came to above their knees. Guzzard was the closest to it and leapt back from its snapping jaws, swinging his sword to knock it back. The noxious fumes staggered him though and his strike lacked strength.

The zolom reared to lunged again, its cobra-like collar flaring and spittle flying from its mouth.

Shepard threw her hand out and the creature froze in a biotic stasis. It was a huge creature though and the stasis was barely holding.

It was enough for Guzzard to leap out of reach and throw his own attack, an ice spell from a mastered materia. The green head of the zolom froze over, holding the stasis just a little longer.

The sputter of assault rifles sounded, the two panicked troopers wildly firing guns that just weren't powerful enough to break through the thick scales. Shepard wasn't sure they were even hitting it though.

The zolom broke free and dove under the water again, swimming around them in wide circles like a shark sizing up its targets. Shepard reloaded, her biotic barrier flaring around her, Guzzard held his sword in a strong two handed grip and both stood ready for it to rear up and attack again. The two troopers clutched their rifles and jerked back and forth looking for it.

It burst from the water, towering meters before them.

The two SOLDIERs sprang forward to meet it. Guzzard leaped up, a vicious swing from his sword slicing diagonally through its jaw. Shepard took aim and waited for a clean shot, positioning herself between the zolom and the infantrymen.

Guzzard rolled out of the way and her finger squeezed the trigger.

The wild sputter of the assault rifle sounded again and impacts tore at the back of her barrier. Her shot went astray, barely grazing the scalp of the injured zolom.

"Hey!" She cried, her head whipping around to the trooper wildly firing in the monster's direction. They were too panicked to hear her or see what they were doing. She threw a singularity at them and spun back to the zolom, determined to finish the damn thing.
Guzzard leaped over a strike from its tail and then turned and sliced right through the end of it. The zolom was frothing with pain and anger and Shepard took aim once more.

Her shot tore straight through its skull this time, striking right between the eyes.

It collapsed back into the water. Blood oozed out of the body from both the hole in its head and the missing end of the tail. The rain slowed to small spitting raindrops.

The SOLDIERs both returned their weapons to their backs.

Shepard looked across at the two troopers, her eyes narrowing. They were still caught in her singularity, whirling lazily in the air, waving their arms in an ineffectual attempt to get down.

She cancelled her biotics and they both fell back down with a splash. She marched towards the short one; he was still clinging desperately to his rifle, even as he clambered out of the water.

"What the hell was that?" She demanded, standing right in front of him and looking him straight in the glowing helmet lights.

He took an involuntary step back.

"I was trying to shoot the - the - the thing!" he stammered. He looked to his fellow trooper for support but none was forth coming.

"You shot me in the back!" She said, defying him to make excuses. Fear she could understand, terror even, but this was unacceptable. "If I hadn't had my shields up I would be bleeding out right now. What the hell did you think you were doing, spraying bullets like that?"

"I was… I was trying to help." He offered timidly. Water and muck that had pooled in his helmet was running down his face in streaks so he pulled it off, daring to look her in the eye with a glance that said he really didn't want to.

Shepard's ire froze immediately at the sight of his whole face.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Fourteen ma'am." He said, looking back down again.

"Fourteen." She repeated it, looking up and taking a breath. "And what about you?" she demanded of the second trooper.

"I'm fourteen as well, miss. Uh, ma'am."

"What are children doing in the army?" she asked, sounding far calmer than she sounded.

"We aren't kids! We signed up as soon as we were old enough." The short trooper said.

"What?" She said coldly. If she hadn't heard wrong, if this was what she thought it was…

"Minimum age is fourteen, Shepard." said Guzzard, standing next to her. "It used to be sixteen but they lowered it last year." His tone was as gruff as usual with no inflections offering an opinion on the subject.

"Do either of you have any training at all?" She asked of the troopers. They looked baffled by the route her displeasure had taken. They didn't see anything strange or wrong about minors carrying assault rifles and marching to the loudest tune. Even at the height of the Reaper war the Alliance
hadn't recruited that young.

"We both had the standard six weeks of training." The short one said, trying as hard as he could to look competent.

"It's pretty comprehensive." Added the taller kid with a reassuring nod.

Shepard didn't say anything. Her disgust was boiling over into anger, the dangerous simmering sort that had ended galactic wars. Right now she was seriously considering starting one.

"Alright, back to the truck." Said Guzzard. "Both of you."

The two kids gave sloppy salutes. Then they turned and began the return trip, both eager to be out from under Shepard's unforgiving stare.

"This is bullshit." She said. It was a gross understatement. Child soldiers, in live a combat zone carrying guns they didn't know how to use.

"Shinra makes the rules, Shepard, bullshit or otherwise." Guzzard said, rubbing the drying mud from his forehead. "We're just expected to bring them home in one piece until they quit or figure out which end of the rifle to hold."

"Or they die." She said.

"Or they die." He said. He didn't have the nerve to watch the two teenagers walking away while Shepard scowled beside him. He turned and began walking back as well.

Sephiroth had planned for an uneventful day, just sitting in his own office and minding his own business.

He had not expected a furious alien woman to burst in and start yelling at him.

"I suggest you watch yourself, SOLDIER," He said in a cold tone, "I don't stand for insubordination."

He didn't care what she thought about the recruitment age or the infantry's lack of competence, this was his army and he suffered no challenges. She wasn't in her planet's military now and she'd just have to get used to that.

Shepard stood before his desk in a clean and orderly uniform but hair still wet and bruises still fresh on her arms, she must have only just returned from her mission and marched straight up to his office.

"I was shot in the back by my own support team today." She said in an equally cold tone, "If you don't see how that's an issue than one insubordinate soldier is the least of your problems."

"Then file a complaint and have him court marshalled." He snapped. Every little problem she had wasn't his concern, he wasn't given to micromanaging and he had bigger priorities.

He knew the infantry were incompetent, everyone did. Lacking even the most basic enhancements, they were little more than ineffectual grunts. Those in charge of their training gave all they thought necessary for men who would only stand in the background while SOLDIERs got the real work done. His time was devoted to the enhanced ranks because that was where the results came from.

"Court marshalled for what?" She retorted sharply, "Using the weapon he was given but not trained for? For being in a combat situation he had no idea how to handle because he's just a kid?"
"The minimum recruitment age was set by the board of directors. It is no more my decision then it is yours." He said.

"But you are responsible for them." She said, crossing her arms.

"They are under my command, as are you."

"Then you are wasting time, money, and lives by sending them into the field insufficiently trained. That you expect your SOLDIERs to dodge friendly fire while protecting what are essentially untrained civilians in addition to their real missions is absurd and an embarrassment to this entire army." She said with a stern countenance, scowling down at him where he sat in his chair. "Frankly General, I expected better of you."

It was only through great restraint that he didn't gape. Nobody talked to him like that. Nobody ever said anything like that to him. To address him as though he was just one of the rank and file and held to account like they were, it was simply unheard of. And she'd just brazenly said she was disappointed in him.

His eyes narrowed but he was kept silent by his outraged disbelief at the absolute nerve of this woman.

The silence stretched on but she wasn't cowed by his withering look. The challenge and cold disappointment in her eyes didn't abate in the slightest and it dawned on him that she didn't fear him. It was an unusual and unwelcome feeling and for a split second he almost found it intimidating. Then he steeled his gaze and stepped up to the challenge. He wasn't going to be talked down to in his own office, by one of his own SOLDIERs.

"If the state of the infantry is so far below your standards Shepard, then perhaps you're the best person to improve it." He said, setting aside her disappointment and focusing on putting her back in her place. If she was so concerned, then let her answer for it. "I can easily have your mission schedule cut down in favour of overseeing the regular army's training."

"If it means less pointless deaths and injuries then I'd be delighted, General." She said, nodding in acceptance.

He'd never heard anyone wield the word 'General' with so much bite. He also hadn't expected her to accept the proposal. It was meant as a threatened punishment, what SOLDIER would settle for training the grunts instead of actual combat? He regarded her coolly and considered what she was playing at.

"After this performance I'll expect significant improvement from them." He gave her another pointed look that was pointedly ignored.

"With all due respect, Sir, I can hardly make the situation worse."

She gave a stiff salute that was infuriatingly textbook and he nodded. She turned on her heal and left as purposefully as she'd entered.

He was left going over what had just happened.

There was no way she could make even the slightest improvement to the regulars. The infantry were unenhanced and undisciplined and served no real purpose beyond bulking up the numbers. She wouldn't make any difference.
He would demand a thorough apology when she realised that.

With an irate scowl he returned to his paperwork and vehemently didn't think about the insubordinate alien.
Training

The regular army trained every morning in the lower levels of the building. Each of the training areas could be viewed from special observation rooms in the level above. They usually went unobserved; it wasn't often that anyone cared enough about the infantry's training regimen enough to bother watching.

This was a special occasion.

Sephiroth stood imperiously before the tinted windows with his arms crossed. The lowly grunts were filtering into the room below.

He had been resolved to let the debacle to play out and then let Shepard bring reports of her failure to him herself, but something had occurred to him. The alien woman had barely been on the planet three weeks and yet she'd already wormed her way into a position of authority and influence.

Many of Shinra's departments recruited from the infantry and not just the military divisions. SOLDIER was the most obvious one, but the Turks, the Air Force, Weapons Development, and even the Materia Department were known to recruit troopers who showed potential. While many would progress no further than the infantry there were still plenty who would be dispelled throughout the company into all manner of vital positions.

It could just be coincidence, Shepard's complaint about friendly fire had been verified by Guzzard's report, but if she wasn't entirely on Shinra's side she was very well positioned to do irreparable damage. He might not take the regulars seriously but a company of Shinra's size was only maintained by large scale co-operation and loyalty. They could not afford to have that compromised.

And so he had decided to oversee the first few training sessions personally.

It wasn't because he wanted to watch her fail. He had no personal stakes in this, it was simple pragmatism.

Back straight and eyes narrowed he watched the SOLDIER in question enter the room below. She marched in and eyed the disorderly group of troopers. There was one of the standard issue rifles slung from her shoulder, as well as her own much bigger gun resting on her back. Some of them looked at her, noted her uniform and gossiped excitedly amongst themselves. Perhaps they thought they were lucky to have a SOLDIER trainer for the day. A few eyed the firing range to the side in anticipation.

She barked out an order and they scrambled into line. They snapped out a salute that was lacking in co-ordination. Shepard's look said exactly what she thought of that.

Sephiroth held back his irritation at their incompetence. The issue wasn't whether or not the regulars were dreadful, that had already been established. The question was whether or not she could do anything about it.

A part of his brain considered whether or not he was taking the wrong stance here but it was ruthlessly quashed. The regulars had been beyond hope long before his time. That was the whole reason behind creating the SOLDIER division.

The door behind him opened. He turned to see Angeal entering.

"They you are." The Second class said, approaching the window. "I was wondering if you- What is
Shepard doing down there?"

"She expressed dissatisfaction with the state of the infantry." He said, facing the room below again. "I suggested she do something about it."

Angeal stood next to him, shelving whatever he had been after, and looked down at the lined up troops. "They aren't enhanced, there's only so much we can ask of them."

"Precisely." Sephiroth said. Of course the ever reasonable Angeal would understand; he wasn't driven by Shepard's so easily disappointed standards. "They've already received standard training, there is little more they are capable of."

"I suppose she does know how to wield that gun of hers. If anyone can help she can." Angeal added with a shrug. "The normal instructors didn't mind though?"

"They did not."

"Really? I would have expected them to be angry at some SOLDIER trying to take over their duties."

"Apparently they were overjoyed at having the mornings off." Sephiroth said in a tone that relayed how unimpressed he had been.

"That's… not the best attitude." Angeal said, Sephiroth had to agree. Nobody wanted to get stuck with the regulars but that didn't excuse them from actually doing the job. At least Shepard wanted to do it. Whether or not she still wanted to afterwards remained to be seen.

Below Shepard spoke to the troopers. They couldn't hear what she was saying but soon the troopers moved in a disorderly line to the opposite end of the room where there were rows of tables set up. Each stood before a table and slung their rifles from their shoulders.

Shepard watched expressionlessly while they dismantled their firearms and then reassembled them.

Or at least, they attempted to do so.

He was torn between disgust and embarrassment at the incompetence on display. Sephiroth hadn't used a gun in years but it was abundantly clear even to him that most of them had no idea what they were doing. Half were just fumbling their way along and would have no chance of reassembling their weapons. The others were boldly going about it in the wrong way entirely.

It pained him to concede the point, but she had been right about at least one thing. There was no way she could make the situation worse.

"Are they working with new rifles?" Angeal asked with a look of pity on his face.

"No." He replied dispassionately. "They are not."

Shepard's hard express remained unmoved.

Angeal settled into the nearest chair and kept watching the way one might study a car crash. Sephiroth sat as well, realising with resignation that this would be far more painful than he had anticipated.

"Were you and Genesis ever this incompetent?" he asked. Sephiroth had never been in the infantry
but many other SOLDIERs had started there.

"We were never in the regulars; the Turks recruited us straight into SOLDIER prep." Angeal said, scratching the back of his head. "I like to think I was never that hopeless."

"I don't see how anyone can be that hopeless." They weren't even using the weapons yet and he was already convinced that none of them ought to be carrying firearms.

"What does that one think he's doing?" Angeal said, standing up suddenly and looking aghast at a trooper trying to wrestle his gun into co-operation.

Sephiroth wanted to march down there and take it from him, that wasn't just incorrect it was dangerous. "That isn't how you-

Shepard snatched the offending weapon from him. Then she gave him a well justified chewing out that had the trooper cowering in shame.

"Planet, why are we giving these people guns?" Angeal whispered in horror.

"Surely they were trained in basic firearm safety." Sephiroth said, the evidence before him loudly proclaiming otherwise. "Surely."

"It doesn't look like it, Sephiroth."

"That training is mandatory!" He cried.

"Perhaps they should sit it twice."

This was… a travesty. The infantry didn't need to be as good as SOLDIER but for goodness sake there had to be some standards! He wouldn't trust these people with a wooden stick let alone live ordnance. And they were responsible for guarding the entire Shinra HQ.

Once the incompetence had reached its zenith Shepard took pity on them. Placing the standard issue rifle she had come in with on the table she called for attention. With a smooth efficiency that spoke of endless repetition she dismantled it and then had it one piece again in minutes. Sephiroth and Angeal both breathed a quiet sigh of relief that there was some proficiency to be found in the world. The troopers were awed at the display.

Once she was done she paused and then took it apart a second time, slower now, pointing out each piece as she went and presumably explaining how it worked. The troopers looked on in wonderment.

Afterwards she walked around the stations, overseeing the individual troopers who were still confused.

It took nearly thirty minutes but eventually all the troopers had their guns in proper working order.

The exercise completed she stood before them again. Some were looking eagerly again at the firing range. Then Shepard told them all to reassemble their rifles a second time. The look of utter despair on some of the troopers' faces would have been comical, had it been in anyone else's army.

Shepard had her work cut out for her. Feeling something approaching shame, Sephiroth found himself actually hoping she succeeded. This was unacceptable.

"I think I've had about as much as I can take." Angeal said, rising from his seat. He had come in here
for something but the dismal sight had apparently driven it from his mind.

Sephiroth had suffered all he was prepared to as well. The two both had more important things to do and this wasn't getting them anywhere. Shepard could deal with it.

Several days later there was an update on the alien SOLDIER, this time from within the company.

"Sephiroth, thank you for joining us." Tseng said, already seated at the table opposite Professor Hollander and holding a pristine manila folder of papers.

"You have news?" Sephiroth asked, taking a seat facing both of them at the end of the table. The matter of her enhancements, or lack thereof, had yet to be resolved.

"The test results have come back." The portly scientist said, scratching his beard and gesturing at the papers Tseng held. "I have every reason to believe Shepard will survive the enhancements."

"This issue now," Tseng said, addressing the General "Is whether or not we should permit her to get them."

It was a complicated issue. His opinion of her had changed drastically in several directions in only the last couple of days. She fit the military mould perfectly and had garnered the respect of her fellow SOLDIERs in no time at all. She was also headstrong and borderline insubordinate when she had an axe to grind. But then she had only resorted to that because she didn't like high casualties in the ranks. Now that his indignation had cooled somewhat he couldn't criticise the endeavour, even if he still resented the implications.

She was smart though. While she hadn't hesitated to brazenly interrogate him in the common area of all places about what his agenda was, the question of her own agenda still stood. She fought intelligently and with confidence, she was already on par with the majority of the SOLDIERs. Would she even want the enhancements? What would she be capable of with them?

"Of course we should enhance her." Hollander said as though it were a foregone conclusion. His voice, roughened by years of chain smoking, was made more gravelly by his enthusiasm. "While she's under I can run a few more tests, I'm fairly certain the mako will react favourably with her but we still don't even know if she's really human. It's fascinating, there's so much more to be done."

"You're not experimenting on her, Hollander." Sephiroth said bluntly. Especially not with the political landscape of the science department as it was. Even if Shepard had been lying about her implants he wasn't going to risk the wildcard she'd be or what the science department would come up with if they got their hands on her.

"It'll just be a quick look. The mako in her system will cover up any scars; she'll be as good as new." Hollander continued.

"You're not going to take a look; you're not even going to keep a record of these results." He said, taking the folder from Tseng and tearing the entire thing in half. Hollander gaped at him. He rearranged the pieces and tore them several times more into shredded confetti which he poured into Hollander's hands. "Those were the conditions of our deal."

"But- I assumed you just said that to get her to sign the contract. You were actually serious?" He looked between him and Tseng in bafflement. "Why? You don't really believe what she said about world ending implants do you?"

"We have very little to go on regarding that." Tseng said. "Given the severity of the warning I would
advise caution."

"We have no reason to believe either way yet. Unless that changes, I won't risk exposing anyone to whatever alien threats she may carry." Sephiroth said. Not to mention he wouldn't risk losing an obviously capable SOLDIER to the science department. He was very well acquainted with how they worked. Disappearing into their clutches wasn't just the scary rumour the lower ranks thought it was. It rarely happened to SOLDIERS, they were too public and too valuable to the company. If a scientist thought it was worth their time though? He wouldn't put it past them. This was his SOLDIER, under his jurisdiction, and he had every intention of making full use of her. The science department wouldn't be riding on the coat tails of SOLDIER's success this time.

"Unbelievable." Hollander said, leaning back and throwing his hands up. "This could be the greatest discovery since- …there's no knowing what leaps in science she could be hiding, you just want to throw that away?"

"You're right, 'There's no knowing.'" He said dismissively. He didn't have to explain himself to Hollander. "We made a deal. She has held up her end, we will uphold ours." He'd have to see if Tseng could get one of his Turks to ensure Hollander had actually deleted the records.

"I agree with the General in this. The threat she posed has currently been neutralized. To jeopardize that now would be counter intuitive. We have secured her allegiance and the Turks are no longer watching her. Further investigation is not necessary, Hollander, from any of us." The Turks patently bland and unassuming tone went over the scientist's head.

"But… she wouldn't even have to know. Just a couple of scans." He tried desperately, before his face twisted in mounting frustration. "I don't believe this. You can't just cut me out like this. If I was head of the science department-"

"But you're not head of the department." Sephiroth cut in sharply. "And Shepard isn't going to be your stepping stone to outdoing the competition."

Heavy silence filled the room. Tseng remained passive, his expression unmoved. Hollander backed down but his frustration morphed into anger and it showed openly on his face, resentment shining plainly through his eyes. He crossed his arms and slouched in his seat like a reprimanded child. Sephiroth barely repressed a sneer. He hated working with most of the scientists, even when it was absolutely necessary. Hollander wasn't the worst of the lot though, not by a long shot.

"If we could get back on track." Tseng said, filling the silence deftly. "Sephiroth, you've seen her at work. Mako enhancements are a company secrets and not to be handed out without discretion. Do you believe she can be trusted with them?"

"She has already shown investment in the company." More than he had counted on. Enough that he hadn't decided whether to be glad or concerned.

"Yes, I did hear she had taken an active interest in the infantry."

He had sent Tseng an update on the situation as a courtesy. He didn't need to, the Turks would have known anyway, but it paid to keep ones allies onside.

"I see no reason not to offer her the enhancements." He said. "Whether or not she will accept I cannot say."

"Very well. I will leave the matter in your hands then." Tseng said, rising and giving Hollander a polite nod that was not returned. "If that's settled then I believe we are done here."
The Turk left and Sephiroth rose to follow.

He remembered something at the door though and turned to address the brooding scientist.

"Holland, one last thing." He said. "The device she keeps on her arm, the Omni-tool. What did you think of it?"

Several emotions flickered through Hollander's eyes. Alarm was the most prominent one before caution took over.

"It's a simple enough interface." He said, picking his words carefully.

"No it isn't." It was nigh incomprehensible. The circular control system, the gauntlet that was apparently both armour and control panel and projector and who knew what else had no similarity to the straight forward OS that Shinra favoured.

Hollander cleared his throat and re-crosse his arms.

"You're not qualified for handling these things General." He said, lifting his chin as he got up and walked out of the room. "If you want a more thorough analysis then bring it down to the lab some time."

Training the infantry was gruelling work.

Shepard rolled her shoulders and waited for the elevator to arrive on the right level. It wasn't physically exhausting work, or even all that mentally demanding, just disheartening about the general state of humanity on this planet.

The first session had told her everything she needed to know.

They weren't simply bad, they were abysmal. Fighting alongside the best the galaxy had to offer for so long may have skewered her standards, but not even the most relaxed Alliance drill sergeant or the shadiest C-Sec instructor would have stood for this. If they were Krogan they would have been kicked from the clan for being too pathetic.

Lack of enhancements was no excuse. It certainly wasn't an excuse she'd take; she wouldn't be taking any excuses at all.

Sephiroth thought this was the best that could be hoped for. That for the unenhanced there was simply nothing to be done. Her eyes narrowed at the thought just as the elevator doors opened. A slew of office workers hastily got out of her way.

Sephiroth hadn't seen what she'd seen. He hadn't witnessed an entire galaxy stand up to their superior-in-every-way executioners and seize victory through sheer force of will. He hadn't seen the Alliance army side by side with Turians, Krogan, Quarian, Geth, all just regular men and woman who gave their everything when it mattered most.

All sorts of incredible things could be done if only you were prepared to work for it and had the nerve to stare down your opponent. Admittedly it had taken the threat of complete extinction in order to get those results. In this case the threat of a demanding Spectre would just have to be enough.

No matter how long it took she would whip these troopers into respectable shape. By the time she was done with them they'd be good enough to stand alongside any Alliance regular. Assuming any survived that long. Clearly they were not used to hard work and their initial excitement at having a
SOLDIER instructor had evaporated swiftly when they realised she was actually intending to get work out of them. They didn't know the half of it. Shepard had never been accused of leaving a job half done.

She reached her destination. All the required grunts were there, nervously standing in a line. She had gone easy on them the previous day, really she had just been assessing what they were capable of. Today began the real work.

"Morning Gentlemen." She said, her back ramrod straight and eyes surveying the line-up. She had never been the traditional drill sergeant sort, shouting every single sentence. She gave direct orders and expected them to be obeyed, no yelling necessary. Wrex had never understood her insistence on it. He thought it hilarious that a woman infamous for blowing stuff up was so damn polite about it. She just found that if she was civil most of the time then everyone paid attention when she really did yell. That and she liked to keep people guessing.

"Ma'am!" They replied, giving her a barely synchronised salute.

"At ease." They relaxed into comfortable stances.

"I hope you were all paying attention yesterday." She began, walking the length of the line and looking them over. "Because you're going to be taking your rifles apart again." After that they'd be going through calisthenics and endurance training. If they worked at an acceptable level she might get them down to the firing range and go through correct technique. She did not hold much hope of that happening.

A groan went up, and she gave them a sharp look. They silenced instantly.

She didn't want to hear it. Yesterday's display was something she wasn't even ready to talk about yet. In the field your weapon was your best friend, you take care of it and it'll take care of you. That went for all of your equipment. Pristine condition was a requirement not a luxury. It wasn't as though it was all that hard either, she'd picked up one of their standard rifles the night before the previous session and spent some time going over the manual it came with, then tearing it down and finally practising at the firing range.

She told them they would be taking their rifles apart first thing in every training session with her, until they could do it in their sleep. Today she would expect it done in ten minutes. Those who exceeded the time would be doing it twice.

"Uh, no disrespect ma'am…" One at the end of the line said in a tone that didn't sound particularly genuine. "But this is a waste of time."

"Is that so?" she asked coldly, her hands loosely clasped behind her back.

"No one cares what us regulars can or can't do. And for those of us who make SOLDIER it won't matter if we know how to properly clean a gun." "Is that what you're here for, Recruit?" she drawled. "To waste time in the regulars until someone promotes you to a job you find more amusing?" He shifted on his feet and didn't meet her eyes. Her voice grew more cutting. "Do you honestly expect the higher ups to be impressed by your lazy and disinterested approach to the task you've been assigned?"

"I… uh, no ma'am."

"I hope not, because I don't appreciate people wasting my time." She said sharply.
"Yes ma'am." He replied meekly, abandoning his point.

With them all in helmets and uniforms it was easy to forget that most of these were still just teenagers with no idea about how the world around them worked, let alone the military. All the SOLDIER worship just made it harder. It was down to her to show them the proper way.

"Recruits, do you imagine monsters will go easy on you just because you're wearing the trooper uniform? Do you expect to be granted mercy on the battlefield just because your eyes don't glow?" She asked of the group, pinning them with her eyes. "Or perhaps you're counting on a SOLDIER to show up and rescue you." She spat the last part scathingly. A few of them looked down in shame at that.

"You have each been given a weapon," she continued, walking down the line again. "You are being deployed into live combat zones where you are expected to hold your own. If you don't know how to fight with your own rifle, or you think it's beneath you to learn, then you won't survive long enough to get any promotions at all. I am here to teach you how to hold your own, how to fight like a unit, and how to excel as army regulars."

Some stood straighter and held their chins up high. Others slumped, their shoulders drooping in disappointment.

"If that's not glorious enough for you then I suggest you leave now because you're not soldier material, enhanced or otherwise." She said sharply. "Either pull your weight, or get out."

A few looked up at her in shock. Two glanced at the door.

She waited. Those were her terms, always had been. It didn't matter what you were or where you came from, all that mattered was whether or not you were prepared to do the work.

They all remained lined up before her. The two who had looked at the door squared their shoulders and stood firmly in line.

Excellent. She gave a sharp smile. It was time to get the real work done. They would be cursing her name for the months' worth of exhaustion and muscle cramps from here on out, but it would be worth it. She would whip these kids into an army to be proud of.

"You have your rifles and you know where the tables are. You have ten minutes. Any questions?"

One timidly raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Um… Did you really kill two Midgar Zoloms single handed?"

She suppressed a sigh. It had better be worth it.
Shepard's week had just gotten a lot better.

With so much of her time taken by the infantry, alongside the missions she was still expected to complete, her Omni-tool was free to work on her other projects. Finally the mini-fabricator had completed the task she'd set it.

Her N7 armour gleamed before her, its ablative ceramic plating unbroken in a dark charcoal. The kinetic padding and shield boosters were fully functional, as was her targeting visor. The red and white stripe down the right arm was a soothing comfort after Shinra's unfamiliar branding. She gave a contended sigh at the sight of it.

This armour had carried her through the Omega 4 relay and then again through the entire Reaper War. It was with great relish that she donned it again. Gaia could bring its worst against her; she would weather it all.

After the weeks of feeling out of place and wrong footed on this planet she stood fully equipped in her own armour, once again feeling like the N7 Spectre she was.

It was with a very satisfied smile that she left her quarters and made her way to the SOLDIER lounge. There was still much to be done but she could afford this moment of self-indulgence.

There were two others in the lounge when she arrived and she sat on the spare couch.

"No because a claymore is a clumsy weapon lacking in precision and- What are you wearing?" Genesis demanded, abandoning the argument she'd heard on the way in.

"Evening Genesis, Guzzard." She said with a polite nod.

"Shepard." Guzzard returned, taking a gulp of foul smelling coffee.

"That is not regulation uniform." Genesis said with narrowed eyes.

"I knew you were the observant type." She said, leaning back and resting her arm along the back of the couch.

"The supplied SOLDEIR uniform is mandatory." He insisted.

"Is it?" she said, observing her gauntlet. Oh it was good to be in full armour again. The chest piece and interlocking plates covering her internal organs were so much more reassuring then a sleeveless woollen shirt.

"Guzzard." He snapped, "Regulation uniform is mandatory, is it not?"

"It's preferred." The elder SOLDIER drawled.

"What do you mean preferred?"

"There's more than one fighting style in SOLDIER, not everyone needs the same gear." He said, clearly more interested in the dregs of his drink. "Company policy is the same for armour as for swords, if you need something fancier than the standard stuff you have to pay for it yourself."

"You mean to say that all this time I could have been wearing whatever I liked and instead I have
been wearing this… purple sweater?"

Apparently he took his clothing very seriously.

"I figured you liked the colour." Guzzard said with a shrug, an amused smirk pulling at his lips.

"It's abhorrent and it itches." Genesis replied, looking down at his uniform in disgust.

"It does itch pretty bad." Shepard said.

"Why do you bother with the regulation uniform at all?" Genesis asked Guzzard.

"I don't feel the need to always draw attention to myself, brat." Guzzard said.

"No wonder you get stuck doing boring missions."

"Go pout at your fangirls." He sneered.

"I just might." Genesis returned with his own sneer.

Guzzard scoffed and looked back to her.

"I heard you might be getting enhanced after all, Shepard."

"Word travels fast." She said, sitting forward and leaning her elbows on her knees. The issue had been lurking in the back of her mind for a couple of days now. "Apparently the mako won't kill me but I haven't decided whether or not to go for it."

She was in fact heartily against it. They're results said there wouldn't any adverse effects but how could they really know? Unless they had already poured mako into some other human built off the back of a dead reaper and seen what happened there was no way to tell. She didn't even know what mako was. A type of element zero perhaps?

"Surely you have enhancements already though?" Genesis asked, looking at her with concern.

"Not the traditional sort." She replied.

"What other sort is there?"

She gave a small smile and wondered what they would think of the truth. The 'I'm-technically-dead' truth.

"Mideel's a pretty strange place." She said, refusing to elaborate. They could think what they liked.

Genesis leaned back and gave her a suspicious look. "A strange place with expertly crafted armour apparently."

She didn't comment.

"No idea if you'll go for it then?" Guzzard asked, "The surgery?"

"I'm leaning towards going without." She ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know a lot about it to be honest."

"Nobody does." Guzzard said.

"Of course you should get the enhancements!" Genesis exclaimed. "You're not truly a SOLDIER
without them."

"The hell she's not, look at her." Guzzard said. Her armour didn't show off bulging biceps the way
the SOLDIER uniform did, but it didn't need to. "You're already powerful." He said addressing her,
sincerity making his voice less rough. "If you need more power, more speed, strength, or agility then
go for it. If not, I wouldn't."

"Are you mad?" Genesis asked, "Who doesn't need more strength and speed? You never know what
you'll have to go up against, plan for the worst I say."

"There aren't many things I can't already take down on my own." She said in consideration. She'd
survived the Reapers, albeit only barely, what could this planet throw at her? Her weaponry and
armour far exceeded anything Shinra could make, was there any need for further strength?

"What if you're without your gun?" Genesis asked.

"Biotics." She said.

"And your magic is exhausted?"

"Omni-blade."

"I still say you should go for it." He said, tossing his hair back dismissively.

"Don't do it if you don't have to, Shepard." Guzzard said.

"Why ever not?" Genesis asked, genuinely puzzled. From what she'd seen of him he was an
ambitious man, eagerly eyeing the next rank. The First Class just looked at him soberly.

"Every little bit they put in, you're a little less what you were to start off with." He said. "You
shouldn't get surgery like that just for the sake of it."

It was with great restraint that she didn't flex her fingers, a reflex reaction when talking about just
how much of her was truly human. She knew what she would feel, artificial tendons stretching and
contracting in a way that was ever so slightly different from her original hands. Scars pulled in the
wrong places, lingering cold chilled her bones from the metal holding her skeleton together, and
always, there was the burning red that seeped up from beneath the skin.

Looking at Guzzard's scarred face and glowing eyes, she understood what he was talking about.

"I think you may be right." She said quietly.

Genesis gave a forlorn sigh, abandoning the subject. She was happy to see it go.

"What does the N7 mean?" He asked after a moment of observing her.

She gave a sharp smile.

"It means I don't need enhancements to keep up with you."

He scoffed, but didn't rise to the challenge. After their match in the VR room he had apparently
decided that sparring with a sniper didn't count.

"This is a Mideel thing?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "I didn't know they had any armed forces,
I thought it was mostly rainforest with natives living in mud huts."
"Like I said. It's a strange place."

The next day Shepard had training again.

She stood waiting for the elevator and wondered at her luck at getting stuck on the only planet with elevators slower than the Citadel.

The doors finally opened, revealing two men in white lab coats.

"As if you know anything about chromosomal-" A thin one with a long black pony tail and beady eyes was saying before being interrupted by the scientist she recognized as Hollander.

"Don't tell me how to-"

They both awkward stopped and cleared their throats when they saw her and then retreated to opposite sides of the elevator.

Choosing to ignore whatever that was about she entered and selected the infantry's floor. The metal walls were polished to a spotless gleam that reflected back the three of them perfectly. She stood in the middle, the two scientists staking their claims in opposite corners around her.

They were both staring at her.

She ignored it.

The mental list of things she needed to do was growing by the second. She had training ideas she wanted to try with the infantry, but it would be a while before they were competent enough for her to risk anything beyond the basics. In the meantime she was considering taking a close look at Shinra's computers. The system was archaic but she was curious about what it could do. Lengthy lectures from both Tali and Legion had fostered an appreciation for these things in her. Not to mention it might be helpful having knowledge of their systems and any convenient backdoors. It had been years since she'd felt bad about such snooping, if the system had vulnerabilities she would prefer to know about it, and if it didn't she would prefer to know that too. There was no such thing as knowing too much.

Planning for every contingency had been her modus operandi for years. It was vastly preferable to desperately trying to fix a situation after it had already gone to hell. Somehow she always ended up doing both anyway.

The thin black haired scientist cleared his throat. His beady eyes were narrowed at her from behind wire framed glasses.

"Fitting in, are you, SOLDIER?" He began, his voice nasally and condescending. "I hear you're doing rather well, for a woman."

She supressed a snort. It was better than being told she was pretty good 'for a human.' Both statements were equally naïve.

"She's doing damn well for any Second Class and you know it, Hojo." Hollander snapped.

She opened her mouth to comment but Hojo beat her to it.

"What would you know, you talentless hack?"

Hollander spat another insult back and the bickering she'd interrupted came roaring back to life.
She considered interrupting the glowing show of maturity but then decided against it. She wasn't responsible for the science department; somebody else could deal with it. It was a lovely thought but one she knew wouldn't be true for very long. She had a way of getting involved in every problem available. But for today at least: not her circus, not her monkeys.

"You're terrified of any SOLDIER succeeding without your assistance," Hollander bit out. "And one already has. How long before they realise you're unnecessary?"

"And how many great successes do you have to your name, Hollander? Do tell us of your great achievements." Hojo spat.

"My triumphs will speak for themselves." Hollander grumbled beneath his breath.

"Ha! Not likely!" Hojo said with a cackle, "And you certainly aren't responsible for the female SOLDIER; that was Sephiroth's doing."

It was as though both had completely forgotten there was an extra person in the elevator, despite her standing directly between them. It reminded her a little of Udina. She crossed her arms and leaned back, taking a deep breath. Even Jack and Miranda hadn't squabbled this much. Well, they had actually, but even they knew when to shut up.

Mordin certainly wouldn't have behaved like this, no matter how socially oblivious he had been.

"Yet he still locked you out." Hollander said with an unpleasant smile. "Losing favour with the higher ups?"

"Like you got any better." Hojo retorted, "Go back to grad school, they might take pity on you there."

She pointedly cleared her throat.

The argument ground to a halt, both stared at her like she had sprouted up from the floor.

For goodness sake, how long was this elevator ride going to take? They weren't travelling to the other side of the planet, just a different level in the same building.

"So, Shepard." Hollander spoke up, interrupting a blessed silence, albeit a terribly awkward one. "Shall I speak with the General about your enhancements? I'll be the one administering them."

Hojo snorted.

"No thank you professor." She said, "I'll speak to him myself." His assumption that of course she'd be getting them irritated her but she didn't disavow him of the notion. He was probably going to be very disappointed.

Not her problem.

The elevator finally dinged open and she marched out, resuming her mission for the day.

Sephiroth stood once again above the infantry training room. An onslaught of Heidegger's sycophantic assistants flooding his office with demands that he do most of the Directors work for him had forced him to make a tactical retreat. Afterwards, when they had all given up and just left memos he would redirect them all straight back in one go. It was a weekly ritual, a pointless battle between people refusing to get any real work done and an utter waste of his time. That was the dreary reality
of the web of Shinra's politics.

He would normally be out on a mission during this pointless song and dance but a slew of short and bitterly unchallenging missions had him returning ahead of time.

A sort of morbid curiosity had drawn him back to watch Shepard's progress, or lack thereof, though he told himself he was here for the sake of quality control. The clash of highly trained talent against unbearable incompetence was oddly fascinating.

They had begun by taking their rifles apart again. Already they had cut down the time it took by a large percentage although some were still hesitant. After that they had finally taken to the firing range.

The troopers were still an embarrassment to armed forces everywhere but Shepard clearly knew what she was doing. She didn't yell much, contrary to his expectations, but gave crisp orders and received quick reactions. She had taken to the task with an efficiency and determination that didn't appear to be waning. Only time would tell whether or not it would pay off.

The session finally ended and the troopers dispersed.

Checking the clock on the wall, he rose to leave. The enemy would have retreated by now, making his office safe once again. He had much to do and only so much time to idly watch the infantry fumble through their lessons.

The door opened before he reached it.

"Morning, General." Shepard said, standing in the doorway in her foreign armour. She didn't look in the least surprised to see him there. She must have come straight up from the hall below.

"Shepard." He greeted, ignoring the strange feeling of having been caught doing something he shouldn't. It was his army and he didn't owe anyone explanations for his actions. "I hope you didn't expect to be given complete free reign over our recruits."

"Angeal mentioned it." She said, and then gave a sharp smile. "I would have been disappointed if you didn't keep a wary eye out."

Of course she would. He crossed his arms and didn't say anything.

"I wanted your opinion." She said, moving into the room and looking down at the empty firing range. The barely damaged targets were still set up, the back wall behind them having fared much worse in the bombardment.

"Whatever for?" He asked dryly with one eyebrow raised. He hadn't gotten the impression that she considered anyone's opinion but her own.

She turned back to look at him.

"I know how to handle a firefight and I intend to teach them that. My experience doesn't cover fighting with swordsmen on the ground though and I am still unfamiliar with Gaia's wildlife." She stated simply. The concession didn't appear to cost her anything; she stated it as plain fact. "Any recommendations on how I should train them?"

"I understood you found my handling of the infantry to be inadequate." What game was she playing?

"I wouldn't say that the situation was being 'handled' by anyone." She returned wryly. He refused to
react to that. She leaned back on her left leg to avoid having to look up by much to look him in the eye. It diminished the difference in height between them and he found it was vaguely irritating. "But you're not blind." She continued, "You fight on the ground yourself and it's your SOLDIERs they'll be called to support. I am asking for your input. If you don't want to give it then I'll continue to train them however I see fit."

He watched her with narrowed eyes. He hadn't expected her to turn around and ask for his advice of all things, not after having the nerve to march into his office and tell him he wasn't doing his job well enough. She was giving the training her full attention and apparently was completely invested in seeing the task done and done well. As much as it irritated him to acknowledge it, it was an attitude more SOLDIERs could stand to adopt.

According to the reports she was equally driven on all of her missions. She was burning through the mission roster at an alarming rate and still had time left for training. 'Works like a damn robot.' Guzzard had said. Going by the numbers alone he would have assumed she was trying to prove something. Having actually met her dispelled that idea entirely; by all appearances she was just brutally efficient. That wasn't something he could condemn.

He looked down at the empty firing range and thought over the role of the infantry and what the most typical deployments included.

"Even with ambient noise, a firing range is a far cry from real combat." He said. The second half of the training had included her playing loud noises on the loudspeakers to simulate the panic and confusion of a fight. The average ability to aim had dropped even further. It was good practice, but no substitute for reality.

"I wouldn't trust them with live ammo even in a simple combat sim." She replied.

"They work frequently as guards. SOLDIERs are there to engage the enemy; the infantry is more for protecting civilians." He said, looking back at her. "Learning to keep their cool and always check their targets is perhaps the most useful skill."

"They're going to be spending a lot of time in this firing range then." She said, looking up at the ceiling and giving a short sigh.

"Tiring of the job already?"

"They're improving." She pointed out, cutting her eyes at him.

"Marginally." He conceded.

"They're no elite division but at least they know which end of the weapon the projectile comes out of now."

"If only they knew how to put it somewhere." He observed lightly. The back wall of the firing range looked like the craters of the moon.

"Let's not get too ambitious." She said with a small crooked smile. Then she sobered and crossed her arms. "Most of them are still growing. It'll throw off their aim." She said curtly.

"Their age still bothers you." He didn't see why it should. They chose to sign up; if they couldn't handle it, it was their own fault.

"Yes. It does bother me." She said plainly.
"I was fighting at fourteen." He said without inflection. The minimum age had never applied to him; he had passed the test with such flying colours he had been ushered directly into SOLDIER. He would never have achieved what he had without the early start.

"So was I." She replied, her tone equally unrevealing.

Then why was she so against it? He waited for her to elaborate but she remained silent.

He did not understand this woman. He severely disliked not understanding things.

He looked up from the firing range, observing her carefully. Her dark red hair was cut for practicality and her green eyes reflected an unnatural red from this angle. They stood side by side before the wide window with their arms crossed. Their black uniforms, despite being drastically different, both reflected a dull gleam in the light.

"I take it you've done this before." He said, nodding down at the empty hall below, "Training people."

"N-school covers a wide range of skills." She said offhandedly.

"N-school?"

She tapped the logo on collar of her armour, the little white and red N7 that matched the stripe down her right arm. The armour looked far more intimidating on her than the SOLDIER uniform had. He suspected this would put an end to any questions about her right to be called a SOLDIER.

"How long would it take you to reach N1?" he asked, assuming it to be a rank. All he really knew was that she was a Commander and a 'Spectre', whatever that was.

"You start at N1." She said.

"What's the highest level then?"

"Seven." She said, a sharp smile cutting across her face again.

"And what does an N7 do?" Was it some kind of SOLDIER equivalent?

"Classified." She said brusquely. "I can tell you however that I had command of my own ship. The Normandy." Something soft entered her eyes at the mention of it. Her smile became less sharp and more fond for a single moment, before it retreated behind her hard mask again.

"A space ship?" he asked, genuinely curious. The thought intrigued him. Shinra was building a rocket ship out on the western continent but that was merely aiming for the moon. This spoke of something far more ambitious.

She covered a small laugh with a cough. "Yes, a space ship. A stealth frigate more specifically."

"Recon?"

"More of a strike team."

"And infiltration?" He drawled.

She raised an eyebrow at him. Then she disappeared into thin air.

He stepped back at the suddenness of it, his hand flying to his blade.
She reappeared half a second later in the exact same place. Her slight smile remained as unchanged as her position but there was a piercing glint in her eyes that hadn’t been there before.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" she asked in a sly tone. He had the distinct impression he was being laughed at.

With narrowed eyes pinning her currently-visible-form in place, his hand drifted back down from the hilt of his sword. "Do that again and you run the risk of being run through."

"Yes, General." She said, facing the firing range again and sounding completely unmoved.

Taking a calming breath he looked away from the insufferable woman. No matter what talent, potential, and powerful allies she might have he was seriously considering giving her scullery duty for the foreseeable future. He got her point, if she were here to infiltrate he would never have seen her in the first place, but that didn't make it any less grating. How did she disappear from even his eyes? His highly enhanced eyes that could spot even most ninjas?

What else could she do that he couldn't account for? It wasn't a question he faced very often and he fully intended to have it answered.

In the meantime though there were other concerns.

"Have you made a decision regarding the enhancements yet?" he asked.

"I have actually." She said. "I'll go without."

"Are you certain?" This was the most sought after secret on the planet. Nobody had ever turned it down before.

"I've already had extensive gene therapy, as well as several other things. I don't need more." She said decisively.

"If you find yourself in a situation where your current strength is not enough it will be too late to change your mind." He warned.

"I haven't seen anything to justify getting them."

A bold statement, especially since she admitted to not knowing much about Gaia's wildlife.

"Very well." He conceded. The decision was hers. "The offer will remain open regardless. The science department will be happy to oblige, should you ever change your mind." Hollander was going to be brutally disappointed at her decision but he could care less.

"Yes, I noticed as much." She said. At his questioning look she continued. "I met Hollander in the elevators, alongside another scientist. Long black hair, hooked nose?"

"Hojo." He suppressed a grimace.

"That was the one. They appear to have some kind of small disagreement." She said lightly.

A small disagreement? By that measure he was a bit dangerous, and Shinra was a little ambitious.

"They are more professional then they can appear." He said.

"Not a very high bar." She observed.
"Don't be fooled by the petty squabbling." He said. "SOLDIER is Hojo's brain child. His intellect is not to be dismissed."

"I see." She said, a calculating look entering her eyes. She turned to make her way out and he halted her.

"The SOLDIER enhancements are Shinra's property and highly classified." He said in a low tone that was inescapably threatening. "I trust you understand how seriously we guard that." She looked back at him, undaunted but clearly understanding.

"My people have our own geneticists. We have no interest in yours." She said. "If anything they seem to have an interest in me."

"They'll keep their distance." He said. She was under his jurisdiction; the science department had no say in what happened to her.

"And I'll keep mine." She said brusquely. "Good day General."
"But apparently I have to wear the uniform anyway!" Genesis exclaimed, gesturing dramatically in his frustration. "Why do I have to wait until First Class but you don't?"

Shepard and Angeal shared a smile and humoured his frustration.

"Did you want to come down to the VR room with us?" Angeal asked, completely ignoring his friend's rant.

"Can't sorry, I've got a mission now." She replied, double checking the time. They were walking together along the corridors of the main SOLDIER floor.

"Going anywhere interesting?" he asked.

"Banora actually. Somewhere in the outskirts by the sound of it." She knew it was their hometown, but that was about the extent of her knowledge.

"Then why are they sending you?" Genesis asked, momentarily abandoning his pout at the great injustices he suffered. "You'd think they would send someone familiar with the region."

"Tell me about it. I don't know the first thing about Banora."

"Are you going on your own?" Angeal asked.

"Nope. The General's leading this mission." She rolled her shoulders, the comforting weight of her Widow exactly where it ought to be. When had she last been on a mission without actually being in charge? That would be, what, Eden Prime? All the way back when she was first being considered for a spectre?

She sincerely hoped this one would have a better ending.

The two men both stopped in their tracks and shared a concerned look.

"What's serious enough to need his oversight?" Genesis asked.

"I hope nobody's been hurt." Angeal said.

"All I know is that it's a monster hunt." There had to be more to it.

"Banora's a sleepy little place, nothing but apple orchards and villagers minding their own business. There are barely even any dangerous monsters." Genesis said, his brow drawn down in thought. "Sephiroth almost never gets sent out to rural areas."

Troubling. Even if she wasn't very high in the ranks, Sephiroth was. What could possibly necessitate both of them? And why not just send Angeal or Genesis instead?

"Your town is in good hands at least." She said, giving what reassurance she could. "I'll tell you all about it when I get back, assuming I'm allowed to."

"We'd appreciate it." Angeal said with a nod of thanks.

"While you're there, take a look around. It's a delightful spot." Genesis still looked concerned.
"Sure, if I have the time. Anyway, I should go."

They said their farewells and she continued on.

Finally, she had a mission that would take her out of Midgar. The twitchy feeling she got from spending too long on the same planet had been growing steadily. Nothing so bad as the six months of house arrest on Earth of course, but after the desperation and havoc of the Reaper War this was like being locked in a room too short for her to stand up in.

It was a good thing she'd taken on the infantry's training because that was a difficult undertaking that demanded a good deal of time. Without it she would have been feeling the claustrophobia of Midgar all the more.

Now she had a mission to a different continent and with Sephiroth's presence it promised to be a challenging one. The sensible person inside of her insisted she wasn't excited. The part of her that drove a Mako tank through a relay and loved it wasn't buying it.

Working with Sephiroth in the field was bound to be… interesting. The animosity she had kicked up by boldly telling him to get his shit together had mostly cooled by now. Their last talk had helped, her asking for his opinion had allayed some of the resentment she felt being directed her way. That didn't change the obvious gulf that came from them not truly being in the same army. She might be working as a SOLDIER and she'd even worn the uniform, but they were both aware that her loyalties lay with the Alliance. Shinra was a convenient way for her to deal with the natives, just as she was a convenient way for him to deal with the Alliance.

Other than Tseng, Nobody else saw the web of politics they were trying to navigate. If they were careful enough, nobody else ever would.

She took the elevator to the roof where the helipad was.

Had this been an Alliance mission it probably would have started with a mission briefing but apparently Shinra preferred the more 'tell you on the way' approach.

One look at the helicopter and Shepard instantly craved a shuttle. Or at least a Mako tank. It might not handle too smoothly but that damn truck could take a serious beating. It even survived her driving.

This thing looked as though a light wind might blow its rotors off.

Cissnei was sitting in the cockpit, checking over the controls.

"Hey Shepard." She greeted with a smile. "I'm your pilot today. I'll be sticking around for most of your mission too."

The General, a Second Class SOLDIER, and now a Turk?

"I've always wanted to go to Banora." Cissnei continued, talking happily despite the lack of response. "I hear the orchards are really pretty."

Shepard had heard that too, but she'd assumed it was just because Genesis waxed poetical with every breath.

"Any idea what we're doing?" Shepard asked. "My briefing didn't have many details."

"Mine neither." She said with a smile that betrayed her statement as a lie. "That happens with all
She hadn't expected to be trusted with anything classified, not this soon at least. Sephiroth obviously didn't trust her and he was right not to. She certainly wouldn't have, had she been in his position.

Checking the time again proved she was early. She leant against the door of the helicopter and watched Cissnei. Eventually the Turk finished going through her pre-flight checks.

"Where are you from, Cissnei?" she asked after a couple of minutes of companionable silence.

"Midgar. I was raised by Shinra." She replied.

"Do you like it here?"

"Midgar? Sure. Its home, even if it is just a pile of industrial grade steel in the middle of a wasteland." She said with a fond smile.

"Home is where you make it." Shepard agreed with a nod. It was amazing what you could grow to love.

"I love missions to the countryside too though. It's so… vibrant. You just don't get colours like that in Midgar." Cissnei said, turning sideways to let her legs dangle out of the cockpit. "What's your planet like?"

"A bit of everything really. I grew up in a big city but Earth isn't a single biome world." She leant her head back against the helicopter's door. She wondered how much of her city had survived the War. Probably not a lot. "My job means I don't often stay in one place for long." She said, dismissing the dismal thoughts as unproductive.

"Do you ever get tired of it?" Cissnei asked, looking up at her.

"Never. There isn't a corner of this galaxy where I haven't found friends and left bullet holes." A smile crossed her face at the thought.

"I like your style, Shepard." She said with a chuckle.

Soon enough Sephiroth appeared and their conversation was cut short. With everyone present and accounted for they were soon in the air.

The helicopter did not fall out of the sky at the slightest turbulence; much to Shepard's relief. She brutally crushed the urge to cling to the walls though, the all too delicate, clearly paper thin walls that she could probably punch through.

It wasn't until they were some distance from Midgar that she got any sort of explanation for the curious mission.

"There have been power outages in the outer Banora region. There have also been reports of unusual monster attacks in the area." Sephiroth explained. "By the sounds of it a break in the local mako pipeline is the cause."

"So we're being sent in to secure the area? That sounds straight forward enough." She said, waiting for the other shoe to drop. She and Sephiroth were sitting across from each other in the back of the helicopter, both wearing the bulky headphones and mic set.

Sephiroth continued. "Before you arrived on Gaia a meteor was sighted that landed in the region. It's
likely that's what caused the damage, but the area is so remote nobody has seen the impact sight.”

A meteor? How was that a big deal? Unless-

"Is there any chance this isn't a meteor at all?" He asked, giving her an assessing look that she was becoming very familiar with.

A single burst of hope blossomed up inside her at the thought of others like herself but she ruthlessly crushed it.

"There's always a chance, however small." She said in a neutral tone. It was a nice thought, but she wouldn't bet on it.

"You don't know anything more?" He pressed.

"What makes you think that it's not just a meteor?" She asked, looking at him cautiously. Why assume otherwise?

"We have no evidence suggesting it isn't but now that we know there is alien life out there, I thought it best to ask. Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"The galaxy is a very big place." She said with a shrug of non-committal. "I can't account for what might have landed here because I don't even know where 'here' is. I haven't had a chance to triangulate your planet's position yet so I can't speak for who, or what, might have discovered you. Not without more information at least."

Clearly trying to decide whether or not she was lying to him, Sephiroth pulled out a grainy photo and handed it to her. "This is the only picture we have."

She drew it closer and studied the low resolution image.

"It might be a ship, in which case it'd be either an escape pod or a shuttle, maybe even one of the smaller fighters going by the size. It could just as easily be a piece of rock. I can't say." The typical flaring around the object made it impossible to identify. "When did it land?"

"The seventh of last month." He said.

With a hum of thought Shepard brought up her omni-tool and started tapping into it, trying to calculate when that was.

"How long was it?" At his confused look she explained. "How long was the month? We don't use the same calendar."

"Thirty days."

"Right, and your days are twenty four hours long which means it landed on- hm." She looked at the date it was giving her and wondered what it might mean.

"Well?" Sephiroth prompted.

"Two days after the Morning War ended." And the day the Quarians and Geth finally started sending aid against the Reapers. They had both agreed to start rebuilding Rannoch together only when the real threat had been neutralized.

"What does that mean?" He asked.
"It doesn't necessarily mean anything." She deactivated the omni-tool.

"It means something to you at least." Sephiroth said giving her a suspicious look again.

"It was a hectic time," She said. Galactic politics wouldn't mean anything to him, but if wanted to know she could oblige. "Almost every remaining fleet had been mobilized. The Reaper War was raging, Cerberus was running around kidnapping people, Rachni were taking ground wherever they could find it and refugees were fleeing in every direction." And she had been on the way to Thessia while the Crucible was nearly complete. Busy times indeed. But that didn't tell them anything about what might have landed on Gaia. "Without actually seeing the wreckage I'm just as clueless as you are."

He sat up straighter at the names of so many different armed conflicts, all taking place around them without anyone ever knowing.

"Is it likely any of these wars might spill over onto Gaia?" He asked, a professional tone failing to hide the edge in his question. "Shinra doesn't want foreign wars being waged on its territory."

"The Morning War is over, as is the Genophage, and even the Rachni Wars have come to an amicable end." Sort of. "As for the Reapers... nobody wants them in their territory. If you haven't been invaded yet then I'd say you've gotten away unscathed." They should count themselves lucky; few others could make that claim.

"Your people sound very war torn." Cissnei said quietly from the cockpit. Shepard had forgotten she could hear them over their microphones.

"We don't look for conflict." She said. "But we don't shy away from it either." Except for when they collectively shoved their heads in the sand because the enemy was too inconvenient. But that wasn't relevant right now.

"What are these Reapers?" Sephiroth asked.

"We're getting off track." She replied. It came out a little harder then she intended. Sephiroth eyes narrowed at her reaction and she got the feeling he wasn't letting it go anytime soon.

The silence stretched on. She met his searching gaze with a defiance that he was probably growing used to.

"If you've nothing more to add-" She didn't and he continued. "We will search the length of the pipeline most likely to have been hit. Once we've located the damage and secured the area, we can send people in to make repairs. For now this mission is classified."

"And if it isn't a meteor?" she asked.

"Depending on what it is, I will decide what is best for the people of Gaia." He returned.

She gave a nod and wondered how likely that was. If it was a crash and anyone had survived and decided to hang around the crash site, then his decisions would not be the only factor. She had her allies, he had his.

She'd let him figure that out on his own.

After some hours they arrived. They'd flown over the much lauded orchards of Banora White apples, only to continued flying on over countryside about a day's march beyond the township. Angeal
would be relieved to hear that the monsters weren't anywhere near Banora village itself. The landscape before them wasn't farm land but a mess of short cliffs and gullies split by little rivers and covered in sprawling forest.

Cissnei piloted the helicopter low over the tress as they searched for the impact sight. They were following where the pipe was supposedly buried. If they didn't see anything then the two SOLDIERs would disembark and search the old fashioned way. Shepard spared a thought for the lost wonders of satellite imagery before steeling herself for whatever might come next.

"I think we found it!" Cissnei called from the front.

Shepard eagerly looked out of the window but the view was a disappointment. There was no plainly obvious ship perched conveniently on the ground. There was only a large crater that was filled with the glowing green of mako.

Damn.

"What is that?" Sephiroth said, resting a hand on the glass.

She looked again, studying the pool. Cissnei did a strafing run of the helicopter and the disturbed liquid rippled away in flickering circles.

There was something in the centre of the pool. Oozing green slid over it, distorting the shape beyond anything Shepard might recognize. There was definitely something solid in there though, and given the sleek looking surface, it appeared to be smooth metal. That could just be a trick of the mako though, she reminded herself.

"I can't tell from here, too much of it has gone under." She said.

"Cissnei, we need to land." Sephiroth called.

"I can't land here!" She called back "There isn't a clearing for miles around."

"We could just jump out and trek back afterwards." Shepard suggested, eyeing the parachutes.

"No go, Tseng wants me to be on the ground."

"This isn't Tseng's mission." Sephiroth said sharply.

"Sorry General, this is a Turk helicopter." She replied. "And a Turk pilot."

"I am quite aware." He said coldly, sending a dark glare at the cockpit.

Ah, interdepartmental squabbling. It was nice to know that some things were universal.

"What's the nearest landing site?" Sephiroth asked.

"About four miles east of here."

"Take us there then. I trust you can keep up." He sent another look of displeasure in Cissnei's direction before crossing his arms and waiting out the rest of the trip.

They reached the clearing and Cissnei landed the helicopter gently.

The doors opened and they disembarked. Shepard stretched the muscles in her neck and drew her rifle, reflexively checking all was in perfect working order.
Cissnei locked the helicopter, as though anyone might try to steal it, and stood holding her large shuriken.

Sephiroth gave a cursory glance at the woods surrounding them, checked his blade, and placing it on his back.

Now it was just the three of them alone with nothing but monster riddled wilderness and a mission.

Shepard took a deep breath and felt a small smile tug at her lips. This was more like it. Beside her she saw Sephiroth relax minutely as well. Did the General tire of his own headquarters?

The crater was due west of them. Sephiroth set a course and led the way through the underbrush. Cissnei followed, and Shepard brought up the rear, keeping a wary eye out. Green moss and silver ferns stretched out in every direction. The forest was bright and full of life, insects buzzing happily through the air and birds singing in the trees. The smell of growing things permeated the air, ripening fruit, damp earth and new shoots pushing up through it.

The crater site was barely four miles away and she expected a quick march. Clearly she had failed to take the valleys and cliffs into account.

She had to keep reminding herself not to try and take the lead. It wasn't intentional, she was just so accustomed to being in charge that she automatically sped up to overtake someone she had no business overtaking. Sephiroth noticed at one point and sent her a look with a raised eyebrow and the slightest hint of a smile that failed to hide his amusement. Barely refraining from slapping her forehead she dropped back and hoped something would attack them already.

Her wish was almost immediately granted.

Shepard threw a warp at a charging sahagin monster and followed it up with a decapitating slice from her omni-blade. Behind her Cissnei alternated between her shuriken and pistol while Sephiroth stabbed a duel horn in the neck and then leapt to the side before the falling carcass could crush him. A flock of tycoons still whirled overhead and dive bombed them once the larger monsters were dead.

The spilt mako drove the creatures mad apparently, causing them to mutate and attack in droves. The ruckus the fight caused had only drawn the attention of more monsters.

She took aim and shot at the griffon-like creatures. One fell from the sky with its head missing and the others gave feral cries and flew wildly overhead. Cissnei ducked a set of vicious claws and drew her pistol in retaliation. She wasn't a bad shot.

The tycoons started to retreat, fleeing higher into the sky.

Sephiroth apparently wasn't prepared to sit idly while they finished them off. He reached out his hand and a wave of green energy was absorbed into the creatures. They jerked violently and screamed, some losing their balance and starting to fall. Shepard threw an incendiary burst at the ones that were trying to escape.

In a rain of burning feathers the last of them fell. With a nod to Sephiroth the three of them continued.

So the sword wasn't just for show. They hadn't faced anything too challenging yet but from she had seen so far he clearly knew what he was doing. It gave her a lot more faith in the young General, knowing he wasn't all hype.

The uneasy tension and distrust between them had been set aside for the moment as well. Nothing
cleared the air quite like fighting side by side.

Cissnei had proven herself to be incredibly professional. She kept a careful eye on her surroundings, including the two people she was with, and had a fine mastery of her weapons. To Shepard's concern Sephiroth obviously trusted the Turk even less than he did her.

"What materia was that?" she asked him as they continued walking.

"Poison." He said, reflexively checking his bracer where they were kept. "It does exactly what the name implies."

"Now you're just making it too easy." She commented idly.

"You shoot through cover." He said, giving her a deadpan look.

"I like to keep them on their toes." She said with a smile. The trees weren't very thick and her targeting visor could spot hostiles through any amount of foliage. She was hardly going to wait for them to come to her.

"They may return the favour." He returned.

She checked her heat sinks. Twenty Three shots left.

"Bring it on." She said with a sharp smile. As soon as her armour had been finished she'd set her omni-tool to making heat clips. She had stores of them now but endless backups were of little use when she could still carry so many of them and her enemies weren't going to drop any extras. She was already carrying far more than usual but she'd still have to make the most of every shot.

He scoffed. "I wonder if you'll be so enthusiastic if we're attacked by more mutated creatures. The mako drives them crazy and they'll become far more ferocious than this."

"Did you want to head back?" She asked in a dry tone.

"I've only got you for cover but I believe I'll manage." He said, not sparing her a glance. Turks didn't count apparently.

"I'll try to leave a couple monsters for you to care of."

He gave her another 'look'. For someone who didn't emote a great deal he managed to convey all varieties of unimpressed cynicism with his eyes alone. It reminded her a little of Javik to be honest.

And it was a comfort to find that the ever-so-reputable general had a sense of humour beneath his stern exterior, no matter how dry.

Suddenly he froze in place. Shepard walked around to see what he had stopped him.

They had reached the giant pool of mako.

The trees suddenly ended, with only the barest lip of earth pushed up before it descended into the glowing green liquid. Off to one side the smashed end of the pipe was visible, mako still oozing out of it. The technicians at the other end had turned off the pipe but since it was so long it took a while for the last of it to gush out.

In the centre of the caldera the edge of something definitely metallic rose up out of the green liquid. Without the disturbance of the helicopter it was easier to see that it was artificially made with a smooth curving edge that simply didn't occur in nature. A wing maybe?
Shepard stepped forward to better see but recoiled at the fumes rising up from the lake. Her eyes watered at it and her head instantly felt light and woozy.

She staggered back and shook her head to clear it. "That is nasty." She said, recovering but cautiously keeping her distance from within the treeline.

"It's poisonous, Shepard." Cissnei informed her, sending her a sympathetic glance.

"It is a ship then." Sephiroth said, his eyes still glued to the submerged wreck. He hadn't moved since seeing it. Something about it was fascinating to him apparently.

"By the looks of it." Shepard said. It might be an escape pod which didn't technically qualify as a ship but that wasn't the point. She activated her omni-tool and tried to scan it.

It was too far away, the sensors couldn't pick anything up.

"Is it one of yours?" Cissnei asked.

"I can't tell." There wasn't enough of it above the water level to see what who it belonged to. "But if mako is a poison then there's no way anybody could survive that." She observed grimly. Hopefully the impact had killed them. Quick and painless. That was much more merciful than to slowly drown in radioactive poison, or to burn up in re-entry.

"We need to get it out." Sephiroth said, snapping out of the intense focus he had fallen into.

Cissnei looked at him in disbelief. Shepard considered the wreckage. By the angle of the crater walls the caldera was quite deep, which meant the ship wasn't small.

"The helicopter won't be strong enough to lift it." She didn't need to see the rest of the ship to know that.

"What are we going to do with it, even if we do get it out?" Cissnei asked.

"Technicians are going to come here to fix the pipe." He replied. "We can't leave this here for them to speculate over."

"So what do you suggest?" Shepard asked, looking at him sceptically.

Sephiroth didn't reply. He just crossed his arms and stared at it, as though it might reveal some secret weakness if he glared enough.

None of the vehicles they had on hand were strong enough and it was far too big for her biotics. Maybe if Jack were here, working in conjunction with Samara, they might have a sliver of a chance. Maybe.

Wait a minute.

"Sephiroth, do you have a gravity materia?" she asked, despite having no idea if it was even viable. She'd read about this materia type and though they were usually used to make things heavier they could also do the reverse.

He gave her a very dubious look. "Materia isn't going to be able to move that."

"Not on its own perhaps."

He nodded when he saw her line of thinking.
"Your powers are gravity based." He said. Clever man. Genesis was still trying to figure out what mystical magic she was conjuring.

"Biotics, yes. On my own I can't lift that, but if you can make it lighter I might have a chance." It was technically possible. The distance was within her range, if only barely. She'd seen footage of Samara grabbing an airborne air-car and forcing it to the ground once. Admittedly this was on a much bigger scale, and she was no asari.

He fingered his bracer, the little orb of materia glowing in response.

"It's quite far away," He said. "My materia is mastered but I won't be able to hold it for long."

And of course the wreckage was in the middle of the lake so no amount of moving around would help.

"A moment should be enough." If it was more then she could manage then she'd know immediately. Her biotics were strong, for a human, but nothing record breaking. Even Miranda was stronger than her, albeit with a lesser range of attacks.

"Fair warning though, the easiest biotic move is a concentrated 'pull'."

"So-?" Cissnei asked.

"So you'd better get ready to run."

"Alright." Sephiroth said with a nod. He held his hand up towards the ship. "When you're ready."

She focused and her biotics flared. "Ready." She said, keeping the ship fixed in her sight.

A pulse shot out from Sephiroth, a wave of power that felt very much like biotics and yet fundamentally different rocketed towards the ship.

The instant it hit she seized the ship in her mind's grasp, willing it to rise up out of the lake. She gave a cry of exertion at the weight and sheer size. It felt like a Krogan punching the inside of her brain. Sephiroth must have still been casting because the weight halved momentarily and she instantly yanked at it. Her hands jerked back in a pulling motion and the whole lake surged. There was a huge swell of fluctuating blue power that rocketed up out of the mako, the bulk of a ship coming fast behind it.

Shepard dropped her biotics and sprinted to the side before it could crush her. Cissnei and Sephiroth did the same, all ducking for cover.

There was a mighty crash, trees cracked and earth was thrown up. Finally they looked up at the clearing that hadn't existed several seconds ago.

In the middle sat a ship. It was partially destroyed, the nose and canons having been completely crushed and one of its wings torn off. Mako poured out of every nook and cranny.

Yet it was unmistakable in design. Before them, glistening in a sickly green coat, sat a Geth fighter ship.
Sephiroth looked at the ship, still dripping with mako, and thought it was the most abnormal looking thing he’d ever seen. It was nothing like the rockets Shinra designed; rather it hulked over like a giant insect, or maybe a parasite. The angles were bizarre, twisting and curving in ways that weren’t so much counter-intuitive as simply unheard of. It was utterly foreign.

Alien.

Sephiroth was fascinated.

“So this ship was made by robots.” Cissnei said at the sparse explanation Shepard had provided, her eyes flitting between the ship and the woman. It towered over them, reaching nearly four meters tall and twice that in length.

“Geth. That’s a race of AI with independent swarm intelligence. It’s not really the same thing.” Shepard replied. Her Omni-tool was activated and she was scanning the wreckage.

“So… alien robots.”

“Fine, yes, alien robots.” She replied with an exasperated chuckle.

“We should be able to investigate it further soon.” Sephiroth said. When they had first dragged it up from the lake Mako had streamed out of the lower gaps in its armouring and fumes poured out from the top. Even with his SOLDIER’s increased resistance he wouldn’t have survived it. Now most of it had drained out and the last of the fumes had dispersed. The black metal surfaces were visible through a slick film of streaked mako, baking in the afternoon sun.

“Even with the mako gone we’re going to have a hell of a time getting in.” Shepard said. “It’s on its side.”

He stopped himself from asking how she could tell. Apparently it was the most obvious thing in the world to her.

Finally daring to approach it, she led them around the side of the wreckage. It’s emergence from the lake had cut a vicious swatch through the trees and left it perching precariously close to a moss covered cliff. Fortunately it was unwieldy and unlikely to roll.

They walked through the remaining trees to whatever entrance she was aiming for.

Sephiroth studied every new inch of it that was revealed with growing enthrallment. He had known Shepard was an extra-terrestrial since he’d met her, but she was still human with only a hint of something foreign about her. This thing was completely alien, it’s design and purpose otherworldly in a way that he hadn’t expected.

Had he been less fascinated by the ship he would have been irritated that he was following Shepard’s lead. Her reflexive attempts to overtake him had been amusing when she realized what she was doing and drifted behind him again. It was less so when he was actually out of his depths and forced to let her guide the way. Fortunately, the curious design and the overwhelming foreignness of the ship had him too preoccupied to fret over his pride.

They circled the smashed remains of a tree to find what looked like a door sitting half open. The ground around it was sodden from the mako, but the air flowing through it was clean enough.
“Fancy that.” Shepard muttered, looking along the metal ridging that ran from the door through to what looked like the ship’s tail.

“What is it?”

“I expected more damage. The nose is completely crushed and I’m betting the core’s dead, but the hull is still largely intact.” She lifted her Omni-tool and scanned it again. She obviously didn’t like the results it gave because her brow furrowed and her arm dropped. “Alright, let’s open it up.”

With that she threw her weight against the slightly ajar door. He stepped forward to help but she managed on her own. There was an ear piercing shriek of metal grating against metal but it did edge further open. Upon closer inspection he realised it wasn’t a door at all, but a loading ramp.

It sat open now like a gaping maw. Inside was pitch black, his enhanced sight barely making out a walkway running from the loading ramp up towards the head of the thing. It was far more obvious now that it was sideways.

Shepard took her rifle from her back and stepped inside. He and Cissnei followed cautiously, hands on their own weapons. There wouldn’t be enough room to wield massamune inside.

“You said these were your allies?” he asked.

“Until very recently we were at war. We’ve since settled our differences, but these Geth may not know that.”

Shepard’s rifle shone a light on their path as did her Omni-tool. Slick surfaces glistened under it while other parts absorbed the light and cast impenetrable shadows stretching away.

There was very little room. It obviously wasn’t designed to carry any more than a couple of people and the odd angle made it even more cramped. Around them bunches of pipes made from some foreign rubbery substance ran backwards and forwards across the ceiling and the walls they were walking over. Even the right way up, there wouldn’t be much room. Obviously robots didn’t much care for comfort.

They turned a corner into an area with more room. The walkway stretched away to what must have been the cockpit, now filled with debris. In the other direction there was a recess in the floor that bowed out against the hull; he assumed it to be a storage compartment.

Shepard spun, swiftly examining every corner.

“There are no platforms.” She said, sounding baffled and lowering her weapon. He looked at the platform by the cockpit directly in front of them and wondered what on earth she meant. “And the controls are dead.” She said with an irritated sigh.

“I suppose the mako fried all the circuitry.” Cissnei said. She was looking about cautiously, her hand fixed firmly on her shuriken.

“Or it was dead before it landed here.” Shepard said. “This ship was shot down.”

“How can you tell?”

“The carbon scoring on the outside.”

The light from her rifle swayed as she moved, landing for a moment on a cluster of metal plating off to one side with coils of pipes feeding into it. It looked like it had been violently pushed out of place,
probably during the crash. Sephiroth approached it.

“What am I looking at, Shepard?” He asked.

“That is all that remains of its weapons systems.”

“It’s completely disarmed?” He had to be sure.

“The disruptor torpedoes are crushed beyond repair.” She aimed her light again and examined some mechanism he couldn’t name. “And it’s been eaten through by the mako apparently. The systems are dead. This is just a shell now.”

He moved on to the storage compartment. Overhead there was a second empty space, a great circular void with a slick orb suspended in the middle. It was cold and dark.

“What was this?” He asked.

“That was the FTL core.” She sounded almost sad.

“No windows.” He said, looking around again. He supposed it made sense, they would probably be a structural weakness, but how did they pilot it?

“That’s a geth thing.” She said with a wide smile that he didn’t understand.

“The architecture is so strange, and almost insect like,” Cissnei said. “Are these Geth insectoid?”

“Not really. The original designs were based on their creators, the Quarians, who are partly humanoid. The Geth have developed their own styles and techniques since. All their ships do look like bugs but I’ve no idea why.”

“I suppose humans wouldn’t understand alien designs anyway.” Cissnei said absently.

“You’d be surprised. Aliens aren’t really all that mysterious, even the glaringly different ones like Geth.”

“What role would this ship play in a battle?” Sephiroth asked. “It’s obviously not a transport vehicle.”

“This is a fighter, built for speed and manoeuvrability. They’re usually deployed from dreadnoughts or cruisers to attack at ‘knife fight’ range.” Shep ard said while kneeling to examine something bolted down.

“What is?”

“Anything closer than ten kilometres.” She said. He and Cissnei looked at her in surprise. Ten kilometres was a deemed a knife fight? Even their combat was bizarre to him. “Space is a big place.” She said at their expressions.

“I take it there would be hundreds of these swarming the larger ships?” He asked, determined to understand.

“That’s right. They use their torpedoes to bring down kinetic barriers, leaving the frigates to burn through the armour plating and finish off the vulnerable enemy ship.”

“What if you were attacking a planet?” He asked.
“That’s more complicated. Is there a defensive fleet?” She asked, turning to him and looking thoughtful.

“Say there is.”

“Control of orbit is really what determines the fight.” She said, “Citadel Conventions forbid direct attacks over garden worlds. Inhabitable planets aren’t so common we can afford to go blowing them up, offensive attacks have to be launched at an oblique angle so that if you miss the artillery won’t just plough straight into the planet.”

“That gives the defenders a massive advantage.” He said. Her short description presented a wealth of scenarios that played out in his head. He pursued the thought eagerly.

“Some sieges have been won simply by positioning their defensive fleets directly over sprawling cities.” She explained, returning her gun to her back. “You can fire at the attackers without hesitation but they can’t return fire without risking massive casualties and destruction of a home world.”

“Holding your own people hostage before an enemy. That… is very clever.” He said, thinking through how the fight might play out. “But it assumes your enemy cares about the planet and civilian losses.”

“That’s why it’s such a risky manoeuver. If they call your bluff then you’ve just put your people directly into the line of fire.” She said with some bitterness.

Cissnei watched the two of them with a resigned look on her face and a muttered “SOLDIERS.”

“What if there is no defensive fleet?” He asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“Then the battle’s already over. No amount of ground based artillery can hold off a fleet. Against anything more than a couple of ships, even GARDIAN laser cannons won’t help you. Any fighting from then on is just a massacre.” Her voice carried the weight of experience. He was reminded that even though he outranked her, she had been fighting her own wars longer then he had. The scars that lit up her face were testament to hard fought battles under terms he didn’t understand.

But what she said had ramification for his own planet. The intricacies of space combat might be beyond his experience but he understood what she was saying. Gaia was wholly outstripped.

“Could this fly on its own?” he asked, casting his eyes towards the ruined cockpit. “Can it traverse space without a larger ship?”

“Theoretically yes, but heat build-up would be an issue. It’s so small that unless frequently vented the core will overheat and cook everyone inside.”

That was disappointing. The idea of flying to another planet on a whim, free of Gaia’s restraints was oddly appealing. He’d never thought about it before but being presented with a ship intrigued him with possibilities he couldn’t even imagine. Perhaps that was why he’d gone out of his way to accommodate Shepard. Beyond the political ramifications, she was a traveller from other planets, among which Gaia was just one more.

“So you couldn’t fly to a different solar system in one of these.”

“That’s not really how it works. The Mass Relays fling you to another system, you don’t just fly there. That would take centuries.” She said. “Space is really big.”

“Will this one fly?” He asked, watching her carefully.
“No. It’s too far gone.” She replied, her expression as uncompromising as always. It had been almost a month and he still couldn’t read her.

“You’re certain.”

“The core’s dead and the thrusters are burnt through. I doubt you could even get any salvage from it, not with the mako eating through everything.” She kicked lightly at a pipe. It snapped and rolled sluggishly. “It’s completely dead.”

“If the torpedoes were still viable Scarlet would be salivating over this.” Cissnei said.

“Air and Space would probably be interested as well.” He said.

“Can you explain its origins without raising a ton of other questions?” Shepard asked. “Or do they already know I’m not from around here?”

“Nobody knows, besides me, Tseng, and Hollander.” Cissnei said. “The Turks have gone out of their way to keep it that way.”

“What can you salvage from this?” He asked.

“Nothing.” She said, scanning it one last time with her Omni-tool. She looked around with her hands on her hips, what looked like confusion crossing her face. “There’s nothing here that isn’t bolted down. There aren’t even any runtimes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the Geth were destroyed in the crash.” She ran a hand through her hair. “Dammit.”

“They might still be in the lake.” Cissnei offered.

“Could be, but that would be just the platforms. The runtimes should have fled to the ship.” She said. It sounded like ‘runtimes’ were software of some kind. Perhaps ‘platforms’ were what they called the physical robot body?

“These servers are designed to be more secure.” Shepard climbed over a bulkhead to a closed compartment. She wrestled with the handle and yanked it open. Mako poured out. Racks of burnt and blackened electronics were stacked inside, mako clinging to every ridge. “Obviously not secure enough.” She said sadly.

The implications of it were lost on Sephiroth and Cissnei. He assessed what they knew now and what his next step should be.

“This ship doesn’t belong to the Alliance.” He observed, running a hand over a bulkhead.

“It belongs to the Alliance’s allies.” Shepard said wryly, cutting her eyes at him “I brokered the peace with the Geth myself.” Another piece of intel to file away for later.

“It’s in Shinra territory.” He pressed.

“True. And the Geth have no lack of ships. I’m sure the other departments would appreciate whatever they can get from it.” She said. “Perhaps it’s time we made this alliance official.”

Sephiroth shook his head. He wasn’t about to relinquish his trump card over the rest of Shinra’s squabbling horde.
“No, this needs to be kept secret.” He said. Shepard, with everything she knew and represented, was his secret weapon. His position was advantageous, so long as nobody else knew he couldn’t be ordered to give it up.

Less than an hour later Shepard stood on the edge of the moss covered cliff and watched the Geth fighter roll away into a steep gully. Sephiroth stood to her side, the glow of his gravity materia fading away. He had been forlorn at hiding the ship as best they could but he hadn’t been prepared to share it with the higher ups and there was no way for SOLDIER to make use of it on their own. The little displays of interdepartmental squabbling had been very telling. Tseng would see to it that a Turk was sent out with the technicians who fixed the pipe to ensure they didn’t ask any questions.

Shepard hid a smile. She had told the truth, the ship’s core was dead, and the controls weren’t responding. But she may have exaggerated ever so slightly. Admittedly it wouldn’t be taking off anytime soon but it wasn’t completely beyond salvage. The fact that it was here at all meant the Geth had a presence in the system. Shinra weren’t about to help her out, she knew that much, but she was resourceful. She wasn’t an engineer, or even a mechanic. But she would think of something. Failure wasn’t something she’d stand for.

She logged the co-ordinates on her Omni-tool.

It was strange that it had been so empty though. Geth didn’t need a lot of gear, they didn’t eat or bleed after all, but even they carried some equipment. The ship had been barren.

Extensive searching had produced a broken Omni-tool though. It had been amidst the debris that filled the cockpit and she had almost missed it. With Sephiroth’s official permission she was going to try and fix it when they returned to HQ. He wanted to have it as soon as it was operational again. She hadn’t decided whether or not she’d co-operate on that front yet.

“Why was this only just brought up now?” She asked once the ship had settled. Fallen trees covered most of it, and they didn’t have any satellites to spot it. “What took so long?” The crash had been over a month ago.

“I was only just notified about the crash, the science department saw no reason to tell anyone. And with the area being so remote we have only just heard about the monster problems.” Sephiroth replied. He turned away from the cliff and checked his gear.

“It sounds more like the Air and Space Department’s territory.” She commented. “Or does the Science Department have a subsection in meteorology?”

“I couldn’t say.” He said.

The mission was officially over, though as far as Shepard was concerned she had just gained another, much longer term mission. Now they had only to return to the helicopter and it was straight on till Midgar.

Sephiroth set a swift pace and they started walking.
“Tell me about these Geth.” He said. His curiosity was obvious, but she didn’t mind. It was just nice not having to pretend none of it existed for a moment.

“What would you like to know?”

“Where are they from?” He ducked under a tree branch as he walked.

“Rannoch, originally. They don’t often leave the Perseus Veil, that’s their star cluster. They were designed to be a cheap labour force by the Quarians. Eventually they developed sentience and the Quarians became afraid of the massive army of functionally immortal synthetics they had created.” This was a story she knew better than most. Her dive into the Geth Consensus had left a lasting impression.

“Who struck first?” Cissnei asked dryly. The Turk hadn’t said much but she’d soaked up everything around her. Shepard had no doubt that Tseng would have a perfect transcript of this entire outing on his desk tomorrow morning, but her interest had been steeped in wonder. Her fascination wasn’t as focused as Sephiroth’s, but she obviously thought the entire thing was amazing.

“The Quarians launched the attack. Judging the risk too great they ordered the destruction of all Geth. While the Geth didn’t have aspirations of rebelling they weren’t about to sit and be exterminated. The Quarians lost the war as well as their home planet, for three hundred years.” Thoughts of Tali stopped her from passing any greater judgement, but it was a study in rank stupidity nonetheless.

“Three hundred years?” Cissnei exclaimed. “What did they do, where did they go?”

“They wandered aimlessly on the few ships they’d fled on. Nobody else would take them.” The galaxy was a harsh place some days. “ ‘The Migrant Fleet’ it was called.”

“That’s so sad.” Cissnei said. She clambered over a tree trunk.

“They shouldn’t have started a war they didn’t have the strength to finish.” Sephiroth said. Empathy clearly wasn’t his strong point.

“People are easily frightened.” Shepard returned with a shrug. “I’ve dealt with many AI though and they aren’t any more inherently evil than any other life form.”

He gave her a strange look. “You can hardly call robots ‘life forms’.”

“Shows what you know.” She scoffed. Edi showed more emotion than he did.

“But aren’t they just computers?” Cissnei asked.

“No. They are not.”

“Yes they are.” Sephiroth said. “They’re just electricity and wires. They were made by someone for a specific purpose.”

“Weren’t we all?” Shepard responded airily, knowing full well an age old argument was on the horizon.

“It’s not a matter of philosophy.” He said irritably. “They aren’t alive. These Geth were physically designed and programmed to one specific end.”

“What does anyone else’s intentions have to do with it?” Shepard asked, growing irritated herself.
He hadn’t even met a Geth, what did he know? She pointedly didn’t acknowledge the part of her
that knew she too had been physically designed, Cerberus’ aspirations the clear end goal.

“It limits what they’re capable of. Is it truly sapient life if it’s just the sum of its programming?” He
said.

“They can alter their own programming.” She corrected, swatting a branch out of her way. They
were almost back at the helicopter. “They have wants and fears and likes and dislikes that are based
on simple taste and experience, not lines of code.” Legion had enjoyed playing online combat games
for some reason.

“Very clever programming then.” Sephiroth said. “They are still bound by the limitations of their
internal design.”

“As are we all.” She said. “They are more than software, just as people as more than DNA.”

“Perhaps.” He replied.

Shepard rolled her eyes. The clearing was up ahead and she was looking forward to a silent flight
back to HQ. Sephiroth hadn’t stepped out of the treeline yet when he tensed.

Half a second later he dove out of the way as the trees were smashed by something. Shepard and
Cissnei ran forward and burst into the clearing, three sets of weapons at the ready.

Between them and the helicopter towered a giant Marlboro. Its huge maw was frothing and its long
tentacles were thick and grasping with strange growths protruding from them. It shouldn’t have been
this big, or this vicious.

Which meant it was mutated. *Perfect*, Shepard thought, bringing her Widow up to aim.

An ear splitting roar later they all dove into the fight.
The malboro was a towering mess of slimy sinew that looked more plant like then animal, but its head was composed almost solely of a giant mouth, filled with rows of razor sharp teeth. Its numerous eyes, faintly glowing from mako exposure, were on the end of stalks that swung around the bulbous head. It stood taller than the helicopter with a wealth of lashing misshapen tentacles that couldn't quite reach across the entire clearing but came pretty damn close.

A tentacle lashed out and Shepard dodged one way, Cissnei and Sephiroth the other. Sephiroth turned and slashed at with his sword. One of the tentacles fell, sliced clean through. That only left about fifty.

The other tentacles lashed at him; he dodged the first and the second but not the third which sent him flying back into the treeline.

Standing at such close range Shepard aimed at centre mass, uncertain what would cause the most damage. She fired her rifle but its only reaction was to swing around and focus on her. It surged towards her, tentacles grasping. With a flash her Omni-blade was out and she sliced through the limbs grabbing at her and then followed it up with a biotic push.

It barely stumbled back and Cissnei threw her shuriken. Her aim was true and the throwing star landed with a squelch in the green flesh just beneath its head. Instead of a burst of blood, the shuriken sank into the slimy muscle and lodged there. The monster barely noticed and bore down on Shepard again, moving with remarkable speed for such a large creature.

She rolled out of the way and then dodged a succession of lashing tentacles. Seeing her chance she threw an incendiary burst before taking cover behind a fallen log. The monster roared at the burning plasma, its slick skin drying and crackling under the heat. Sephiroth attacked it from behind, halving its reach with a single slice. Shepard sprung from her cover and threw a biotic warp. From this angle she could see that the thick gelatinous hide functioned as bizarre natural armour, with the consistency of drying concrete. On a creature so large her warp didn't have the full impact she'd hoped for. Stasis and singularity would be equally ineffective. She reloaded her widow.

Sephiroth meanwhile was slicing through tentacles at impressive speeds. One managed to wrap around his leg but he carved through it before it could haul him off his feet. Given the way it uprooted a tree and hurled it at him, getting caught wasn't an option. Cissnei was at the opposite side of the clearing and peppering it with bullets from her pistols, 'killing it with bug bites' as Kal'Regar had once said.

They hadn't faced much combat together during this mission but they had fallen into a reliable pattern. Cissnei dealt reliable if small damage with every shot. Sephiroth drew its focus and sliced through the defences while she kept him covered and dealt catastrophic damage with each slow but well aimed attack. He moved with speeds she could barely keep track off, her rifle was powerful but with huge kick and a slow reload, she had to make each shot count.

She took careful aim and fired, one of its beady eyes in her sights. The stalk the eyeball stood on exploded.

The malboro gurgled with pain. Its other eyes swivelled around looking for the culprit but not finding one its rage was taken out on Sephiroth. It charged him, its maw gaping open and he sprung back. His lightning fast reflexes were barely enough to save him from the wave of poisonous breathe the monster spewed at him. Green fumes poured out from its maw and the air turned deadly. Sephiroth
coughed and staggered out of the way, dodging the tentacles that lashed after him. His barrier materia sprung to life, barely keeping the fumes at bay.

Shepard took aim again and second eyeball exploded. Sephiroth, keeping his distance, turned to materia and threw a ball of fire at the roaring monster. The outside of its hide crackled and blistered under the heat and it lashed out all the more furiously, being baited across the clearing.

Shepard reloaded and it lost another eye.

It spewed another wave of poison and the other eyes all swung around and found her. It had finally made the connection between the deafening bang of the rifle and the pain of a lost eye and it ground its massive teeth at her before charging. Shepard activated her tactical cloak and sprinted to another tree while it smashed through the log she'd been using for cover. The poison in the air made her mind foggy and her limbs sluggish. She pushed through it anyway. Sephiroth had sprung forward in the monster's moment of distraction and swung for the main bulk of it. His sword sliced through its hide but lodged in the sinewy muscle. Shepard shot out another eye. With a frustrated grunt Sephiroth yanked back his blade and slashed again. Yellow ooze poured out through the wounds it was collecting and its attacks were becoming much more erratic in fury and desperation.

Another of its eyeballs exploded. Sephiroth's blade kept it from retaliating. Cissnei's bullets drilled into its sides. Two more eyeballs fell. Sephiroth leapt closer with acrobatic fluidity to slice off several more tentacles and then dancing out of range of the poisonous breathe that it spat at him. The creature swung around wildly in pain, its last eye searching for its enemy as it staggered and coughed out its poison. Cissnei approached, reloading for what was surely the end of the fight.

By now the clearing was littered with amputated green limbs, all twitching and blinking sporadically. Sephiroth's blade glinted in the late afternoon sun. In that moment the malboro saw Cissnei with its last remaining eye.

With a burst of energy it shoved Sephiroth back while one of its last few tentacles wrapped around Cissnei's leg. Before she could react it lifted her up and sent her hurtling through the air. Shepard threw a light biotic lift at her to soften the fall but she still crashed into the side of the helicopter with enough force to dent the side of the cockpit and break off one of the rotors. Red stained the glass and polished metal.

The creature roared at the sight. Sephiroth practically flew towards it and stabbed straight through its head, his blade protruding out through its mouth. Its last couple of tentacles writhed ineffectually against the blade. He pulled the blade back out and it swung around, rearing up drunkenly. Shepard took a last shot straight into its open mouth. It stumbled, its oozing blood gushing through its mouth. With a sickening gurgle it toppled and was finally still.

The forest had fallen quiet. The only sounds were that of dripping blood and engine oil.

Shepard sprinted to where Cissnei lay. The Turk hadn't moved yet, she was still lying partially inside the torn door of the helicopter. Sephiroth drew out his cure materia.

Shepard leaned over her and took her wrist. Still no movement but there was the faintest pulse. She swiftly activated her Omni-tool and scanned the unconscious Turk. The display showed two badly broken ribs, and a punctured lung, alongside a wealth of lacerations and bruises and a broken leg. She angled the display for Sephiroth to see.

He studied it in silence then his materia began to glow and he held his hand over the worst of the cuts. As Shepard watched through the Omni-tool's display, the lacerations and bruises faded away.
The glow subsided and he returned the materia to his bracer.

"What about her lung and ribs?" she asked, looking to him in confusion. He had patched up her superficial wounds but the internal damage was as they'd found it. Her lung would collapse if they didn't do something soon, and if the ribs were jostled too much she would drown in her own blood.

"Cure materia can't move broken bones; it only knits flesh back together." Sephiroth said. "If you try to heal someone without resetting the bones…" He didn't elaborate. She understood the gruesome implications.

She helped move her out of the smashed side of the helicopter, Sephiroth bending the dented metal out of the way. It was dangerous to jostle her, especially given her ribs, but she'd run the risk of bleeding out if they didn't move her. Broken glass tinkled as they moved her from the wreck.

"What's the nearest village?" Shepard asked, looking at the sky. The helicopter was trashed and the sun would set in less than an hour. They couldn't call for medical-evac; they were too far off the phone grid. Time was of the essence.

"Banora. Seven hours north of here." He said, retrieving a pack of emergency supplies from the helicopter's exposed interior.

"As the crow flies?" She asked doubtfully. They were surrounded by cliffs and gullies that would slow them drastically. She crossed the clearing to collect the cooling heat sinks.

"As the SOLDIER marches." He replied. When she returned he handed her the pack and she slung it onto her back.

Sephiroth knelt and picked Cissnei up as gently as possible, holding her bridal style. A fireman's carry would have been easier but would have risked driving her rib even further into her lungs. She gave a laboured, watery sounding breathe at the movement but did not wake.

"Take point, Shepard." He said with a nod.

She drew her rifle and led the way back into the forest.

On the edge of Banora there was a stately manor house. It had acres of land around it covered with strange curved apple trees and slow turning windmills.

Shepard slammed open the first door she found. She was met with a long corridor. At the end was a dining room.

Immediately moving to the long table she threw aside the centre piece and cleared everything but the table cloth.

A door opposite her banged open and two people peeked in, a man and a woman looking terrified.

The woman stood behind him, a red materia in her hand, while the man held a fire poker like it was a club.

"What's the meaning of this?" he exclaimed, holding his improvised weapon out with a shaking hand. His eyes darted to the crossed swords above the mantel piece next to her but she didn't have time for any of this.

"Get a doctor." Shepard ordered.
"Who are you? What are you doing? You can't just-"

Sephiroth finally came rushing through the door, still carrying the comatose Cissnei.

The two people froze at the sight of him.

"Oh, goddess." The woman said.

"Go and get a Doctor." Sephiroth said as he lay Cissnei down on the table. The two people remained frozen.

"Now!" Shepard snapped. That shook the man out of his stupor and he rushed out of the room.

Cissnei groaned and then gave a great wracking cough. Her breathing had grown louder and more ragged the further the night wore on. Her suit was stained with drying blood from wounds now healed, the real damage was internal. Sephiroth had had to risk permanent injury by using his cure materia on her a second time. It was either that or let her die before they arrived. Hopefully surgery would be able to save her and the lung partially healed around a misaligned rib. Her laboured breathes echoed in the small room.

"The Doctor shouldn't be far away." The woman offered after a few moments of tense silence.

"We've done all we can." Sephiroth said. Finally without his burden he stretched out his arms, stiff from having held her up for almost seven hours.

Shepard belatedly noticed the woman nervously eyeing the rifle in her hands. She absently compacted the widow and returned it to its place on her back.

The two SOLDIERs were both covered in filth from their march. The trip had been swift and tense, there hadn't been time to stop or go around anything in their path. So they had crossed rivers, cliffs, and valleys with unerring focus and barely a word swapped between them. No matter what they thought of each other this wasn't the time for games or politics. They were soldiers and they had a job. Shepard set the course and shot anything that tried to get in their way. Sephiroth held Cissnei and scaled any landscape in the way as though he wasn't carrying anything at all.

Fortunately they hadn't come across any monsters as mutated as the malboro. Apparently Sephiroth could take out the normal malboro's without any trouble, the mako mutations made all the difference. It hardly mattered now.

Shepard ran another scan on her Omni-tool. They had made very good time but Cissnei wouldn't last much longer. Her fist clenched. The gurgling sound of collapsing lungs desperately trying to drag in oxygen haunted a dark part of Shepard's mind.

All they could do now was wait.

The woman from the house hovered nervously.

Sephiroth stood by the door they'd burst in through, looking out into the night. Shepard took a seat and watched the dying Turk.

This should not have happened. But it did, and now she would see it through.

The doctor soon arrived. It wasn't until the sun had risen when he declared he had done everything he could.
"You saved her life with that materia." He said, packing his gear back into his bag. "I can't say if she'll ever make a full recovery though, not with her lung malformed like that. Your Midgar doctors may be able to conjure up a miracle but I wouldn't bet on it."

It was disheartening, but at least she wasn't dead. Shepard held on to that. Cissnei might spend the rest of her days confined to a desk, but at least she would have further days. It had been far too close though. It only took a second for something to go wrong but Shepard had higher standards than this. She did everything she could to bring her people home but dammit, it wasn't always enough. The memorial wall on the Normandy was testament to that.

Sephiroth had called for medical-evac. Soon enough a Shinra helicopter would be there to take them back to Midgar.

She stood outside the house, breathing in the cool morning air. As it turned out the house they had broken into belonged to Genesis of all people, and it was his parent's they bossed around in the early hours of the day.

They were still inside now, talking to Sephiroth who when last she checked was not enjoying the attention. When the two Rhapsodoses had finally stopped panicking over who was sitting in their dining room they had proven themselves incredibly self-important and ostentatious. So much so, that they made Genesis look meek in comparison. Sephiroth obviously had no idea how to talk to civilians, not even those who were trying to pay him compliments.

He'd given her a look that she was pretty sure had an order for backup in it somewhere, but she'd promptly abandoned him to deal with it. He could get himself out of that mess.

She set out towards the village. It wasn't far, the little paved path leading towards a small collection of cottages. Genesis' house was by far the largest and the nicest, although the smaller dwellings had their own simple charm. There was a fountain in the centre of the village where she stopped and sat of the stone rim. The air smelt of apples and wood. It was so unlike Midgar that it was impressive Angeal and Genesis had integrated so well.

"Excuse me," A voice interrupted her musings. She turned to see a little old lady wearing a brown skirt and a simple green shawl. An old man was behind her, his black hair shot with grey and leaning heavily on a cane. Something about them was ever so slightly familiar. "Are you one of the SOLDIERs staying at the Rhapsodos house?" the woman asked. It seemed news travelled quickly.

"I am." Shepard said, rising and giving them a smile. "What can I do for you?"

The old man cleared his throat. "Forgive us for asking, but our son is a SOLDIER as well." He said, standing up as straight as he could. "We were wondering if maybe you knew him."

"Ah, you must be Mr and Mrs Hewley." Shepard said, feeling silly for not realising sooner. "I do know Angeal, he's a friend. I'm Shepard by the way." They shook hands.

"It's an honour to meet you Shepard." Mrs Hewley said. Mr Hewley smiled at the introduction but then he coughed into his hand. He turned away, still coughing painfully. His wife patted him on the back, old and well-worn concern on her face. Shepard tried to keep her emotions from leaking into her eyes at the sight.

"Forgive me." He said when he had recovered himself. "How is Angeal? Is he well?"

"He doesn't write nearly as much as he said he would." Mrs Hewley added, as they all pretended his episode hadn't just happened.
"He's doing very well, as far as I know. I haven't know him all that long but he's a good soldier." Shepard said. Angeal was a decent guy. By the looks of it his parents were good people as well. "You should be very proud."

"I knew he would. He's always been such a good boy." Mrs Hewley said with a nostalgic smile.

Shepard gave a small smile in reply. She got the distinct impression that Angeal would be mortified to hear about this, so she'd have to remember to mention it to him.

"Thank you for telling us." Mr Hewley said, "It's so hard to get news out here."

A faint whirring noise began somewhere and Shepard looked around for the source. It took her a moment to place it as the sound of a helicopter.

"It was nice meeting you but I should go. I'll tell him you said hi." She said as the Shinra helicopter come into view.

"Tell him to write more often!" Mrs Hewley replied.

Shepard turned away and made for the pick-up point.
Shepard sat at the darkest corner of a bar and stared into the depths of her drink.

There weren't many nice bars above the plate in Midgar. There were a great many pretentious clubs to see and be seen, but very few where the lights were low, the drinks were good, and people minded their own damn business. Especially if you happened to be a SOLDIER.

Cissnei had disappeared into Shinra's medical wing and Shepard had new missions arriving on her phone. She could fill them in her own time, at her own discretion, and she would. Right now she just wanted to sit and contemplate the bottom of her glass.

The sound of Cissnei's laboured breaths were still echoing in her mind. Perhaps if she'd gotten the enhancements it wouldn't have happened, but there was no way to know and it was too late now anyway.

The rasping sound of air being forced through a collapsing lung had been stuck in her head the entire flight back to Midgar and she just wanted to get away from it.

She knew why. Cissnei was a nice girl, they hadn't known each other very long though and Shepard would hardly say they were close. But watching someone slowly suffocate as their lungs gave out tore open a part of her heart she didn't like to acknowledge. The sound took her back to a place where soulful black eyes gazed at her tenderly and green scales were smooth under her touch.

So she sat in her dark corner and waited for the past to leave her in peace. A mopey song was playing in the background and quiet conversations carried on around her.

It wasn't working as well as she'd hoped. Maybe it was the setting, maybe it was just her mood, but old voices were resurrected as she emptied the glass.

She looked idly at the rows of bottles before her, lined up behind the bar alongside memorabilia she didn't recognize. The words 'I don't know if Turian heaven is the same as human heaven...’ floated through her mind and she closed her eyes in pain, ‘...but if we both end up there, meet me at the bar.’

She signalled for another drink.

The bartender was quick, opening the bottle and sliding it along to her immediately. He didn't have many customers but one look was enough to dissuade him from trying to start up a conversation.

She took a sip of the bland alcohol, it was weak and lukewarm. She wished it was ryncol, the Krogan drink that was also technically a poison. She wasn't supposed to drink it but she did anyway, on bad nights. It would burn its way down her throat like when she'd drink with Wrex and just... forget. What she wouldn't give to forget. But she could never forget; all she could do was remember.

'Siha... I await you across the sea.'

There was not enough alcohol on this planet to block some things out.

She had dealt with her grief as best she could. The middle of a war was no time to be taking mental health days, especially when you were the one spearheading the entire war effort. There simply wasn't the time, you mourned and you moved on. Shepard had never been one to dwell on her losses; she preferred to live on in their memory and that was what she was trying to do.
Some losses were harder than others.

Someone sat in the seat next to her. She grit her teeth, irrationally aggravated at whoever it was. If they tried to make conversation she would throw them out a window. Finally she looked up only to see it was Guzzard.

He didn't look at her, he didn't say anything. Instead he just ordered his own drink. She finished hers.

His beer arrived, accompanied by her next round.

They both took a gulp, the dull murmur of other people's conversations droning on around them. Neither spoke.

Later, when their bottles were almost empty he gave her a weak smile that tugged at the scaring on the left side of his face. She returned it, her bitter smile no doubt cracking open the red fissures that lined her face.

Their next round arrived. In calm silence they tapped the tops of the bottles together and remembered. For now it was enough.

"The local doctor was correct." Tseng said quietly. "Cissnei may never make a full recovery."

Sephiroth didn't say anything. Silence sank into the corners of his office, the two men sitting on opposite sides of his desk. The mission had been informal in many ways; he wouldn't be handing in a report to Heidegger who probably didn't even know he'd left. This was the closest thing there would be to a debriefing. It was a delicate matter, dealing with the Turks always was.

"What happened, Sephiroth?" Tseng asked.

"A mutated malboro." He replied tonelessly. Failure wasn't something he accepted, but this had come far too close to it.

"What happened at the crater?" Tseng pressed. That was the question wasn't it? With Cissnei unconscious he wouldn't have received any reports. Tseng's eyes narrowed at Sephiroth's continued silence. "One of my best field agents may spend the rest of her life bed ridden." He said coldly.

"There was a ship." Sephiroth replied. With the rush back to Banora there had been barely any time to analyse what he'd seen. Further reflection had only raised more questions.

"Was it one of Shepard's?"

"Her allies." Or so she had claimed. "There were no survivors." He added. He didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed. It would have been fascinating to meet other aliens but Shepard was trouble enough on her own.

"Any salvage?" Tseng asked.

He shook his head. How could an entire ship carry even less information than a single woman? It was infuriating.

"Nothing at all?" Tseng pressed. Information gathering was usually Turks business although Sephiroth knew the art of it. Any such expertise was wasted against alien technology. "Not even a Captain's log? Their technology is far sturdier then ours."
"Not sturdy enough. After over a month at the bottom of a lake of mako there was nothing left."

"A shame." He said with a barely audible sigh of disappointment. "It would have been useful to have some intel that didn't come directly from Shepard."

"You think she's lying to us?" Sephiroth asked. It was a question that plagued every one of his conversations with the woman.

"Not necessarily. But she doesn't have any reason to be honest either." Tseng said.

Sephiroth tilted his head in acknowledgement of the fact. Shepard clearly didn't fear them and she didn't truly need anything from them either, not now that she was healed and her equipment was repaired. Working alongside her in the field had only emphasised how very little she was beholden to them. She was tied to their agreement by little more than convenience and her own goodwill. It was not a comforting thought.

"You were correct about her loyalty in the field." Sephiroth conceded, leaning back in his chair. "I suspect the story about the death of her platoon was an honest one given her determination to save Cissnei. Not that she lacked determination beforehand, but she marched with the stubbornness of a tonberry the entire way back."

"She kept pace with you?" Tseng asked with a raised eyebrow.

"She didn't keep the pace she set the pace, on a seven hour hike across uneven, monster infested terrain." Sephiroth hadn't needed to put down Cissnei and fight even once. The alien woman had slaughtered any opposition with efficiency and precision, all without sacrificing their punishing pace. "Shepard has no lack of faults but her performance in the field isn't one of them."

"She did mention medical implants of some kind." Tseng said, musing over the information.

"A secret she guards fiercely." Sephiroth replied. There were so many questions. Being a high ranking member of Shinra had taught him that some questions were best left unanswered.

"I wouldn't have expected her to be so invested so soon." Tseng commented, drawing the conversation away from enhancements. Nobody appreciated the need for secrets quite like the Turks.

"She may not be loyal to Shinra, but she is loyal to Shinra's troops." Sephiroth replied absently.

"Are the two not the same?" Tseng asked.

There was a beat of silence before Sephiroth covered his slip up.

"Of course they are." He said, wondering at himself. Tseng was his ally, currently. They both made concessions to maintain that and Sephiroth had no intentions of testing the limits of their agreement.

Tseng cleared his throat and stood to leave. He paused before the door and looked over his shoulder.

"The President's negotiations in Wutai are not going well." He said, seemingly apropos of nothing.

"They won't let us build a reactor?" Sephiroth asked with narrowed eyes. There weren't many reasons he could think of why the Turk would want to tell him that and he didn't like any of them.

"The board of Directors think they might still be convinced." Tseng said. "They are wrong."

"And the President is too set on the idea to be dissuaded." President Shinra was a cunning businessman, and he knew what he wanted. He also knew how to get it.
"I hope your SOLDIERs are in top form Sephiroth." Tseng said, calmly meeting his gaze. "We're going to need them."

Sephiroth let out a long breath. He had suspected, but if Tseng was warning him then it was all but inevitable. His office felt very small all of a sudden.

"Does it bother you?" He asked in idle curiosity, not voicing the hundred fold concerns that came with an imminent war. "The idea of fighting against your homeland?"

Tseng looked back at him once more, a strange little smile tugging at his mouth.

"I'm not Wutaian anymore, Sephiroth." He said, his smile disappearing. "I'm a Turk."

He left the office, as quiet and unassuming as always.

Several days later Shepard was at the firing range with her troopers. They might technically be Sephiroth's, but she'd come to think of them as hers.

Her impromptu drinking session with Guzzard hadn't been mentioned by either of them since. They'd gone about their business and life continued, as it should. She was thankful for his tact.

Right now she was anything but thankful as the infantryman she was watching over took a shot and completely missed the dummy target.

All the troopers had made good progress. Her insistence forced them to improve, whether they wanted to or not. They understood the proper maintenance their rifles required now as well the finer details of how the weapons actually worked. They still had a long way to go but at least they were less likely to be stuck with a jammed gun because they hadn't bothered to clean it properly.

That wouldn't help the trooper in front of her who had the aim of a drunken vorcha.

He lined up his next shot and fired. Shepard gave a cough of barely concealed laughter when he accidentally hit the target two lanes over. The display was getting painful but she was determined to wring some improvement out of him. He was tall for a teenager and one of the more heavily muscled troopers. She could see he was putting too much of his strength into the trigger which was pulling his shots and throwing his aim. They were all wearing their helmets so she couldn't see much of his face.

"I don't like guns." He said sullenly.

"This is the weapon you have been given. It doesn't matter whether or not you like it." It was true he wasn't a natural with a firearm of this sort but that was what training was for.

"Sephiroth got to swap out his regulation sword for something he liked." He whined.

"When you reach his rank feel free to do the same." She said.

His friend firing in the next lane snickered at their conversation.

"Yes ma'am." The first trooper grumbled, lifting his rifle again.

They all learned very quickly that she demanded respect, but she didn't maintain the severe façade that many officers did. She was prepared to talk to them at their level and help with whatever problems they had, so long as they remembered who was in charge. They didn't need to quake in
fear, they just needed to get the job done.

These two had caught her interest, though for completely different reasons. She watched the second one take aim. He was smaller than the first trooper, not quite as tall and with a wiry frame that his uniform hung off limply.

"Good shot." She said when he hit the target in the chest. It was a little off but he was improving by leaps and bounds.

"Thank you." He replied, pride in his voice.

He had been lagging behind in the more physical aspects of the training. His endurance left something to be desired but he was a very smart kid with good aim. By the looks of it he had the determination to overcome his shortfalls.

His friend was the opposite, she wouldn't call him stupid exactly but he was the leap without thinking sort with endless energy. As far as physical capability went he was top of the class. His skill with a gun was the only thing holding him back, but even that he took to with enthusiasm. The two usually hung out together and from what she'd seen they worked well as a team.

She had high hopes for them. But that was for the future; today there was much work to be done.

The burly one lowered his rifle and looked at the target in disappointment.

"If I was in SOLDIER-" He began.

She cut him off with a very pointed look.

"Okay I know you dislike SOLDIER for some reason but hear me out." He said, holding his hand up disarmingly.

"I don't dislike SOLDIER; I dislike you being so focused on someone else's job that you forget to do your own." They were all so set on enhancements they forgot about the hard work and dedication needed to pull it off. It was pure laziness and she didn't have time for it.

"Alright fair enough," he allowed, "but if we're talking about combat SOLDIERs clearly do it better than we do."

"Of course they do. Why do you think I'm here training you?" she asked, giving him a dry look.

"Oh, yeah." He said with his head titled as he scratched his neck "I guess I just think of SOLDIER as men with swords."

"He doesn't mean that as an insult, ma'am." The thin trooper next to him said quickly, "Do you?" he asked, giving him a look that was obvious despite the helmet.

"Oh! No, sorry, I didn't mean that, like, the way it sounded." She chuckled at his panicked apology. "I'm not offended. Most SOLDIERs are burly guys with giant swords. And very few of them have any idea what to do against someone wielding a gun who actually knows how to use it." Since they trained against monsters and other sword wielding SOLDIERs, snipers were something of a mystery to the enhanced ranks. It was still frustrating Genesis to no end.

"Yeah but..." The trooper said haltingly.
"But?"

"You couldn't actually go toe to toe with a regular SOLDIER, could you?" he asked sceptically.

She gave a bark of laughter.

"Are you seriously asking her that?" The other trooper asked, looking at him like he was mad.

"I'm just curious!" He said throwing his hands up defensively.

"Of course she can hold her own with the SOLDIERs, she's one of them."

"What makes you think I can't, trooper?" She drawled.

"Well, you've only got a gun. As soon as they get close the fight is over right?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Assuming they can get close at all." She said.

"Yeah, okay. But SOLDIERs have crazy reflexes. Couldn't they just dodge your bullets?" He said, "Though I suppose you've got crazy reflexes too, so you could shoot at where they're going to be. Wait, can you do that?"

That he was trying to think tactically about it at all was victory enough, even if the assumptions he was making were woefully incorrect. There was plenty of time to learn.

With a small smile she drew her rifle from her back. She objected to competing with her fellow SOLDIERs for recognition, but she had no problem showing the troopers how it was done.

The two troopers shared a look of surprise and excitement and quickly stepped aside. The other infantrymen along the line stopped what they were doing and watched eagerly as well.

The targets were all far too close for it to be anything like a challenge and a black widow was massive overkill for any firing range this small.

She took three shots and the heads of three dummies exploded. The bodies were thrown back by the sheer force of it and the echoing BANGs were deafening.

The troopers looked at her with renewed awe.

"Nobody dodges my bullets." She said, idly stashing the heat sink.

"I'm very glad you're on our side, ma'am." said the burly trooper.

"I look forward to seeing you boys in the field." She replied, returning the widow to its place on her back.

"We'll be following your lead." the wiry trooper said.
Sephiroth stood with his back to a stone pillar, measuring his breaths and holding his sword so that it wasn't visible from the other side.

He was in the ruins of an old castle. Green moss carpeted the ground and everywhere large chunks of crumbling stone and rotting wood lay. Half the ceilings had collapsed leaving it a labyrinth of winding narrow corridors and rotting open halls filled with lonesome support columns and overhanging terraces. The midday sun streamed in through holes in the roof flooding the castle in blinding light and stark shadows.

He hated this VR setting. Whose idea had it been to let Shepard choose the arena?

Genesis was taking cover on the other side of the hall. Sephiroth had seen him flee that way and he knew there was no exit. If only he could get there Sephiroth could force at least one opponent out of this match. Angeal was around somewhere as well but he didn't know where.

He sprinted out from his cover, hurling a burst of electricity up at the overhanging balconies on the other side as he went. There was no retaliation.

He paused at the next pillar, waiting for the sound of shots that never came. The thunderous bark of a sniper rifle was suspiciously absent. He took a quick look around at the balcony.

Nothing.

It was too good a chance to miss and he sprinted forward again. Genesis must have noted the prolonged quiet as well because he ducked his head out. Using the materia skills he was becoming famous for, Genesis flung a fireball at him. Sephiroth slid underneath it, the wave of flames passing a hair's breadth over him, and then he leapt up and struck.

Genesis rolled out of the way and then brought his blade up to defend himself. Sephiroth's masamune struck down against him, mercilessly searching for weaknesses. They both kept out of view of the balconies, each trying to force the other out of their small wall of cover but having no success.

Then Angeal jumped down from the level above, landing a kick on Genesis. The red head recovered quickly though and retaliated against his friend. Sephiroth attacked the newcomer almost leisurely.

Angeal's swordsmanship was very good for a Second Class, but that wasn't nearly good enough for this fight. His attacks were strong and well directed but they lacked the speed to last for long. Angeal was fighting worse than usual and it soon became him against Genesis and Sephiroth, which was wholly unfair but he had gotten himself into such a situation. It was simply easier to force him out of the fight first.

Their blades slashed and parried and Angeal struggled to keep up. Sephiroth pressed forward and Angeal leapt back, losing ground swiftly. They fought through the open hall, Genesis hedging him in and preventing his fleeing through the other exits.

Sephiroth dodged sideways and Angeal overextended, leaving himself fatally open. Sephiroth darted forward, his blade whistled through the air at the perfect angle to knock Angeal's sword out of his grasp.

Just before his blow landed, masamune was violently knocked to the side as a bullet ricocheting off
the blade.

He didn't let go of the sword but he stumbled back, swiftly readjusting his grip. Genesis swore and threw a fireball but at the balcony but a second shot rang out anyway.

Sephiroth turned to find cover but was prevented by Angeal whose sword swept at him with much greater mastery than it had a minute ago. Sephiroth narrowed his eyes at him, barely casting a shield in time to stop the next bullet.

"Oh, you little rat." Genesis said in outrage, seeing the smile on Angeal's face. "You can't team up, that's cheating!" He leapt forward to finish the fight that had been in his favour barely a second ago but was thwarted by a bullet to the shoulder. It was stopped by his pauldrons but it had enough power behind it to throw him back.

Angeal leapt forward immediately to press the advantage now in his favour.

"How can you cheat in a game with no rules?" Shepard's amused voice called down. A second later a burst of gravity obliterating biotics hurled Genesis and Sephiroth across the room.

Angeal attacked before they could regain their feet. He struck with enough force to make up for any lack of finesse and the constant barrage of bullets and biotic attacks backed him up. Sephiroth and Genesis found themselves grudgingly fighting back to back, wasting energy on their shield materia and just trying to keep their feet on the ground. Sephiroth scowled at the turn of events and his gravity materia began to glow in his bracer. Two could play at this game.

A little while later the four SOLDIERs were coughing through a cloud of dust as they clawed their way out of a brand new mountain of debris. The only thing that remained of the castle was a lone brick chimney in the far corner that had somehow survived the collapse. Sephiroth blamed Shepard.

"So, that really was a load bearing wall." Angeal said, brushing gravel out of his hair.

Apparently there was a limit to the amount of gravity warping attacks any one castle could handle.

"You couldn't just throw fireballs, could you, Shepard?" Genesis asked scathingly. There were rends in his uniform that no amount of repairs could hope to fix and his pauldrons were dented

"Hey, I wasn't the one who knocked over half the support columns." She replied, unearthing her rifle and checking if for damage. "And anyway, Sephiroth was using a gravity materia so I can only take partial blame."

Sephiroth pulled his legs out from the pile of rubble and sat on it. Then he got to work freeing his hair from whatever masonry had it pinned.

"That's the last time you get to pick the settings, Shepard." He said, ignoring her accusations.

"Oh, don't be like that. It was a great place for a fight, until we knocked it over." She replied, looking all too pleased with herself for somebody who had just dropped a castle on themselves.

"I never realised how many chest high walls there were." Angeal said.

Shepard laughed. Sephiroth and Genesis glared at her.

"So… who's the winner?" Genesis asked, perching himself atop a fallen column, uncaring for the destruction.
"I think the building has triumphed over us all." Shepard said conversationally. Genesis snorted.

She'd been hit worse than the others but appeared no worse for wear. The armour was clearly good for something.

That was easily the most dramatic fight Sephiroth had fought in these rooms in years. He could barely remember the last time he had actually been tired after a sparring match. They all sat for a moment in bizarre camaraderie amidst the rubble.

"You know Shepard," Genesis began, watching her while he examined the blade of his sword for any nicks. "Did I mention I had a mission to Mideel last week?"

"Oh?" she replied, sounding largely uninterested.

"Yes," He continued undeterred, "And nobody there had heard of you."

"It's a big place." She said, leaning back on her hands. "What part of the island did you go to?"

"The south."

"I'm from the north." She replied offhandedly.

"I meant the north." He corrected with a smile.

"I'm from the north east."

"Precisely where my mission took me."

"It's a very small village; I doubt you would have found it." She said dismissively, refusing to treat his line of questions seriously.

"Ah yes, because you're such a country bumpkin." He replied dryly.

"I am aren't I?" she said, examining her armoured glove for damage.

"What are you getting at Genesis?" Sephiroth asked. That line of questioning was far too close to classified.

Genesis looked between the two of them for a moment.

"Nothing." He said, sounding pleased with himself for some reason. "Nothing at all."

Shepard just rolled her eyes.

"Actually, that reminds me." She said, sitting up straighter with a sharp smile lighting her face. "Angeal, your mother said she would like you to write more often."

The SOLDIER in question turned red.

"Thanks." He said, looking anything but thankful. Genesis laughed at his embarrassment.

Not long after they finally got up from the great monument of destruction and filtered out. Angeal and Genesis both had missions they needed to complete and they left first. Sephiroth deactivated the simulation and made to leave.

"Sephiroth." Shepard called before he reached the door.
He turned back to her as the other two walked away.

"Yes?" he asked.

Her previous light-hearted mood had wilted away and her customary severe expression was back.

"If the offer still stands," She said, clearly thinking her words over carefully. "I will take the enhancements after all."

He hadn't expected that.

"Why?" He asked slowly, watching her reaction. Her face betrayed nothing but it was clear that this wasn't a decision she'd made lightly. He wondered if Cissnei's current state had something to do with it.

"It seemed prudent." She replied.

"You fight well and you haven't failed any of your missions." He said, crossing his arms. "What changed your mind?"

The smallest sliver of something soft entered her expression before the impenetrable wall slammed down on it again. He had caught the look in her eye though. Regret, guilt, loss. She kept her emotions under tight control, but they were there.

"People are counting on me." She said curtly. "I won't be the weak link in this army."

"There will be no going back." He warned. He didn't know why he said it. She would be an even greater asset when enhanced as well as further tied to SOLDIER itself. Perhaps he simply didn't want to see the right to choose discarded.

"I know." She said, looking him in the eye unflinchingly.

"Very well." He said with a nod. "I will tell Hollander."

Black trees stretched on forever, haunted by figures of smoke and memory. A voice, cold and without pity, floated on the air.

"You exist because We allow it."

Infinite eyes glowed in the dark. They were red piercing eyes that watched and saw everything yet didn't see her. Didn't see anyone at all.

"You will end because We demand it."

Shepard sat bolt upright in bed, the light of her flaring biotics illuminating the tiny room.

She would have thought that such dreams wouldn't bother her any more, not after all this time. They always bothered her.

She threw off the blankets. Her skin felt too tight and her thoughts were scattered and threadbare. The dark was too dark, so she turned on the light which was too bright. She wouldn't be getting back to sleep tonight.

With a scowl directed at nobody, she threw on some clothes. The closest thing she had to civvies,
which were no comfort at all, but she couldn't bring herself to put on her armour. Not at two in the 
morning when there was no real threat. The Reapers would not turn her into a trembling child, 
cowering in her armour in the middle of the night.

Especially not when she'd already killed them.

She hadn't dreamed of the black forest since the Crucible. Perhaps the thought of her upcoming 
enhancements were bringing them back. She wasn't as sure about her decision as she'd implied.

The issue had been eating at her ever since she'd returned from Banora. It was her infantrymen that 
had finally made her act though. They were relying on her. They looked to her, as the SOLDIER, to 
bring them home safely. She was already among the best humanity had to offer and she knew it, but 
that wasn't always enough. Sometimes it nowhere near enough, as the Reaper war had shown.

She wouldn't let them fight alone.

A noble sentiment. But now she had to live with it. Shinra moved quickly, a week from now she 
would be getting the mako injections and there would be no going back.

She flung open the door and marched out. There weren't a lot of places she could go at the moment. 
The notion of going to the firing range and shooting till her demons had all scampered away sounded 
like the best therapy she could get right now. She made for the elevator.

It was almost funny how an eighty level sky scraper could feel more suffocating than her three level 
ship ever had.

At least there was nobody around. Polite conversation was the last thing she felt like humouring right 
now.

The elevator opened with a ding. There was somebody already there, despite the hour.

It was Sephiroth.

He looked very much like he didn't want to talk to anybody either. His skin seemed even paler than 
usual but his back was ramrod straight and his eyes hard.

She stepped in without a word and barely a glance. The carriage was moving on to the building's 
higher levels before it would go back down to the level she selected.

The two shared the lift in a silence so thick it seemed to smother even the half-hearted elevator music. 
A brief glance at the buttons showed they were going to the executive floor; Sephiroth was probably 
headed for his office then.

She spared him the briefest glance and saw what looked like perspiration on his brow.

Not her business. He had an army of medics at his disposal and was entirely capable of handling his 
own problems.

The elevator arrived at his floor. He stepped out and the doors began to close.

Damnable curiosity got the better of her and she stopped the door from closing. She watched with 
concern as Sephiroth reached his office. She would just make sure he wasn't going to drop dead in 
the middle of the corridor and then be on her way. Was that a tremor in his hand?

He stood outside his office, his hand on the door handle. Instead of entering he rested his forehead
against the door and closed his eyes, obviously unaware Shepard was watching.

A second later his legs gave out.

She immediately raced down the corridor. Whatever lethargy he had fallen into ended abruptly when she tried to help him up and he was instantly struggling to his feet, scowling for all he was worth. He leaned back against the door for support and tried to look like he wasn't.

"I do not need assistance." He said, eyeing her suspiciously. He really was sweating, and the slight pinching around the corner of his eyes told her he was in pain.

"You just collapsed and you're feverish." Shepard said, not bothering to hide how unimpressed she was. It was one thing to deal with your pain in private, she didn't tell anyone when her implants grated together or old wounds ached, but she'd never collapsed in front of her men.

"I am not feverish." He snapped back.

"Just shut up and unlock the door." She said, perilously close to putting on her spectre voice. Now she was involved, she couldn't just leave.

With a scoff he turned and unlocked the door. It took noticeable effort for him to do so without support and she gave him something to lean on as he entered. The glare he gave her would have convinced most Krogan to back down. She ignored it.

"I don't need your help." He snapped again, managing the final steps on his own before collapsing into his chair. She knocked the edge of a chess board sitting on the corner of his desk as she went. The pieces were thrown out of place but didn't fall.

"You nearly passed out in the middle of the corridor." She replied dryly.

"It isn't any of your business."

"You're damn right it isn't." She said, "What's wrong with you? Are you sick or injured?" She activated her Omni-tool and selected the scanner.

His hand snapped out and grabbed her wrist before she could start the scan. She paused, holding her biotics in check.

"I didn't let them scan you." He said in a low voice. "I ask the same in return." He still held her wrist in a crushing grip.

She looked at him for a moment and thought about doing it anyway. He was clearly in pain, but she couldn't expect him to honour their agreement if she wouldn't. "Alright. Fair enough." She deactivated her Omni-tool. He relinquished her hand. He was stronger than he looked.

She stood back and considered him. He was barely present enough to be bothered at her seeing him like this and that was concern enough. This was not what she had expected of the SOLDIER who readily helped knock down a castle the day before.

He was sitting down in his own office and if she couldn't scan him to see what was wrong there wasn't a whole lot more she could do. She pursed her lips in frustration.

"I am fine, Shepard." He said, watching her with the hooded eyes of someone very tired. He absently stretched his arm and looked away.
Jack used to do that. She would stretch out her arms and bent them at the elbow when remembering Pragia and the wealth of injection marks lining the inside of her elbows itched.

Shepard found it unnerving. Thoughts of the enhancements floated through her head.

She turned to the chessboard she'd disturbed and idly returned the pieces to their places as best she could remember. It was a small wooden set, much nicer then the virtual one Traynor had brought aboard the Normandy. That was the luxury of living at home base, she supposed.

"Who are you playing?" she asked, still keeping a careful eye on Sephiroth.

"Myself." He replied, leaning his head back against the leather of his high backed chair and closing his eyes.

"Are you winning?" She eyed the pieces.

"I always do."

She snorted. Then she picked up the white bishop and took the black knight.

He saw what she had done, and his suspicion left his eyes. In its place was displeasure. With grave indignation he reached out and took the white rook.

That was how Shepard found herself playing chess in the General's office at two in the morning.

Twenty minutes later the last of the pain was starting to leak out of Sephiroth's expression and Shepard was thoughtfully examining the board. With a sigh she moved a pawn around what she was certain was an artfully laid out trap.

Sephiroth leaned forward in his seat and immediately made his own move as though he had known in advance what she would do. He still moved cautiously, like some deep abiding pain still lingered, but the thoughtful nature of the game appeared to be a calming distraction. The irritability she'd woken up with was waning as well.

"Why do this, Shepard?" He said after he had moved and she went back to considering her own tactics. "Why are you here?"

"It's not costing me anything." She said with an indifferent shrug. She was sitting across from him with her elbows resting on her knees as she planned out her strategy. "And you're not bad company, once you've stopped analysing everything I do for hidden motives."

"I never stop analysing things." He said stiffly.

"I guess you are bad company then." She moved her pawn a final time. "I'll have my queen back please."

His look of displeasure was back, matched evenly by her smile.

"I cannot believe they have chess in space." He said, returning the piece grudgingly.

"Oh, they don't." Shepard replied offhandedly, "This is my first time at this game."

He paused, his hand reaching over the board. "It is not." He said with narrowed eyes.

She chuckled at his affronted look. "We usually play on virtual chess boards, with virtual pieces."
He gave a barely mollified hum at her concession. Then he made his own move and took her last bishop. Her king was starting to look a little exposed. He leaned back with a self-satisfied expression.

She had observed that while he didn't say a lot his non-visual cues were quite telling once you knew what to look for. Oddly, his mannerisms reminded her of Grunt. The economic movement that spoke of ingrained martial training and his complete indifference to almost everyone were strangely reminiscent of the tank grown Krogan. On the battlefield his movements held more flare and enthusiasm then his normally rigid posture, the only time she could recall him smiling had been with a sword in his hand.

"How is that possible?" He asked.

"Virtual chess?" She asked with a raised brow. "It's the same technology as any other haptic interface."

"We have the same pass times. The same customs." He observed coolly, watching her as he moved a piece on the board. "We even speak the same language. None of this should be possible."

"You're telling me." She replied.

"You don't know the cause?"

"No idea." She said, leaning back in her chair. "But my money is on the Salarians."

"Salarians." He awaited an explanation.

"How long have humans lived here? On Gaia?" She asked.

"Two thousand years, approximately."

"Humans have lived on Earth for more than thrice that." She said while moving her queen behind his line. "Around two thousand years ago, the species called Salarians were investigating different primitive species."

"Primitive?" He drawled with a raised eyebrow.

"Pre-space-faring cultures more specifically." She explained. "Salarians excel at intellectual pursuits but are ill suited to traditional combat. At the time 'uplifting' stronger species to fight for them was all the rage. The pressure from the rachni wars had driven them to quite a few questionable practices."

"There is no trace of these Salarians here." He observed with a shake of his head.

"That you know of." She corrected. The asari had no conscious recollection of the heavy prothean influence on their culture, who could say what humanity had forgotten? "The Salarians succeeded in bringing the Krogan race to the galactic stage only for the Krogans to later rebel and start a war of their own. There's been no talk of uplifting since, but the Salarian Union isn't known for its trustworthiness. It wouldn't surprise me if the Salarians had considered finding a use for us, before the Krogan debacle. Especially given the reputation humans have amongst the council species."

It was a plausible theory, but nothing more than that. It hardly mattered now anyway; humans were living on Gaia irrespective of who was responsible for it.

"What reputation do humans have?" Sephiroth asked; curiosity in his eyes. He idly moved a piece on the board but clearly was more invested in the conversation. "How do we differ from these other species?"
"We're much more..." she sifted for a word. "Individualistic."

"This is a unique trait?" He asked.

"Individualism? absolutely. Not that the other species are all the same, it's just there are less outliers." She said, "Humanity is all outliers."

"I disagree entirely." He scoffed and crossed his arms. "Humans have an inbuilt herd mentality. They thrive when told what to do, where to go, how to act."

"It's nothing compared to the others." She said, resting one ankle on her other knee and slinging an arm over the back of her chair. "Take the Turians. They are militaristic. That's not a stereotype, their whole culture is constructed around the armed forces and over ninety percent of Turians fit the military mould perfectly. Is there any character trait at all that can apply to the vast majority of humans?"

"Stupidity." He replied immediately.

"Doesn't count, it's universal." She answered with a smile.

"Fear then." He said, leaning his elbows on the desk and threading his fingers together.

She snorted. It was like arguing with a racist Batarian.

"That's an emotion, not a character trait. And again, universal." She said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "For every human who happily gets in line there is one who hates the line, one who gleefully ignores the line, and one who doesn't believe there's any line at all."

"On Earth, perhaps." He allowed with a patronizing tilt of his head. "When I tell people to get in line they always do. Immediately and without complaint."

"You've never had anyone stand up to you before?" She asked with a snide smile that earned her a scowl in return. "Perhaps you need to get out more."

He rolled his eyes and looked back to the chess board. He resentfully eyed the queen behind his ranks.

"The others species didn't like how unpredictable human diversity makes us." Shepard continued, remembering the fuss kicked up when humans moved in large numbers to the Citadel. "Krogan, for all that they're feared, can always be counted on to be war-like. Elcor like to take their time. Volus have great business sense and Drell are highly introspective. The only guarantee with humans is the lack of guarantees." She smiled at the thought. Oh how she missed it all. "'Disgustingly chaotic', the Turians once called us."

"Not an inaccurate description for them." Sephiroth replied with an amused glint in his eye.

Shepard looked at him with her head tilted, unsure what to make of him. "You know you keep referring to humans as 'them'?"

He paused, evidently he hadn't realised he was doing it.

"You said humans are chaotic. I am not chaotic." He said, trying to dismiss his strange word choice. "Perhaps I cannot truly be numbered amongst them."

Shepard snorted and reached for the board.
"The fact that you are not like us is exactly what makes you one of us." She said with a worn smile on her face. "Nothing is more human than insisting you are not like the other humans."

He opened his mouth to retort but she interrupted him.

"Check."

He looked down to see her queen cornering his king.
"Shepard!" Cissnei exclaimed, sitting up straighter in her hospital bed and then wincing and sinking back down again. "What are you doing here?"

Shepard smiled at her surprise. It had been a mission just finding the right room, the infirmary was large and the secretaries were all stubbornly unhelpful.

"I wanted to see how you were doing." Shepard replied, closing the door softly behind her as she entered. It was a small room with a narrow bed in the centre and an IV dangling from a stand next to it. Next to it were a metal chair and a bedside table with a vase of dusty plastic flowers sitting on it. The open window gave a magnificent view of the backed up traffic forever honking around the Shinra building.

"I am allowed to visit, right?" She asked at Cissnei's look of confusion.

"Oh…" For a moment the young Turk looked like she didn't understand the words, she just stared at Shepard in confusion. "I'm improving. I'm not dying anymore." She offered with her tilted head sideways.

"What?" Shepard demanded. "Why are you looking at me funny?"

"I just didn't expect a SOLDIER to stop by." She said, shrugging and then wincing with a spike of pain. "I am a Turk, you know." She held her hand against the base of her ribs, rubbing a sore spot. Her eyes remained on Shepard, a curious glint in her brown irises.

"You can't come out to see us right now so we have to come in and see you." Shepard replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. She sat in the chair next to the bed and crossed her arms. "You were injured while fighting at my back Cissnei; I have a right to care."

Cissnei's look of bafflement melted into sincerity. She opened her mouth to reply and then closed it again.

"Thank you, Shepard." She said finally. The girl looked shyly down at the blankets draped over her legs.

"Has nobody else come to see you?" Shepard asked, with narrowed eyes but a soft tone.

"Turks aren't really the sentimental type." She pushed her hair out of her face and shrugged in feigned indifference.

She had mentioned not having any family. Waking up alone in an infirmary with no friendly faces in the vicinity was something Shepard could relate to.

"Well, hopefully you won't be in here much longer anyway." She said hopefully. What she'd seen of Gaia's medicine hadn't inspired much confidence but they did have apparently magical things cure materia. Whether or not it truly was magic remained to be seen.

"The doctors say that I could easily be back in the field one day." Cissnei replied with a forced smile. "I'll be fighting again in no time. I don't mind a little pain, I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will."
"And I can make myself useful even if the healing takes a while." She continued with threads of desperation in her voice.

"Cissnei." Shepard said softly. She reached out and took the girl's hand. "You're alive. You will be fine, regardless of whether or not you can fight again."

She looked down at their hands. The ghost of something strained and desperate lurked in her eyes. "I have to fight again." She said quietly. "Turks don't have any retirement plans. There's no such thing as an ex-Turk."

Shepard took that in silently.

"Anyway. Ignore me." Cissnei said, drawing her hand back and recomposing herself. Her customary smile was forced back into her face with admirable determination. "I heard you're getting the enhancements after all. I thought you were pretty set against them?"

Shepard leaned back in her chair.

"Working again already?" she asked with a raised brow.

"I-" Cissnei looked away for a second. "It was a sincere question. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Shepard sighed and looked away as well.

"I am getting the enhancements." She conceded. "I have to fight again too." A wry smile split her face. What else would she be doing if not fighting? Spectres didn't retire either.

"You really will be a part of Shinra then. There's no going back from the enhancements." Cissnei replied with a smile that was strangely ominous.

"So I've been told."

"Well, I'm glad you're around, Shepard." She leaned back into the pillows propped up behind her. She gave a quiet sigh and closed her eyes for a moment.

Shepard figured it was time to cut the visit short. Obviously Cissnei was tired and in pain, it would be best to let her get her rest. She stood up, her knees making cracking noises that her armour smothered.

"I hope you recover soon, Cissnei." She said. "I'll stop by again sometime, if you don't mind."

"I'd like that." She replied with a small smile.

Shepard made for the door.

"Hey, before you go," Cissnei called, keeping one eye open but letting the other rest. "Could you do something for me? Go get my bag off that dresser and open it up."

Shepard raised an eyebrow at the request but followed the instructions. She unzipped the black leather satchel and peered inside.

"What am I looking for?"

"Second pocket on the left, under the first aid kit." Cissnei replied.
Shepard rooted around inside it. She moved aside a pair of fingerless gloves, a Kevlar materia bracer, and several magazines, of both the ammunition and the literature variety.

Beneath the first aid kit at the bottom was a shiny red orb three times the size of a marble.

"A Summon?" Shepard asked, holding it up. She didn't know much about materia but she had gleaned that much.

"The phoenix, from Junon." Cissnei said. "I retrieved it but summons don't respond well to me."

Shepard examined the strange little ball. Despite her armoured gauntlets she could tell it was warm to the touch. It looked dark and inactive but she could almost see something swirling deep within it.

"It's yours if you want it." Cissnei said.

Shepard looked at her in shock.

"I don't know how to use this." She'd never even held a materia before. Weren't Summons the most difficult variety to wield?

"I'm sure you'll figure it out somehow." Cissnei replied, with a smile and a shrug. "And you never know when you might need just a little more help." She finished, softly.

"I appreciate it." Shepard said with a nod.

"Don't die, alright?" Cissnei said, her smile turning wry. "You're the only nice SOLDIER out there. We need you to last as long as possible."

Shepard scoffed at that. "They aren't all bad."

"Pompous, self-obsessed, glory chasing idiots." She replied, crossing her arms loosely.

"I am contractually obliged to be offended by that." Shepard replied, crossing her arms in turn.

"Not you of course." Cissnei replied airily, "Just all the others."

"I happen to know of at least three- well, two SOLDIERs who don't fit that description." She said, struggling to keep a smile from her face.

"That's a glowing review, Shepard." Cissnei deadpanned.

"You're supposed to be resting, Turk, not being a smart ass." Shepard said with an artificial scowl that earned her a chuckle.

"Anyway, I should go. Let me know if you need anything, Cissnei." She called over her shoulder as she left, slotting the materia into her ammo pouch.

Later that afternoon Shepard was haunting the hallways of the SOLDIER floor. It was quiet for this time of day; there was almost nobody else around. Reliable sources had said that her target was last seen headed in this direction and she kept a wary eye out.

The elevator at the end of the corridor opened with a ding and the one she was looking for strode out.

"Hey, Genesis." She called before he could walk away.
"Yes?" He asked, looking back to see who had called out and she got a look at his blood and gore splattered uniform.

"Hell, are you alright?" She asked, stalling her own mission in favour of investigating the truly impressive amount of filth he was wearing.

"Oh, this isn't my blood." He replied with an absent flick of sticky and matted hair. "Some monsters are simply messier than others."

Shepard had approached but she took a step back again at the smell.

"I can wait if you like." She offered.

"No it's fine. What did you want?" he said, clearly not as bothered about it as she would have expected from someone so fashion conscious. It was nice to know he was a resilient soldier despite all the fussing.

"I need your opinion on something." She said, reaching into her ammo pouch and drawing out her new materia and holding it up for him to see.

"That is a summon materia." He observed, waiting for her to get to the point.

"Which sums up all I know about it." She replied. "It was just given to me and I have no idea what to do with it."

"You've never used summons before?" He asked with a raised brow.

"I've never used any kind of materia before."

He looked at her in shock.

"But you're from Mideel!" He exclaimed, staring at her in disbelief.

"…Yes?" She agreed cautiously.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes as though he expected she might follow it up with a punchline. She waited out his scrutiny.

"You mean to tell me that you're from the epicentre of natural forming materia and yet you have never once used one?" He said finally, crossing his arms.

"I've never needed to before." She said, momentarily activating her Omni-tool to illustrate her point. Who needed tri-fire when you could hurl balls of burning plasma?

"Not even Cure?" he pressed. His expression had changed from being shocked to appalled.

"So you see my predicament." She replied.

He gave a huff at the oddity of the situation.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he asked her.

"I'm not so arrogant as to think I can just pick up a weapon and expect to know how it works."

"A shame." He said with a sly smile, "It would have been amusing to see you try and wield that."
"Thanks Genesis." She said with a derisive snort. "I wanted your advice. Where should I start? Should I even bother?"

"I really couldn't say, not without getting some idea as to your aptitude and mana levels though I imagine they would be essentially non-existent." He said thoughtfully. "But why ask me? There is a materia department you know."

"Because you aren't going to waste my time if I'm a lost cause." She replied. She didn't have forever; if materia were a weapon that would take years to learn to wield then she'd be better off just figuring out how to synthesis medi-gel and ignoring the summon entirely. "That and you're the best I know when it comes to materia." She finished with a dismissive wave.

He paused at that and looked at her with widened eyes.

"Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul." He murmured with something like wonderment in his voice. He snapped out of it almost immediately. "Do you have the afternoon free?" he demanded, suddenly all business. She began to answer and he charged on. "Excellent. I'll go get cleaned up and we can start immediately."

"Just like that?" she asked, wondering at his sudden enthusiasm.

"I'll bring some simple unlevelled materia and we'll go from there. We'll meet in the training room in ten minutes." He said before striding off with a spring in his step.

Angeal was in his room calmly watering the wilting pot plants on his windowsill.

His was one of the few rooms amoung the Second Class lodgings that actually had a window. It might have been small but he was determined to make the most of it. Unfortunately the Midgar sun was as murky as Midgar's water and his plants were not thriving as he'd hoped. The cactus was still happily growing in its little pot but it was a greater achievement to kill a cactus then it was to grow one.

He didn't have his mother's green thumb but he wasn't completely incompetent. So help him, this little plant was going to grow. He was humming in thought while absently scratching at his short beard when the door behind him slammed open.

"Angeal!" Genesis cried as he stood dramatically in the open doorway.

"Good afternoon, Genesis." He replied, not taking his eyes away from the plant.

"You would not believe what just happened." Genesis said, dramatically collapsing into the chair at Angeal's desk. Then he turned a displeased look at the door he'd just entered that now stood open to the corridor.

"You say that about everything." Angeal commented idly, turning a fond look at his friend.

"This more so then usual." Genesis replied, getting back up with endless grandeur to close the door. "The arrow has left the bow of the goddess." He quoted with a flourish as he returned to his chair.

"Oh, I see." Angeal said with a sage nod. He knew that if he just waited Genesis would get to whatever he thought was so exciting. Asking about it would only prolong the melodrama.

"I just spent the entire afternoon showing Shepard how to use materia." He said when Angeal refused to inquiry.
"Showing her… she didn't already know?" Angeal asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Isn't she from Mideel?"

"Precisely what I said." Genesis replied.

"She really has no idea?" Who didn't know how to use materia? He'd thought even the average civilian knew how to use them, if only at the lower levels.

"We started with an unlevelled fire materia and she couldn't even identify it. She truly is clueless." Genesis said with disgust. He took his materia very seriously. Even Angeal winced, that was an impressive level of incompetence.

"I suppose she does have that thing on her arm to make up for it." He allowed, moving to sit on the edge of his desk. From what he'd seen the glowing device could throw fire, electricity, and who knew what else. He suspected it was also responsible for the invisibility trick.

"And yet she somehow has huge mana reserves!" Genesis said, leaning forward suddenly. "More than the average Third Class even. This, from a woman who has never wielded materia before? It doesn't make any sense." He finished with narrowed eyes.

"Huh. Maybe her, what are they called, biotics? Maybe that has something to do with it." Angeal offered.

"Could be, but that's hardly the strangest thing about it all." He said, getting up and stalking to the window and looking out of it imperiously.

"Oh?"

"She's from Mideel, supposedly, but she doesn't know how to use materia." He said it as though the mystery was a personal insult and began to pace across the small patch of open space. "She clearly has military training, extensive enough to keep up with almost any SOLDIER, but somehow not with Shinra. She carries highly advanced weaponry that again, isn't from Shinra." He continued, working himself up into a rant. "She's experienced and obviously well-travelled and yet doesn't know anything at all!" He said, throwing his hands up with frustration. "It's like she's not even from Gaia!"

"Wait." Genesis said, interrupting himself and coming to a sudden halt. His eyes narrowed. "Surely not."

"Surely not what?" Angeal asked, wondering where the conversation had just gone.

Genesis whirled around to face him.

"She's not from Gaia." He said with realisation in his eyes.

Angeal gave a startled laugh and crossed his arms. "You're being absurd, Genesis."

"Am I? I asked her what her limit break was. Do you know what she said?" He asked, pausing for dramatic effect. "She asked me what a limit break is."

"Alright it's odd, Angeal conceded with a tilt of his head, "I'll give you that much, but you're jumping to-"

"Then I told her that you have to be careful of using materia while riding chocobos because they don't always react well. Can you guess what she said?"
"Honestly, I'm afraid to try."

"What's a chocobo?" Genesis said, doing a poor impression of Shepard's strange accent. "Angeal, she doesn't know what a chocobo is!"

"There's no way..." Angeal began. There had to be a more reasonable explanation, there had to be. Shepard was definitely strange, and he couldn't think of anywhere on Gaia that wouldn't have heard of chocobos, but this was just too ridiculous.

"Maybe she's just crazy." He suggested half-heartedly. "Or she has memory problems?"

"You've met her." Genesis responded dryly. "Does she strike you as a woman not in full command of her faculties?"

Angeal couldn't argue with that. Shepard was nothing if not very down to earth. "But it isn't possible. Is it?"

"It explains her strange powers and equipment." Genesis said thoughtfully. "Not to mention the fact that there are no records of her as even three months ago."

"It doesn't explain anything, it just raises more questions." He said, scratching his head. "Though Guzzard might have some answers. They're friends."

"He wouldn't say anything even if he did know." Genesis commented, sitting back on the chair now that he'd made his point.

"I suppose you're right." Angeal said, barely believing he was saying it. "But Sephiroth is in on it, whatever the secret is." He finished, looking up at Genesis sharply. "We can't say anything."

"Why makes you say that?" The red-head asked.

"He stopped you from asking her more about Mideel the other day. And she answers directly to him, not to Heidegger. He handled her entire recruitment." Now that he thought about it that really was suspicious.

"I wonder if she's even human." Genesis mused.

"She's getting enhancements in the next couple of days. Whatever she was, she's one of us now."

Genesis rolled his eyes at him. "You have a deplorable lack of curiosity Angeal."

"If you're so curious then why don't you just ask her?"

"Don't be ridiculous." He scoffed, flicking his hair with grave distain. "There'd be no mystery if she just told us."

"And I'm being ridiculous?" Angeal replied.
Enhancements

Shepard held her hand out and concentrated, the small green ball of materia glowing fiercely in her hand. She focused on the large robot, a guard spider, that was positioned in front of her. She and Genesis had requisitioned it from the weapons department for their little training sessions. The automated defences hadn't stood a chance but it was still upright, teetering on its four large pincers, the weaponized scorpion tail dangling listlessly off to the side.

The Gravity materia in her hand was nearly mastered. Not because she had gotten it to that level, they had just found that she didn't have the control yet to wield anything lower without the materia immediately exploding.

Handing her all the power in a high level materia though was a safety hazard like few others. Genesis had handed it to her and then immediately activated his shield.

She ignored him and focused on her target. She needed to learn control of this, she would stand for nothing less.

"Slower this time." Genesis said, watching critically. "You need to keep your mana output steady."

The guard spider started to twitch, its bulk lifting slightly higher. Shepard's eyes narrowed in concentration. It felt so similar to biotics, and yet very different because there was a medium in between her and her target that flew in the face of a decade of experience. In a way materia were almost like more versatile biotic amps, the difference being that you didn't need to focus on an amp because it was already inside your brain.

She lifted her hand slowly, her hand curling into a fist as she strove for control over the little orb. The machine rose ever so slightly in response. Shepard scowled and moved her hand a little faster.

The guard spider instantly rocketed straight into the roof, smashing with brute force against the girders that lined the training room's ceiling. The decimated pieces of torn metal fell helplessly to the ground.

"I think we can safely say you understand the offensive side of things." Genesis said dryly. He held his hand out and she returned the materia with a sigh. It was technically progress from the previous session, but not as much as she would have liked.

"For a moment there I almost thought I had it." It was so frustrating to be without control. It was like her first days of biotic training all over again. But at least you could put down a materia. "That's enough for today. I'm going to tear through more than just machines if we keep this up."

"I had thought surely you would have more control over the gravity materia." He said, sending her a sympathetic look and stowing the materia in his bracer. "Your biotics are gravity based are they not?"

"You finally figured it out." She replied with a smile.

"How do you do it?" He demanded, pinning her with a scrutinising stare. "Is it hereditary? Can it be learned?"

"It can't be taught if that's what you're asking, either you are a biotic or you are not." She said. She couldn't see any apparently dangers in answering his questions, as long as she didn't provide too many specifics. He had been asking a lot of questions recently, she couldn't get away with ignoring
all of them.

He hummed in response.

"Perhaps it's similar to mako exposure. Mana reserves are strengthened by mako exposure and your reserves are vast." He mused, looking at her thoughtfully. "They don't rival mine of course but they're nothing to be dismissed."

She snorted at that.

"I don't know enough about mako to make a comparison, though I suppose it might be similar." She said. There might be a connection between eezo and mako but she couldn't. "Biotics are only triggered by pre-natal exposure though."

"That's barbaric." He said, looking disgusted.

"I don't mean injections or anything like that. It's naturally occurring." She quickly corrected. Jack was a special case, most biotics required no tampering.

Genesis seemed suspicious about the entire thing He had been studying her a lot lately, when he thought she wasn't looking.

"Well, I have no idea how the mako injections will react to you but I am eager to see if you survive the enhancements." He said, flicking his hair and turning to collect the equipment they'd gotten out.

"Thanks Genesis." She deadpanned. She was nervous enough about the whole ordeal without him throwing comments like that. Some part of her was convinced she was crazy for just considering it. Maybe she was. She had to stop herself from cataloguing the myriad ways it could go catastrophically wrong. They knew how germs worked, right? And DNA? Had they even discovered antibiotics yet? That wasn't even getting into the mystery of mako itself. But if it worked, if she had the ability to save even one more life because of it wasn't it worth it?

"I have been assured that I almost certainly won't immediately drop dead, but people have been wrong before." She said dryly, helping him cart away the remains of several brutalized practice dummies. "What's it like? You've gotten the surgery, what does it entail?"

"It's not as bad as everyone says." He said, not making eye contact.

"Really?" She had a very hard time believing that.

"It does hurt." He conceded eventually. "The injections come in batches of six and each is worse than the one that came before, but at least they've started phasing out the mako baths. They were torturous. That said I always found the hallucinations to be the most fearsome part of the ordeal." He fiddled idly with his steel bracer packed full of materia. Shepard got the impression this was usually taboo. "Mako can do interesting things to your mind. Some people are given to hallucinations every time they go under and it's dangerous for everyone if they turn violent."

"Brilliant." She said, refraining from pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. "That's just great. Crazy hallucinations on top of ham-fisted surgery." What am I doing? Why did I sign up for this?

"Fear of needles?" He asked with a sly smile.

She gave a harsh bark of laughter.

Oh no, she didn't mind needles, she didn't fear doctors or scientists or even surgery. It ran so much
deeper than that. Fears were complicated and illogical things. Just waking up with the beeping of machines and the smell of antiseptic triggered a deep seated panic in her, haunted by the inescapable terror of waking up to find years had passed and her friends had moved on again, all her work had been reversed now she'd been brought back to fix it all over again. To be revived, whenever they found a use for her.

Shepard wasn't afraid of death. She was afraid of being denied it, again.

She hated that Cerberus had scarred her on such a deep level and took every measure to prevent their operatives from ever knowing it. Even Miranda had never known how much it affected her. Bizarre as it was, her resurrection was one of the greatest crimes she held against The Illusive Man, regardless of his intentions. It had lurked in the back of her mind whenever she spoke to him.

_You killed my platoon on Akuze._

_You brought me back._

Few people realised that despite Shepard's impenetrable professionalism she knew exactly how to hold a grudge.

Genesis didn't need to know any of that.

"Let's just say I had a bad experience." She said.

"What happened?"

She scowled at him and put her hand on her hip. "Do you think I was born with a face like the craters of the moon?" she asked.

"Well, I was hardly going to say it." He commented. The smartass. "You look more mechanical than anything else."

Shepard's smile grew brittle at that.

"We all have our burdens." She said, knowing some of her bitterness leaked into her voice. He could hardly know why his comment hit too close to home.

He looked at her oddly at the change in her tone.

_There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the goddess,_" He said softly, as though it was supposed to be comforting. _Hero of the dawn, Healer of worlds._

"I have no idea what that's supposed to mean."

"Troglodyte." He said with a sniff. "You don't know the story of Loveless? Of the Prisoner, the Wanderer, and the Hero?"

"I can't say that I do." She replied with a shrug.

"Of course you don't." He muttered. "It is an old poem and our greatest epic. It tells of friends torn apart by war, lovers separated, and the world's ultimate destruction or its ultimate salvation depending on how you chose to interpret it." He explained it patiently as though he was sharing some great treasure. "The true meaning is unknown, but I have always aspired to be the Hero: _Hero of the Dawn, Healer of Worlds._"
"Why on earth would you want that?" She asked, looking at him incredulously.

"Jealous are we?" Genesis asked, his voice slightly mocking, but she heard the thread of sincere curiosity. "Or do you think I can't do it?" He said with narrowed eyes.

"I think heroism might not be as fun as you think it is." It wasn't fun at all. It was miserable and lonely and usually fatal. What was wrong with these people?

"Whoever said it was fun? The hard work is what makes it all worthwhile." He flicked his hair dramatically and held his chin up high. Shepard shook her head in bafflement at him.

"Well, good on you for volunteering." She said, giving it up as a lost cause. "I hope you live long enough to regret it."

"I do not understand you, Shepard." He replied, looking put out by her response.

"That's alright, Genesis. I don't understand you either."

"Right this way." Hollander's voice carried down the corridor. Sephiroth turned the last corner to see him directing Shepard into his lab. She was in a normal SOLDIER uniform again and wearing the same expression as when she was preparing for a fight. Hollander looked almost giddy.

He halted abruptly when he saw Sephiroth.

"What are you doing here?" the portly scientist asked, his smile falling.

"We have terms Hollander. I'm here to see they are met." He replied coolly. He walked confidently past the scientist and into the lab. "And as Shepard has already proven herself fully capable of snapping through your handcuffs I'm here to ensure she doesn't accidentally tear a hole in the building."

The hallucinations and accompanying mako rage could be very dangerous. If Shepard forgot herself for even a moment she would make a very big mess. He had a wealth of mastered materia as well as his sword. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that, cutting her head off would be counter-productive.

Shepard tilted her head in acknowledgment of that, rolling her shoulders absently. Hollander sputtered ineffectually for a moment, obviously not having expected any of this.

"I can't administer enhancements with someone present, you don't have the clearance!" Hollander retorted.

"Shall we call it off then?" Sephiroth asked.

Hollander's expression turned into a deep frown. He looked at Shepard but received no support from her; she just crossed her arms and waited.

"You could have sent someone else." He finally said, entering and turning to lock the door. "You must have a busy schedule, General."

"Yes I do, so I would appreciate you not wasting my time."

Hollander frowned at him again and looked like he might refuse to cooperate. Sephiroth ignored him and leaned against the paper strewn desk, crossing his arms and facing the gurney in the middle of the room.
Shepard looked at him with a raised brow but didn't say anything. She still looked like she was seconds away from barking orders at someone but she actually relaxed ever so slightly at his appearance. That wasn't the reaction he usually got.

Finally Hollander caved. He moved about the room getting the last few preparations ready and muttering under his breath. Sephiroth sent him a sharp look and a second later the scientist remembered that SOLDIER's had enhanced hearing. He was quiet after that.

This went completely against every company policy. Nobody witnessed the injections and with no head of the department the top scientists were answerable only to the president. Sephiroth had spent much more time in the labs than any other SOLDIER but even he wasn't privy to most of what went on behind their reinforced doors.

This was a special case.

Shepard, more than just a political ally, was making a name for herself in SOLDIER. Sephiroth had read the reports and seen her handiwork. "Woman's a damn tank," as Guzzard put it and he had to agree. With a war on the horizon such an experienced fighter was too valuable an asset to risk to Hollander's ambitions. That was the great advantage to doing this under the table. Hollander could hardly complain to the President that Sephiroth was overstepping himself when none of it was officially happening in the first place.

Hollander wouldn't risk going behind his back to the President either, because then he'd have to share the rights to Shepard with Hojo. Medical exclusivity over the SOLDIERs was a massive bargaining chip.

It was a double edged blade though. With the entire project off record there were no standards. Even the Turks couldn't make much headway in this department leaving Hollander completely unsupervised. The current state of the science department was even more cut-throat than usual.

At Hollanders instruction she stripped to her underwear and sat on the gurney. She didn't seem at all shy about it but then he supposed the close confines of a space ship wouldn't allow for much privacy.

There wasn't an inch of her not covered in deep scars.

While Hollander wheeled out a tray of instruments Sephiroth claimed the chair at his desk. This would not be a quick procedure so he made himself comfortable.

He hadn't seen Shepard since the impromptu chess match in his office. His embarrassment at being seen in a moment of weakness was overridden by the conversation that had followed about humanity. It was more philosophical than he usually humoured but it had been stuck in his mind for the past few days.

The things Shepard had said were both a strange comfort and wholly distasteful. On the one hand hearing that humanity was defined by its diversity was somehow validating. He knew he was unlike the people around him. In every way possible he stood apart, but according to her that only reinforced how much he belonged. It was a nice idea: that perhaps everyone stood apart and they were united in their differences.

On the other hand being told he was just another person was repulsive. Most people were pathetic, weak, and incompetent. He knew he was better than that, he had to be. He had worked tirelessly to stand apart from the masses. He wouldn't allow himself to ever just be part of the crowd.

'There is nothing more human than insisting you're not like the other humans.'
Nobody had ever gotten on his nerves quite like Shepard. Perhaps that was her unique feature.

Hollander left to fetch something, telling her to lie down. She didn't instead she just looked with distaste at the tools on the tray next to her.

"Nervous?" Sephiroth asked.

"This lab wouldn't pass even the most relaxed Alliance health and safety standards." She replied.

"Everything has been sterilized." He said, wondering what more she wanted. The floor and walls were a blinding white and all the metal equipment gleamed silver. There was only a hint of the green from mako fumes tinging the corners of the room.

"That doesn't stop it from being almost two hundred years out of date." She mumbled. He rolled his eyes. Of course, how could he forget her so easily disappointed standards?

"Why volunteer then?" He asked in challenge.

"Because I am stuck here." She said, finally lying down on the operating table. "And beggars can't be choosers."

Her impenetrable mask wasn't as firmly fixed today as usual. She was noticeably uncomfortable. He hadn't expected her to be that nervous but given her reaction to waking on a gurney in Junon perhaps he should have.

In a rare moment of empathy he thought to distract her from her surroundings.

"Tell me about your ship." He asked. He might even collect some unfiltered information while he was at it.

"Sorry, Normandy's classified." She replied absently. He scowled. "I can talk about flying in general though if you like."

"How far can you go?" He asked before he could stop himself. His curiosity on the subject had not abated.

"Anywhere with a Mass Relay, that opens up star systems all across the galaxy."

"What are these Relays?"

"They're an interconnected system of mass effect fields harnessed across the galaxy. Think of them as really big slingshots." She said, latching onto the subject keenly. "Except a Relay can only fling you to another Relay, anywhere off the beaten path comes down to fuel and the power of your FTL drive."

"How did you build them then?" He asked, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Surely it would have taken lifetimes to fly even at the speed of light to the other side of the galaxy to finish the network. It must have been a massive undertaking." It made Shinra's system of mako pipes and reactors look laughably small in comparison.

Hollander re-entered the room, wheeling in several glass cylinders of mako. The glowing liquid cast a green tinge on the white and silver of the room.

"We didn't build them. All we did was find them." She said, something dark lurking in her voice. "The majority of our most advanced technology is based on the Relays and similar structures."
"Who built it then?"

"The Reapers." She said quietly. He was certain she had mentioned those before. Silence crept into the room and he wondered what could earn such disquiet from her. Hollander continued to putter about, ignoring their conversation as he attached the cylinders to long pipes and needles set up on each side of the operating table.

"What are the Reapers?" He asked.

"Nothing you need to worry about." She replied. Hollander leaned over her and attached sensors on the end of long wires to each side of her forehead.

"What are those for Professor?" Sephiroth asked.

"It's just so I can monitor her while she's under, we do this to everyone, stop pestering me." Hollander snapped back. "Do you want her to die from an overdose?"

Sephiroth gave a bland look at his outburst. Hollander scowled and returned to his work. He was taking a note of her general state so he would have something to compare to. He got out a penlight and pulled open one of Shepard's eyelids, not particularly gently, and shone the light at her pupil. She tensed but didn't react beyond that.

"Huh. Fake." Hollander muttered to himself. He glanced at his notebook on his desk. Then, noting the General sitting at that desk he focused on his patient again. It did not go unnoticed by Shepard and her scowl was vicious.

"What are the other planets like?" Sephiroth asked before she could decide she didn't want to co-operate after all.

"Everything you can imagine." She said, her eyes following Hollander intently. "And a good many things you can't."

"Are they similar to Gaia?"

"Some. This is a garden world. They're rare but they're the best planets to live on. Most colonies and home worlds are garden planets. There are always exceptions of course." She said. Her breathing had become carefully measured. He was familiar with the technique, it was something snipers did to maintain calm in a firefight and avoid throwing their aim.

"Oh? What else is there?" He asked, determined to keep the conversation going.

"Well, the Hanar, who are like sentient jelly fish, live on a planet that's almost completely covered in ocean. The Krogan home world of Tuchunka is essentially a dead planet. It's been so irradiated by endless war and nuclear blasts that it's just a massive pile of rubble now. They'll fight tooth and nail for it though, Krogan are stubborn."

"Why fight over rubble?" He asked.

"Because it's their rubble." She replied with a short laugh.

Hollander's preparations were finally ready and he moved to the metal restraints welded onto the table.

"Couldn't they just move to a more prosperous planet?" Sephiroth asked, watching Shepard tense slightly. With clear effort she forced herself to relax again.
"If only it were that simple." She said tonelessly. There was a series of clicks as Hollander closed the restraints around her limbs. He positioned the needles along her arms and legs. Shepard's jaw locked into place. Her eyes were fixed on the ceiling and Sephiroth wondered if in her head she was reciting her rank and identification.

"Now, this will hurt a little." Hollander said, watching her carefully as he controlled the set up. The first syringe, the smallest, found its mark. The green liquid was slowly emptied into her veins.

She kept her focus on the ceiling with barely even a blink. Her breath was still strictly measured. Nearly a minute after the syringe was empty she relaxed slightly again. Not bad for the first shot. Hollander moved the second syringe into place.

"This will hurt a lot." He said.
Downtime

It was a strange sensation, to know you were dreaming. Shepard knew that she wasn't really in London; she knew she wasn't walking streets deserted like an old school horror movie, filled with rotting corpses both organic and mechanical, piled high in the eerie pre-dawn light. That didn't make it any less unnerving.

She walked down the same path she had taken the last day of the war. That day she had been sprinting, firing at every screaming husk and wailing banshee with extreme prejudice on her way to the beam. Garrus and Tali had been right behind her most of the way, working like the elite unit they had become. Now it was dead silent.

It looked like early morning. A fine mist hung in the air, accompanied by the stench of rotting flesh. The city stood cold and empty, not a breath of wind to give it life. Even her own steps were silent. Where were all the people?

Despite being aware that none of this could truly be real she knew she had a goal. She was searching. Around every corner, in every nook and cranny. Searching, always searching.

Ahead was where the beam of light had been. Burnt out mako tanks were dotted along the way, stranded wherever Harbinger's blasts had thrown them. She looked inside each one for somebody, anybody.

Nobody. They were all empty.

She kept moving, her stride slow and uneven. She must be injured, her legs didn't feel right.

Finally she saw someone she recognized. Almost at where the beam had been there lay a body. Smooth Green scales and expensive black leather, with soulful black eyes that had fallen blindly open.

Thané. She wanted to fall to her knees, to call out for her lost lover, but she didn't. Shepard passed by the dead Drell, still searching.

Another body. Anderson. His head was tilted to the side; his eyes had fallen shut in his last moments. He was sitting exactly as she had last seen him on the Crucible, his uniform dirt and blood encrusted. She passed by like a wraith despite the vicious clenching in her heart.

Finally, at long last, she heard the sound of a harsh intake of air followed by wet sounding coughing. She leapt forward, desperate to find whoever was still breathing.

Garrus, sitting propped up against an upturned truck. His blue armour was blood splattered and cracked in places, his hand held against his chest presumably to put pressure on a wound. She could weep for sheer joy at the sight of him, her dearest friend. She sprinted forwards. He looked up, his eyes meeting hers.

He swore and scrambled back, his hand fumbling for his handgun. What? He pulled the trigger; it gave the sad click of a used heatsink.

Why did he recoil from her, panic in his eyes? She reached out for him and caught sight of her hands.

She staggered back because they weren't her hands. They were long gangly black metal with blue
glowing pipes reaching up around her arms. She stumbled back in horror, shaking head in denial. Her chest was the same metal and pipework, with a blue power core humming in the middle. Her hands raced to her head and felt smooth metal instead of hair, a gaping metal maw instead of a mouth.

She tried to scream but she no longer had vocal chords. Only a pained moan escaped her, accompanied by metallic rattling.

In a flash the blue light form her chest exploded out and London evaporated. She was in a lab and machines were blaring out warnings and there were needles stabbed into her arms. Her heart rate, already high, rocketed in panic and her biotics flared wildly. She could barely see through the haze of her own power that exploded out.

A voice was shouting something, the iron ring of command clear but her mind was too muddled to hear. In her panic all she knew was the volatile thrashings of her biotics that raced through her mind and the bitter rage at the needles snapped off in her limbs.

"Stand down! Shepard, you have to stand down!"

The voice finally got through and reality dawned. She blinked, vaguely recognizing the shape of Sephiroth on the other side of a violent wall of blue power, holding out his hands to use materia.

She collapsed back, her biotics fading away a second later. She was in a Shinra Lab and this was her idea, she reminded herself in an attempt to get her breathing back under control. Her biotics weren't normally that strong or volatile. It had looked more like something Jack would do then her own meagre biotic ability.

With her biotics gone, the shield Sephiroth had cast around her in a bubble faded away as well. He lowered his hand and leaned back against the wall. He actually looked tired. Hollander meekly peered up from where he had been cowering behind his desk.

With a pained groan Shepard sat heavily on the operating table. So much for the restraints. With the rush of energy gone, a bone deep pain in every extremity kicked in. Wincing slightly, she pulled the jagged end of a snapped hypodermic needle out of her arm.

Hollander approached, stepping cautiously as though she might explode again.

He was much gentler now then he had been when the administering the injections. Perhaps seeing her tear half the room apart had beaten some humility into him, or he had enough sensitivity to sympathise with just how much pain she was in. Her skin was stretched and searing, her muscles ached as though she'd just been on a gruelling week long march and she had a splitting head ache. The pounding in her head was familiar at least: it was the result of brutally overused biotics.

Hollander extracted the broken needles, being careful not to jostle her much. Trickles of processed mako mixed with blood oozed up from the pinprick wounds. She was sticky with sweat and felt disgusting.

Sephiroth sat at the desk, watching in silence. His brow was furrowed in thought.

The enhancements were now complete.

Once free of the needles Hollander directed her to an adjoining bathroom. With as much composure as she could manage in such a state she hobbled her way there leaving the two men behind in a thick silence. Even in her slightly clouded state of mind she felt the oppressive tension in the room. Something had gone wrong.
That was problem to be dealt with later. Right now, she was filthy and had access to a shower.

Once clean the entire room filled was with steam and her body red from the blissfully scorching water. There was a mirror over the basin in the corner that she had avoided. Right now it was too clouded for her to see anything. She dressed in her SOLDIER uniform. The effect of the mako was already obvious, she didn't normally have this much muscle mass. She had always been the lean type, with wiry muscles that carried far more strength then looks implied. She still didn't break into the same beefy territory the other SOLDIERs did but she was clearly going to have to alter her armour again.

Much had been said about mako's ability to increase healing rates, to patch up old wounds and wipe away scars. She didn't know why that unnerved her. Even a cursory glance could tell her that her body was as scarred as it had been since her resurrection. Whether the mako took longer to have that effect or if it was just her, she didn't know.

There was one other physical effect of the enhancements she was curious to see. Every SOLDIER bar Sephiroth had eyes that glow blue.

Finally she took a deep breath and whipped the condensation from the mirror. She gave a bark of bitter laughter at the sight. Her natural eyes had once been dark mossy green. The eyes she'd been rebuilt with reflected red sometimes, but normally appeared the same as her original set.

The mako had burnt straight through the false colouring. Vibrant red glowed from her optic feeds, the tiny three point circle surrounding the glowing core was now fully exposed, just as the Illusive Man's had been. She held her hand up to her face and saw the red light reflected on it. The cracks in her face had torn open even more, the red cybernetic weave underneath making her look gaunt and monstrous.

She felt like she was going to be sick. She clenched her jaw and refused to let herself react.

It didn't mean anything. Aesthetics were only skin deep. Even if her cybernetics and enhancements were not.

*I'm still human. They can't take that from me.*

It was only with great strength of will that she didn't think about the dream she'd had. Of being a broken Husk, hunting down the few people she had left.

*They will not break me.*

She'd looked like hell before; it had never gotten in her way. She had a job, people to protect, and things to kill. That was enough. It had to be enough. Even if she did look like some kind of proto-reaper horror.

She turned away from the sight. Her back was straight and her eyes unwavering.

It was enough. There would be no turning back. She'd just have to forge a way ahead.

She re-entered the main lab in time to hear the tail end of a hushed conversation.

"-get the dosage wrong?" Sephiroth asked, his voice scathing.

"How was I to know-" Hollander began before cutting himself off at the sight of her.

That sounded promising.
She crossed her arms and awaited an explanation. It was her body and she damn well deserved to know what was happening to it.

Hollander cleared his throat.

"Your body had a far stronger reaction to the mako then anticipated. I gave you the same amount we would to anyone on their first exposure, but the effect has been as though you were already heavily exposed." He cleared his throat again and leafed through some paper work on a clip board. It was a good excuse for not making eyes contact and he made the most of it.

"So now what?" Shepard asked, her voice curt.

"Now you're almost as enhanced as a First Class." Sephiroth said.

"I can't give you any more enhancements, even if you are promoted." Hollander looked very disappointed about it. "It would almost certainly kill you." He said with a sigh.

Shepard rubbed at her forehead, tying to soothe the ache. "Why did this happen?"

"How should I know?" Hollander replied with a gruff scoff and a shrug of his shoulders. He tossed his clipboard onto his desk.

"Fair enough." That was what she got for not letting them run any tests at all, she supposed. Regardless, nobody short of Doctor Chakwas, Mordin, or Miranda got to take a look at what made her tick.

"You'll have to come back in a month, just so I can ensure your body has adjusted correctly." Hollander said. "Other than that, you're now fully enhanced."

"Welcome to SOLDIER." Said Sephiroth.

Two days later Shepard hadn't left her room.

All newly enhanced SOLDIERs were scheduled five days of downtime to become acclimatised to their new strength. Apparently few actually made the most of it though; being so excited about the changes in themselves many SOLDIERs, especially the younger ones, asked for new missions almost immediately.

She sat curled up at her desk and refused to move. The pain had ebbed away and her body felt strong and energized. It was different though. Every move had her implants grinding slowly or rushing to keep up. Her optics kept zooming in and then out again every couple of minutes as they tried to decide what to do with the sudden rush of mako. The few remaining parts of her that were purely organic were fine, but the cybernetics were taking longer to adjust. Hopefully it wouldn't last much longer.

She couldn't fight like this. Not with her vision shifting focus unpredictably and her muscles delivering inconsistent amounts of strength. She'd accidentally shattered several cups while just trying to pick them on the first day. It was infuriating.

The change in her biotics was equally worrying. Thankfully they had settled down within a couple of hours. The increased amount of power hadn't subsided though. It gave credence to the theory that mako and eezo were related. She still wasn't quite the powerhouse Jack was but she was pretty close. If only she could have Samara's control as well.
The novelised version of *Loveless* was sitting open on the desk in front of her. Despite her best attempts at focusing it was just not getting through and her mind wandered. Which was exactly what she didn't want after her mako induced hallucinations, but even scanning for minerals wasn't this boring. Most of the poetry went completely over her head and the rest was insufferably pretentious. Well, that explained why Genesis liked it.

She idly turned the page and wondered how much more she was prepared to suffer when her Omni-tool gave a soft ping.

She had set it to detect any electronic signals. It ignored the cell phone and radio frequencies that Shinra used, but she wasn't going to risk missing anything within her range. If both a Geth ship and herself had crashed here recently who knew what else might show up?

She activated the 'tool and looked at the signal it had found.

Then she froze. It wasn't a ship, or even another Omni-tool. The device didn't know what the signal was, but it was directly above her. With precise and calm movements she turned and looked.

Nothing. Or at least, nothing she could see. But there was a vent in the ceiling, off to the right a little in the centre of the room. It was part of the archaic air conditioning system.

She reached over to the side of the desk and grabbed her targeting visor. Putting it on with no sudden movements, in case she was being watched, she activated it and looked at her room with new eyes.

There was definitely something in the vent. She could see a blue outlined silhouette through the grate. It was small, whatever it was. The signal was still going strong.

With a flick of her wrist her biotics surged and the grate fell open, a black fuzzy something tumbling out.

Her hand remained raised, ready to attack, but then she faltered at the sight of it.

It was… a cat? It had black fur with a white underside that covered most of its face. It looked most disgruntled at having the floor suddenly fall out from under its feet and stuck its nose up at her. Then it went and stood by the door, its tail flicking back and forth in irritation.

She checked her Omni-tool again. This was the source of the signal. Her eyes narrowed.

There was something ever so slightly wrong about the way it moved. It sat facing the door, refusing to grace her with its front but the way it had walked there reminded Shepard sharply of EDI in her robotic body.

With a sharp smile Shepard activated her Omni-tool and brought up her hacking suite. Strange genetic tampering went over her head, but prowling synthetics? Those were her speciality.

Several hours later there was a knock on Shepard's door.

"See? I told you!" the synthetic cat said in a thick Scottish accent.

She hadn't expected it to talk, most infiltration drones couldn't but this was clearly more than that. Its name was Cait Sith and after she'd locked the door and blocked the signal it had been broadcasting it had accused her of cheating. Then it threw an electrical charge at her and tried to bolt for the door. That didn't end very well for the little synthetic and it had been alternately issuing grandiose threats and begging her to let it go ever since.
She went to the door, curious about who had been spying on her. She couldn't see Sephiroth or the Turks wielding such a thing. She'd kept the fake cat specifically to see who she would draw out.

The man at the door was tall and tanned, wearing a long blue coat and looking uncomfortable. His face was pulled into a polite smile, his dark hair framing his face. She recognized him from the news.

"Director Tuesti?" She asked.

"Of Urban Development, yes." He stuck out his hand for her to shake. "You can call me Reeve."

What interest could his department possibly have in her? And since when did this planet have synthetics?

"What can I do for you, Reeve of Urban Development? I didn't think your department had much interest in SOLDIER." If not for the occasional news item she wouldn't have even known they existed. It was the smallest department, smaller even then the Materia development team and not taken very seriously.

"Well, I hear a stray piece of our technology ended up in your room." He said, his smile becoming a little strained. His eyes peered around her to see if he could catch a glimpse into her room. She moved aside to let him in and then immediately shut the door behind him. The cat had finally escaped the software dampening she'd placed on it and now sat on the bed looking very ashamed of itself for having been caught in the first place.

"Is this what you lost?" She asked, crossing her arms and leaning back against the closed door. "It's a very curious toy."

"Oh yes, pet project. Nothing serious really, but it'd be expensive to replace." Reeve's smile dropped as he picked up Cait Sith by the scruff of the neck, giving it an unimpressed frown.

"There aren't many people who would call an AI 'nothing serious'." She said offhandedly.

He stiffened for a moment, before chuckling and shaking his head.

"He's nothing like that I'm afraid, it's just very intuitive software." He looked like he wanted to avoid discussing it but knew the odds were low on that happening.

"He?" she asked with a raised brow, still blocking the exit.

"It. It's just clever programming, really."

"Aye lass, I'm just a spot of programming." The cat added, "Nothing to see here."

"Shut up, Cait." Reeve said, still smiling. "It's an easy mistake to make. Programming is a confusing subject, even for the experts."

"It confuses even me." The cat said.

"Cait." Reeve said, his tone a warning. It finally shut up.

"You programmed him to be a smartass?" She asked. There were many different synthetic creatures in this galaxy, many of which she had personal dealings with, but that was a first. Edi had turned into a bit of a self proclaimed expert on human humour but she hadn't been designed that way. And she wasn't a cat.

"Like I said, pet project. Now, if you don't mind SOLDIER, I have a lot to do-" He made for the
door, perhaps hoping she would move at his insistence. Instead she activated her Omni-tool and scanned the squirming cat in his hands. "What are you doing? Hey!" He dropped it and it hid behind his leg.

"Just taking a look." She said as the scan finished. Clever programming didn't even begin to cover what this was. "Funny, I've never seen a VI with a modulating core before."

Reeve was about to retort with a denial when he paused.

"There's no reason a VI couldn't have a modulating core. As a prototype it would make it easier to tweak the system." He said, crossing his arms. So he knew his stuff. Perhaps he was even the engineer responsible?

"That's way too demanding on the power cell." She said, shaking her head. "If you needed to tweak the software it makes far more sense to connect it to a console or log in remotely."

"Not if you had hardware isolation." He pointed out.

"VI's don't need to have isolated hardware." She said with a satisfied smile. "That's a safety measured designed specifically for AI."

His smile dropped. Cait Sith looked up at him accusingly.

"You're very well informed." Reeve conceded, looking at her suspiciously. "Shepard wasn't it? What exactly do you intend to do with this information?"

"Calm down, I'm not going to tell anyone. I doubt anyone else in this company even knows the difference between AI and VI anyway. Scarlet certainly doesn't." She said with a shrug, finally moving away from in front of the door. He didn't look like he was about to bolt anymore.

"She thinks her guard spiders are AI." He said with a small laugh that Shepard shared. The head of Weapons development might make fine blades but the art of robotics was clearly beyond her.

"That's an insult to artificial life everywhere." Cait said.

Shepard smiled and sat at her desk again. Her guard had been lowered by the simple joy of talking about things so intimately familiar to her. She knew AI like few others and the subject was very personal. She hadn't expected to find someone who could discuss it here, on this technologically deficient little planet.

"Well, I suppose the cat's out of the bag…" Reeve said, smiling at his own pun. "What do you think?" He gestured at Cait, who had just climbed up his trouser leg to latch onto his arm and swing up to his shoulder. It was an impressive feat for such a scrawny looking little thing and Reeve looked at him with pride.

"His design is intuitive enough." She said, studying it critically. It was tame for an AI and that was a nice change. "Why a cat?"

"He's an infiltration unit. Nobody is going to look twice at a cat."

"And he was infiltrating my room?" She asked with a wry tilt to her lips.

"Ah, well, not your room specifically-" Reeve began, scratching the back of his neck. "That device on your arm. I've never seen anything like it. I sent him to take a closer look." Excitement spread across his face at the mere mention of her Omni-tool. "What is it? Where did you get it? How does it
"Pet project." She replied, refusing to give more.

Reeve gave sigh of dejection. He still looked at her curiously though.

"You know, you've caused quite a buzz in the different departments. Scarlet is foaming at the mouth at the thought of your rifle and the materia department researchers all have bets going on how you to make that blue power. Even some of the Turks can't understand what a sniper is doing in SOLDIER."

"Great." She said with a groan. "That is just what I needed." She ran her hand through her hair, wondering how long it would be till there was a queue of infiltrating cats trying to spy on her.

"May I?" He asked, extending his hand towards hers, more specifically the device strapped to it.

"No, you may not." She crossed her arms again.

"I just want to know how you maintain a haptic interface." He said quickly, desperation leaking into his voice. "I've been trying for months but it's always either too sluggish or it doesn't respond at all."

"If it's sluggish then the problem is probably your power source." The older Omni-tool models sometimes had that problem. But not hers, the one on her wrist would power itself for decades.

"I don't know how to fix it." Reeve said.

Shepard looked at him in consideration. She had been reprimanded before for helping people thoughtlessly, but this could be useful. She got up and rooted around a bag she kept in the corner.

"I'll tell you what, Reeve. You can't look at mine, but I'll let you see this one." She turned, holding up the remains of the Omni-tool from the Geth ship for him to see.

"This is an Omni-tool. Busted and mako drenched, but an Omni-tool nonetheless." She held it up to the light, and he studied it intently, leaning forward to get a closer look. "If you supply me with some materials for its repair you can help me fix it."

His face lit up with excitement. "I'll go get my tools."

He immediately made for the door, Cait Sith still perched happily on his shoulder.

"And about 25grams of Palladium." Shepard said, just before he could leave.

He looked back with a furrowed brow. "Alright." He said, nodding in determination. "I will be right back!"

Sephiroth knocked on the door and waited for a response.

It had been nearly a week since Shepard's operation and she hadn't completed any missions or even been seen since. She was entitled to that time off, but it was highly unusual for her to be so inactive. Shepard normally burned through missions at a rate that had them scrambling for new ones to keep her occupied.

He was officially concerned. Without the medical standards and check-ups normally mandated, she could be reacting poorly to the mako and nobody would know. Or she could be scheming up some new problem to harass him with. Leaving her to her own devices for too long sounded like courting
danger. That and Heidegger's secretaries were currently laying siege to his office.

"It's open." Her voice called.

The door swung open and music filled the otherwise quite corridor.

The words 'Don't fear the Reaper' were being crooned by a man accompanied by electrical guitars. For a moment Sephiroth wondered if this was alien music he was hearing before dismissing the thought as irrelevant.

Inside Shepard was sitting very comfortably on the edge of her desk and focusing on some sort of miniature construction project happening at her desk. He shut the door behind him.

"Sephiroth. What brings you here?" Shepard asked, silencing the music on her Omni-tool.

"Just making sure you haven't died or fallen into a coma." He replied, observing the strange mess she was working with.

"Heidegger's assistants flooding your office again?" She asked with a knowing smile. He refrained from scowling at her; it felt too much like ceding a point to be scowling at her already.

"You don't appear to be suffering overmuch." He said dryly. She looked wholly unbothered as she sipped from a steaming mug. The smell of green tea hit him and he wrinkled his nose.

She laughed at his expression. "It didn't smell so bad when I was unenhanced." She stood and moved to the small shelf that had a ceramic teapot on it, refilling her cup. "An old team mate used to drink it religiously and ended up getting me hooked on the stuff."

"It comes in individual packets here, you know." He was almost sure a teapot in the dorms went against some of the safety regulations but given all the other regulations he was breaking just by letting her in SOLDIER at all it seemed pointless to bring it up.

"It does in space as well. But that was never up to his standards; it always had to be in a fancy kettle Outrageous waste of space." She shook her head fondly in a manner that he found instantly curious because it was completely unlike the stern attitude she usually maintained.

"A waste of space? And what do you call that?" He asked, nodding at the half formed something sitting in a pile on the desk.

"This a model ship, thank you very much." She sat again, picked up two smaller pieces and began trying to fit them together.

"It's a child's toy."

"Some people collect stamps, others keep a diary. I do this." She replied, focused on her work. "Hold that, would you?" She thrust a third piece at him that he had no choice but to grab.

"Why?" He asked in bafflement. It sounded like a frivolous waste of time. He couldn't imagine why someone so practical in everything else would indulge in such a thing. The piece he was holding didn't look like it would fit in the others.

"It keeps me busy, helps me think. And right now it's helping me fine tune my fine motor controls." She managed to attach the pieces and retrieved the one he had been holding, adding it in. "I had quite the collection back on Normandy, there were even two little Normandies, both an SR1 and an SR2."
"A waste of space on a war frigate." Another piece was thrust at him and he studied the small curving bar of metal.

"Space is a big, cold, and lonesome place. You find what joy you can where you can." She glanced up at him. "And I like to build things, between all the destruction."

"I see." He really didn't but he could understand the theory.

"You don't have any hobbies?" She asked.

"I don't build anything." The current piece he held was swapped out for another and he sat down in the chair opposite her to make the whole process easier.

"What do you do when you're not working or fighting?"

"I'm always working or fighting." He said dryly.

"You're not doing either now."

"That's your doing."

"You're welcome." She said with a shameless smile. "Thanks, now this piece." He watched her sift through the remaining pile of bits and failed to see any logic in her method.

"I do own a few old maps." He offered after a few moments. "I wouldn't call it a collection though, more research than anything else." Who could tell when a map of rural Kalm might come in handy? It was an investment, not a hobby.

"The old yellow parchment sort?" She asked.

"Some of them. There's a regional Wutai map on old leather." It was a thing of beauty that map and it hadn't been cheap either.

"Of Wutai?"

"It depicts the Western coast of the Island, where the mountains reach the ocean." The rugged shoreline was filled with cliffs and gullies and hidden rivers. He had spent hours studying it. "North isn't at the top of the map though, east is. All old Wutai maps are like that, facing the rising sun."

"Is it written in Wutaian?" She asked. He could see what she intended with the next piece of her model and held it at the right angle to fit in with the part she was working with.

"It's in an old regional dialect."

"You understand it though?"

"Not a word of it."

She chuckled at him.

There were only two large pieces now, both fully assembled; they just needed to be joined up. The shape was starting to look familiar. She hummed in thought as she spun them around.

"That bit connects to this part." He said, pointing at different ridges on the two halves.

"It does not, that would snap off this bit." She said, trying to connect them the way he had suggested.
"See?" Said piece fell back to the table.

She huffed in disappointment and returned both larger pieces to the desk. They both studied them in silence, trying to solve the puzzle. He lifted one half and was inspecting it, when it dawned on him that he'd seen this before.

"This is-?"

"It's a Geth Interceptor. Not quite the same as the downed Fighter in Banora but it's pretty similar." She picked up her own piece and refitted the snapped off part. "I bought it ages ago but never got around to assembling it. Fortunately I still had the schematics so I just printed the parts out again."

Looking at it now he could see how it should look, when fully assembled. The question was getting it there. "No wings?" He asked.

"They don't need them. No oxygen, no drag, no wind resistance." She swapped pieces with him and studied it herself. "What other maps do you have?"

"There's a Mideel one with no names." He said after some thought. That map hung in his office and had baffled many an executive and curious soldier. "It's completely useless to anyone not already familiar with the area."

"Is it of the rainforest?"

"It follows a river through the southern peninsular. There are little symbols showing where dangerous mako pools and monster nests are." He held his half of the ship up again, certain he knew how it was meant to fit together.

"That sounds useful." She said, angling her half.

"It would have been, had a tsunami not completely flooded the area almost a century ago. It may very well be the last map of the old typography. The only evidence that there used to be more, before the water claimed it." It was sad really. He loved that old map.

The two parts of the ship seemed to fit just right. There should have been a click though; there was normally a little _click_ when a part was properly connected. He twisted it ever so slightly.

There was a loud _crack_ and it collapsed back into a pile of countless individual pieces.

"You have got to be kidding." She said.
Shepard fell hard onto the mat, a sting in her jaw.

Angeal was no push over.

Not that she expected him to be, but for someone who always lugged a sword around he was very capable without it. Who would have guessed he was an unarmed specialist?

"You're sure you don't want me to go easy on you?" He asked with an easy smile on his face.

"Why, are you done warming up?" She answered, her lips curved into a sharp smile and she rocked back to her feet, ready for another round. It had been far too long since she'd had a good hand to hand fight and right now her muscles were rejoicing in the effort. Her week of self-enforced confinement after the injections had ended and her cybernetics were functioning smoothly again. Now it was time to see just how impressive those enhancements really were.

Angeal, who was stretching his hand because her face wasn't entirely soft flesh and bone, took a step back and got into position. They were both out of their armour and wearing lightweight exercise clothing. It was early morning and nobody else was competing for the gym. The slightest dull rays of light made it in through the high frosted windows.

She was not going down again without a fight, and neither was he given the focused expression he wore.

He threw a punch, she dodged, he struck again. She danced out of the way and then swept his feet out from under him. He recovered quickly and the exchange grew faster. Her guard was up, as was his, and neither was prepared to give an inch. It was a good, hard fight and she felt her smile stretch across her face.

He had brute strength, the sort that could compete with most Krogan, and he made the most of it. She had that strength too now, but she hadn't yet learned to fully utilize it. She deflected a hit, then he over extended on the follow up and she decked him with a beautiful right hook.

He stumbled back with a pained grunt. The pause was only for a second before he was back in the fight with daunting determination and solid defences. She cracked her knuckles, stretched her neck, and met him blow for blow.

"I forgot how quick you are." He grunted, dodging a swipe.

"And you hit like a damn tank." She replied. Her blood was pumping in her veins and it felt incredible.

It brought back fleeting memories of sparring with her crew. There had always been room in the hold of the Normandy for a little training. It was a necessity for a crew that contained both a restless adolescent Krogan and Jack, who did not handle the inactivity of space travel with much grace.

She had fought countless matches with Garrus, brutal fights with no holds barred that taught them both everything they needed to know about fighting the other species. She'd had to stop for a little while, when he'd made that ridiculous comment about reach and flexibility and she hadn't been able to stop laughing. Poor Garrus, he'd had a hard time living that one down.

And there had been the times when she fought against Thane; rare events at first because taking on
the assassin in hand to hand combat was not for the feint of heart. They had been swift and silent matches, fluid and elegant; no matter how ruthless. Thane's prowess had been unmatched then, even by her. Those memories were so precious now.

'You are fast, Siha,' He had said once with amusement in his deep black eyes, evading her every hit until suddenly he wasn't in front of her at all. Then there was the slightest movement of air behind her. 'But not nearly fast enough.'

Angeal's punch connected with her gut and she staggered back. She chided herself for getting lost in memories and tried to refocus. Now wasn't the time.

She threw herself back into the fight, a scowl taking the place of her smile. Her new strength was great but against Angeal it didn't work in her favour. Her speed had been enhanced as well and she capitalised on that.

She struck viciously, twisting around him and keeping the pressure on. He leapt away only to charge her.

He might have had the strength of a Krogan but he still wasn't one. Shepard charged as well and slid at the last minute, ducking beneath his strike she grabbed his arm and twisted it around. He cried out and spun back; she seized the moment and threw him bodily over her shoulder, slamming him onto the ground.

Not long after that they called for a break with no clear winner but plenty of bruises. Shepard could already feel the dark purple patches blossoming across her face and sides tingling slightly as her body starting fixing the damage. That would have been much more useful six months ago.

She collapsed onto the bench that ran the length of the wall and grabbed the water bottle she had brought. The water was cool and refreshing, but her mood had been soured by the memories she usually kept locked away.

"Shepard?" Angeal asked, apparently having noticed her change in demeanour.

"Sorry." She said, shaking her head to dispel her foul mood. There was no reason to punish others for her own misfortunes. "It's nothing."

He studied her for a moment before daring to guess.

"Homesick?"

"Not really, I've never stayed in the same place for long." It was true that she travelled a lot but it was still a lie. "I do miss the people." She admitted.

"If you go back home… " His started haltingly and she didn't miss the way he watched her out of the corner of his eye. He and Genesis had been acting strangely around her lately, especially when any mention of her origins was brought up. "I'm sure you'll see them again." He finished and lowered himself onto the bench next to her.

"I left in the middle of a fight, a really big one." It was one hell of an understatement. She dragged a hand down her face but made herself continue. She refused to be held prisoner by the past. "Two of my oldest and dearest friends were fighting at my side. Garrus and Tali. We got split up and I don't know if either of them made it." She didn't know if anyone had made it.

"If they're anything like you then they'll be just fine." Angeal offered with a comforting hand on her shoulder.
She looked up at him and was reminded that for all the uniforms and titles, he had never seen war. He had never fought in pitched battles where you knew without a shadow of a doubt that not everyone on your side would survive, no matter how hard you pushed yourself. The optimism in his eyes was foreign to her.

"Yeah." She said, brushing aside the subject. "Anyway, were we talking about something? On the way here?" She vaguely recalled a conversation left half finished.

"You were telling me about your troopers." He accepted the change in subject smoothly. "Good on you for taking up that challenge by the way, I don't know anyone else who would volunteer."

"Well, if you want something done right." She leaned back against the wall, letting her head fall back as well. Mako might have given her increased endurance but Angeal fought like a damn bear. "I had a mission yesterday with two of my most promising troopers. I've been watching them for a while now, they both have a lot of potential." It was amazing what they could achieve when they finally shut up about how great SOLDIER was. They would be rivalling Alliance soldiers soon if they kept improving. "Anyway, we were hunting hell-houses down in the slums."

"Those are always fun." He leaned back against the wall as well.

"Tell me about it. They aren't too dangerous once you know where they are, but until then-"

"You're getting ambushed by buildings." He said with a chuckle. They weren't the weirdest creatures she'd fought, but they were at least in the top ten. They were some sort of many limbed, slimy thing that snuck into small abandoned buildings and sheds and used them like a shell. Fighting what looked like angry sentient houses felt like a weird dream she'd once had.

"So, these troopers. I'd briefed them on what the enemy was like and the best way to address the situation."

"Did they listen to a word of it?" he asked.

"The smart one did. His endurance needs some work but he's as cunning as a Salarian." He had encyclopaedic knowledge on subjects no sane person would ever need to know about, he was like a walking codex with the aim of an Infiltrator. Shepard had great hopes for him. "When the first hell-house snuck up on him he followed my instructions to the letter, he checked his targets, made smart shots, and kept his distance. After the first one went down he climbed on top of it and took pot shots at the others."

Angeal laughed. "That's your training alright. The poor kid will be doomed if he ever gets to SOLDIER."

"It's great to see actual progress." She continued, ignoring his comment entirely. "Two months ago they would have just been blindly spraying bullets and waiting for some SOLDIER to show up and rescue them."

He tilted his head in acknowledgement of that. "What about the second trooper?"

She gave a long sigh that bordered on resignation.

"That one. I honestly don't know what to do with him." She ran a hand through sweat slicked hair. "He's strong and he's a quick learner. Top of the class in fact, but he just isn't suited to a rifle." It pained her to admit it. She still believed that personal compatibility was irrelevant when it came to the basics; you had to know how to fight under tough circumstances regardless of your own inclinations. Not liking a gun was no excuse for not knowing how to use one. But teaching this kid to fight with a
rifle felt like teaching a FENRIS mech to wield a slingshot.

"Maybe he's SOLDIER material then." Angeal commented. "Well, traditional SOLDIER material." He amended at her dry look.

"That isn't going to help his tour as an infantryman. He puts too much strength into the trigger which throws his aim off and he takes cover only to immediately reveal his position to every enemy in the vicinity. One of the hell-houses cornered him and do you know what he did?"

"Turned tail and ran?"

"He clobbered it to death with the butt of his rifle." She said, her eyes turned skywards in resignation.

He choked on his water. "Really?" he wiped his mouth and looked at her in disbelief. "A hell-house? Those things can take a ton of damage."

"I'd be impressed if not for the fact that he had a full magazine which he ignored in favour of blunt force trauma. I'm tempted to just give him a club and unleash him on something." Like that irritating red headed Turk maybe.

"Let me know how it ends." He said, laughing lightly. "Do you need any help by the way?"

"With the troopers?"

"I have some spare time these days. If you needed any extra hands let me know." He said, speaking earnestly.

"Actually…" Now that she thought about it he could definitely be useful. "I think you're going to regret making that offer." She said with a smile. It was too late now, he'd already said it.

"Good morning, troopers." Shepard said, several hours later.

They all saluted, the movements crisp and in perfect unison. At her nod they shifted into parade rest.

"I have a surprise for you today." She continued. There was the slightest shift in the line. She was aware of nervous looks being shared despite the helmets that covered their eyes. It hadn't taken them long to become wary of her surprises. Like that time she had them all helicoptered three days outside of Midgar and made them march back. She'd had a great time, but they hadn't seen the fun in it.

They would probably like this one.

Angeal entered the room behind her. The slightest bit of tension ran through the line, but otherwise they remained unmoved.

"SOLDIER Hewley will be taking over unarmed combat training." She said, smiling slightly at the excitement they suddenly radiated. It would be interesting to see how long it lasted, especially if he trained the way he fought. Her side was still dotted in purple bruises. "They're all yours, Angeal."

He stepped forward into her place and she stepped away because she had her own plans for this lesson.

"You," She pointed at one of the troopers. The wiry, smart one she had been watching. "Come with me."
If he was surprised he didn't show it. She turned and walked out of the open training room towards the firing range, he followed dutifully. Behind her Angeal began his lesson.

"Is there a problem ma'am?" The trooper asked when they arrived at the range. With the visor of his helmet down she couldn't see his expression and his voice only gave away mild curiosity, with no break in his composure whatsoever.

She led him to one of the stalls, where a hand gun lay on the bench. It was nothing like the carnifex or predator pistols she usually carried, but it was compact and useful all the same.

"There's no problem, Kunsel." She said, standing back a bit and letting him enter. "I want to see how you shoot with this."

He picked it up and held it easily, checking the magazine automatically. Obviously he'd used such a weapon before. To his credit he didn't seem nervous under her scrutiny.

"You can take the helmet off, you know." She had always found her own helmets constricting and harder to aim in. Also she was ever so slightly bothered that she couldn't see his face. At least you could see a Quarian's eyes through their masks.

"I like the helmet." He said with a self-conscious shrug. Whatever worked for him, she supposed.

He raised his arm, aiming at the hanging paper 50 metres away and took a moment to sight his target. There was no 'firing from the hip' business, which she was thrilled to see. That was always painful to watch and frequently ended in dislocated wrists and dangerous misfires.

He fired. A small hole was torn through the paper target. It wasn't exactly in the centre of the human outline, but just a couple of centimetres to the left.

"Not too bad." Shepard said. For someone who had been pretty much hopeless several months ago it was great. She took a couple of steps out of the stall to fetch the rifle she'd hunted down earlier. "Alright, now try with this one."

He looked at the sniper rifle she held out to him and gulped. It was the standard Shinra long range rifle; it looked to Shepard's eyes like one of the old M24 rifles they used to make on earth. He put down the pistol and his fingers twitched to take the weapon she held out.

Shepard was secretly thrilled at his reaction. It was nice to have someone appreciate her craft.

"I've never used one of those before." He said, scratching the back of his neck. He sounded almost bashful, as though embarrassed at having never used a highly specialized, high grade military weapon.

"Well fortunately I have. Or something like it." She held it up the way he ought to hold it and he finally accepted it. "Tuck it into your shoulder, nice and close, it's got a lot more kick then your usual weapon." She stepped away and let him get comfortable. Normally she would have him lie down or at least kneel, but this range didn't really allow for that.

He stood confidently and looked through the scope. Then he straightened his neck and squinted at the target before switching back to the scope. She briefly moved his limbs, repositioning him just enough that wouldn't accidentally hurt himself or anyone else. He kept his finger over the trigger guard and patiently waited for her instructions.

With a touch of a button on her phone the targets jerked back and then retreated to 100 meters.
"Hey!" He called, looking over the scope again. It wasn't far, not for the rifle he held, but the troopers had rarely worked at this distance before. Their spluttering assault rifles barely made half the distance.

"Can't make it too easier for you." She said with a slight smile. She stood back to allow him more room and leaned against the wall.

"Acquire your target." She said, eyes watching him closely. He waited for her command. "Take a breath and fire, in your time." She said softly.

There was silence for a moment and she held her breathe.

Then the loud report of the rifle rang out and he jerked at it.

The target now had a second hole in it, this one directly in the centre. Shepard smiled at the sight.

"I like this." Kunsel said, looking down at the rifle in his arms. She could hear the smile in his voice.

"Keep this up and you're going to go a long way." This kid was wasted in Shinra. He should have been an Alliance marine.

"Thank you, ma'am." He said, lowering the rifle. Something like awe had crept into his voice. Then he rolled his shoulder awkwardly, probably trying to relieve the ache from the kick. "But I…" His voice trailed away.

"You can speak freely, Kunsel."

"I wanted to be a SOLDIER one day." He said, not looking up from the gun he held.

"And you think being a sniper will jeopardize your chances?" she asked. It probably wasn't inaccurate. From what she'd observed there was bitter competition between the Turks and SOLDIER over any troopers who showed promise. It was probably why the Turks hadn't had many objections to her involvement in training.

"They say you have to be smart for SOLDIER, but they usually only go after the muscle bound types. I was hoping that if I trained hard enough I might make the cut anyway." He finally lowered the rifle completely. "This feels a bit like burying the dream."

"Is it the sword or the rank that you want?" she asked, crossing her arms and trying to see through his helmet. She liked the drive he'd shown until now, it was way too soon for resignation.

"I wanted to be one of the elite." He scratched the back of his neck. "But I'm not really very good with a sword."

"That shot you just made was very good, especially for someone who has never used that sort of rifle before." She nodded at the target that would be definitely dead had it not been made of paper. "But if it's the elite you want then 'very good' isn't enough. You have the potential to be a great sniper, if you train hard, keep your head, and make the sacrifices that go with the job. Where you go from there will be up to you because if you're good enough your weapon of choice or your body type won't matter."

"Really?" He said, finally looking up at her with what she imagined to be hope in his eyes. "I mean, uh, yes ma'am."

"That's Shepard to you, Kunsel." She held out her hand. "Outside of class only, of course."
"Shepard." He said with a nod, shaking her hand.

Weeks passed and training continued. She had returned from the firing range to see all the class dismissed, except for that one burly trooper, Fair, who was doing squats in the corner while Angeal lectured him about something. She left them to it. Angeal's training sessions had become a regular occurrence that the troopers simultaneously anticipated and dreaded. Angeal felt about the same, but she wasn't going to let him off that easily.

She didn't take Kunsel from those lessons because he needed that training more than most of them. She did however find him practicing at the firing range during his free time and would give permission for him to use the sniper rifle again and then ruthlessly corrected his form. He'd been improving by leaps and bounds since.

Shepard wasn't just content to watch other people fire at paper targets though. At Cissnei's insistence she'd finally been convinced to make an appearance at the Turk firing range, deep in the bowels of the building.

She was glad that she had because it was infinitely better than the infantry one. The targets could be set so much further back that it felt like more than just taking pot shots, and she didn't have to constantly be using a concussive mod and be worrying about her bullets going through the walls and killing someone on the other side of the building. Clearly the Turks played rough with their firearms, and this hall was designed to weather the worst of it.

Shepard stood at a dotted line, aiming from a standing position at a miniscule target that was designed to dart about over three hundred metres away. There was very little in the way of safety measures here. It was presumed that you knew how to behave and if you were foolish enough to stand where you shouldn't than that was your problem. It was wildly unsafe, but she found it strangely comforting to be in a place where the assumption was that you knew what to do with a firearm.

Cissnei, who was finally free of the infirmary but not yet of all physical ailments, was taking aim next to her despite the decrees of her doctor. She had been released on the grounds that she was only cleared for office work for at least another week. Clearly that was too much to ask.

"And the nurses kept trying to take my guns from me." She said, firing repeatedly at the closer targets with her pistols. "They wouldn't let my shuriken even in the room!"

"That didn't stop you, did it?" Shepard said.

"Of course not." Cissnei said. She stopped to reload. "And how is enhanced life?"

It had been nearly a full month now. Her body had finally accepted all the enhancements. It didn't shock her anymore when her reflexes kicked in long before she anticipated them and she hadn't accidentally broken anyone's hand during a hand shake in over a week. She had a final check-up booked with Hollander for the next day that she was stubbornly not thinking about. After that the process was completed, with surprisingly little fuss. Honestly, she couldn't believe how smoothly everything had gone. There hadn't even been a single explosion.

"Oh, it's about the same." She replied, focusing on her target. A split second later she squeezed the trigger and the target exploded.

The other Turks pointedly didn't look but she heard a scoff from one with obnoxiously bright red hair a couple of meters away. She considered that a point in her favour.
"You don't look the same." Cissnei said offhandedly. "You're a bit more… cyborg-y."

Shepard sent her a deadpan look. "Why don't you save your insults until I'm not holding a very big gun."

"What is it with you SOLDIERs?" she scoffed with a light hearted glint in her eye, "Always thinking the size of your weapon is all that counts."

"Your shuriken is bigger than the average child."

"That's different." She sniffed. "And it is not. It's no bigger than a toddler, at most."

Suddenly everyone in the hall straightened. Shepard looked around for the source of the disturbance.

"General." Cissnei greeted with a polite nod at Sephiroth's approach.

Well that explained it. Sephiroth looked out of place in the depths of Turk territory, his strictly military demeanour at odds with the relaxed sink-or-swim attitude of those in suits. They had all adopted an air of casual alertness that hadn't been present when she entered. Clearly he hadn't received the same invite she had.

"Turk." He replied, addressing Cissnei with obvious indifference. Cissnei got the message and made herself scarce.

"Have you seen Genesis?" He asked her as soon as the Turk had retreated, wasting no time with pleasantries.

"Not today I haven't. Why?" She checked her heat sink and began looking for a new target. The Turks were going about their business around them, giving a wide berth to the two SOLDIERs who had somehow gained ground within their territory.

"I need to tell him that throwing fireballs at cadets is not an appropriate disciplinary measure." He said with what was almost a sigh. Shepard held back a laugh.

"He'll probably just switch to electricity." She replied. "You can't summon him up to your office?"

"Summoning Genesis anywhere is rarely worth the trouble."

She was peripherally aware of him crossing his arms as she looked through her scope. There. She'd found the pattern in the little robotic target's movement.

"Why must the elite always be such troublemakers?" she said, suppressing a smile.

"Quite." He said rather pointedly.

"You think I've been troublesome?" Her target stilled for a fraction of a second and she pulled the trigger. "Wait till I get started." She lowered the Black Widow and watching the torn bits of metal fall pitifully to the ground.

"I'll have medics on standby." He replied.

She brought up the rifle with a smirk and swapped out the heatsink.

She and Sephiroth had been talking more in the past month. There had even been talk of a rematch at chess, but she had yet to take him up on it. She wouldn't go so far as to say they were friends, she wasn't sure he was actually familiar with the word, but they had reached an equilibrium. An
unofficial truce of sorts had been called where they were allowed to meet and have conversations that weren't business related and they didn't have to be on constant high alert around each other.

"Does it have a name?" He asked after a moment of silence.

It took her a moment to realise what he was talking about before she noticed his eyes on her rifle. Suddenly she missed the days when every word between them was measured for political implications and idle personal questions were strictly off the table. He couldn't have known why she didn't like the question though and she wouldn't refuse to answer.

After a short silence that was unexpectedly tense she replied. "Its name is Siha." She ran a finger gently along the scope, something tender in her movements. "It means... protector. Or there abouts, it was the name of a Drell angel."

He raised an eyebrow at that. Apparently he thought naming a gun after an angel was silly. She couldn't care less.

"Did you give it that name?"

"Yes I did. It's a reminder of who I am and what I do," She bowed her head and her voice lowered, "for days when I forget."

"SOLDIER does more than protect people." He observed, watching her like she was some foreign curiosity. She supposed she technically was.

"And I am more than just a SOLDIER." She said, her voice a little more strict than she'd intended. She compacted her Widow and stored it on her back, silently declaring the subject to be dropped. "Anyway, I have something for you." She pulled out from her armour's storage compartment a fully repaired Omni-tool.

"Ah, I was wondering if you would ever release that." He said, reaching out and taking it. He observed it carefully, turning the device over in his hands.

"I'm not an engineer and mako does electronics no favours." She said, crossing her arms. It was typical; people who didn't understand technology were always complaining that it didn't work exactly how they wanted it to. "It's running now but I hope you appreciate just how much effort went into getting it that way." She saw no reason to mention Reeve's involvement in the project.

"What can it do?" Sephiroth asked.

"At the moment, not a lot. It's back to factory settings."

"You wiped it." He said, looking at her with narrowed eyes.

"Obviously." She replied. Did he really expect otherwise? It hadn't contained much information anyway. Geth had no reason to store information on Omni-tools; they were really just weapons to them, and occasionally a means for interacting with organics. That one had contained little more than some shared Quarian-Geth battle plans that were all old news by now.

"What do you have to hide?" he asked.

"What do you want to know?"

He gave her a look of disapproval at her evasiveness. "How do I navigate it?" he finally asked.
"You'll need these." She produced two thin gloves. Making them had been one of the hardest parts of the endeavour and she had relied heavily on Reeve to get it done.

Sephiroth looked at them questioning. He spared a look for his probably very expensive black leather gloves.

"There are microchips in the fingers; they'll let you interact with the haptics. Otherwise your hand will just go right through the holograms." She explained.

"You use yours without gloves." He pointed out, taking the pair out of her hands and giving them a thorough examination.

"I have subdermal implants."

He paused.

"Then how did Hollander manage to use it?" he asked, his brow furrowed. All this time and the question still stood.

"That is a very good question." She didn't have any answers, yet.

Perhaps she'd ask him tomorrow.
The Prisoner

The SOLDIER lounge was, as always, a comfortable place to relax. Genesis and Angeal were sitting idly on the couches and Shepard was leaning against the counter next to the radio and the coffee maker. Despite the relaxed general atmosphere of the room Shepard was listening tensely to the radio.

It was tuned to the news which right now meant Shinra's negotiations with the nation of Wutai. The negotiations that had suddenly been cut short, inconclusively.

The reporters were heavily biased towards Shinra. Wutai was not well thought of, or at least that was what the reporters wanted you to think about the only nation on the planet not yet flying the Shinra flag. It was so obvious that Shepard suspected the radio station was Shinra funded. There was so much speculation and blatant racism in the reports that it was hard to tell what had actually happened. The only unquestioned fact was that things had taken a sudden turn for the worse.

Eventually a rough picture emerged of what had actually occurred. After months of slow moving negotiations, the vice president, who was an old friend and advisor of president Shinra, had grievously insulted the royal family. How or why, the reporters didn't know or wouldn't say, but they claimed it was merely an innocent cultural misunderstanding. Whatever it was though, it was serious. In retaliation Emperor Godo had flatly refused to negotiate with the man and asked for him to be removed from the Wutai capital.

Shinra had reacted explosively. The entire venture was abandoned, the president stating that he had never felt so insulted in his life, and the entire Shinra envoy was preparing to leave as swiftly as possible. In the meantime they were tripling all their guards and defences, claiming Godo's hostility was fearsome.

The Emperor offered no apology.

The reporters were having a field day expounding on all the many flaws of the Wutai people and how terribly unreasonable the Emperor was. It was largely sensationalism but to Shepard it sounded distinctly like the build up to something terrible. She didn't know much about Wutai or even what the negotiations had entailed beyond the rights to build a reactor, but clearly tensions were high and threatening to boil over.

The others weren't the least bit concerned.

While she stood with her tar-like coffee, bound to the crackling radio, Genesis and Angeal were arguing over poetry of all things. Angeal was humouring it with good natured boredom and Genesis was theorising eagerly. They were no more alarmed than if she had been listening to a sunny weather report.

"Shepard, what are your thoughts?" Genesis asked, looking up where he sat with great dignity on the couch. "I am ever eager to hear an outside perspective on the subject."

"No you aren't, you just want an excuse to repeat your own opinions." Angeal grumbled.

"What are you talking about?" She asked. Thoughts of what the future might hold for this planet, politically speaking, were doing laps in her head.

"The endless mystery that is Loveless." Genesis said impatiently.
"Right. Remind me?"

"So uncultured." He said with a disdainful flick of his hair. "How very disappointing."

"What do you want me to say?" she said with a shrug. "Surely you already know everything that there is to know about it."

"Yes, but its true meaning is open to interpretation. The tale of the three friends weathering a war is ever poignant and ever mysterious."

Angeal shook his head in resignation. Clearly he had heard this all far too many times. Shepard hadn't yet reached that point, there was still time before she lost all interest whatsoever. A story about people going to war wasn't quite a high brow as Genesis would have everyone believe and it did reach her on some level. At least it wasn't Elcor Hamlet. She had no idea what it was supposed to mean though. This sort of ponderous poetry wasn't really her thing; she preferred her entertainment be short, sharp, and to the point. Thane had slowly coaxed her towards some more nuanced artwork but it had been an uphill battle.

She sat on the last free couch.

"A hero, a wanderer and a prisoner, right?" She said, crossing her legs at the ankles and saving local politics for later thought. She hummed in thought. "Maybe they're all the same person."

"That's a ridiculous idea." Genesis scoffed, before leaning in closer. "Why do you say that?"

"People are too complicated to be summed up by one word alone." And war brought out many facets of person that you often didn't know were there until you had stared death in the eye and asked it to take the other guy instead.

"Maybe the story isn't about the friendship of three people, but the struggle of a single person to reconcile the different roles they have to play. There's the Prisoner - trapped in a war they didn't ask for. The Hero - standing up to fight despite their reservations. And the Wanderer - alone with their decisions and the horror of war." She finished softly. Memories resurfaced at her words, but none stuck quite like that of the sleepless nights on the Normandy, when the true horror of the day's decisions finally kicked in.

Angeal and Genesis both looked at her in bafflement, no doubt wondering where that spiel had come from.

"But there are others in the war effort," Genesis said, watching her in troubled curiosity. "They wouldn't be alone."

"Everyone is alone in war." She said quietly. Nobody could make apologies for what you had to do.

The two men exchanged a concerned glance.

"It sounds like Mideel is a lot more war torn than we've heard." Angeal said with apprehension in his voice and sitting up straighter. The way he said 'Mideel' sounded an awful lot like he meant something else. It wasn't the first time he'd done that and she wondered just how much she had given away. These were her brothers in arms but she shouldn't really be speaking freely around them.

"Are you in trouble, Shepard?" Genesis asked abruptly.

"What?" she said, looking at him with a confused frown. Where had that come from?
"Because if you are, you know you don't have to face it alone." Angeal said.

There was an awkward silence. Shepard tried to puzzle through what had led to his assumption. This planet wasn't where she needed to be, but in all honesty her time on Gaia had been more peaceful than anything she could remember. It had been nothing but hunting monsters and training troopers, with the occasional bout of impromptu politics, and it was almost unnerving in its mundanity. She didn't know what to do with peacetime.

"What sort of trouble do you think I'm in?" She asked, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

"How should we know? Perhaps something from your homeland, perhaps you fear something here." Genesis said. They both watched her with serious expressions. She looked back with a carefully blank expression. "You are a fellow SOLDIER, even though you refuse to dress like one. I hope you are not so taken with your newfound strength that you have forgotten you have allies."

A small smile crept over her face. The offer was a genuine one and she was genuinely moved by it.

"SOLDIERs look out for their own." Angeal said with a nod. "Even when they're from… Mideel."

She leaned back on the couch and shook her head. So much for subtlety. How much did they actually know and how much had they only guessed? She wasn't going to disavow them of any incorrect assumptions.

She couldn't help the smile that stayed on her face though. These were good men. Their offer of help was touching, even if they had no idea what fighting against her enemies usually entailed. She could have used such loyalty a year ago.

"I'll keep that in mind." She said, getting up. Unfortunately she had her appointment with Hollander to get to. "See you two around."

The elevator opened on the floor of Hollander's labs and Shepard marched out. The science department took up more than one floor and from the looks of it almost this entire level was Hollander's territory. Clearly he was a busy man. She walked through the labyrinthine corridors to the right room, just as she had the first time she was here. Unlike the sleek 'modern' look most of the other floors strove for, the walls here were strangely industrial looking with steel rivets lining the reinforced doors. It was a far cry from the pristine tech lab on the Normandy; it had more in common with Warlord Okeer's Krogan cloning lab. It had the same unwavering and ruthless feel to it.

She'd stopped by her room to change back onto her standard SOLDIER uniform on the way here. It was partly because her N7 armour would be a pain to work around, but it was also a symbolic gesture. She wasn't here as a random alien she was here as a part of something.

It might have been a pointless move but such a precaution was a comfort to her. The lab still made her twitchy.

She arrived and entered after knocking. She had finally stopped tapping the centre of doors, expecting a holographic button. It had earned her numerous strange looks until she acclimatised to the simplicity of doorknobs.

Inside Hollander was sitting at his desk with a skinny, bearded assistant standing over his shoulder, both squinting at a computer screen. There was no sign of Sephiroth; presumably the ever present spectre of paperwork had launched another attack.

"Come in, SOLDIER." Hollander said absently, barely sparing her a glance. The second man was
given no introduction.

There was still a gurney in the centre of the room but this one didn't have the large needle and tube carrying apparatus that had carried out the injections. Instead a wealth of wires and sensors were hanging over it from a frame that stood to the side.

Finally Hollander finished whatever work had engrossed him and got out from behind his desk.

"Lie down." He instructed, scurrying around the room to arrange and check various pieces of equipment she couldn't identify. She sat on the bed and made her muscles relax. "Did you bring that arm computer of yours?"

Shepard didn't answer. Her silence did not appear to bother him and he continued in his work, oblivious to her keen eyes following him.

"This shouldn't take long, it's probably not even necessary." Hollander said, talking idly as he worked, not looking her way. "It's just a precautionary measure to see if the mako has been fully absorbed. Shouldn't be long at all."

He finally finished whatever preparations he needed and wheeled a rattling tray of sensors and other equipment to the side of the gurney. There was a hypodermic needle full of clear liquid lying next to a stethoscope.

"Lie down." He repeated, finally looking at her and frowning.

She grudgingly did so. He immediately got to work, taping little sensors on the end of wires to her forehead and upper body. The other end of the wires he attached to the equipment hanging over her like a crouching figure ready to pounce. She focused on the ceiling beyond and elected to ignore him until it was over.

"How's that, David?" Hollander said when the last sensor was in place.

"Stats are coming through cleanly." The assistant at the desk in the corner replied, watching the computer screen as though there was nothing else in the room. "Start when you're ready."

Hollander reached for her ankle and the nearest metal restraint welded into the gurney.

"What do you need that for?" Shepard asked sharply, moving her foot away.

"It's for my safety as well as yours." He said with a petulant frown, reaching for her ankle again. "I don't want to get accidentally kneed in the face, especially since I don't know strong you are yet."

"You've already seen how easily I can break through those." And she knew how uncomfortable they made her. She'd already finished the injections, what use could they be now?

"Don't worry, these ones are stronger." He replied offhandedly.

She sat up at that, knocking several of the sensors out of place.

"Hey! Stop that, you're messing it all up. It's just a standard safety procedure." He started rearranging the sensors, trying to get her to lie down again and muttering insults under his breath. She held him back with her hand on his chest. He froze and looked down at the scarred limb holding him at arms distance.

"You are not putting me in restraints again." Her voice left no room for argument.
For a second he looked like he wanted to argue, but something in her burning red eyes convinced him to drop it.

"Fine." He said, his frown deepening. She let her arm drop. He barked an order and the assistant left the desk and helped get the wires and sensors back in place. She lay back down and but her own scowl remained prominent on her face.

"I'm going to give you a mild sedative, then I'll run the tests and you'll be out of my hair in less than ten minutes." Hollander said, with no small amount of bitterness.

"Wait a minute; nobody said anything about a sedative." She said, grabbing Hollander's arm before he could pick up the needle. The assistant gave a frustrated sigh and Hollander threw up his free arm.

"Don't be absurd! Of course you have to be sedated. You can't be awake for it, that would be-

"You didn't bother putting me under for the injections; there's no reason to do so now." She snapped. The whole situation was wearing her patience thin; Hollander's presumption only made it worse.

He shook his arm free.

"You're being ridiculous, SOLDIER." He said gruffly. He said the word 'soldier' like it was an insult or maybe an order but the bite was lost on her. "This is how the tests are done. I do this to everyone. Surely you're not afraid of a little injection?"

"You're not knocking me out, Hollander. Either I am conscious for these tests or they don't happen at all."

Hollander didn't back down this time. His brow was drawn down in determination and his lips pursed in impatience. She sat up again, pulling half the sensors off in the process. He crossed his arms.

"Have it your way then." She started pulling the remaining sensors off of her.

"Alright, fine." He said tersely. She paused and looked back up at him. He met her eyes boldly.

A second later there was a sharp pain in her neck.

She spun with a cry, throwing her elbow out. There was a cold rush through her veins and the strike lacked its proper strength. The assistant was hit broadly in the face and thrown back by the impact anyway, the now empty needle falling from his grasp.

Hollander was yelling something but her ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton wool. She staggered up, the last few wires torn off, but already her legs could barely hold her up and she fought against collapse. A thick haze took hold of her mind, her eyesight turning blurry.

She stumbled away, putting a wall to her back. Endless training and hard won experience threw her emergency mode, distinct orders seeping through the haze. Don't let them sneak up behind. Neutralize the threat. Her limbs barely responded to her though and her own body felt like a foreign entity.

"Quickly..." Hollander's words barely broke through the heavy fog clouding her mind. "...by the goddess, I am going to find out what makes this woman tick..." Off to the side the assistant was struggling back up to his feet, he and Hollander stood ominously waiting for her to fall. "...whether Sephiroth likes it or not..."
Even with her mind and body betraying her she wouldn't go down that easy. With a snarl she called on her biotics and flung her hands out. The biotic power didn't responding like it should have, the surge of mass effect fields was sluggish and she could barely control what she did have. The chill in her blood stream had spread to her extremities and it was all she could feel. The grind of her implants echoed in her inner ear, suddenly fighting against the new chemical concoction.

"-sedatives are working…" the voice of the assistant drifted to her. The two scientists drew closer.

Absolutely not. She wouldn't stand for it. Her growl was fierce and she reined her biotics in, her iron will refusing to let them fall through her grasp. The blue power surged around her once more, flowing under her command. She shook her head to try and clear the haze. Unexpected it did recede, her mind clearing a little even as her limbs remained foreign to her. It was more than enough.

She threw out a blast. It was impossible to gauge the power of it and she didn't much care. Hollander and the assistant were both thrown back with great force and there was a deafening noise of metal tearing open. The vast release of energy brought greater clarity to her, as well as greater anger. Who the hell did Hollander think he was? Did he really think she would go down so easily, that she wouldn't fight back?

The scientist stumbled back up to his feet, his assistant stayed down. Hollander looked at her in terror, finally realising he had bitten off more than he could chew and dove for his desk, fumbling for something beneath it.

Shepard raised her hand, blue swirling around her in preparation for a second attack. Then she froze as a deep synthesised voice rang out.

"Shepard-Commander."

Her head whipped around to find the source of the voice. Behind her the wall had been completely torn open by her biotics revealing the next room. It was much larger and filled with more hulking pieces of equipment.

In the centre of it was the unmistakable shape of a Geth trooper.

It was held in place by huge metal restraints, one of its arms was missing, and a mass of foreign wires were hooked up to it. None of its armouring remained, or any of its various weapons.

Her anger chilled to something much more dangerous.

"Geth. Are you operable?" She asked, getting to the immediate business of the state of her allies.

"Our platform is compromised." It said frankly.

"It talks…" Hollander said with astonishment.

She turned back to the scientist, her glare pinning him in place. He had left his desk and was looking at the skeletal Geth with amazement. One look at her and the awe drained away. He backed away from her, moving slowly towards the door.

"Why is there a Geth in your lab, Hollander?" She asked with terrible calm. She had connected the dots: an Omni-tool Hollander knew too much about and a Geth with its arm surgically removed. The empty ship in Banora, conveniently hidden at the bottom of a poisonous lake, and a crash landing with no official reports: it painted a clear picture. One she did not like.

"I don't have to explain myself to you." He said unevenly, shaking his head in paltry defiance.
Before Shepard could retort that it was in his interests to start explaining immediately, the door behind him slammed open.

An irate looking Sephiroth stormed in. He had his sword drawn and looked like he'd just sprinted there.

"What is happening?" He demanded, swiftly taking in the sight of broken equipment lying forgotten, an assistant hiding behind a desk, Shepard looking furious, and a wall torn completely open. He halted at the mess of machinery in the next room, unsure of what to make of the sight. "You sounded the alarm for escaped specimens, Hollander." He said, the demand for an explanation evident.

"Shepard was acting uncontrollably." Hollander began, clearing his throat nervously. "I was afraid for my safety." It was technically true but it left out the pertinent details, and it made no mention at all of what Shepard was currently focused on.

"Geth." She said, sharply addressing the synthetic because she wouldn't waste time on Hollander. "Explain the situation."

"We are being held captive and illegally experimented on by Professor Hollander and his associates. We appeal to you for sanctuary." It replied, its synthesised voice showing little inflection despite its words. The stilted movements of its main optic feed were enough for Shepard to understand its body language but it must have been completely foreign to the other two. Sephiroth stared intently at the metal creature. "As an ally of the Systems Alliance we place ourselves in the protection of Commander Shepard."

"You can't do that-" Hollander began in sputtering alarm.

"The hell it can't." Shepard cut him off sharply. "The Geth are my allies and they're under my protection." She hadn't shouted down a horde of Quarian Admirals just to abandon the synthetics now. They had followed her to Earth in the final assault and fought and died alongside countless Alliance marines.

"It's just a machine." Sephiroth said tersely. "Build another one."

She opened her mouth for a scathing reply but Hollander beat her to it.

"No it isn't!" He exclaimed. "That's what's so incredible, its coding is more than just robotics, there's something almost natural about it, like some kind of melding of organic DNA with-"

"What part of 'it's my ally' did you not understand?" She said, cutting him off again. If he'd noticed the Reaper code already the situation was dire. "I won't let you torture anyone who is under my protection. Release it." She ordered.

Hollander looked taken aback. He glanced at Sephiroth, still standing behind him, before lifting his chin. "It's property of the Shinra Science Department. It isn't a SOLDIER issue."

"I represent the System's Alliance and that is under my jurisdiction." She said, pointing an accusing finger at the suspended Geth.

"But Shinra isn't." Hollander replied with a broad scowl. "You can't have it. Go ahead, complain to the President. I don't answer to you and neither does he."

Shepard looked at Sephiroth. He looked back, glanced at the Geth, then Hollander, and finally met her eyes again.
"He's right." The General said. He sheathed his sword. "The Alliance doesn't command Shinra. And SOLDIER doesn't command the Science Department." He crossed his arms. "We have an agreement, Shepard. This isn't part of it. Stand down."

Her eyes narrowed at him, and for a split second she considered refusing. But she couldn't win from this position and they all knew it.

"Alright then." She said coldly, relaxing from the tense position she had instinctively adopted. The sedative had been burned through by her implants already and she had full control of her limbs again. She turned to face the Geth. Its glowing optics followed her. She was retreating, but that didn't mean she would leave them with the advantage.

"Commander?" It asked.

"Deactivate."

The glowing optics of its head immediately went dark and the whole creature sagged in its bonds. Hollander cried out in distress, Sephiroth watched with a silent glower.

Shepard spun and marched out, walking past both men and not wasting a glance on either one.
Shepard marched through Shinra's halls, vainly trying to hide just how angry she was. She wasn't entirely successful; given the way those in her path took one look and immediately remembered that they had urgent business elsewhere.

A Geth was being held captive by the Science Department. Just the idea of it made her furious, but she tempered her anger. Boiling rage wasn't useful to her right now. This was too steeped in politics for her to risk rash action. Her next step may well start several wars if she wasn't careful.

The Geth unit was desperate though. To Sephiroth and Hollander it probably sounded composed, but that was just a result of its synthesised voice. To see a Geth held captive against its will was unheard of, even the Quarians had barely ever managed it. The runtimes would just jump to a different platform and fry the old one while you were still trying to put on the handcuffs. That was why they had remained a mystery for so long. Their networking capabilities were unrivalled by anything less than the Reapers.

But here, on this isolated little planet, there was no other platform or even an unsecured server. The people of Gaia had barely invented internet, let alone wireless networking. The storage on the Geth ship had been completely fried; all the surviving runtimes must have fled to the platform, only to then be trapped by Hollander.

Not for much longer, if she had any say in the matter.

The Geth unit had deactivated on her command. By the looks of it Hollander had mistaken deactivated for dead, but it was more like sleep mode. The runtimes were still functional, but they were now inactive and the code couldn't be sourced. She could get a message though to them though; her Omni-tool was designed to interact with Geth. Hollander probably thought that in removing its arm and the mounted Omni-tool he had disabled its ability to connect to any other networks. He should have stuck with genetics.

She arrived at the right floor and marched past several empty offices to the one she was looking for.

Before entering, she called up her Omni-tool and activated the dampening features. Set as it was, it should jam any broadcast signals in a radius of several metres. It might be paranoid of her, but you could never tell if a room was rigged with surveillance bugs and she wanted this conversation to be off the books.

Dismissing the 'tool, she knocked and entered without waiting for a response.

"Reeve, I need your help," she declared, marching into the well-lit office.

Reeve, who sat at a cluttered desk with magnifying goggles on his head and a soldering iron in his hands, jumped in surprise.

"Welcome lass," Cait Sith said in his thick, inexplicably Scottish accent. The AI cat had been comfortably curled up on a high bookshelf, but he stood at her entrance, his tail flicking lazily in the air.

"Hello Shepard!" Reeve said, removing the googles and thin gloves he'd been wearing. A butchered looking circuit board was on the desk in front of him. "Here, take a look at this. I finally got the battery to--"
"Reeve," she said tensely, "This is important. I need a favour."

He looked startled at her interruption. He must have noticed her serious tone because he abandoned the electronics on his desk and leaned back in his chair, giving her a concerned look.

"That sound's ominous," Cait said, leaving the bookshelf and jumping up onto the desk. He sat, as prim and proper as only a cat could, on an 'In' tray full of documents.

"What's this about?" Reeve asked slowly. "I thought the Omni-tool was fully functional." His words were carefully picked and she knew her own words needed to be the same.

He was interested in her technology; he even had a basic understanding of it. So far his interest appeared to be just the simple joy of discovering something new, instead of any political ambitions he hoped to feed. Hopefully she was reading him correctly.

So far, he had been true to his word, but he was still the Director of a Department, neither SOLDIER nor scientist, and with his own agenda.

Navigating the ever shifting sands of politics wasn't one of her strengths, and Shinra played by its own rules. Reeve was deeply embroiled in Shinra's politics at the highest level and he had a poker face even she couldn't read.

She wasn't here to play the political angle though. Despite his position, Reeve was an engineer at heart.

"Do you know how I recognised Cait for what he is so quickly?" She began, keeping her tone purposefully light.

"I choose to believe you are just very intelligent," he replied without hesitation. "Just as I expect you to believe that Cait is a simple wind-up toy." The cat in question nodded sagely in agreement.

"Do the other Departments know about him?" she asked.

"I'm known to be a little eccentric. I doubt they care that I keep a toy robot." He crossed his arms, his smile becoming a little strained at the mention of the other Departments. "What did you need?"

"I need you to build me a box," she said, crossing her arms in turn.

"And why is that?" His expression barely moved, but suspicion leaked into his voice.

"I have a wind-up toy of my own, and I need somewhere to put it."

Cait stood up. Reeve's eyes widened. Excitement and curiosity were clearly visible in his brown eyes but so was caution. She could almost see the gears spinning in his head. He abruptly stood and went to stand in front of the bookshelf, tracing his bearded chin with his thumb. Cait followed him and climbed up his trouser leg and his jacket to sit on his free arm.

"Why did you ask about the other Departments?" he asked, watching her over his shoulder.

"Because I would prefer they not know about this," she said quietly.

Reeve's back straightened.

"Aye, that isn't suspicious at all." Cait's tail twitched nervously. He looked up at Reeve, who looked back silently and idly stroked the fur behind his ears.
"Where is it now? Where did it come from?" Reeve asked, not taking his eyes from his AI cat.

"He's a friend and an ally," she replied, sidestepping both of his questions. "And he needs help."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

Calling a Geth 'he' was technically inaccurate; neither the runtimes nor the platforms had genders. Humans tended to be more trusting if you pretended they did, though. Calling Legion male had helped reinforce that it was a living creature with an individual identity and not just a set of wires to be unplugged. Fortunately, Geth didn't take issue with gender identity and just considered the treatment a human quirk.

"He's Shinra's ally or SOLDIER's?" Reeve asked as he watched her out of the corner of his eye. "Or your own?"

"I wasn't aware there was a difference," she replied without missing a beat.

He looked back to the bookshelf at that. From where she was standing she could see that its contents were mostly textbooks, thick and cumbersome tomes on electrical engineering and programming languages.

"Where is he?" he asked after a long moment of silence. "What's he like?"

"He needs a new platform. The current one won't last much longer," she replied. "Please."

He sighed and let Cait drop to the floor. Cait gave a disgruntled meow.

Reeve ran a hand through his hair and returned to his desk.

"You haven't actually answered a single question," he said, looking up at her with a barely dignified pout. She heard the sound of impending capitulation in his voice and gave one last push.

"Help me out and you can ask him yourself."

Sephiroth was angry.

Everyone had swiftly fled the gym at the mere sight of him, and now he had the entire room to himself.

His sword flashed silently in the bright lighting. His movements were well-practised, drummed into him from years of brutal training. He wielded absolute control, of himself, of his weapon, and of every fight he was faced with. He would settle for nothing less. His precision and technique were flawless. A training dummy fell to pieces exactly as he intended, but it was of little comfort. If only he could control everything else the way he did his sword. If only those around him would fall into line the way training dummies fell apart before him.

Damn Hollander. Smug, pathetic, traitorous, untouchable Hollander. The President would let him get away with murder, and he knew it. Sephiroth had expected betrayal from the scientist. He had learnt years ago that nobody who held any power in those labs could be trusted.

But Shepard? She was a SOLDIER, one of his own and supposedly under his command. What a joke.

That damn alien woman was more trouble than she was worth. Did she know just how many strings he had to pull just to get her into SOLDIER? Did she imagine that he could just snap his fingers and
the entire company would do exactly as he pleased? Or that she was the only problem he had to deal with?

Damn Shepard.

Shepard, who had the nerve to be angry that Shinra had investigated a foreign presence in its territory. She hadn't just been angry, she had actually looked betrayed that Hollander had torn apart her pet machine. As though the mess of wires and circuitry were anything more than an alien weapon. If they didn't want Shinra looking at it, they shouldn't have left it on Gaia. He remembered what she'd said about the Geth: the machines had forced their inventors off their home world for three hundred years. It might be Shepard's ally, but it wasn't his.

He was almost certain that she was prepared to abandon them all for the Geth. She'd betray her newfound allies in favour of a single broken machine.

He hadn't seen her since she'd marched out of the lab, still barefoot and groggy but with the decorum of an Admiral dissatisfied with her army's performance. Something about that irritated him far more than it should have. She had been backed into a corner with no weapon or political clout to back her up and still she walked out with absolute control over the situation. He was the General and she the subordinate, but that meant nothing when he had no control over her.

At least Hollander played by the same rules as everyone else with ambition in Shinra. Whose rules did Shepard play by?

With a low growl he decapitated the last training dummy. There was no challenge to it, and it didn't appease his frustration in the least.

As though summoned by his irritation, the door of the gym swung open and Shepard walked in.

She slowly looked over the destruction he had wrought and then met his eyes. He scowled, practically daring her to comment. She simply raised an eyebrow and then turned away entirely, making her way to the punching bags that hung in the corner.

Her silent dismissal burned. When everyone else cowered, she just gave him a bland look and went about her business. He turned back to his own training, refusing to acknowledge her.

With no training dummies left, he ran through a series of sword kata. The steady thump of fists against leather in the background punctuated his movements.

That only irritated him further. He moved smoothly from one position to the next, but he'd finally had enough. He sheathed his sword.

"Shepard," he barked, turning to face her.

She threw one last punch before holding the bag still.

"What?"

"You fight hand-to-hand?" He wasn't asking a question, it was an order.

She stood straighter and looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Is that a challenge?" she asked sharply. Clearly he wasn't the only one in a foul mood.

"Yes. It is." This was a bad idea, and he did not care.
She stepped forward onto the mat in the centre of the room, leaving the punching bag hanging listlessly behind her. She rolled her shoulders and looked up at him defiantly.

He took off his coat and pauldrons, laying them aside along with his sword. He wanted a challenge, not a corpse. She didn't have her armour to protect her; she stood in loose fitting exercise clothes.

He didn't often spar unarmed – he preferred the bite of a blade – but right now the blunt force of hand-to-hand suited him just fine.

The two soldiers stood faced each other. Shepard stood lightly on the balls of her feet with her hands help up in front of her. Her expression was blank, but her eyes burned fiercely.

He assumed a ready stance, most of his weight on his forward foot.

She struck first, a simple punch. He blocked easily and struck back, sneering at how predictable it was. She grabbed his hand and twisted it, pulling him forward and trying to throw him off balance. He didn't stumble, instead he moved with the sudden momentum, turning to keep his feet. His side was left open, though, and she made the most of it, delivering a vicious blow.

His blows were the heavier and gave her less time to recover, still she moved silently around him like a predator, striking swiftly and unpredictably, and getting through his guard far too often. He used all the training Shinra had given him, but she fought dirty, with tricks no military academy would teach.

He stretched his left hand, an ache forming in his knuckles. There was no way she was normal flesh and bone underneath that scarred skin.

He barely dodged a kick to his knees, and then blocked a follow-up attack and countered with a rain of sharp strikes, refusing to be thrown into defence. They exchanged blows at a punishing pace, dodging and blocking and throwing hits seamlessly. His blood was pumping furiously through his veins, his built up anger both driving him on and growing with every strike. He was exposing months' worth of frustration against her, and she met him blow for blow. She scowled viciously at him, he glared back.

One of his hits connected with the side of her head, and she stumbled back. He struck again, intending to drive her back. She snaked out of his reach again, her movement fluid and lightning fast.

They pulled apart, eyeing each other from across the mat and breathing heavily. Pain was blossoming along his sides where her strikes had consistently connected, and his fists were aching from hitting her. The discomfort wouldn't last long, but it was infuriating that it was there at all.

His hand curled in want of a blade. If he'd had his sword, this would have been a very different fight. He saw her fingers twitch the way they did just before she called on her biotics. He scoffed at the sight.

"Stand down," he ordered coldly. Some part of him wanted to throw all sense to the wind and take her up on the challenge, to abandon the spar and make this a fight with no holds barred. He wouldn't though. He was conscious of how violently he craved such a challenge and knew he had to reject the idea. He wouldn't relinquish his control.

She leaned back on her right foot and crossed her arms. She was by no means relaxed.

"Giving up?" she asked.

"Are you?" he returned sharply, reminded again of the way she had stalked out of the labs. She straightened. Suddenly the conversation wasn't about sparring anymore, and they both knew it.
"I'm not going to be intimidated into blindly following orders," she said, her voice low and steady. She dropped back into a loose fighting stance and stepped slowly to the right.

"And you have the nerve to call yourself a soldier." He sneered and stepped left, the two of them circling each other. They had stepped back from the brink, but the fight wasn't over.

"I am a soldier, not a brainless thug," she said with her burning eyes fixed on him. "I don't turn on my own just to please the bureaucrats, and I certainly won't abandon a loyal ally out of fear of a reprimand."

Before he could reply she struck, making a sweep at his legs again. He avoided the strike and stepped back.

"Siding with a single broken machine over the most powerful army on Gaia isn't tactically sound," he said scornfully, before leaping forward and striking back. She dodged the first punch and blocked the second.

"So I should abandon a prisoner of war who is being tortured? I should turn my back on my own men because they've become inconvenient?" She said between laboured breaths and heavy hits. "Is that how you operate, General?" The accusation in her voice was unmistakable.

"I am not afraid of making hard decisions," he said coldly, looking her in the eye.

"You think you made the tough choice?" She stared back at him in disbelief. "Do you really think Hollander won't hold this over you? You don't have the nerve to stick to your guns once the President is mentioned, and now Hollander knows it. Whatever power you had over him, you just lost."

He hit her in the solar plexus, and she stumbled back, unable to defend herself in time.

"Don't try to lecture me on Shinra's politics," he growled, stalking forward. She stepped back and raised her guard again. "I have made allowances for you, but Shinra has my loyalty. I demand the same from you."

"You've made it very clear where your loyalties lie, General." She ducked under his arm and struck his side. He grit his teeth against the impact and returned the attack.

"With Shinra, Commander," he spat. She danced back out of reach with skill that wasn't taught on Gaia. There was no hiding the fact that they were not on the same side. She represented one army, he another. The captive Geth was her ally but Shinra's enemy. "I am loyal to the people who could very easily decide you aren't worth the trouble and have you thrown in prison."

"If that is what I get for objecting to a war crime, then so be it," she hissed, dodging blow after blow.

"You can't commit a crime against a machine!" he said, his frustration and impatience obvious in his voice. "They're just metal. They don't feel pain."

She threw a haymaker, aimed directly at his face. He caught the punch at the last second, his fist closed around hers, held inches from his face. The strain in his arm was vicious.

"Yes, they do feel pain." She snarled, red fissures in her face cracking open from the hits she had taken, and her red eyes burning with absolute conviction. He was caught in the scorching glow, pinned by the two orbs lit from within by an eerie red light. A distinctly artificial light. She met his stare head-on.
It finally dawned on him why she cared so much about the machine in the labs.

"What are you?" he said, still caught in those burning false eyes.

Her scowl deepened, and then she kneed him in the stomach.

He doubled over, the air driven from his lungs, as she stalked away.

She left the mat and then the gym as he straightened, but he couldn't bring himself to be upset about the way the match ended.

Those eyes had been green when they'd met. How was it he had never thought anything of them before? It staggered him now.

He didn't know whether to be horrified at the sight of something so undeniably mechanical in a human face, or awed by the sheer brilliance of the conviction burning in those artificial eyes.
Alibi

It was a perfectly normal day and Shepard was behaving in a perfectly normal manner.

Her final check up with Hollander had been over a week ago. She hadn't seen the scientist since she left the lab or Sephiroth since she fought him in the training room. The General had sent her orders, officially telling her not to go anywhere near the Science Department and flooding her with boring but time consuming missions. Perhaps he thought she might try to lay siege to the labs if not kept occupied.

Other than that, there had been no follow-up to the debacle. Nobody said anything about the wall torn open in the labs or the prisoner within. She didn't confront anyone and went about her life as instructed, the issue of the Geth by all appearances swept under the rug. Everyone was going about business as usual.

Except for Reeve.

He had been working feverishly all week, barely even stopping to eat or sleep. Shepard hadn't needed to emphasize any sense of urgency; he had thrown himself into the project with full enthusiasm. Thankfully nobody cared enough about Urban Development to bother spying on him. Quite an oversight in her opinion, that someone who could make a fully functioning AI in his spare time was left unattended.

Currently, she was working in the training rooms with Genesis. There was a noticeable improvement in her materia proficiency. There were others in the training room, not that anyone was really watching, but she was in full view of plenty of trustworthy people, all of whom could easily testify to her whereabouts.

Beside her, Genesis was happily ranting. He waxed poetic about the new sword he had commissioned, only stopping occasionally to critique her technique in materia casting.

She dutifully continued casting, using an ice materia to try and break through the shield he had cast over a training dummy. When she succeeded, he recast it and she moved onto a different element. It was their standard practice, and nobody paid them any attention. Even Genesis was barely watching. Shepard hid her smile. Then with a casual flick of her wrist she sent an encrypted message from her Omni-tool.

'New platform is ready.'

About five seconds later she received a silent reply.

'Transfer Complete.'

For a brief moment, she smiled to herself. Nobody understood efficiency quite like the Geth. Then she focused again on the materia in her hand and went back to building an alibi.

Several hours later, Shepard hastily shut the door to Reeve's office behind her as she entered.
It had required great restraint from her not to immediately sprint to the office as soon as the Geth runtimes had made the jump, but that would have drawn attention. Instead, she had lingered in the training rooms, wasted time on easy missions in the slums, and chatted casually with her fellow SOLDIERs. Finally she had made her way, ever so casually, to the floor that housed Urban Development.

Her casual demeanour evaporated the second she was inside Reeve's office.

"Did it work?" she asked, not wasting any time with pleasantries.

Reeve and Cait, both looking tired and dishevelled, were staring intently at the box in the centre of the room. Reeve's eyes were strained and bloodshot from lack of sleep.

"I think so," he said, scratching his hair absently but keeping his eyes fixed on the box. "It's not... I mean, the box is there and the lights are on but... this is nothing like Cait Sith."

He was right.

The box that stood immobile on his desk was nothing like the small and feline Cait. It was nothing like the streamlined mechanics of a normal Geth unit either, no smooth plating and sinewy wiring holding up a bobbing headlamp.

Instead, it was a short and squat pyramid with the top chopped off, made from a black metal and no more than two feet tall. It was rough and asymmetrical, with last minute additions welded on wherever there was room. The most noticeable protrusions were an ungainly antenna and a camera and microphone at the top of an adjustable pole. It smelt of engine oil and produced a faint whirring sound.

It was ugly and inelegant, but that didn't diminish the sheer miracle of its existence. In a single week, Reeve had created a quantum computer blue box. Indeed, it was nothing like Cait, the basic structure required to store Geth runtimes being completely different. The fragmented nature of the consensus was significantly more complicated. Reeve hadn't managed to replicate the more complex parts of the hardware, the lack of Eezo made it impossible. The runtimes could still function but only at a much slower pace.

He had managed it by leaning extensively on the many schematic readings Shepard had stored on her Omni-tool, but that didn't diminish the magnitude of his accomplishment. This guy was clearly a genius. It was a shame she hadn't met him back when the Crucible project was hiring.

"How do we interface with him?" Reeve asked, barely taking his eyes off of it.

"Can you hear me, Geth?" She asked.

"Yes." The reply was immediate. Reeve looked startled, even though he had personally installed the speaker. Cait was standing at Reeve's feet, his tail flicking nervously in the air and his fur standing slightly on end. He'd never appeared scared before, but being faced with another like himself clearly unnerved him.

"Are you... uh, comfortable?" Shepard asked the box of Geth. She felt a little silly just asking, but it was a valid question, right? They'd made this creature a new body; it seemed polite to ask how it felt about that. Then again, Geth were pretty blasé about getting new platforms, maybe it didn't care at all. "Did all your runtimes make it across?"

"The transition was without error. All runtimes are now housed in this unit and our previous platform self-destructed after our departure," it reported succinctly.
"Self-destructed?" Reeve asked in alarm. His arms dropped to his sides.

"Standard procedure." She waved off his question. She hadn't exactly spelt out where the Geth had come from or why. It would be better for everyone if she didn't have to. "Do you have everything you need? Is it roomy enough in there for you?"

Cait's curiosity had finally overcome his trepidation. He'd left Reeve's feet and leapt up onto the desk. Staying out of sight of the camera, he prodded the box experimentally. The camera immediately swivelled around to stare at him. Cait sat frozen in its gaze, his paw still held out halfway between him and the box. A second later the camera swivelled back to Shepard, and Cait breathed a sigh of relief as though he'd gotten away with some great crime.

"This platform is… acceptable," the Geth replied, having dismissed Cait. The camera swivelled around on its stem, rotating down to see its own box. "We will not be able to provide you with support in combat."

Reeve gave an awkward chuckle and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry about the simplicity of it. I didn't have much warning. Your software is remarkable, if you don't mind my saying."

The camera focused in on him, the sound of the zoom faintly audible.

"This is Reeve Tuesti, a friend of mine," Shepard said. "He designed and built the platform you're currently residing in."

"You have our gratitude, Reeve Tuesti."

"Does this unit have a name?" she asked.

"We are called Scout."

"It's a pleasure, Scout," Reeve said. He stood tall before it like a dignitary. "This is Cait Sith. I made him," he said with both pride and excitement in his voice.

"Hello!" Cait stuck his head in front of the camera.

"Hello," Scout responded, its camera zooming in and out on the slightly twitchy cat. "You are a synthetic. We did not think humanity had made any synthetics besides EDI. We are glad to be wrong." It was as warm a greeting as a Geth could give.

Cait snorted out a laugh.

"I'll happily prove you wrong as often as you like," he said, his tail waving lazily in the air.

The Geth apparently did not know what to make of this. After several seconds its camera panned back to Shepard.

"We require further information," it finally said.

"Do you know where we are?" Shepard asked. "Or how you got here?"

"The Reapers shot down our ship," it replied without hesitation. Cait's head tilted in confusion and Reeve looked startled. They both watched intently. "We drifted and then crash landed. Our defences were inoperable when Hollander found us. We do not know what planet this is."

Reeve's head snapped up to face her. She wanted to lower her head into her hands because how was she supposed to explain away what it had just said?
"Shepard," he said in alarm.

"Why do you still say 'we'?" she asked, ignoring Reeve. "All the others I've worked with started saying 'I' after the upload."

Scout's hardware whirred in thought.

"Habit," it final offered, almost meekly. She smiled at that.

"Shepard," Reeve repeated, harsher this time. "A word?"

She suppressed a sigh. It was inevitable that she'd have to explain herself sooner or later, but the situation was complicated enough as it was. Reeve's help was invaluable; she couldn't afford to lose it.

He jerked his head towards the far corner of the room and she followed him there, leaving Cait to interrogate Scout.

Reeve just starred at her for a moment, his arms crossed and his brow lowered. His eyes held both hesitation and burning curiosity.

"Where does he come from?" he asked, the caution obvious in his voice.

"My home," she replied, crossing her arms. "Mideel."

"Right. Mideel." He didn't meet her eyes, alarm was clear in his posture. He didn't take a step back, but he looked like he wanted to. After a minute of tense silence, he spoke again, "Is this a company cover up or are you a plant? What do you want? Why are you here?"

"I'm here for the same reason Scout is. I was shot down," she said plainly. It wasn't completely accurate, but there wasn't time to explain the workings of the Crucible, and she had to tell him something of the truth. "I'm not spying on Gaia, or even Shinra – I was legitimately hired. Tseng and Sephiroth made me a deal: to work for Shinra until I return home."

"I see." He stopped trying to lean away from her. "And Scout?"

"Scout was not offered a deal," she said stiffly.

He caught the hard edge in her tone. He looked back at the asymmetrical platform he had built and then again at her.

"Was he in the Science Department?" he asked, his voice low as though he feared the answer.

She met his eyes and carefully kept her expression blank. "Are you sure you want me to answer that?"

His eyes closed in what looked like pain at her non-answer. It was glaringly obvious given what Scout had said about being defenceless by the time Hollander found it. She wouldn't admit to it, though.

"Do you have any idea what we've done?" he said, his words slow and his voice hollow.

"We've rescued someone from being torn apart by scientists who don't see how a machine could possibly be alive." She kept her voice steady and looked him evenly in the eye.

He looked away and ran a hand down his face. "I understand not wanting to leave him down there, I
really do, but if anyone finds out–"

"Finds out what? What have we done?"

"We've stolen one of Hollander's specimens!" He threw his hands up in frustration.

"No we haven't," she said dryly. "I haven't been anywhere near the labs, and I certainly haven't taken anything. Have you?" He opened his mouth to contest the point, but she kept going. "We can't be caught because there is no evidence. There isn't any evidence because we haven't actually done anything."

He crossed his arms and watched her through narrowed eyes.

"Planet, I hope you're right," he finally said, shaking his head and looking down.

"Could you detect the runtimes on their way here?" she asked. He grudgingly shook his head. "Then nobody else can either." If even the Quarians couldn't stop the Geth from networking, Shinra didn't have a chance.

Reeve sighed. He sounded tired.

"Don't take the Science Department lightly," he said, turning back to face Cait and Scout. "They have the President's full support. I might be head of a Department, but mine is the smallest. He barely listens to a word I say. Even SOLDIERs go missing sometimes." He looked her in the eye. "We are both expendable."

"Yeah," she said softly. She hadn't forgotten Hollander's attempt to sedate her, even if everyone else had.

Reeve moved back to where Cait was sitting directly in front of Scout's camera. Shepard followed and watched the two AI trying to hold a conversation.

"Do you want to have your fortune read?" Cait asked, his tail flicking excitedly.

"There is not enough data to determine the future," Scout replied.

"Don't be a spoilsport, Boxy. For only three gil I'll read your future."

"It used to be cheaper," Reeve said with a small smile, shaking off how unsettled he was.

"We do not believe you, Cait Sith," Scout said.

"Are you accusing me of lying?" he replied in mock outrage, getting up on all four feet.

"Yes."

"Ach, you wound me with your accusations!" He staggered back melodramatically as though struck.

"We have not injured you." It sounded puzzled and its camera's followed Cait's stumbling path.

"This platform is not capable of such an action."

"That didn't stop you! My reputation is ruined!"

There was a pause as the Geth thought this over.

"We will not tell anyone you lack prophetic ability," it offered in recompense. Shepard smiled.
Legion had never appreciated jokes either. There was something mystifying about watching the two of them completely fail to communicate. Reeve watched eagerly, his eyes constantly flicking between the two synthetics.

"...Thanks, I suppose," Cait said.

"You have no open networking capabilities," Scout said, still sounding puzzled. "We wish to connect systems in order to interface directly."

"Easy, laddie," the cat replied with a laugh and a friendly shove at the base of the platform. "We don't know each other that well."

"You have the organic tendency to intentionally misinterpret information," Scout replied, the Geth equivalent of exasperation in its synthesised voice.

"You're a very strange chap," Cait said. He leapt up onto the flat top of Scout's platform, spun around three times, and then lay down comfortably with his tail curled around him. "Not sure I like you."

The camera watched him do all this with an air of bemusement.

"We have not reached a consensus regarding you either, Cait Sith."

At that second, Shepard's phone started ringing. She answered it without checking the ID of the caller.

"Shepard speaking."

"Get to my office," a deep voice that was becoming very familiar barked. "Now."

Then he hung up.

She gave a disgruntled look at the phone. Reeve looked at her in concern.

"Tell me we haven't been caught already?" he asked.

"It looks like Sephiroth is about to tell me," she replied, feeling her lips pull into a hard smile. If they had been caught perhaps she'd at least get the chance to punch him in the face again.

Sephiroth leaned back in his high backed chair behind his desk as he stared down the soldier before him.

Shepard stood at parade rest, glaringly out of place in her N7 armour, and completely inscrutable with her usual stern expression. They were still pretending that they were only a subordinate and Commanding Officer and that there was some standard procedure for any of this.

She was unmoved by his hard stare and simply waited patiently for him to speak.

He would have gladly left her waiting indefinitely if there had been any chance that his extended silence would make her uneasy. Clearly that wasn't going to happen. It irritated him that she was so collected. It irritated him far more that she was capable of irritating him in the first place. He needed
to keep his wits about him. He was fighting for Shinra's future in galactic politics and he couldn't afford to let one vexing soldier destroy his composure.

"Hollander came to my office this afternoon," he began, in a low and deceptively calm voice. "He demanded to know why the Geth in his lab exploded."

He watched carefully for her reaction. The only thing he could make out in her expression was anger, evidenced by her thinned lips and narrowed eyes.

His own anger from the training room had cooled to caution and disquiet. There was far too much going on here to risk an emotional reaction, especially in light of the afternoon's development. He couldn't risk a misstep, not against Shepard. He'd seen the way she fought and the strategies she used on a chessboard. Misdirection, jarring changes in approach that left her enemy with no time to reposition. Ruthless shots that took the heads off opponents who hadn't even known they were in her crosshairs. He knew better than to underestimate her now.

"What did he do to it?" she bit out.

"Nothing, apparently," he said.

"Of course he'd say that," she muttered darkly. "And what did you tell him?"

He didn't reply at first, instead letting the silence stretch on. She had been angry at the Geth's imprisonment, at his preventing her from doing anything about it, and then she had cooled completely and returned to her work. Was that really the extent of the self-righteous anger she had displayed during their spar? For all the claims of not abandoning her own just because she was ordered to, that was exactly what she'd done.

Or at least, that was how it appeared. He watched her simmering display of anger and wondered what truly lay behind those mechanical eyes. This was a convenient end to an inconvenient problem. With the Geth gone, Hollander had nothing to hold over him, Shepard had nothing to rebel over, and he had the only alien on the planet safely within his regiment.

It could not have been more suspicious.

Something was amiss. Shepard had been far too cooperative. She was never cooperative. She was angry about the situation and exactly the sort of person who would try to do something about it.

But he knew she hadn't been back to the labs, she hadn't even been in contact with anyone who had gone that way. She was visible on numerous security cameras the entire time. Who else could have been responsible? Nobody besides himself even knew about the Geth, outside of the Science Department.

"I assured him that, despite his accusations, you were nowhere near the labs at the time of the incident," he said. "There are even witnesses to verify that you could not possibly have been involved," he finished with a scowl. Yes, it was very convenient.

"Why would I kill the prisoner I wanted released?" she asked scornfully.

He could easily envision her taking action, but not of this sort. Unless it was some kind of mercy killing? That didn't sound likely either. Hollander was convinced some outside action had caused the death of his prized specimen.

"Assuming that it is actually dead," he replied.
"Didn't it self-destruct?" There was hope in her voice, but her eyes remained hard. "Is it only partially destroyed?"

"The electrical components are gone. You can hardly check a machine for a pulse, who knows if it's really dead," he said, trying not to scowl at her.

She scoffed. "According to you it wasn't even alive in the first place."

He carefully maintained a blank expression at that. Whether a synthetic structure could truly be alive was a question for a philosopher, though he was inclined to think not. The mechanical eyes boring down at him refused to accept that answer. Just as she had refused to accept that the Geth was off-limits.

"If you were to be found in unlawful possession of Shinra property, company policy would demand I arrest you," he said coldly.

A biting smile crossed her face for a brief moment, all sharp teeth and burning eyes.

"If you were to be found trying to hold a Spectre captive, Citadel policy would demand I show you what a very poor lapse in judgement that would be," she said, her voice low and calm.

It wasn't shocking that she had the gall to stand up to his threat. It was, however, the first time she had actually threatened to act in her own authority against him. Perhaps it would come down to that.

"I would suggest picking your battles very carefully, Shepard," he said tersely. They both needed this arrangement, her more than him. Both would suffer if it fell apart.

He was reticent to admit it, but he missed the brief period of frankness they had shared. She was refreshingly unlike anyone else in the behemoth of a company he served, and he could never predict what her opinions might be, except that they'd probably be controversial. But if they had to be enemies, he refused to be the losing party.

"Likewise," she replied, "but as you said, I haven't been back to the labs since Hollander tried to sedate me, and in the meantime he's managed to trip the Geth's self-destruct function." Frustration was clear in her voice.

"And what are you going to do about that?" he asked.

"About--?" she repeated with a raised eyebrow, before his meaning dawned on her. "Oh. Well, Hollander isn't going to be found next to an open window with a bullet in his skull, if that's what you're asking. Not my bullet anyway, I can't speak for anyone else he might have angered."

"Nobody else would dare."

"I think you aren't giving the disgruntled people of your planet their full due."
Assignment

"You're sending me to Wutai?" Shepard asked, trying to keep the scepticism out of her voice. "You trust me to be part of an international envoy?"

"No," Sephiroth replied. "I do not."

She was back in his office. Her phone was still clutched in her hand, displaying the mission she'd been assigned. She'd been just leaving Reeve's office when she got the message and had immediately marched up to his office for more information.

She stood in front of his desk; he stood behind it. The blinds were pulled down to dim the piercing glare of the early morning sun that would otherwise stream directly into the room.

The yawning chasm between them had barely lessened. She was very well aware that he wasn't on her side; he just found her useful. Life had to go on, though. The company didn't come to a standstill for them, and he was still her commanding officer. She'd do her job and do it well, but she didn't trust him to not throw her out the airlock at the first available opportunity.

He didn't look at all surprised at her sudden appearance– given the curt message he had sent, he'd probably expected it. He looked strangely uneasy, though. She had learnt enough about his mannerisms to pick up on his mood, however stoic he appeared. He stood with his back stubbornly straight and his jaw fixed, his head tilted down and his eyes narrowed. What would have been sulky on anyone else looked threatening on him. It was defensive. - It did not bode well.

"What do you need me to do?" she asked, wondering what this meant.

"You and Angeal will be guarding the vice president and escorting him back from Wutai," he said tersely. "Bring him back alive."

She nodded in understanding. It sounded simple enough; every soldier in the galaxy had to pull guard duty some days. But Wutai was a powder keg right now, one she didn't know a great deal about.

"You think they'll try to attack?" she asked. "I didn't think the situation had come to blows yet."

"Not yet, but it's only a matter of time," he said, sounding both irritated and tired. He looked down at the map on his desk labelled Wutai City.

"The Wutai are very set in their ways," he continued, turning away from the map and moving to the other side of the desk. There he leaned against it and crossed his arms. She stood next to him and looked down at the map, studying what she could make out. "They value honour and respect, and they claim Vice President Mitchells gave them neither. Their ninjas are famous assassins skilled in stealth and disguise, and the Crescent Unit – the best of these warriors – are sworn to the service of the royal family. They may well try to avenge the insult Mitchells paid to the Emperor."

Assassins. She couldn't restrain the slight curl in her lip at the thought. The monsters she had been hunting were getting boring, but going up against people trained in stealth and combat? That was why she got up in the mornings.

"What did he actually do?" she asked. The news reports had made evasive mention of the vice president's misstep, but revealed nothing specific.
"The reports didn't say," he said with narrowed eyes. "You'll be flown out tomorrow at 2000 hours with a squad of infantrymen. You may take your pick as to which squad. You'll be in Wutai for two days, after which you will see the safe return of Mitchells to Rocket Town."

"Why Rocket Town?" She stretched out her arm and scanned the map with her Omni-tool. It was an old map, the corners wrinkled and some of the names faded. His eyes followed the glowing 'tool.

"It's the closest major base we have to Wutai," he replied. She met his eyes and saw something strange in his expression. They had been covertly glaring at each other for days now, neither prepared to give any ground. Now he looked... concerned almost? Perhaps it wasn't quite strong enough to merit the word, but the hostility was gone; in its place was something she didn't recognize on him. The silence stretched on.

"You cannot fail this mission, Shepard," he said finally. It was an order.

"What makes you think I will?"

"You know nothing of Wutai. You don't know the location, the situation, or even the man you're meant to be guarding." He didn't say it with any bite; he was simply stating fact.

"Then why send me? There has to be someone better suited." Surely there was at least one SOLDIER who had actually been to Wutai? And if it was so high priority why not send a First Class?

"I originally assigned Guzzard to this mission, but I was overruled," he said grudgingly, looking away. Then his eyes snapped back to her. "Heidegger specifically asked for you."

Sephiroth might have been the general, but Heidegger was the director of the entire armed forces. The vice president outranked them all.

"Why?" she asked in surprise. She hadn't even met Director Heidegger – what was she to him? She wasn't famous here, not really.

Sephiroth didn't say anything for a moment. She stared him down.

"Because he doesn't expect you to succeed," he said, his voice low.

She stilled.

"He's going to be very disappointed," she said slowly. She lifted her chin and looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"See that he is," he replied evenly. "You might be an alien, but you are also a SOLDIER."

"What's Heidegger's game?" she pressed. There had to be more information to work with, fighting Wutai ninjas was one thing, but Shinra's politicians were just as dangerous from inside their luxurious offices. She had her hands full just working around Sephiroth.

"I'm sure you've noticed Shinra's politics are not kind," he drawled. It was one hell of an understatement, but then politics never were kind. "I don't like having the reputation or the lives of my men sacrificed for someone else's ambition. And I'm certainly not going to lose just so someone else can win," he finished sourly.

She crossed her arms. "And what part do you expect me to play in this little power struggle?" she asked with a raised brow.
"I expect you to do your job." He stood straighter. "And keep your mouth shut."

She snorted. "I have my orders."

The next day Shepard was preparing to leave for the mission. She was completely ready to get out of Midgar. Hell, she was ready to get out of this side of the galaxy. Wutai would just have to do.

She had picked out the squad of troopers she wanted. They were the best of the company she had been training. The two best – Kuskel and Zack – were numbered among them, along with ten others. Most of them were practically bouncing in anticipation. It was just guard duty, really, and she sincerely hoped it would be an uneventful mission. But it was high profile nonetheless and probably the most exciting mission any of them had ever been assigned.

More importantly, she was in charge. Angeal did technically outrank her, but this was her mission and Sephiroth had left the details to her. Angeal didn't seem to mind. It was the first real mission outside of low-level monster hunting that was solely her responsibility, and she was savouring it. After the freedom she had on the Normandy and the huge amount of responsibility she'd assumed during the Reaper War, working under someone in the field was suffocating.

She hadn't forgotten about Heidegger's schemes. How that played into everything, and why Sephiroth actually thought to tell her, she didn't know. All she could do was accomplish the job assigned to her and then face any hiccups as they appeared.

She passed through the SOLDIER lounge. Guzzard was sitting on one of the couches, eating a large collapsing sandwich and reading what looked like a gossip magazine of all things.

"Hey," he called, seeing her over the top of the magazine and then lowering it to talk. "Hear you're going to Wutai."

"Yeah, with Angeal and some of my troopers." She leaned against the nearest couch. There was still plenty of time before she had to leave, and there really wasn't much left to do. She could afford to hang around and chat.

"Well, best of luck," he said, taking a sip of a cup of coffee. She could smell it from where she stood, more sugar than coffee and steeped in the watery milk Shinra had the nerve to call cream. She moved over to the coffee machine to make her own bitter draught.

"Hey, I'm going to be in Rocket town for a couple of days," she said, the smell of burnt coffee wafting through the air. Enhanced olfactory senses were not as useful as Shinra claimed.

"Yeah? Damn, wish I got that mission. It's a good little town. The Shinra base is rubbish, though. It's cramped and cheap. I think the company was still finding its feet when it was built." He gave a nostalgic sigh at the thought, before taking a bite out of his sandwich. "If you get any time off, you should go see the rocket. It towers over the town, you can't miss it."

"A space rocket right?" She asked with a smile. Now that she'd like to see. Maybe they were close to breaking the atmosphere. Admittedly, it had taken Earth over a century to go from launching rockets to viable space travel. Still, she'd like to get a look in. Maybe she'd offer a couple of tips. Drop a schematic on a desk somewhere.

"Yeah, they've been building it forever. An old friend's in charge, Cid. Bit of a hard case, but he's a good guy. He pilots for Shinra when he's not trying to get the damn rocket finished."

"He's the pilot and the engineer?" she asked in shock. Joker wouldn't be caught dead tinkering in the
engineering decks, and Tali wouldn't dream of sitting in the pilot's seat. It was a probably unfair, though, to compare Shinra's early attempts at space travel with the Alliance's. Earth had centuries of experience to draw from – entire industries existed simply to cater to the construction and maintenance of their ships. Shinra was still trail blazing.

"Yeah, he'd never let anyone else touch his precious hunk of metal," Guzzard scoffed. "Actually, while you're there, think you could do me a favour?"

"What do you need?"

"Cid asked me to find him a part. I don't know if it's the last piece of the engine or some upgrade for his damn tea kettle, but he can't get it in the village, and I haven't gotten around to shipping it yet. Any chance you could drop it off?"

"I don't see why not," she said with a shrug. She wanted to stop by the Rocket anyway.

"Thanks, Shepard. I'll buy you a beer when you get back." He picked up his magazine again.

"What's that?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her. Its glossy pages and vibrant colour looked ridiculous in his callous-ridden hands.

"One of Shinra's monthly magazines." He held it up for her to see. The cover had a heavily photo-shopped Sephiroth on it. She smirked at the sight and he gave a lopsided grin. If Sephiroth pulled that pose in combat, she'd shank him with her Omni-blade.

"This one's got a bunch of new SOLDIER bios. Some of them are pretty damn funny." He idly flipped through a couple of the pages, taking another bite of his sandwich. "Angeal's ends by saying 'he stands for Honour, Truth, and Justice.'"

"And the American way, huh?" she muttered with a smile, taking a sip of her coffee.

"This is outrageous!" a familiar voice cried out from the corridor. Genesis stormed into the lounge, waving around a copy of the same magazine.

"Have you seen this?" he demanded when he saw he had an audience, holding out the magazine like it was a dead rat. "This pathetic excuse for journalism?"

Guzzard chortled up a laugh, and Genesis glared at him.

"What's wrong with it?" Shepard asked. It was pretty standard propaganda; she would have thought Genesis would love the exaggerated praise.

"He isn't in it," Guzzard said, his mouth pulled to the side in a twisted smirk.

"I am in it, thank you very much," he spat back. "In a group photo. The same one as you."

"I'm in it?" Guzzard asked, talking around the last of his sandwich that he'd just stuffed in his mouth.

"Ugh," Genesis sneered and dropped heavily onto one of the couches, his arms crossed and his lips pursed like a sulking child. Shepard tried not to laugh at the sight, but a snort of amusement escaped her anyway. His glare snapped to her.

"You think it's funny, do you?" he spat. "You, who got half a page to yourself."

"Wait, really?" She looked back to Guzzard. She hadn't done anything special on Gaia, why did she get special attention? She was the first woman in SOLDIER, maybe that was it.
"Sure. Here," Guzzard said, flipping to the right page and then clearing his throat. "Melinda Shepard of Mideel—"

"My name isn't Melinda." She interrupted, dropping onto the couch next to Genesis.

"What is it then?" Genesis asked.

"Shepard. Try to keep up," she said.

"PR's just given you another one then." Genesis said with a snort.

"Anyway," Guzzard said, drawing their attention back to the article. She couldn't see the page from the way he was holding it. "Melinda Shepard of Mideel, first woman in SOLDIER and first long-range specialist,' blah, blah, blah… oh, here it is: 'She was raised on a small chocobo farm by her older brother who dreamed of joining SOLDIER but was killed by Wutai radicals before he could enlist. Shepard enlisted in his memory, determined to avenge him.'"

"I don't have a brother," she said, her brow drawn down. She had no family anywhere in the galaxy, unless you counted Wrex, who to the best of her knowledge had never run a chocobo farm.


She rolled her eyes. Bloody weird propaganda.

Genesis leaned his head back on the couch. "You should see the picture." He drawled.

"You probably shouldn't," Guzzard said, looking at an interesting patch of wall.

"Oh, I thought it was great," Genesis smirked. "They really captured your fun side."

With a resigned sigh she grabbed the magazine Genesis was loosely holding and leafed through it, certain she would regret it.

She barely even noticed when she came to the right page. It took her a moment to realise that it was meant to be her.

The woman in the picture was thin and top heavy, her armour curving in at her waist and then flaring out dramatically in exaggerated and sculpted form. The posture the artist had put her in wasn't something any human spine could survive, let alone something anyone would attempt in combat. Her scowl, which she knew was normally too aggressive for the media's tastes, had been reduced to some kind of sexy sneer. She wasn't even holding her weapon; they'd given her a hideous chrome Shinra rifle.

The N7 on her collar had been replaced with the Shinra insignia.

Taking a calming breath, she handed the magazine back to Genesis.

"It's certainly memorable," he said sliding slightly further away from her. He had the decency to look at least a little apologetic. Guzzard was still appreciating the wallpaper. She'd suffered many an insult before, and she knew the wisdom of never searching for images of herself on the Extranet, but this was the first time her own superiors had tried to turn her into a pin-up girl.

"It's good to see that SOLDIERs are treated with dignity and respect," she said with resolute calm.

"The last issue had a shirtless Sephiroth on the front," Guzzard offered.
Twenty-four hours later Shepard was sitting in a military plane approaching the Wutai capital. Her Black Widow was sitting comfortably in her arms in its compacted form.

Angeal sat across from her, his arms crossed, his head drooped down in sleep, and his sword propped up next to him. Further along was the squad of troopers, eager to land and brimming with excitement.

A couple of issues of that damned magazine were floating around, and she’d noticed a couple of the troopers sneaking furtive glances at her. She’d glared straight back and they’d remembered that irritating her wasn't in their best interests.

Kunsel was quietly reading in the dim lighting while Zack was practically bouncing in his seat. Shepard had half a mind to tell him to sit still, but with the amount of energy he had it probably wouldn't do any good. Let him fidget now and then be focused when they got there.

"Hey, Shepard," Zack called, looking up from the emergency landing pamphlet he had been trying to fold into origami. His black, spikey hair sprung in almost every direction, despite the helmet he usually had to wear. "Why are we in Wutai?"

"To guard the vice president," she replied, looking at him sceptically. "Didn't you read your briefing?"

"No, I mean, like, what's he doing in Wutai? He's negotiating something, right?"

That was a more reasonable question.

"Shinra wants the right to build Mako reactors on Wutai territory. The Emperor isn't open to the idea, apparently," she said.

"Why wouldn't he want Mako power? Who would turn down cheaper electricity?" Zack asked, scratching his head.

Perhaps it was because Mako power came with Shinra control. She kept the thought to herself.

"The reactors need to be built in Mako rich areas, usually springs," Kunsel said, not looking up from his book. All the other troopers had taken off their full-face infantry helmets as soon as the plane took off, but he happily wore his for the entire thirteen-hour flight. "Pretty much all the viable sites in Wutai have ancient shrines and temples built on them."

"How do you know that?" she asked. The news reports certainly hadn't said anything like that.

"My dentist is from Wutai," he said with a shrug.

All the reports had done a very good job of making Wutai sound aggressive and unreasonable. You would never have known Shinra was negotiating for the right to desecrate holy sites, assuming Kunsel's information was good. No wonder things weren't going well.

She held her rifle more securely as the plane was shaken by turbulence. This mission was looking far more complicated than the simple security detail assignment it was dressed up as.

The pilot's voice crackled through loud speakers – they would be landing soon. Angeal woke up as the plane lurched and started losing altitude.

Soon enough, they were on the tarmac. The airport wasn't in the city proper, and thick green forests surrounded the landing strip. It was early morning, but they were still in the shadow of rugged
mountains that marched away to the north. The air was chilly and the ground was covered in heavy dew.

Only a small figure in a black suit was there to welcome them.

"Cissnei!" Shepard called, walking over to her with a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm welcoming you to Wutai," She replied. Her smile was polite and professional but her eyes shone with genuine happiness.

Behind Shepard some of the troopers were muttering about 'shady Turks'. A reprimanding look from Angeal silenced them. Angeal could probably hear her conversation, but the troopers didn't have his enhanced hearing.

"I thought you weren't cleared for field work yet?" Shepard asked.

"Oh, I'm not in the field. I'm just Mitchell's PA," she said with a smile, readjusting her jacket to hide the shape of a pistol.

"Uh-huh. So, are you coming to Rocket Town?"

"No, I'll be going back to Midgar when he leaves here, so I can't cover for you if you screw up," she said, hiding her smile and turning back to lead them to the terminal.

Shepard snorted.

"However will we survive?"
Attempted Diplomacy

The Wutai capital was stunning— and it was going to be hell to work around.

Shepard looked across the square from where she stood at parade rest on the left side of a heavy wooden door. Angeal occupied the same space on the right. A Wutai city guard in full regalia stood on every corner. To Shepard's eyes it looked like traditional Japanese armour, the sort she'd once seen in a museum. They watched her and Angeal expressionlessly, and the two SOLDIERs returned the stares.

The original plan had been to meet Vice President Mitchells at the guest housing the emperor had provided, but half-way there Cissnei had received a call. Apparently Mitchells didn't care to wait and had decided to go out for an impulsive breakfast in the city, bodyguards be damned.

This was not the behaviour of a man concerned about assassination.

Cissnei had remained professional, only her slightly pursed lips revealing her irritation, and they'd simply been rerouted. The infantrymen were paraded back to Mitchells' quarters on his order where everyone could see them, and Shepard and Angeal were left waiting outside his favourite eatery.

Shepard didn't show her irritation, being on guard for a VIP usually meant working around them rather than with them, and guard duty consisted of long arduous waits. Many people saw security as an irritation or a status symbol, instead of men and women desperately trying to keep them alive. If Mitchells was as hated as she'd been led to believe and given what she'd seen of Wutai so far, this would not be an easy job.

The city was built along the banks of a winding river under the backdrop of imposing mountains and surrounded by a temperate rainforest. They were in the heart of the city, which consisted of grand palaces and temples, each standing tall and majestic with their curving green roofs and red pillars. While the main road and ceremonial paths from the major temples to the palace were wide and open, most of the streets were narrow, cobbled paths beneath overhanging balconies and roofs. The winding passages were filled with unexpected corners and forks in the path, and windows opened far above with clear views of anyone walking down below.

Shepard herself couldn't have picked a better city to make an assassination attempt.

Angeal saw their disadvantage, as well, and they had shared a look as they entered the city. Hopefully, Mitchells would be reasonable. His insistence on them standing outside didn't bode well. They should have been inside with him, but according to Cissnei he demanded otherwise.

Across from them, on the other side of the small square, was a shrine to Leviathan. Whether it was the Summon they were worshiping or some other entity, she didn't know. It was a popular site, and many people walked quietly through the square to make reverent offerings and murmur hushed prayers. The smell of incense wafted towards them on a chilly spring breeze. Some of the troopers had scoffed as they passed the many shrines and temples. Others had looked uncomfortable, and a couple nodded in respect.

Shepard neither bowed nor scoffed, but she was careful to show no disrespect. Years ago she had been dismissive of such things – this world was trouble enough and she didn't have time to worry about the next. Now, her belief in the spiritual was just a mess of guesses and a desperate need to believe there was something more. There had to be something that guided right and wrong because the horror of the Reapers could not be all. As dark and as cruel as the galaxy was, she refused to
believe that was *all* there was.

Across from her an old man started coughing. In the otherwise quiet square, the sound was loud and jarring. He clung to his chest and staggered to the nearest support column being used to hold up a thin awning. He shook with every wracking cough, his eyes watered, and he nearly lost his balance. The square was busy; nobody gave him a second look.

Beside her Angeal took a step towards the man, concern etched across his face.

"Angeal," she said lowly. He faltered, and she gave a barely perceptible shake of her head.

The Wutai guards still stood immobile on every corner. There were numerous dark windows looking down on the square, and the man they were meant to be protecting was currently unaccounted for.

Angeal slowly stepped back into position by the door. His face was drawn in anguish for a brief moment before his training took over and his expression relaxed into an unreadable mask.

They still had a job to do.

The door between the two SOLDIERs was flung open. She caught it before it could smack her in the face. The door was immediately followed by a large man in a grey silk suit with Cissnei trotting after him. Angeal and Shepard followed without hesitation, one on either side of him. He walked with great stomping steps and paid no attention to the people behind him. His grey hair was starting to retreat back across his scalp and his face held deep lines from years of sneering. The smell of cigarette smoke and too much cologne lingered in his wake.

The eyes of the city guards followed them as they marched out of the square.

"Alright, here's what I want," the man who had to be Mitchells barked at Cissnei as he walked. "I want a seat at whatever show is on tonight, one of their incomprehensible plays. They look so cute in their white make-up and big bows."

"Sir, you can't go to a show," Cissnei said, barely holding back an irritated sigh. "You have one last meeting before you fly out."

Shepard kept her eyes flitting from the dark corners on the street to the windows above. If someone were to jump out from an alleyway they could handle it, but a shot from above? There was very little she could do about a single well-aimed shot.

"I thought they didn't want to meet with me anymore?" he sneered, stomping down the street without a care for the people pushed out of his way. "Isn't that what they said? 'The emperor refuses to treat with someone so lacking in respect'? They don't want to see me, fine; I don't want to see them either. Shinra can show them how respect really works."

"This is important. It would be dangerous to refuse to attend," Cissnei said, keeping pace with him despite her shorter stature. These streets were too thin for cars, but the city wasn't very big. He obviously knew the route well.

"They told me to get out. It's too late now to try and suck up. Why should I want to see them?"

"Because you are in their city, surrounded by their troops," she replied under her breath. Mitchells didn't hear it. Cissnei cleared her throat and then spoke aloud, "It is the empress herself who has asked to see you."

"What does she want?" he asked, showing no interest.
"She will tell you herself tonight. I suspect it is a final farewell."

He scoffed.

"I bet she'll want me to drink more of that shitty tea."

They arrived at the guest house. It was guarded by more of the city guard, as well as the heavily armoured imperial guards. They stood somberly in grey and dark blue uniforms and full face masks. Shepard and Angeal moved smoothly between them without hesitation into the building.

Shepard was staggered by the glaring difference between what she was seeing and what the news had reported. The "unspeakable treatment" the Shinra media had spoken of wasn't quite as dire as implied. The guest house was nothing short of a palace. It wasn't located on the same complex as the royal palace, but it was within sight. The outside was impressive, gilded in gold and decorated with the eight legged horse of Odin. It was bizarre seeing Norse mythology integrated into Japanese architecture, but Shepard had long since given up trying to make sense of every strange thing she encountered.

Mitchells sauntered in, past the foyer and into a warm and comfortable living room, paying no attention to anything around him. It was just as luxurious as the outside, but the lighting was surprisingly dim and the smell of cigarettes lingered. There were no windows and no hiding places – safe enough for now.

"Sir," Cissnei called, "your new security detail."

"New guards, huh? Who've we got?" He spun back around, finally sparing a look for the two SOLDIERS. His eyes passed over Angeal disinterestedly, but he honed in on Shepard with a smirk she didn't like. "Well, you're a damn sight prettier than the ones I usually get."

"Shepard, SOLDIER Second Class," she introduced herself with a nod and a stern expression.

"Happy to meet you, sweet cheeks."

Her mouth twitched in the beginnings of an irritated frown. Angeal cleared his throat.

"Angeal Hewley, SOLDIER Second Class."

"Hn." Mitchells smiled at him blandly and then pulled out a cigarette. "You two can stand guard outside the front door." He patted his pockets for a lighter.

Behind him Cissnei rolled her eyes. "Sir--" she began, her voice already heavy with resignation.

"With all due respect," Shepard cut in, "we cannot protect you if we're outside the building. It's in your interests for at least one of us to remain in the room with you at all times." The Wutai didn't appear actively hostile; this was standard treatment for any diplomatic envoy, as far as she was concerned. They'd assigned her to keeping him alive and she was going to take all the proper measures whether he liked it or not.

"Nonsense!" he snorted, his focus on the lighter he'd found. "Rupert's sent me two intimidating SOLDIERS. What's the point if I put them where nobody can see them?"

"An assassin isn't going to come in through the front door," she said, trying to explain patiently despite how irritating she found him. "We'd be guarding the only entrance they won't use, as well as telling everyone in this city that you are vulnerable because your best guards are all outside."
"Or they'll see the hulking brutes Shinra has on call and think better of trying to attack," he said with a chortle before taking a drag of the now lit cigarette. His eyes stayed on Shepard. "I'm not having a pack of grunts buzzing around my ears. Not even you, sugar-tits."

Angeal cleared his throat awkwardly.

Shepard's frown turned into a scowl she didn't bother to hide. She wasn't going to grace such a comment with a retort. It was suddenly no longer impressive that he had offended the Wutai to the point of getting thrown out; frankly, she was impressed they had put up with him for so long.

"You don't smile much do you? I think I'll stick with the scrawny Turk." He nodded towards Cissnei, his smile leering. Her expression was the patented bland look of a Turk – very dangerous. "Outside." He wiggled his fingers towards the front door.

"No," Shepard said with her arms crossed. "We are going to be outside whatever room you are in, and we will enter when the empress does. She will have her guards with her the entire time, and you will have yours." She wasn't asking permission.

"Shepard–" Angeal began, looking at her in alarm. Mitchells was about to retort, but she spoke over him.

"Troopers will search the room you intend to receive her in beforehand to ensure it is properly secured, and both Angeal and I will be next to you until the last of her retinue leaves the building."

Her tone left no room for argument.

"Who do you think you are–" Mitchells began, his cigarette forgotten and his chest puffed up in indignation.

"We are here for your safety, not your comfort or your reputation. Our orders are to keep you alive, whether or not you like it," she said coldly before turning to go find the troopers. "Let Cissnei know when you've decided which room to receive the empress in," she said over her shoulder, briefly meeting the Turk's eyes. Cissnei could keep an eye on him until she got back.

Mitchells was red-faced and scowling, but she marched out before he could start shouting or whatever he intended to do in retaliation. She didn't much care.

"Shepard!" Angeal cried as soon as the door shut behind them, sounding both outraged and horrified. "You can't just say things like that, not to the vice president!"

She scoffed. "I didn't say anything that outrageous; I just told him what the security measures would be."

"You overrode the orders of the second most powerful man in Shinra," he said, dragging a hand through his hair. "We are all going to be court-martialled."

"It'll be a lot worse than that if he's killed here."

"Our job is to watch, not to interfere. He's the one in charge."

"We can't watch if we're not even in the same building. And an obnoxious body guard is better than an incompetent one." Sephiroth hadn't asked her to make Mitchells comfortable. She probably shouldn't be making new enemies but she wasn't going to let some idiot politician tell her how to do her job.

"Tell him that," Angeal said, looking back over his shoulder at the room they'd just left.
"You think I should go back and repeat myself?" she said wryly.

Several hours later Shepard and Angeal were again standing on either side of a door, except this time they were in the heart of the guest house with Mitchells fretting inside the next room. The empress was supposed to arrive at any minute. The troopers were on guard throughout the rest of the building, covering exits and passageways.

As they waited, Shepard tried to remember everything she knew about Japanese culture. Kasumi had shared the occasional anecdote, but ultimately this wasn't Japan, and it certainly wasn't the mid-22nd century cosmopolitan Japan of Shepard's time. Wutai culture looked very similar in certain ways, but it was also drastically different. The yin and yang symbol decorated with Celtic knot-work on the opposite wall made that abundantly clear.

Finally the empress arrived.

Angeal and Shepard stood unmoving while she floated towards them, a lady-in-waiting behind her and eight visible guards around them. The empress stood in a heavily layered kimono, richly coloured silk brocade trailing behind her. She had thick grey hair, painstakingly swept up into a bun that was kept in place by headgear Shepard couldn't begin to name. She was an older woman, short and thin, but with a presence that demanded attention. Her back was straight and she looked unashamedly forward, her head held high.

Clearly this was not the stereotypical demure Japanese woman. She struck Shepard as someone burdened with terrible Dignity.

There were hard lines on her hard face that no amount of make-up could hide. But this woman wasn't trying to hide; a traditional fan for meekly shielding oneself hung closed from a string around her wrist. She looked at them openly, her eyes calmly observing, assessing.

"Empress Suiko Kisaragi, the great Queen who rules all under heaven," one of her guards announced, loudly and with great decorum. They all wore full facemasks so it was impossible to see which one was speaking.

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The guards all carried thin curved swords at their sides. She could spot quite a few hidden extra weapons as well, and she was willing to bet they had others she couldn't see. They all had the symbol of Leviathan on their ornate armour. These were of the famed Crescent Unit.

Suiko stood regally, the picture of composure and nobility, waiting for the door to be opened to her. Shepard sincerely hoped Mitchells wasn't going to be petty and keep her waiting. The lady-in-waiting stood meekly in a plain kimono with her head bowed.

The moment dragged on, but everyone remained motionless. The empress' eyes landed on Shepard.

"This is the female warrior we have been told of?" She said quietly, barely moving, though her sharp eyes remained trained on Shepard.

In response, Shepard gave a slight nod.

Suiko's eyes widened slightly before her expression returned to the picture of uncompromising composure. Shepard raised a brow. The empress gave the barest hint of a nod in return.
Finally the door between the two SOLDIERS swung open. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke mixed with incense wafted out to greet them.

Suiko floated in without hesitation. Her guards moved around her, two taking Shepard and Angeal's place on either side of the door as they left their posts and moved in to guard Mitchells in person.

"You speak Wutaian?" Angeal whispered so quietly no one without enhanced hearing would hear him. "I didn't catch any of what they said."

It took her a moment to realise what he meant. It explained the surprised look she had received. "No, my Omni-tool has a translator."

He nodded slightly, but said nothing.

Inside the room Mitchells was sitting on a couch and Cissnei stood behind him, both in high quality suits. Shepard and Angeal took their places standing on either side of him. Mitchells gave Shepard a dark look, but it passed as soon as the empress stood before him.

"Your majesty!" he cried with exaggerated enthusiasm, standing to greet her.

She bowed deeply and with much fussing he did too. Cissnei and the lady-in-waiting bowed with respect as well. For a single moment none but the guards were standing straight in the room. The faceless Crescent Unit soldiers faced her and Angeal behind their masks and the two SOLDIERS stared right back. Then the moment ended, and the diplomats were standing tall again.

Mitchells extended a hand for Suiko to shake. She looked at it suspiciously for a moment before shaking it daintily, giving a barely indulgent smile.

"Will your niece be joining us tonight?" he asked with a broad grin.

Suiko's expression turned brittle, but her voice was polite as she replied. "I'm afraid not. She is not yet accustomed to dealing with such esteemed visitors." Her well-practiced tone nearly hid her indignation, but not from Shepard. She could guess what direction his 'great insult to the royal family' had taken.

"Shame. Such a lovely creature," he replied, sitting back onto the couch he had risen from and waving vaguely at the couch behind her.

She lowered herself onto the piece of furniture with great ceremony. Her guards smoothly and silently positioned themselves around her, two directly opposite Shepard and Angeal and the remaining four each occupying one of the corners of the room.

It was a small and windowless room. With so many guards in it, two of which were standing where she couldn't see them, Shepard felt surrounded. Her rifle was a comforting weight across her back, but the room was too small for such a weapon. Given the instinctive roll of Angeal's shoulders, she imagined he felt the same way about his sword.

"Want a drink?" Mitchells asked, pouring two large glasses of amber liquid from a nearly full decanter. It was strong; Shepard could smell the alcohol from where she stood on the opposite side of him.

The empress declined the offer so he drank both glasses himself. Cissnei stood behind him wearing her best poker face, clearly not in a position to influence the exchange.

It soon became obvious this was an attempted offer of reconciliation. The empress, clearly not a
woman given to humbling herself, was making every attempt to make amends with the vice president.

Mitchells was having none of it. He would be leaving first thing the next morning, and by the looks of it he was determined to do so with nothing but ill will between him and his hosts. At first, it appeared as though he was simply being disagreeable, he was a petty man and easy to dislike, but the longer the awkward discussion went on the more Shepard was convinced he was pushing her aside intentionally. Presumably, he had his own orders from the president, and she was starting to suspect those orders did not include a mutually beneficial treaty.

Given Empress Suiko's determination to wring a truce out of him, she knew what he was up to as well.

"We would not have you leave our shores with any misunderstanding, Lord Mitchells," she said, her voice aged but strong. Her current manner of subservience didn't suit her, but she stuck to it with great dedication, no matter how grudgingly. "We have been honoured by your visit."

"No, no, the honour was all mine," he said with a bored wave of his hand.

"We are grieved that you should leave having failed to make a treaty," she continued as though he hadn't spoken. "Perhaps if you, or another of Shinra's lords, visit again we will have greater success."

"I doubt it," he said contentiously. "I think it would just be a waste of time."

"An agreement between our people would benefit both of us. This is an endeavour worth pursuing," she insisted grimly.

He snorted. "Should have thought of that before you kicked me out of your city."

She pursed her lips with grave indignation.

"I wonder that you came so far for a treaty you have so little interest in?" she said coldly. "Or that you bother talking to people for whom you have no respect."

"I was fully prepared to be reasonable," he said with a bitter scowl. "You threw me out."

"We are eager to have an agreement with Shinra, so long as you respect our sovereignty," she said with cold dignity.

He scoffed loudly and finished another glass. How many was that now?

Suiko's pursed lips turned into an outright frown.

The conversation continued stilted, awkward, and borderline hostile between two parties who clearly despised each other. Shepard felt like she'd been here before. At least this time there were no Reapers and nobody was asking her to get them to play nice.

"Was there anything else, Your Majesty?" Mitchells said, openly sneering. "I've got an early flight tomorrow morning."

"We have brought a gift," she said stiffly.

The lady-in-waiting handed her a decorated wooden box. It was long and thin with Wutaian characters carved along its face. It looked both important and expensive.

"In honour of your visit," Suiko said, as though she were pronouncing some grave sentencing. Then
she bowed over the gift and presented it to him with both hands.

He took one look at the box and tossed it behind him onto the couch.

Suiko rose to her feet in outrage, and the hands of one of her guards twitched. Shepard and Angeal's focus immediately snapped to him, but he didn't move beyond that.

"How dare you?" Suiko whispered, horrified beyond words. Her sharp eyes were clouded with the sort of rage that would be more fitting on a Krogan. She grasped her closed fan like a dagger, but she held herself still rigid and indignant.

"You know what? I don't want your shitty gift," he said, climbing to his feet, knocking over the nearly empty decanter, easily towering over the short woman.

Her guards all tensed and took a step closer to her, their hands moving to the hilts of their swords. Angeal and Shepard both stepped closer to Mitchells, Angeal making good use of his bulky musculature and height to create more room.

"What?" Mitchells said, throwing his arms out and openly glaring at the closest masked guard. "What are you going to do? What are you going to bloody do?"

The unmoving mask stared back at him. Suiko glared up at him, unbowed and uncaring for his wild gestures.

"You are a fool, Vice President Mitchells," she declared.

"What the hell would you know? I'm the second most powerful man in the world; you're just some Wutai bitch," he spat down at her, his words starting to slur.

"I am an empress. You are a drunkard."

Mitchells sneered again, swore at her, and then lifted his hand.

In the blink of an eye, the royal guards had all drawn their weapons. Angeal's hand snapped to his sword and Cissnei had her gun out, but Shepard was faster.

Her hand flashed out and seized Mitchells' arm before it could fall. Everyone froze, their eyes locked on the two of them. Mitchells's head turned back to look at her, furious at having his drunken plans interrupted. The guards and the empress waited with baited breath to see what would happen.

Shepard deftly pushed Mitchells behind her, uncaring for his cry of protest, and stood directly between him and the Wutai.

So help her, they were not starting a war tonight.

Suiko looked up at her with her brow drawn down, unsure what to make of this development. Angeal and Cissnei were staring at her with a bizarre mixture of relief and absolute horror, their weapons pointed at nobody in particular.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," Shepard began, putting as much respect into her voice as she could but too much iron rang through her tone for it to sound at all repentant. "But the vice president is indisposed this evening. Shinra appreciates both your visit and your gift."

Suiko's gaze drifted from Shepard's stern countenance to the dishevelled Mitchells, shoved back on his couch, and then back up to her again. She gave Shepard a cautious nod.
The empress left before the meeting could disintegrate any further, her retinue of very tense guards surrounding her. While she couldn't see any of their eyes, Shepard could feel the weight of numerous stares on her.

Mitchells, to put it lightly, was not pleased that she had just shoved him out of his own meeting and taken charge.

"Shepard…" Angeal began despairingly as soon as the door was shut.

She hoped this episode wouldn't hurt his career. Her own career at Shinra she didn't care about, but it would be wrong to drag Angeal down with her.

"Who do you think you are?" Mitchells yelled, having finally gathered himself enough to know who he was angry at and why. "I'll have you court-martialled, executed, thrown out of Shinra!"

"Sir, perhaps you should sit down," Cissnei tried, vainly, to calm him a little.

"Are you insane, Mitchells?" Shepard said harshly, ignoring the others. "Do you have any idea what you almost did?"

"I don't need your permission to do anything!" he cried, trying to get in her face. He wasn't tall enough to pull it off, but that didn't stop him from trying.

"Not only would you have started a war, you would have gotten yourself and everyone else in this room killed! For no good reason! Do you want to die?" she demanded talking at him like he was a private who had just disobeyed a direct order and not a tipsy executive who she was meant to answer to.

"You're the bodyguard," he spat. "If you can't protect me that's your fault!"

Angeal was guarding the only door, apparently having decided to let them yell it out and see what was left afterwards. Cissnei looked up at the ceiling with deep resignation.

"I can protect you from a couple of assassination attempts, maybe even more than that, but if the emperor decides to finish you off for hitting his wife, then what?" She could see she wasn't getting through to him. He was too angry at her to hear a word she was saying, but that didn't stop her from trying to get the message through his thick skull. "You aren't in Midgar; there's no Shinra here to save you. You're in the middle of the Wutai capital, surrounded by armies of highly trained Wutai warriors. You have to play by their rules, whether you like it or not. Otherwise we all die here."

He didn't yell back, instead his scowl turned into a petty sneer.

"Stop trying to play so tough, sweet cheeks," he said, looking her over derisively. "Daddy will handle the scary foreigners."

She very much wanted to call back the Crescent Unit and let them have at it.

Mitchells sauntered off, doing a poor job of hiding his stumbling silently counted to ten and tried to imagine how pretty the sunset on Rannoch was. It wasn't as helpful as she'd hoped.

She was pretty sure this wasn't what Sephiroth had hoped for when he said 'bring Mitchells back alive.' Still, nobody could say she wasn't doing the job.
Little beacons of red and blue light shone from Shepard and Angeal's eyes, allowing them both to see without the need for external lighting. They were again guarding the door outside Mitchells' room, now in the hours past midnight. Mitchells would hopefully be sleeping by now. This was Angeal's watch and Shepard would leave him to it in a moment. As it was, she was enjoying the silence since there was so little of it in her head. This was a political nightmare, and she would bet anything that it was about to get several hundred times worse. That didn't even take into account any further attempts at suicide-by-Crescent-Unit Mitchells might attempt. She'd been on plenty of diplomatic missions before, but she'd never met anyone so aggravatingly stupid about it. Even if Mitchells was acting this way intentionally, it was rank idiocy on his part. Too much time around Krogan had Shepard wanting to head-butt some sense into the man.

"I once kicked a man out of a skyscraper," she said idly into the calm night.

"What floor were you on?" Angeal asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Halfway up," she said coolly. "The memory is suddenly comforting."

Angeal chuckled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. His laughter soon petered out.

"It's not right," he said into the night. "He shouldn't disrespect people like this, not you, and certainly not the empress. Has he no honour?"

"Few do, when it comes down to it," she said with a sigh.

"That's a depressing way to see the world. Our honour guides us and keeps us accountable." The dark corridor soaked up their quiet conversation and gave back a thick silence that hung in the air. Angeal hung his head.

"We should have helped that man in the street," he said quietly.

It took her a moment to remember whom he meant. The old man, coughing uncontrollably in the square until he collapsed. It had been a long day and she hadn't given the incident much thought.

"Is it honourable to abandon your duty for one man?" she asked, trying not to sound too cold.

"Is it honourable to sit and watch someone choke to death in the streets when you can offer a hand?" he replied bitterly.

"Perhaps not, but you can't save everyone," she said, her voice stern. "It's more important to help as many people as possible then it is to maintain your honour. The two are sometimes mutually exclusive." There was no honour in what she had done to the Alpha relay, but she'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"I don't believe that," he whispered.

She sighed.

"Then I hope for your sake this doesn't turn into a war." What chance was there of that?

He didn't reply. She hoped he hadn't heard her.

"Good night, Angeal." She dragged a hand down her face and left for her sleeping quarters for the
They would need to be up early the next day to leave Wutai.

They had suffered no attacks so far.

Would it be too much to ask that their questionable luck hold for one more day?
Retribution

Everyone was up early the next day with Angeal organizing the bored troopers while Shepard and Cissnei wrangled Mitchells out of his drunken stupor and in the direction of the airport. Angeal was absolutely ready to get out of Wutai, which was a shame; he had always wanted to visit the island. Babysitting Mitchells and trying to ignore the hundredfold angry glares of the locals took the joy out of it.

Mitchells was in a bitter and biting mood, but Shepard wasn't taking any prisoners. He hadn't appreciated the early wake up call, or being told in no uncertain terms what his schedule for the day would be, but Shepard remained unmoved by his ranting. The hungover vice president was powerless in the face of her merciless efficiency, despite his loud and repeated objections to her calling the shots. At this rate any war with Wutai would have to wait until Shepard had finished waging her one-woman-war.

Word of the narrowly avoided disaster with the empress must have gotten out. The Shinra procession, consisting of the vice president and a wealth of guards, all set out from the guest house and found the number of city guards around them nearly doubled. Although inscrutable behind their silver masks, their posture was more aggressive than the day before. The guards made no move against them, but Angeal felt hedged in, as did the troopers who looked about nervously. The weight of countless unfriendly eyes made the back of his neck itch.

Angeal led the way with Cissnei, his eyes scanning the crowds that parted begrudgingsly before them. Outright scowls and whispered curses were common. The people knew Mitchells had disrespected their royal family and barely hid their displeasure. The streets were crowded and narrow; if someone started a fight there would be countless civilian casualties. The mumbled hostility wasn't nearly as worrying as the hidden eyes among the crowd which made no noise and followed silently, impossible to pin down.

Mitchells had a headache and either didn't notice or just didn't care. Angeal walked close to him through the streets, ready to react to anything.

His sword was a reassuring weight on his shoulders. His reflexes were fast enough to thwart unenhanced ninjas, but only if he actually saw them coming. It was hard to counter an opponent you didn't know was there. Shepard brought up the rear, her keen eyes flitting between the empty windows overhead and the balconies that hung over the pathway. Her heavy rifle wasn't on her back but in her hands, albeit still compacted so as not to look too aggressive.

The tense silence gnawed away at him as they made their way through the city, certain there would be an attack.

But the attack never came.

They arrived at the airfield without incident. The tarmac was quiet and empty of the city's resentful crowds. Still, the weight of hostile eyes followed them. There was no official send-off from the royal family, no friendly parting words; the Wutai were as happy to see them go as they were to go. The itch of being watched didn't leave him until they were finally on the plane and the doors were shut.

Angeal let out a quiet sigh. He couldn't believe they had gotten away so easily. He had been certain there would be some kind of attack, some retribution for Mitchells' behaviour. The Wutai were angry and hostile, but not foolish enough to strike openly, it seemed.
It was oddly anti-climactic, but he was incalculably glad for their restraint.

"Man, I can't believe this mission was so boring," Zack said to nobody in particular, standing aimlessly in the middle of the corridor. Angeal was still sitting, strapped into his seat from take-off. Shepard and some of the troopers were in one of the luxurious cabins guarding Mitchells. Hopefully, he was sleeping off his hangover and not giving her more reasons to dislike him.

Most of the troopers were sitting quietly, weary after their uneventful late night patrols. Zack didn't look tired in the least.

"Boring?" Angeal asked. "You've been to Wutai City so many times it's boring now?"

"Well, no…" the trooper hedged, scratching the back of his neck. "I've never been to Wutai before, but we didn't even get to go out and see the city. And I was really hoping for some action, you know?" His initial awe at working with a SOLDIER Second Class had melted into a respectful camaraderie almost immediately such that he spoke freely around Angeal.

"Don't speak too soon, the mission isn't over yet," Angeal replied seriously. He didn't really mean it, but still, until Mitchells was safe inside the Rocket Town base, they were technically on duty. This young trooper showed promise; he ought to be passing on good habits.

"It is pretty much over, though, right? We're in the air already." Zack compulsively did a couple of squats while he spoke, his arms swinging with the motion.

"Stop that. You can't do squats on a moving plane. Sit down," Angeal said, trying not to shake his head with bemusement. "And Wutai's Ninjas are masters of stealth. This plane could be full of them."

Zack paused. "It's a Shinra plane." He hesitantly sat in the seat next to Angeal.

"So we're all relaxed and unprepared should the enemy strike," he replied with mock seriousness.

Zack looked at him suspiciously and then gave a brief glance over his shoulder. "But where would they hide? We would see them… right?"

"Their disguises are famous. They could be anywhere," he said in a quiet tone. "In this room even."

"Anywhere?" Zack looked alarmed and cast a nervous glance about the cabin. Then his head swung round again to face Angeal with an incredulous look on his face. "Wait a minute! You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

Angeal smiled and adjusted the angle of his backrest. "I'm going to get some sleep now. Let me know if you see any ninjas." He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

"Very funny, Angeal," Zack grumbled.

He cracked his eye open at the boy.

"Uh, I mean, 'very funny, sir'."

Angeal snorted.
The sound of Mitchells' snoring was music to Shepard's ears. Their eight hour flight was nearly over, and while the foul vice president was sleeping now, he had been awake and angry at her for most of its duration. Unfortunately for him, she was accustomed to angry bureaucrats and his impotent rage earned no reaction from her. It was anger she had probably earned, having more or less taken over the entire operation, but then he'd proved himself fully capable of getting them all killed. Cissnei hadn't stopped her; she'd just smiled and watched with something like glee in her eyes.

Now Cissnei was gone, having boarded her own plane to Midgar, and Shepard was alone with Kunsel and the sleeping Mitchells.

"Hey, Kunsel," she said quietly, leaning back in her seat with her legs crossed at the ankles. Next to her Mitchells slept sprawled out in his seat with his mouth gaping open. The trooper at the door turned his head to look at her, still wearing the helmet that hid his entire face. It really was like dealing with a quarian.

"Why do the Wutai Mako springs all have temples on them?" she asked idly. The subject had been on her mind since he'd mentioned it on the flight over. "Is Mako sacred?"

He tilted his head in thought. "Sacred? I guess you could say that. Some say it's the lifeblood of the planet."

"I didn't know planets could bleed," she said dryly. What did that make her voracious resource mining?

"Some people call it spirit energy." Kunsel replied. He was leaning back against the wall with his arms loose at his sides. "I think it's meant to be a circle of life kind of thing."

She nodded in understanding. "So they worship the planet?"

"Something like that. It's why some people don't like the Mako reactors," he finished quietly with hunched shoulders. "They think they're sacrilegious. What happens when the spirit energy is all gone?" His head turned away from her, looking down and off to the side, but she got the impression he was watching her out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, they're entitled to their opinions," she replied with an indifferent shrug. She didn't worship Mako, but if someone else wanted to that was their problem. "Though draining a planet of finite resources isn't a good idea when you've only got the one."

"The one what?"

"Planet," she replied.

He snorted, his shoulders relaxing.

"So, is this mostly a Wutai belief?" she asked curiously. "The spirit energy thing?"

"It's pretty common on the western continent, and Mideel has similar theories. You don't see much of it in Midgar, though, and I don't know what they believe out in Fort Condor." He scratched his chin under the helmet. Who knew, maybe he had a beard under there. "How do you not know any of this?" he asked.

She hummed and didn't answer. A couple of minutes later the pilot's voice announced they were about to land. It was time to wake up Mitchells and finish the mission.
Rocket Town was a quaint little village, and Guzzard had been right: it did stink of engine oil.

Mitchells had no time for any of it and sauntered from the plane to the waiting car with no glances spared for the scenery or the people accompanying him. His sneer was a permanent feature on his face.

He muttered something that sounded like 'joyless thug' as he passed Shepard. She silently raised an eyebrow and then sat next to him in the car.

The airfield was close to the Shinra base, so the drive was short. The town appeared small and quaint, with small wooden houses fenced by oak trees covered in bursts of new leaves.

Beyond the town was the Nibel mountain range. The craggy heights were still snow-topped, the early thaw of spring not having kicked in yet. A lone winding path led away from the town towards the mountains, marked by a crooked wooden sign engraved with 'Nibelheim Crossing'.

Above it all was the rocket.

It towered over the town, tall and thin, with its smooth white panels shining boldly in the sun. Large metal girder supports held the slim two stage rocket upright, hulking oxygen tanks latched onto the sides.

It was nothing like the ships Shepard knew, but she recognized it immediately as a vehicle made for space travel. It was a comforting and strangely nostalgic sight. The sleek panels, designed to thwart the vacuum of space, the massive bulk of fuel used to escape the planet's gravity, these things were intrinsically familiar. At the sight, she felt an ache in her chest and a deep yearning for sleek ablative plating, the steady hum of a Tantalus drive core, *Normandy* painted across the hull.

A soft sigh escaped her.

"What are you so happy about?" Mitchells demanded, next to her.

The spell broke, and she was thrust back into the moment.

A tiny propeller biplane caught her eye. It was parked in the driveway of the house closest to the rocket, the words *Tiny Bronco* in chipped and faded paint on its wings. According to Guzzard's instructions, that would be Cid's house, the pilot friend she was supposed to make a delivery to. Hopefully, there would be time once she'd gotten rid of Mitchells.

The car pulled up at the base.

Guzzard was proving himself to be an accurate source of information: the base looked awful.

A grey concrete slab of a building sat like a rotting cadaver on the edge of town. A squat tower on the northern side overlooked a small abandoned airfield next door. Decommissioned planes and abandoned trucks lay rusting on the cracked tarmac. Clearly Shinra didn't much care for waste management.

Even in the late afternoon sun a thin mist was rolling down from the mountains and creeping up on the base, already obscuring the edges of the airfield from view.

Angeal and the infantry arrived in two transports behind her, and together they marched into the
Mitchells was just as eager to escape them as she was to foist him onto the next poor soul assigned guard duty. Still, her job wouldn't be over until she was safely inside the base and the next set of guards had officially taken over. Angeal stood stoically next to her.

There was nobody at the door. It was a minor outpost and clearly not the first of anyone's priorities, but it was still a military base. Surely there was some form of security?

Before she tired of waiting and just forced her way in, it opened to reveal two infantrymen, their uniforms faded to a lighter blue than her own troopers. The two of them stood to the side of the door in belated welcome and saluted.

"Finally. You can get out," Mitchells said, jerking his head at Shepard back towards the car. "I have… lots to do," he finished awkwardly, his gaze dropping for a second. Then his scowl deepened and he looked up defiantly again.

What exactly could the vice president of Shinra have to do, here, in this forgotten little base? It looked like the Gaian equivalent of getting assigned guard duty in Siberia. Maybe that was the reason behind his appalling behaviour, or maybe he was always like that and Shinra had just finally had enough of his antics. So much for the power of the vice presidency. Had he been less of an obnoxious waste of oxygen, she might have felt pity for him.

"Not just yet, we've got to get you inside first." She nodded to the two saluting troopers, "Lead the way."

Mitchells gave a disgusted snort.

The troopers shared an invisible glance behind their helmets, and then turned and tensely walked them further into the base. They moved nervously, with twitching palms and hesitant steps. Perhaps the pressure of having an executive and two SOLDIERs suddenly showing up on their doorstep was getting to them. A cursory glance at the rooms they passed gave the impression they didn't entertain much.

It was a small base, and adequately furnished, but it still managed to feel dark and empty. The large windows displaying the abandoned airfield only made it worse. An ancient cargo plane with its wheels and one of the wings removed blocked out most of the late afternoon sun. There was an expansive view of patches of rust interspersed with camo paint. It felt eerie to be forced into such a dark little place, after the bright and sunlit outdoors.

There wasn't much time to ruminate on the scenery. They entered a dusty foyer with multiple corridors leading deeper into the base. A lone secretary with bleached blonde hair sat behind a desk. She smiled politely at them, her hands neatly folded on the desk. Funny, Shepard had never seen a Shinra secretary smile before. Perhaps the country air was getting to her.

"Are you happy now?" Mitchells drawled.

She opened her mouth to declare just how happy she was now that she was getting rid of him, but she faltered.

Something about this place didn't sit right. Her eyes narrowed and she took a swift look around. It was cramped, her unit of troopers taking up all the empty spaces in the room. She couldn't see anything out of place or obviously wrong.

What was setting her off?

"Is there anyone else stationed here?" she asked of the troopers. Angeal gave her a funny look out of
the corner of his eye. He probably wanted to leave as well, but it would only take a moment to ask a question or two.

"No ma'am," the closest trooper replied in a soft, eastern continental accent.

"Then who covers the night shifts?" Angeal asked.

"There are two others, of course," he replied after a moment of silence. "They are both sleeping at the moment."

The secretary twitched.

Angeal looked back at Shepard with a raised brow, silently asking if she was satisfied. She crossed her arms.

"Go get them," she said.

"Oh for planet's sake," Mitchells muttered.

The two troopers shared a look behind their expressionless helmets. The hands of the shorter one twitched nervously.

"I gave you an order, soldier." A little iron rang through her voice; she could practically feel her own troopers standing straighter behind her. She might be wasting time over nothing, but the plane wasn't going to leave without them. It would be nearing sun down soon; the sleeping guards should be getting up anyway.

She knew better than to ignore her instincts.

"Of course, ma'am," the trooper finally said. He and his partner left, passing the secretary and disappearing down one of the opposite corridors.

Shepard watched them leave, a suspicion forming in her mind.

A gunshot tore through the room a second later.

She spun around, her rifle instantly in her hands and a biotic barrier forming in the air.

Angeal had leapt in front of Mitchells, his sword still held out from deflecting the bullet.

The secretary was holding a pistol, her eyes wide with surprise and a bullet hole in the wall just left of her head from where Angeal had deflected it. A second later Angeal's sword bit at her throat as she recoiled, dropping the gun.

Shepard took his place in front of Mitchells, who swore, only just realising what had happened and stumbling backwards. She hauled him back to his feet, keeping her eyes on the secretary. The woman glanced in the direction where the other troopers had disappeared. She edged away from Angeal, trying to move towards the corridor behind her but having no luck.

The troopers reacted with loud exclamations and belated fumbling with their weapons.

"Quiet!" Shepard barked. "Angeal--"

Before she could finish, she heard a familiar clunky mechanical sound through the thin walls. Shepard's attention snapped to the wall opposite the large windows, and she threw her hand out, casting the strongest barrier she could over Mitchells and the troopers.
The rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire tore through the wall, bullets colliding with barriers and ricocheting everywhere. The thin wall was shredded open under the barrage, revealing several troopers in pale uniforms manning a cumbersome machine gun.

Were they Wutai? It didn't matter-- they were trying to kill them, and that was all she needed to know.

Shepard fired through the deafening onslaught and one of the fake troopers fell. The others cast a barrier a second too late.

Her own barrier and shields were soaking up most of the damage, but her troopers didn't know what to do and were panicking. Some fumbled with their rifles while others ducked or tried to run. Their training kept them from firing wildly, but they were still grossly inexperienced. They were too cramped in the tiny room and the surprise attack had taken them off guard.

Mitchells cowered behind her, his hands over his ears.

Angeal hunkered down behind the secretary's desk, trying to drag her out of the way of the hail of bullets. She twisted her way out of his grasp and fled down the corridor. He swore and gave chase.

They were trapped and without cover, her shields wouldn't last forever. With a scowl, she turned and ploughed straight through the outer wall, dragging Mitchells along as her biotics knocked aside glass, plaster, and concrete alike. She yelled orders to the troopers, telling them to find cover and use whatever defensive materia they had.

As soon as they were clear, she turned and threw a thunderous shockwave. The fake troopers and their machine gun were thrown like rag dolls through several cinder block walls. The roar of constant artillery fire died.

In its place was a heavy silence. They stood in the airfield, now filled with mist, the last of the sun's light only serving to cast shadows of the abandoned vehicles. They were in the shadow of the cargo plane, the rusted holes in its side dark above them. Her eyes picked out movement on the tarmac.

Mitchells sat and hyperventilated at her feet, still within range of her shields.

Farther along, barely visible in the fog, Angeal broke out through the wall as well. He looked around in confusion, no trace of the secretary in sight. His sword still in hand, he looked out at the tarmac with narrowed eyes.

While the troopers panted and stuttered out the confused questions of teenagers who had just gotten their first taste of real combat, Shepard silently activated her targeting visor. She held her rifle securely and peered through the mists.

"Stay alert," she ordered, her voice low but hard. The troopers noticed, finally taking greater stock of their surroundings. "And check your targets." They couldn't see what she saw in the fog: glowing silhouettes, armed with curved swords and knives, hiding in the old planes and trucks and slowly drawing closer.

She had to get Mitchells out of there.

"They're Wutai, aren't they?" Kunsel asked quietly beside her. He was surprisingly calm compared to the others.

"I thought ninjas were all about stealth and subtlety," Zack said, his voice shaking as he clutched his rifle and looked back at the hole in the side of the base. "Not machine guns shooting through the
"I guess subtlety is only an option when the enemy doesn't see you coming," Kunsel replied. "They probably hoped we wouldn't stick around and then Mitchells would be all theirs. This must be plan B."

Shepard watched the silhouettes closest to Angeal and decided on a course of action.

"Zack," she said, dragging Mitchells to his feet. He objected weakly and she ignored him. She pulled his tailored suit jacket off of him, and he objected more strenuously. She continued ignoring him. "Go to Angeal. The path is clear. This is for him." She handed Zack the jacket. "Tell him to go for a run."

He looked at the jacket in confusion for a moment, and then snorted out an odd laugh.

"Yes ma'am." He saluted before sprinting towards the other SOLDIER.

She turned to the rest of the troopers, noting that some had calmed down while others were still freaking out. She called for their attention and they crowded around. A brief glance towards the tarmac told her that some of the attackers had gone after Angeal and Zack, but the rest advanced on them. She was running out of time.

"Kunsel and Mitchells, you're with me. The rest of you, get to the cargo plane. Mackenzie, you're in charge until I get there," she said in a hushed voice. Nervous looks were exchanged at the declaration that she wasn't going with them. "I will follow, but you have the training for this. Remember what you have learned. The loading ramp is open and there are two Wutai inside."

"How are we supposed to--" one of them began, eyeing the plane with his shoulders bunched up and a tense grip on his rifle.

"You have ranged weapons; they do not. Make use of them," she ordered, desperately hoping she wasn't sending them to their deaths. "Take the plane and they'll have to fight their way in against all of you. You'll have the upper hand. This is serious; it's not a drill or a simulation. Fight like a unit, watch each other's backs, and check your targets."

They stood straighter at her orders, Mackenzie taking a deep breath and forcibly relaxing his death grip on his gun. He wasn't the strongest or the best shot, but he was had a good head for strategy as well as the respect of the others.

"Do you understand, Mackenzie?" she asked, staring intently at him.

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded with determination. It would have to do.

"Good. Move out."

She grabbed Mitchells again, who was still breathless and as pale as the mist. Maybe that would make him harder to spot. He was jabbering nervously, punctuating the silence with the sound of his own shaky voice. She shushed him. This would only work if they were undetected. His dislike of Shepard was discarded in light of the fact that she had the biggest gun, and he did as instructed.

Kunsel pushed the overweight executive forwards, Shepard leading the way.

Behind them gunfire sounded. Off to the right, the sound of metal clashing rang out in the early evening. That must have been Angeal. The Wutai left some of their hiding places and converged on the sound of combat.
She stalked on silently, her keen eyes peering through the fog and tracking the enemy through her targeting visor. The edge of the tarmac nearest the road was being guarded. Neither distraction had caused them to move. Shepard returned her gun to its place. Her fingers were twitching to call up her Omni-blade, but the light would draw attention.

The route she took was long and circuitous, sneaking forwards quickly and then waiting stock still to avoid the silhouettes ghosting along on the hunt. There were more of them than she realised; this was not a small or half-hearted operation. Mitchells barely kept quiet behind her, panting with terror and exhaustion. They leaned against the side of an abandoned dump truck and held their breath while a Wutai armed with a naginata walked past the front of the vehicle, barely missing them.

Mitchells was holding her arm as though afraid he might be left alone in the mist. She couldn't feel it through her armour, but his knuckles were white against the red stripe. Even Kunsel was starting to look anxious, beads of sweat forming on his neck.

The edge of the tarmac was on the other side of the truck, but so was an enemy guard armed with a katana.

"Stay here," she whispered.

"Where are you going?" Mitchells demanded, rude and insolent even when terrified.

She didn't reply. Instead she activated her tactical cloak and stepped out from behind the truck. The Wutai weren't the only ones who knew how to do stealth.

The man with the katana looked right through her as she approached. His armour was a less ceremonial and more practical version of what she'd seen in Wutai, adorned with the Leviathan insignia. He watched the tarmac diligently, hand on his weapon, ready to cut down the vice president or his guards as soon as he saw them.

Her Omni-blade flashed out too quickly for him to react.

Kunsel and Mitchells both jumped when she reappeared at their side.

"The coast is clear," she addressed Kunsel, "Follow the road till you get to the house beneath the rocket."

"You're not coming with us?" Mitchells asked, "But what if they come for me again?"

"You mean the house with the little plane in the driveway?" Kunsel replied, focusing on her. She nodded.

"The owner's name is Cid. Tell him you need a ride to Midgar immediately. Give him this if he doesn't trust you and say it's from Guzzard." She grabbed the small box Guzzard had entrusted her with from her secondary ammo pouch and handed it over.

"Okay. Cid's house. Guzzard," Kunsel murmured, sounding lost for a moment and then shaking his head to try and focus. "I think I got it." He had been running on adrenaline since the first attack. It was starting to wear off.

"You're doing great, Kunsel. Just hold it together a little longer," she said, her hand on his shoulder in what she hoped was a reassuring gesture. "I need you to report only to Sephiroth, alright? Nobody but Sephiroth. This is important, tell him everything that's happened and that he can reach me on my Omni-tool."
"What's an Omni-tool?" he asked with his head tilted.

"He'll know." She removed her shield harness from her armour and slung it around his waist. "I'm going to want this back, soldier, so you need to make it."

He looked up at her. She fancied she could see thoughtful eyes through the helmet's visor.

"I'll see you when you get back to Midgar, ma'am."

She nodded and patted him on the shoulder. He stood and partly led, partly dragged Mitchells towards the road.

As soon as she saw they were safely beyond the base and airfield she turned back to the tarmac. The sound of her troopers' rifles echoed sporadically between the planes and trucks. With narrowed eyes, she drew her rifle and went hunting, disappearing into the swirling mist.
Genesis stalked through Shinra's halls, an irritated scowl on his face. Angeal and Shepard were supposed to have returned already. That upstart little Turk had made it back, so where were the others? He hated being left out of the loop.

"You, Turk," he called out, getting Cissnei's attention. "Yes, you."

She frowned and raised an eyebrow at him. Irritating the Turks always amused him, but she was a special challenge.

"Did you need something, SOLDIER?" she drawled, making no attempt at pretending to be interested in the conversation.

"You got back from Wutai this morning, did you not?" he asked, getting straight to the point. "What time were Angeal and Shepard supposed to arrive?"

She shrugged. "We took different flights."

"Evidently. But don't pretend you don't know their schedule. When were they meant to leave Rocket Town?"

"I'm afraid that's classified," she said with false sweetness.

"Oh, so you don't know?" he asked archly. "Not so highly ranked after all?"

She gave a bark of laughter. "Nice try, SOLDIER, but you'll have to do better than that." She turned and continued on her way.

He matched her strides and walked with her into the elevator, earning an irritated glance. She pressed the button for the highest level. She was heading to the rooftop landing strip then?

"All I want, little Turk, is to know when I should expect the return of my brothers-in-arms. Well, brother-and-sister-in-arms." He disliked even having to ask her, but Sephiroth was hardly going to tell him, not without very good reason anyway. It was marginally easier to irritate the information out of the Turk.

Cissnei gave a vexed sigh and glanced at her watch. Then her brow furrowed, and she looked at the time again.

"They aren't back yet?" she asked, her voice suspiciously neutral.

"If they were I would have no reason to ask you about it, now would I?" he said scathingly.

Concern flickered across her expression for a brief moment before she smoothed it back into an unreadable mask. It unnerved him. Before he left, Angeal had mentioned that the mission felt odd somehow. He didn't tell Genesis any details, it was classified after all. But the basics had been in the media: two SOLDIERs and a unit of troopers being sent to safeguard the vice president's return to Rocket Town. That nobody had mentioned them since was suspicious.

"When were they meant to arrive, Cissnei?" he asked, dropping his haughty tone and expression, if only briefly.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. The wind blew relentlessly across the small landing
strip and helipad, the entirety of Midgar spread out beneath them.

"Hours ago," she replied.

There was a faint hum in the air, the sound of a plane approaching. Only small, important planes were allowed to land on the tiny landing strip, anything bigger was either rerouted through Junon or had to land outside the city.

"You shouldn't be here," Cissnei said when a tiny plane came into view and circled around to face the tarmac.

"Quite," Genesis replied, crossing his arms and watching the approaching plane. It wasn't one of the sleek silver and red planes the executives or the president himself usually favoured. Instead, it was an ugly peach colour with strangely angled wings, a horizontal propeller on the end of edge. It looked glaringly out of place.

The two of them watched as it made its landing, pulling up to a stop almost immediately. Genesis approached, but Cissnei pointedly put herself in front of him and was the first to reach the plane.

After a minute of waiting, the door of the cockpit opened, and the passenger door followed soon after. It was a wonder there was room for passengers at all on such a tiny, rickety thing.

Vice President Mitchells stumbled out. Behind him was a trooper, wearing what Genesis recognised as some kind of metallic belt that belonged to Shepard's armour. He was reasonably certain it was the source of her shields.

"These belong to you?" the pilot called, a white scarf wrapped around his neck and flapping wildly in the wind.

"Sir!" Cissnei exclaimed, catching Mitchells as he began to collapse. The man was pale and sickly looking. Any tour on such a tiny plane would probably be taxing, but he looked like he'd suffered far worse than just an uncomfortable flight.

Genesis was more interested in the trooper. It was impossible to tell with the helmet, but his mannerisms were vaguely familiar.

"Shepard's pet sniper?" he guessed.

He could feel the weight of the boy's scowl, even if his helmet hid it. He didn't deny it though.

"Private Kusnel, sir," the boy said slightly waspishly and snapped off a textbook salute. He adopted parade rest and kept his head high, but his shoulders were slumped with exhaustion.

"What happened?" he asked. "Where are the others?"

Cissnei was asking the same of Mitchells, but the man just shook his head mutely. Strange, he didn't normally suffer any lack of words. She got out her phone and called for a medic.

"Where are Angeal and Shepard?" he asked again of the boy.

"I can only report to General Sephiroth," he said.

Genesis narrowed his eyes and stepped closer to him. He towered over him.

"On whose orders, private?"
"Shepard's orders, sir," he replied calmly.

He held back a sneer. He wasn't going to be kept out of the loop. Something serious had to have happened; both Angeal and Shepard were incredibly dangerous – and incredibly professional. This spoke of a mission gone completely awry.

"Very well," he said with a terse nod. "Lead the way." He gestured towards the elevator and made to follow.

"Wait," Cissnei called. The medics arrived and she handed Mitchells over to them. Then she grabbed Kunsel's arm and slung it over her shoulder, her other arm around his waist as though holding him up. Genesis raised an eyebrow at her.

"Um, I can walk," Kunsel said, looking uncomfortable and trying to hide it.

"No you can't," she said curtly. "We can't have you passing out on the way there. I'll escort you to Sephiroth's office."

"I'm not sure that's your place, Turk," Genesis drawled.

"Do you want to find out what happened to your fellow SOLDIERs or do you want to stand out here and argue?" she called over her shoulder, unashamedly hauling Kunsel back to the elevator.

Soon enough they were in Sephiroth's office, and the story came out.

Kunsel was trying very hard to hide his exhaustion, Genesis listened intently, and Cissnei made it perfectly clear that she wasn't going anywhere until she had heard the entirety of the trooper's report. Shepard's shield harness had mysteriously disappeared from the trooper's waist between the tarmac and Sephiroth's office. Cissnei had noticed as well and Genesis saw her give the boy an indecipherable look.

Sephiroth sat behind his desk and listened to Kunsel explain what had happened.

"And Mitchells is alive and well?" Sephiroth asked.

"Yes, sir," Kunsel replied. Cissnei verified it with a nod.

"How many Wutai are at the base?" Genesis asked, more concerned about the fight that could still be raging for all they knew. "What was Shepard planning, beyond getting Mitchells out?"

"I don't know. I saw nearly two dozen ninjas, but there was almost no visibility, so there could easily be twice that. They're hiding in the old planes and trucks. Shepard had the other troopers barricade themselves inside a cargo plane; I don't know what she's planning beyond that."

Sephiroth hummed in response. "Thank you, private."

Most infantrymen in Genesis' experience would be either giddy or terrified at the very presence of the great General Sephiroth, but Kunsel appeared too tired to bother with any of that. He just nodded in respect and waited for further instruction.

Sephiroth's eyes landed on Cissnei and narrowed, "As you were so considerate as to help private Kunsel get here, you can help him back to the barracks now." It wasn't a suggestion.

She looked like she wanted argue, but her chances of winning were slim. She grudgingly nodded and turned to leave, far less interested in hauling Kunsel about this time.
"She plans to just outwait them," Genesis said when the door closed behind them. "Shepard's hoping the Wutai will withdraw when they realise Mitchells is gone." It was a bizarre tactic under the circumstances. He would have simply attacked and driven them out, not taken shelter. Perhaps she was concerned the troopers would all be slaughtered the second she turned her back. "They're probably going to need medical evac."

Sephiroth stood and looked out the window, his hands behind his back. The sun was nearly setting and the lights of Midgar shone below, casting a faint glow on the General. Genesis assumed he was doing it to look dramatic.

"She could be right, they might withdraw," Sephiroth said, frowning slightly. "But if it really is the Crescent Unit, then it's unlikely."

"What? Why?"

"They don't retreat they don't grant quarter, and they don't surrender. They are sworn to it."

"How barbaric," Genesis said. Against the might of SOLDIER it shouldn't be anything to be bothered over. Angeal and Shepard could easily handle a couple dozen unenhanced ninjas. Surely.

"It's part of their code of honour. They show respect for both their Emperor and their enemies by holding nothing back in a fight," Sephiroth continued, looking thoughtful. "This may be different. Mitchells gave the insult, not SOLDIER or the infantry."

"Unless they see all parts of Shinra as one and the same," Genesis replied, a trace of concern beginning to gnaw at him.

An awkward silence hung in the air.

"Then they won't retreat until everyone is dead," Sephiroth said.

Angeal ducked beneath a swing from a silver katana and then lashed out with his own sword. The man dodged, evading Angeal's blade with grace and nearly unnatural flexibility. He tried to retreat into the darkness, but Angeal wasn't going to let him go. Finally, the Wutai was forced to parry and the strength of the strike was enough to stagger him. Angeal cut the ninja down before he could recover.

Behind him he could hear Zack fighting his own opponent, deflecting a blade with the barrel of his rifle and then taking a shot even he couldn't miss at this range.

They were at the top of the open ramp of the cargo plane and it was almost pitch black. Only small dying fires across the tarmac and the flash of gunfire lit the night. The Wutai were masters at stealth, and he'd had barely any warning before they struck, but surprise alone wasn't enough to take Angeal down. Most of the troopers were sheltering next to the gaping holes in the plane's hull, occasionally firing out at the ninjas below. Two motionless bodies with poisoned darts in their throats lay awkwardly on the floor by one of the openings. Another sat in a pool of blood at the end of the ramp, his helmet smashed in.

Other corpses littered the tarmac. He had thought at first there were only a handful of ninjas, but everywhere he turned there were more, silent, unrelenting, and lethal.

Angeal still wore Mitchells' grey suit jacket, but the ruse was over. He had seen Shepard on the tarmac and gotten his orders. He didn't know where she had been going until the windows of the tower above were smashed out. The harsh report of the Black Widow tearing through the night was
a great comfort. Several of the other abandoned planes and trucks had been shot through or set alight by incendiary blasts from above.

The troopers were having a hard time focusing. They'd done well to barricade the ramp, though little of their efforts remained. Now, hours after the attack had begun, their adrenaline was wearing off. The Wutai were experienced and uncompromising, seizing every chance they got. Even in desperation, the troopers weren't bold enough to kill their enemy without hesitation. Three had already paid for it with their lives.

Behind him, Zack was pale, his eyes darting about anxiously, pointedly not focusing on the blood splattered over his hands. Shooting someone at point blank range was a messy business. The poor kid had probably never killed anyone before.

A small voice in the back of Angeal's head whispered that he had never killed anyone before either. He ignored the thought… and the blood dripping from his blade.

He shook his head and focused, recasting his shields over himself and Zack. He was in the same alert state he assumed while hunting monsters through the wastelands: just cutting down dangerous creatures that would hurt people. It was easier that way. He was a SOLDIER and they were counting on him; he couldn't afford to be crippled by the reality of the situation. There would be time for remorse afterwards.

No ninjas stepped forward to replace those he had struck down. The cargo plane, sitting ever so slightly unsteady with its landing gear and one wing missing, had fallen silent. The remaining troopers found nothing to shoot at, and even the harsh echoes of Shepard's sniper rifle paused for a moment. Was the enemy retreating? Was that it?

They must have realised Mitchells had escaped and were withdrawing. It was finally over.

The gurgling roar of an engine broke the silence. He looked towards the noise but he couldn't see far enough to make anything out. His eyes were enhanced, but he was still only a Second Class and the thick mists under a starless sky were impenetrable.

The report of Shepard's rifle sounded again, and then the bizarre air warping pressure of her biotic ability. A barrier? A shape materialised in the mist, hurtling towards them from the side: a small fighter plane covered in the glow of strong shields.

Angeal yelled for the troopers to move barely a second before impact. In the moment it hit, he grabbed Zack and tried to drag them out of the fighter plane's path, but the entire cargo plane was knocked aside by it as the fighter plane tore through the ramp and the back of the plane. Metal crumpled and shrieked as it tore, and the hull of the larger plane lurched violently. Shepard's barrier did its job and saved them from the worst of the impact, but they were still thrown through the air. The tail of the larger plane pitched upwards and the entire body of the plane rocked onto its side. There was a moment of stunned confusion before the air was filled with screams and fire exploding from the remains of the fighter plane.

Angeal dragged himself out from under fallen debris and immediately began searching for the troopers.

"Hey! Angeal!" Zack coughed out in the growing cloud of smoke, Angeal could see he was miraculously uninjured in the fiery red light. He had even managed to hold onto his rifle.
"Zack, on your left, there's an opening," he said, pointing towards one of the rusted out holes in the hull that the troopers had been firing through. They needed to get out, the plane may have been shelter before, but now it was a death trap. Smoke steadily filled the air.

Zack looked like he was going to stay and argue, but Angeal yelled over him. "Go! Go back to the base and get to the tower! The others will follow you." The report of Shepard's gun thundered perpetually in the background. She would provide the troopers with cover, and Angeal would get them out. Zack hesitated at the opening.

Angeal pried up a large sheet of fallen metal that had pinned two other troopers. They stumbled up, one bleeding from his right arm and the other barely capable of walking. The latter had managed to hold onto his rifle somehow. Angeal sent them to the opening, giving Zack a steady nod. The boy would have to lead them out.

He moved as quickly as he could, finding the troopers and digging them out. Some had escaped uninjured, others could barely move. At least one had been crushed to death by a torn metal beam. Angeal bowed his head and kept moving. No amount of training or simulations could make up for the hard reality.

Smoke had filled the top half of the sideways compartment and outside the sounds of combat raged on. The troopers disappeared steadily through the opening, and he hoped he wasn't sending them straight to their deaths. The remaining air grew thick and he choked, but there were still two troopers yet to drag out of the plane. He shook his head to clear it, but there wasn't enough oxygen. Gritting his teeth he punched a hole in the rusted metal and breathed in the flood of fresh night air. Behind him the fire roared with new strength, its flickering tongues gaining ground.

Finally, there was only one more trooper to go. The boy was bloody and unconscious, but still breathing. It looked like Mackenzie, or maybe Hastings. It didn't matter; he had to get him out before they both suffocated.

Just as he was lifting the boy onto his shoulders and rearranging his sword so as not to injure either of them, the sound of another engine roared to life and he felt his stomach drop. He caught a glimpse of a tanker speeding towards them through the hole he had made in the side of the plane. He turned and sprinted for the exit, the trooper jostling over his shoulders.

He leapt through the opening, skidding across the tarmac just as the crash of the truck smashing into the plane tore through the air. The cargo plane, one wing still pointing straight up, tilted drunkenly and then began to roll towards them. Angeal sprinted for all he was worth, his shield materia snapping into place around him. The plane groaned as gravity dragged it down, countless tonnes of metal blocking out the night sky as it fell.

The swirling blue of biotics lit his vision for a split second. Then the plane hit. Pain exploded through him, every nerve ending alight before all feeling faded away entirely.

Shepard saw the plane begin to roll and Angeal sprinting away with a trooper on his shoulders.

A burst of biotics didn't make any difference against the bulk of the plane, and it continued in its relentless downwards course. It would crash onto its back right at the foot of the tower.

Angeal moved with all the speed his enhancements gave him.

It wouldn't be enough.

She threw herself out the window, her biotics slowing her fall. The remaining troopers, who had all
made it to the tower in mostly one piece, cried out in alarm. She landed softly and then threw the biggest barrier she could over Angeal and the trooper.

The plane crashed down over them. She felt the barrier collapse under its weight.

She raced towards where they were buried. Bullets and poisoned darts pinged off her armour and got caught in the padded weave. She sent a token incendiary burst to where the ninjas were probably hiding, but she didn't have time for them now.

The plane was a wreck, its rusted hull and wing shredded and crumpled up. Calling on her biotics, she tore at the section where she believed Angeal was buried. Remembering the massive spike in her power since her own enhancements, she gritted her teeth and pushed for all she was worth. The rusting metal shrieked and tore apart. With a concentrated blast it was shredded and forced aside.

Angeal and the trooper were finally exposed beneath it. The trooper was horribly twisted, his neck bent at an unnatural angle and his eyes unseeing. Angeal was unmoving and still pinned by part of the wing. She dragged him out and felt for a pulse, her own heart beating loudly in her chest.

There, the smallest beat of a pulse against her fingers. His legs had been crushed and mangled, bone protruding from his thigh and blood seeping everywhere, but he was still alive. She scrambled for her cure materia. She fixed him up as much as she could, but there was little time. She could hear the Wutai scrambling around the fallen plane. Most of the bleeding had stopped. She dragged him up and across her own shoulders.

The racket of constant gunfire started up. She cast a weak barrier over them and ignored the rest.

Damn, he was heavy. She stumbled to her feet, only to immediately dodge the blade of a long knife. She nearly overbalanced, but she turned and sliced through her opponent's blade with her own. He was stunned for a moment and that was all she needed, her Omni-blade ending the fight before it could drag on. A weak biotic blast threw back the Wutai charging at her from the side, and then she took off at a sprint for the tower.

The sounds of gunfire grew louder, and the Wutai sought cover. It took her a moment before she realised it was the troopers giving her cover from the tower. The ping of poisoned darts ricocheting off her armour continued, but they couldn't charge her and force her into a melee.

The deadweight of Angeal slowed her down and left her short of breath. Sweat dripped into her eyes, but she focused on her target, the gap in the wall of the base, and forced herself to keep going.

It felt like a lifetime, but they finally reached the wall. She dragged herself into the building and up the stairs. The ground floor wasn't safe – there were plenty of hiding places in the corridors and no cover in the open stairwell. She charged, focusing on her breathing.

Finally, finally, she got to the top of the circular staircase. At the top Zack was holding open the door for her and trying to fight off a ninja with an axe. As she charged past he barged the Wutai over the railing with his shoulder and into the deep stairwell beneath.

He slammed the door shut behind them.

"Barricade it. Barricade the door," she panted, dropping Angeal off her aching shoulders and using the cure materia again. Her lack of control had frustrated Genesis to no end, but in this case it didn't matter. Each spell was massively overcharged and healed damage as much as possible.

"How are you holding up?" Shepard asked, hours later. Her eyes briefly strayed from her rifle's
scope to watch Angeal. Outside in the burning sun and smoke, the Wutai still controlled the airstrip and had blocked the base's exits. They knew to stay out of sight of the tower, at least. The tarmac was strewn with the remains of those who hadn't learned.

"I'll live," Angeal said, gritting his teeth and looking forward stubbornly. "I have to live."

"Yes, you do." She looked at his legs, still crushed and misshapen, but at least the bleeding had stopped. "I'll kill you myself if you don't," she said with a forced smile.

He gave a half-hearted chuckle before gritting his teeth again. It was a weak attempt at humour on her part, but it was encouraging that he at least pretended to be distracted by it. His enhancements had done wonders for his healing rate, but things like crushed bone and shredded tendons were never just going to be shrugged off.

He was propped up against the wall next to her, while she sat facing the smashed open window. His legs were stretched out in front of him at odd angles that were apparently the most comfortable, his sword lying on the ground next to him. Dried blood from his now scabbed over head wound stained his face and was matted in his hair. His uniform was a torn mess.

"This isn't good," he finally sighed, too quietly for the closest conscious troopers to overhear. They were spread out around the large open room that was the tower's highest level, some sleeping, others keeping watch, some in too much pain to do anything at all as poison coursed through their veins. There wasn't much to be done anyway. The Wutai had figured out pretty soon that while the infantry rifles could make a massive racket, they were almost impossible to accurately aim at this distance.

"I'm glad you noticed," she said grimly.

There was movement on the tarmac: a shadow, drifting between the planes, hoping to blend in amidst the wreckage. She pulled the trigger. The report of the black widow thundered and the shadow fell.

"How many are left?" Angeal asked, after a long moment of drawn out silence. She was the only one who could effectively fight at this range, as well as the least injured. He waited on her timing as she scanned the tarmac below.

"Us or them?" she finally replied, seeing no movement below.

"Both."

"Not enough of us and too many of them," she sighed. "They're hiding in the tanker, behind the smaller planes at the eastern end, and in the rubble of the cargo plane. I've shot through as much of the armouring as I can, but there are still too many places for them to hide." She had hoped at first they would retreat when it became obvious Mitchells wasn't here. That hope had dwindled into nothing.

"We aren't going to make it out of here, are we?" Angeal sighed. "Not on our own."

"Don't bury us just yet; we're still breathing." She gave him a stern look. "And I am not going down without a fight. Are you?"

"Fight?" he gave a bark of bitter laughter. "I can barely move."

"You said you have to live. Why? Why do you need to live?" she demanded, turning as much of her focus as she could spare onto him. "Talk to me Angeal."
He fell silent. After several minutes she assumed he wouldn't answer.

"My father is dying," he finally said, his voice bleak and low. "Most of my pay cheque goes to his medicine." He breathed slowly, steady patterns to combat the pain. "My mother's hands shake too much for her to sew, and Father's too sick to work in the orchards. Without me… without me, they'll have nothing."

"Does Genesis know?"

He shook his head. "He'd only offer to help. He'd insist on it."

"And that's a bad thing?" she asked incredulously.

"They're my family, my responsibility." He spoke with conviction, his eyes free from the cloud of pain for a moment. "I owe it to them to do this myself."

"You're a very proud man, Angeal," she said, watching him grimly.

"It's not like that," he said, lowering his gaze. "This is about my family's honour. We don't need charity."

"Was it charity when I dragged you out from under that plane? Should I put you back?" She looked out across the airstrip again. What he was doing made her angry, but what business was it of hers? What did she know about honour, let alone family? She had never had either of those things.

He didn't answer.

Nearly an hour later, when she assumed he'd fallen asleep, he spoke up.

"Are you an alien?" he asked quietly, with no warning whatsoever. It was a good thing she'd been sitting stock still for so long so it wasn't noticeable when she froze.

"What brought this on?" she replied with a choked laugh and an eyebrow raised in incredulity. He gave her a pinning look and waited. Perhaps she hadn't been as subtle as she should have been. "I am a human, if that's what you're asking."

"But you're not from here."

"No. I am not from Rocket Town."

"Shepard," he said, a plea for earnestness, pain clouding his voice again. She sighed, why bother hiding at this point?

"I was born on planet Earth." She watched for his reaction.

His mouth opened and no noise came out. Then he closed it again.

"Oh." He gave a little nod, as though he wasn't entirely sure what to do with this information now that he had it. He didn't know where to look and his eyes drifted away, but then he was suddenly hesitant to keep his eyes off her as well and they snapped back. She patiently waited for him to get his bearings.

"Genesis figured it out months ago, but I suppose I didn't really believe it," he offered, timid after his demand for an answer.

"Well, now you know," she said with a shrug and half a smile.
He hummed in agreement, and then mused over the revelation for several minutes. "So what about you then? Why do you need to live?" he asked, watching her out of the corner of his eye. "Anybody special waiting for you back on… Earth?"

"Wouldn't that be nice," she said with a snort. The airstrip remained empty. A shame.

"No one at all?" he sounded disbelieving.

"There was someone, though not on Earth." As much as it hurt there was no point hiding from it. "He died, about six months ago."

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said respectfully.

"We both knew it was coming." Which didn't make it any less painful, but at least it didn't blindside her. "He had a lung disease that plagues his kind. He only had about six months left when I met him."

"Did you know he was dying?" He didn't look her in the eye as he asked.

"It was one of the first things he ever said to me."

"Then why did you…?"

"Whoever said love was rational?" She smiled bitterly – maybe she was just a sucker for punishment. "Besides, the world was ending. What better time to have a whirlwind romance?"

"Huh." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Before… you said 'his kind'?"

She smiled ever so slightly. "There are all sorts of people in my corner of the galaxy."

"Are you saying that he wasn't human?" He leaned back from her slightly, then winced in pain and returned to his previous position. "Isn't that a little like… well…" His question sputtered out awkwardly

She fixed him with a pointed look. "I suggest you think very carefully about whatever it is you're about to say, Angeal."

He cleared his throat again and looked straight ahead. "I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"Damn straight," she replied, the beginnings of a smile twitching at her mouth.

"Was he blue?" he asked a minute later, watching her with narrowed eyes.

"Green," she said frankly. "With scales." This time she really did smile. His look of shock was priceless.

"Please tell me you're joking."

"Drell are technically reptiles, but they are surprisingly anthropomorphic. Much more than most other sapient species."

"Whatever makes you happy," he said, before muttering, "I am never going to be able to look at you the same way."

Shepard laughed. "You sound like a backwater colonist gaping at an asari and wondering if her head tentacles move."
"I have no idea what you're talking about, but it sounds terrifying."

They were outnumbered and her men were flagging. A shadow tried to sneak across the tarmac to the base of the tower. She smiled sharply and stopped them in their tracks.

Then she reloaded.
Defiance

Sephiroth arrived back at his office, the orders Heidegger and the President had issued still echoing in his head. Genesis materialised at the door soon after, apparently incapable of waiting for an official announcement.

He briefly considered sending the impertinent Second Class away, but he probably owed the man an explanation of some kind.

"So?" Genesis asked, the twitching in his fingers giving away his anxiety.

He took a breath and looked around his office: the large windows letting in the dim light of an overcast afternoon, framed maps on the walls, the uncluttered desk. How much was about to change?

"We are at war," he said with a calm he didn't feel. His gut churned with a dizzying mix of dread and anticipation. His senses sharpened with the thrill of a new challenge, only to be beaten back down by the weight of the expectation placed upon him. Shinra was at war with Wutai, and he was tasked with securing the victory.

Genesis took a deep breath at the declaration.

The President was irritated at Mitchells' survival, while Heidegger had been visibly angry. He suspected that Heidegger had been angling for a promotion in the wake of a new opening, only to be thwarted by Shepard's unrelenting competence and Mitchells' continued existence. Ultimately though, the life of the vice president didn't matter, the Wutai attack had given Shinra the perfect reason to start a war and still claim to be the wounded party, even if not to the full extent they had hoped for.

"The Wutai brought it upon themselves," Genesis said in a considering tone, as though he could guess Sephiroth's train of thought.

"Perhaps," he allowed with a tilt of his head.

"Angeal and Shepard have had the most experience fighting Wutai at this point," Genesis said, musing aloud. "I wonder what they'll make of it."

"I imagine Shepard would be disappointed with everyone," he replied, smiling grimly. "Except for herself, naturally."

Genesis snorted. "That armour wasn't designed for peacetime." His humour drained quickly, a tense nervousness taking over him instead. It was strange to see him so unsure of himself. "Do you think they'll put up much resistance? I've never been to Wutai before, what's the terrain like?"

"Rugged and well-fortified. They haven't survived this long as an independent nation without solid defences." Oh yes, he had his work cut out for him.

"No trifling skirmish then." Genesis' eyes narrowed at nothing in particular.

"I suspect not." A small smile cut at his face. His own trepidation was giving way to exhilaration, anticipation. It would be a challenge like nothing he'd ever faced before, but it didn't matter.

He had his orders; he would conquer Wutai for Shinra. His smile grew. Genesis noticed.
"I bet I'll kill a ninja before you do," Genesis said offhandedly.

"You will not." He gave him a dry look.

"Everyone's eyes will be on you." He flicked his hair back dismissively. "Nobody will expect me."

"And after the first melee they'll know exactly what to expect of you. Right down to your sloppy footwork."

"And by then we will have discovered just how much of you is nothing more than company propaganda," he said with a biting smile. "I doubt the Wutai will be impressed by magazines and billboards."

"Or by your ridiculous posturing," Sephiroth replied, "unless the Wutai's weakness is overly dramatic poetry."

His eyes narrowed. "You take that back."

He chuckled for a moment. Genesis made for an amusing distraction occasionally. Still, there was much to be done, and he found himself sobering. He reached for the map of Wutai Island in the drawer of his desk.

"Why are you in my office, SOLDIER?" he asked.

"I would like to volunteer for the reinforcements sent to Rocket Town," Genesis replied, smoothly ignoring the change in topic. "I can't let Angeal and Shepard take all the glory of the first battle."

Sephiroth paused and then put down the map.

"What makes you think there will be reinforcements?" he asked quietly. Hopefully, Shepard and Angeal wouldn't need the help. He knew his own orders, courtesy of Heidegger. The Director had been robbed of his tragic massacre in need of avenging, but he was a determined man.

Genesis went very still, his eyes fixing on Sephiroth.

"The Wutai are laying siege to Shinra property and slaying Shinra's people," he said with indignation and insistence. "You cannot let that stand."

"I don't give all the orders," he said in a low tone.

"What did Heidegger say?" Genesis asked insistently.

Instead of answering, he went to a cabinet on the far side of the room and unlocked the top drawer. It was lined with wire mesh to block broadcast signals. Behind him, Genesis repeated his question. Sephiroth turned and fitted the Omni-tool he'd retrieved to his wrist.

"Where did you get that?" Genesis demanded, clearly confused and frustrated.

"I'm going to get in contact with Shepard," he responded, returning to his desk. "You can stay and be silent, or leave and bother somebody else with your questions." Heidegger hadn't said he couldn't contact Rocket Town, he'd just assumed he wouldn't be able to.

Genesis pointedly sat in the opposite chair and crossed his arms.

The Omni-tool glowed over his hand, the orange light solidifying into a circular console in his palm. Endless experimenting with the gadget had not made it any less strange. He ran his fingers over the
controls still expecting for them to pass through the light, but they didn't. As always, the haptics held up and smoothly followed his commands. The labels for all the functions were different from the standard Shinra terms, but he had learned to manoeuvre it well enough. There was no blade, no hacking suite, and no stealth ability. Presumably those needed to be installed. The non-standard feature already programmed into it was a single contact: Shepard. It had been there when she gave it to him. There had been no reason to use it until Kuskel mentioned her message.

It didn't make any noise when he selected the contact. He half expected it to ring like an old mechanical phone – or to not work at all. Instead, a little broadcasting signal flashed twice, and then there was a quiet ping.

"Shepard?" he called. "Come in, Shepard, this is Sephiroth." How was he supposed to know if it had even connected?

There was silence. Then it crackled and clarified into the sound of Shepard snapping off commands.

"Hang on, Sephiroth," she said, her voice grim. The sound of her gun barked in the background, too loud over the speaker. "...there. Angeal, you're in charge, don't pass out." Her voice was muffled, as were the sounds of her boots marching across hard floor. "Are you still there, Sephiroth? I don't have long."

"Then I will be brief," he replied, speaking quickly. Genesis leaned forward in his seat. "What condition are you in? How long can you hold out?"

"We hold the tower, but they've taken the airstrip, knocked down half the base, and fenced us in. I've got eight troopers still alive, but they're injured and most are poisoned." She spoke succinctly, with little inflection or distinct emotion. "We have plenty of food but not enough medical supplies; there's only so much cure materia can do. At this rate, half the troopers will be dead by the end of the week."

"And the Wutai?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"They've learned to stay out of sight," she said, some satisfaction seeping into her voice, but also sounding weary. "I don't know how many are left, but they still outnumber us. I could hunt them down one by one, but as soon as I leave the tower they'll cut me off and the others will be defenceless."

"What about Angeal?" Genesis asked.

"His legs are shattered. He's not dying, but he can't fight."

"What happened to him?" he demanded. Disbelief and confusion were thick in his voice.

"They dropped a plane on him."

Genesis didn't know what to say to that.

"And you?" Sephiroth asked.

"Uninjured, plenty of ammo," she said grimly.

He didn't reply. He knew his orders.

"Sephiroth?" she asked after his silence stretched too long.
"The two of you could make it out," he said.

"I am not abandoning these men." It wasn't an argument but a statement of unassailable fact. She said it with absolute resolution, and he held back a sigh. She wasn't going to be dissuaded. "Angeal wouldn't make it anyway," she continued. "The Wutai are not to be taken lightly."

"You don't know that," Genesis interrupted, sounding both offended and desperate.

"I do know that," her voice remained grim and unshakable.

"I've been ordered not to send help," Sephiroth said.

There was silence over the line. Genesis looked at him with wide eyes. In place of the vice president's assassination, the tragic deaths of two SOLDIERs and a unit of infantry would fuel a war.

"I understand," she replied with a steady calm.

He blinked and his brow dropped. "I didn't expect you to take it so well."

She breathed out heavily. "I know better than anyone the position you're in. If you say you can't risk a rescue, I won't second guess that."

"Thank you," he said, unexpectedly touched. He had anticipated anger and accusations. Not… whatever this was. It wasn't resignation; the sound of her heatsink being reloaded crackled through the speakers. Respect perhaps? How unexpected.

"It's been an honour, General," she said, her voice hard once again. He could imagine her bringing her rifle up to her eye and lining up a shot.

"Likewise…" The report of her gun thundered and the call disconnected. "…Commander," he finished under his breath.

It occurred to him that those might be the last words he would ever say to her. Something inside him twisted at the thought.

_If you can't risk a rescue._ She expected him to make the call and she respected his decision. That stung because it hadn't been his decision. She would die on her feet, no doubt snarling and distorting gravity with her last breath, while he sat calmly in his office and had his orders overridden.

Even in death she would outdo him.

"You're going to abandon them." Genesis was pale and looked stricken. Then anger flooded his eyes and his hands curled into fists that trembled. "You're going to just leave Angeal and Shepard there to die, to be hacked to pieces! Your friends, people who trusted you—"

_Friends?_

"No." He looked up sharply, steal in his voice. "I am not."

"Then what are you going to do?"

He had his orders. But he would not abandon his SOLDIERs – not even for Shinra.

Angeal couldn't feel his legs. At first the pain would flare up suddenly and sharply with every breath, nearly paralysing him and leaving his vision swimming. It had receded slowly over time. Now his
legs were completely numb, he wished the pain would come back. Pain meant you were alive.

The blood soaked material of his trousers was caked and torn but failed to hide the misshapen mess beneath. He made a point of not looking down at them, but his attention kept being drawn back to his broken legs. It was terrible and fascinating – like a car crash, it was hard to take your eyes away no matter how horrible. The only difference was that he was still attached to this wreckage.

He had overheard Shepard's conversation with Sephiroth, although fortunately none of the troopers had. She'd distanced herself as much as possible, but his enhanced hearing picked it up clearly. There would be no reinforcements. It seemed the pain wasn't the only thing to abandon them.

"Hey."

He looked up and saw Shepard holding out her rifle to him. She had been steady and resolute since the whole fracas began, but the dark circles around her eyes were prominent against her scarred skin. Her armour was blood stained but still intact, thank Gaia.

"Make yourself useful," she said, still holding out the rifle.

"I can't use that." He knew how to use a gun of course, SOLDIER training was extensive, but he made a poor sniper and her gun was still an alien weapon.

"I won't be able to use it either, at this rate," she said, insistently pushing it into his hands. It jostled his legs. He didn't feel it.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, confused and concerned. Shepard was the only thing keeping them from collapsing entirely. The troopers had been trained well enough – also thanks to Shepard – but this was more than training alone could ever prepare someone for.

"I'm going to catch some sleep, only a couple of hours. When the Wutai realise I'm not up here keeping watch, they'll swarm the tower. As long as they're kept at a distance, we can outlast them, but if they get into the tower…"

She didn't need to finish. They all knew what they were facing. There was a trooper in the corner who had stopped moving sometime during the night. No amount of materia had been enough.

"All you have to do is fire every couple of minutes," she said, running a hand down her face. Her composure had been unbreakable so far, but it was clear she was exhausted. "You don't even need to hit anything, just keep them on their toes. I'd give it to someone with better aim, but the kick would dislocate their shoulder."

He nodded and took up the rifle. He had his orders. "Sleep well, then."

She helped him up to the chair and into what looked like a comfortable position, leaning against the back of the chair and the wall next to it so he wouldn't topple. Now that he couldn't feel anything, it didn't really matter how he sat. His hands trembled at the thought, that he might never feel anything again. He swallowed thickly and forced his thoughts back into the moment. The chair was positioned to be out of the line of sight of any rifles from below, but he still needed to stay focused.

In front of him lay a desk on its side that had been pushed up against the smashed open window. He rested the end of the black widow on the desk's edge and settled the stock into his shoulder.

"Wake me if anything drastic happens." She patted him on the shoulder and then went to find a comfortable corner to curl up in.
He sighed and looked out at the tarmac. The bright afternoon sun glinted off of broken steel and torn armour strewn across the short runway. In another couple of hours the sun would set, signalling they had been trapped there for twenty four hours. Could they last another night?

The rifle was heavy and solid in his arms. It was no sword, with a strong blade and a wrapped hilt that fit into his hand like he had been made for it, but it was a comfort, nonetheless. This weapon tore through armour like it was tissue paper, and the Wutai feared it.

There was a flicker of movement, and he pulled the trigger. With a thunderous bark, the stock punched into his shoulder. He felt it, and that was a bitter relief. Silence fell over the tarmac, and he readjusted the stock. Hopefully they wouldn't notice he hadn't hit anything. He took a deep, steadying breath and forced his hands to readjust the stock into position. He was alive. For now that had to be enough.

Zack came and sat next to him, taking the space he had just vacated on the floor. For some time they sat in silence, Angeal occasionally firing and hoping the Wutai didn't catch onto the sudden lack of proper aim and Zack staring at nothing with uncharacteristic stillness.

"Are we going to die here?" he asked quietly.

Angeal looked at him. He was injured with a shoulder wound, and blood stained hands. He had gotten as much sleep as he could, but physical exhaustion wasn't the problem.

"We might," he replied, tilting his head with the concession, "but we aren't dead yet."

"What about this time tomorrow?" Zack asked, his normal vibrancy missing from his voice.

"Chin up, Zack." He forced his own smile and wondered how Shepard had done this for so long. "We will fight for as long as we can. Don't let them break you."

"Yeah. I just..." His voice wandered and the distant look returned to his eyes.

Angeal thought the conversation had ended and returned his focus to the tarmac.

"Tom died."

Angeal's eyes snapped back to Zack. The boy spoke like he was in a daze, his tone empty and hollow.

"That's Mackenzie. Thomas Mackenzie. I didn't think his wounds were so bad. I guess the poison got him."

He didn't know what to say.

"He used to snore. You could always hear it in the barracks. He was the only one who liked those protein bars; he would always take everyone else's and hoard them up. No idea why." He gave a short strangled laugh as he spoke, his eyes dry and his face twisted into grief that didn't belong on a fifteen year old. Angeal hurt just to see it. "He listened to really shitty music and said he was going to make it to SOLDIER one day. He was going to get to First Class and be on all the posters."

"I'm so sorry." It felt woefully inadequate. He pulled his hand from the trigger guard and squeezed Zack's shoulder. It was the most comfort he could provide.

Zack leaned into it and his head dropped. A faint tremor ran through the boy until finally he broke, quiet sobs making his shoulders shake and his tears falling freely.
"So we arrive at the base, and then what?" Genesis asked, sitting tensely in the helicopter with his sheathed sword across his lap. His eyes kept drifting to the window.

Outside, the last of the day's sunlight was fading away; night would have fallen by the time they arrived. Darkness wouldn't favour the ninjas, though, not against the enhanced.

Sephiroth had to concede that he didn't have a plan so much as a series of intentions. Cissnei had agreed to help get them to Rocket Town, and Guzzard was covering for them back at HQ. Acquiring their co-operation in boldly disobeying orders had been simple enough, but once they actually arrived? That remained to be seen.

"They're trapped inside the base, so we will have to clear a path," he replied. "Assuming Shepard hasn't simply burned it to the ground by now."

Genesis snorted. "I can't decide whether you can't stand her but endure her out of professionalism, or if you're crazy about her and just don't know how to express it."

He wasn't going to grace that with an answer and just gave him a deadpan look. Genesis smiled widely at the lack of response.

"We'll be landing in five," Cissnei called from the cockpit.

Genesis' smile dropped, and Sephiroth took a deep breath. They'd brought ample materia and medical supplies for the injured, but there was no saying what would happen when they touched down. Nobody who could take Angeal out of a fight should be taken lightly.

"We need to take the tarmac. If there are still Wutai hiding in the planes, then we can't safely move the injured," his hand rested on the hilt of his sword. His heartbeat was picking up in anticipation of a fight. "Spare any who surrender. As for the rest, you are cleared to use lethal force."

Genesis nodded seriously. "So are they." He double checked his barrier and cure materia and the set of antidotes they had brought. Who knew how much they'd need?

By now, only the talented and the desperate would remain, the eager and foolhardy would have been killed off in the first sortie. Even the unenhanced were capable of impressive feats when they were desperate.

The glow of the base came into sight. It was a ruin. Small fires and destroyed vehicles were strewn across the tarmac, trails of smoke rising into the early night sky. The base was little better; the walls facing away from the tarmac had been collapsed into impassable rubble. The top of the squat tower was mostly dark, except for small flickering lights.

The helicopter lowered into the lightly wooded pasture beyond the airfield. Thin mist trailed down from the mountains in patches too insubstantial to affect visibility.

"I'll guard the chopper," Cissnei said, taking off her headset and looking at them over her shoulder. "You boys go get them."

The doors slid open and the two SOLDERs emerged into the dying light. The thin sliver of a moon hung in the sky and the wind sighed mournfully. Walking through the knee high grass and thin mist, they made no pretence of hiding. Each drew their sword as they reached the edge of the tarmac, leaving the slight cover of sparse trees behind.

For a moment everything was still. The fires crackled softly, casting a flickering red light on the torn
remains of old planes, but there was no movement on the tarmac.

Then Sephiroth spun and blocked the blade bearing down on him. The ninja was inscrutable behind a grey mask, but his arm shook from the force of the parry. Sephiroth sliced him in half before he could recover. Behind him, Genesis threw a fireball at one opponent and cut down another.

The ninjas materialised around them with no warning and tried to drive them back into the trees. Blades slashed and crashed against each other in the night, the ninjas' fast and ruthless.

Sephiroth rolled to the side, a ninja with two thin blades following him. Masamune slashed at his abdomen but the ninja ducked beneath it, trying to get inside his guard. Sephiroth kicked him back and his sword arced down after the wiry ninja. The man evaded his strikes with dancelike grace and struck like a snake, recoiling almost immediately.

Others leapt in to fill the gap, but were cut down. Darts and throwing knives shattered against his silvery shields.

The ninja with the twin swords still eluded him, striking and disappearing again like a flash of lightning.

The dull blue and grey uniform was hard to keep track of in the dark, the waxing crescent moon barely illuminating anything. Sephiroth had practice fighting someone who could disappear completely however, and his attention remained fixed on his opponent.

He pressed his advantage and drove his opponent back onto the tarmac, parrying and attacking seamlessly. The ninja knew he was losing ground. His attacks grew more desperate, wild and unpredictable. Sephiroth's heart rate thundered to the tempo of the fight, his sword slick with blood and a vicious snarl on his face. He deflected a poorly aimed stab, knocking one of his enemy's swords away, and then ran him through the heart.

The body fell back from off his blade, just as a harsh *bang* tore through the air. Sephiroth's shields flared before he realised it was his ally's gun he was hearing, and an enemy crumpled behind him with a hole in his head.

"Nice to see somebody else on the receiving end of that rifle," Genesis called out, forcing back one ninja and dodging the throwing knives of another. A third struck at him from the side and he leapt aside, swinging his sword in a parry barely in time.

Sephiroth stretched out his hand and sent a string of lightning bolts lashing out at the knife thrower. The tower was a black silhouette against the dark blue sky with not even a flash of light as the report of a rifle thundered again and another ninja fell. Genesis glowered at the assistance.

The remaining Wutai stood steady, their shields glowing vainly around them.

"Go!" Sephiroth called, raising his blade and calling on his fire materia. He heard the ring of swords being drawn from their sheaths and saw moonlight glimmering against dark armour. "Get to the tower. I'll take care of the rest."

Genesis nodded and took off at a sprint.

The Wutai fought with growing desperation, and each victory was hard won. They were throwing everything into the fight, and Sephiroth returned their ferocity in full force. The ninjas' attacked with high levelled materia – poison and fire, chiefly. He deflected most, but a blast of ice hit his blade and made his fingers stiff. He snarled through it and slashed at the ninja responsible.
Bursts of fire lit up the base of the tower. The Black Widow thundered across the airstrip.

He didn't know how many there were left or how far Genesis had gotten. The last of the forces had converged on him, only the fastest, the strongest, and the most desperate to survive remained.

A blue streak fell from the tower, slowing as it reached the ground. The report of the rifle grew louder, and biotics arced across the tarmac.

Sephiroth slammed the hilt of his sword into the ribcage of a ninja and felt bone crack. He ducked a slice aimed to decapitate him and slashed at the ninja's sword arm in return. They enemy was everywhere, and Sephiroth bared his teeth, the thrill of combat burning through his veins and guiding his arm.

A biotic blast threw back three Wutai hiding behind some rubble. A moment later, there was a blurry flash of orange and Shepard materialized, her Omni-blade buried in the chest of a ninja with an axe.

For a single moment of blazing fire and merciless steel, they were back-to-back, Shepard wreathed in biotics and lightning flicking across Sephiroth's blade.

Then his sword slashed across a ninja's throat and she vanished from sight.
Crossing the Rubicon

The fight against the Wutai was ultimately a short one. The remaining ninjas who refused to surrender or flee were cut down when Genesis and Sephiroth arrived. It was the bloodiest exchange Genesis had yet seen, but Angeal's injuries, when he made it to the top of the tower, hit him far harder. The sight of his legs, broken and bloody, made him wish there were more ninjas he could gut.

The end of the fight was mostly a blur. He remembered Shepard leaping out of the window when he got to the top of the tower and the flashes of light as she and Sephiroth cut down those of the tarmac.

The biggest problem was getting the injured out of the tower. Lowering them out of the window had been the easiest strategy in the end – easier than navigating the steep and narrow stacked staircases, anyway.

Angeal was no longer conscious by the time they got him out.

Now, Genesis sat in the waiting room of Shinra's finest medical facility, set aside specifically for SOLDIER. The hospital was offsite from HQ and state of the art. Angeal had gone into surgery with Hollander the previous day. The countless hours of pacing had been torturous for Genesis, waiting for any update as the night grew old.

The next day, Genesis still hadn't been let in to see him. He didn't know the cause of the delay, but he was perfectly ready to set fire to the next person who told him to wait 'just a moment longer.'

Nothing else mattered until he had seen him. SOLDIER, Shinra, the war: all were secondary right now.

The elderly nurse holding down the desk opposite him gave a highly put upon sigh.

"You can go in now," she said curtly. "You've got thirty minutes." She looked grudgingly relieved to finally be rid of him, but her relief was nothing compared to his as he nearly bolted through the door.

Angeal was sitting up on a blue hospital bed, looking tired but awake. Both of his legs were in white casts. One covered everything from his knee to his toes while the other ran the entire length of his leg. It was a vast improvement over the crushed mess they had been when Genesis found him in the tower. He had barely recognized him propped up against a wall, desperately trying to defend a room of half-dead troopers with nothing but an infantry rifle and low-level materia.

Angeal looked up at him now, a sad attempt at a smile on his face, and suddenly Genesis didn't know what he was supposed to say to his oldest friend.

"They finally let you in," Angeal said, his smile lopsided and doing a poor job of hiding his pain. "You made it out of Rocket Town uninjured?"

"You idiot!" he replied fiercely, his laughter ending abruptly. Angeal blinked at him.

"What were you thinking? Getting a plane dropped on you! What were you thinking?" He stood at
the foot of the bed as he yelled at him.

"It wasn't on purpose," Angeal replied, looking at him like he'd gone mad. Maybe he had, because none of this was right.

"You're a SOLDIER; you're better than this! You're *supposed* to be better than this!"

"I know," he said in a quiet voice.

"You shouldn't need to be rescued; you're supposed to walk away from fights with barely a scratch, your enemy little more than an inconvenience. You don't get trapped, you don't get injured!" he spat, before his energy drained and he dragged his hand down his face. "This shouldn't have happened," he whispered, looking away. His shoulders sagged.

"I know," Angeal replied softly. "But we're not invincible."

Genesis sat heavily in the chair by the bed. That wasn't a statement he was prepared to agree with, no matter how true.

"Not invincible yet, perhaps," he muttered.

"What?"

"You haven't heard?" Now that Angeal was awake, he should finally be taking pride in the other developments that had occurred. It had been a busy couple of days. "Then allow me to congratulate you on finally reaching First Class."

He took great satisfaction in Angeal's look of shock. This was more like how it was meant to have gone, shared exultation in finally achieving a goal they had both been striving towards for years. There should be celebrations and fireworks and spending excessive amounts of his own hard-earned money. No part of his dreams had featured the infirmary.

"First Class…" Angeal said, awe, disbelief, and a trace of pride shining through his voice. Then his brow furrowed. "But why? What did I do?"

"How should I know?" Genesis replied, shrugging and flicking his hair. "I'm being promoted for my part in a stunning rescue; I don't know that you've done anything to deserve it."

Angeal's expression clouded over and he swallowed harshly.

"How about surviving an attack while everyone around you dies?" he retorted, all trace of pride replaced with pain and bitterness. "Or outliving teenagers who expected you to protect them?"

"Angeal…" Genesis didn't know what to say. Angeal looked so lost.

"I'm sorry," Angeal said quietly, his eyes fixed on his encased legs.

"Don't be," Genesis said, shaking his head. "I'm glad you're in one piece, but I am sorry about the troopers."

Angeal looked at him, his eyes uncharacteristically bleak – and that hurt.

"You did everything you could," he said softly.

"Did I?" He leant his head back against the wall, and his eyes gazed at the ceiling.
"Yes. You did. Of course you did." Because he was Angeal and that was just who he was.

Silence fell, thick and weary, and soaked into every corner of the room.

"You should be walking again soon, according to Hollander," Genesis said, trying to banish the oppressive silence. He was practically pleading with Angeal to be comforted, and he received a strained smile for his efforts.

"It hasn't even been a day, but I am already keen to be out of these casts," Angeal replied, a faint smile at his lips. At least he was playing along.

"I don't think it'll be long," Genesis said, "especially once you have the enhancements of a First Class."

"You're not going to stop going on about that, are you?"

"Of course not."

"We did it," Angeal said with a sigh. It wasn't quite the triumphant cry it should have been, but he sounded glad at least. "I know it's been years, but it feels like only yesterday we were looking up at the Shinra building and wondering if they'd even let us in."

"First Class Genesis Rhapsodos," he mused, the beginnings of a smile tugging at his mouth. "It's about time."

Angeal snorted and shook his head.

"You were right, by the way," he said. At Genesis' confused look he elaborated, "Shepard is an alien."

"What?" Genesis almost fell off his chair.

"She verified it herself," he said. "Why are you surprised? It was your theory."

"Yeah, but I didn't think she was actually--"

A jarring knock on the door interrupted them.

"Time's up already?" Angeal asked, sounding disappointed.

The door cracked open, and a head of black spikey hair poked in.

"Is this Angeal's-- Oh, hey, Angeal!" Zack said, smiling brightly.

"It's one visitor at a time!" the lady at the desk barked behind him.

"Yeah, absolutely, miss! We'll just be a second," Zack said, still smiling, as he entered the room, held the door open for Cissnei, and then closed it behind them. He turned and faced the two SOLDIERs, both of which were staring at him and wondering what was happening.


"Oh, heh, sorry." The boy scratched his head, ruffling his hair. "May I come in?"

"Why are you here?" Genesis asked, not bothering to hide his sneer. The rank and file were such a nuisance.
"I promise I'll be quick," he said, waving Genesis off. "And it's good to see you awake, Angeal. I'm sure you'll be back on your feet in no time. Anyway, I've been accepted into SOLDIER!" He held his arms wide as if to display his newly promoted self.

"I didn't know they'd lowered the bar again," Genesis commented, examining the state of his gloves. Cissnei, standing inconspicuously in the corner, snorted.

"Congratulations, Zack. I'm really proud of you," Angeal said with a smile, pointedly ignoring Genesis and Cissnei.

Zack beamed with pride.

"You've worked hard, and it's no small achievement."

"I never would have made it without you, you know, helping me with training and… saving my life." Zack's smile threatened to fall, and he looked away. "So, thanks, I guess."

The sombre mood drifted back into the room, and Genesis wanted to strangle the boy. Honestly, he'd only just gotten Angeal to think about something else.

"Do you know how many… how many made it back?" Angeal asked, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

Zack opened his mouth and then closed it again, like the words were stuck in his throat and he didn't know if he wanted to dislodge them. The joy in his eyes died.

"Six," Cissnei spoke up from the corner where she had been silently watching the discussion. "Six troopers returned from Rocket Town, including Kunsel."

Zack and Angeal both bowed their heads.

"What are you doing here?" Genesis asked her quietly, while the other two shared a moment of silence. He looked at the Turk with suspicion.

"He doesn't have the passcodes for this place yet," she said, nodding at Zack. "I got him in. And I wasn't going to stay outside and be glared at by Beryl."

Without warning the door slammed open, and the nurse in question marched in, her lips pursed. Angeal and Zack's silent moment of respect was thoroughly derailed.

"All right, enough. Get out," she barked, her hands on her hips and her glare withering. "You want to visit people, you follow the rules. Let the young man recover in peace."

Genesis opened his mouth to object, and Angeal started to tell her he didn't mind.

"Out!" she thundered, pointing to the exit and ignoring Angeal completely. A dejected Zack led the way out followed by an unrepentant Cissnei and finally Genesis who was indignant at being thrown out. This was Zack's fault.

"I guess I should get going," the boy said, scratching the back of his neck.

"You do that, Third Class," he replied, giving his best withering glare. "Don't think that just because you're a SOLDIER, now you have no superiors."

"Yes, sir." He snapped off a salute and disappeared down the corridor, not looking as repentant or respectful as Genesis would have liked.
He shook off thoughts of the youth and walked along at a leisurely pace, the glare of a resentful nurse still burning holes in his back.

"That didn't take long," Cissnei commented, walking next to him. He raised an eyebrow at her in question.

"For your promotion to go to your head," she amended.

"Excuse me?"

"You're excused," she said with a dry smile. She readjusted the newspaper she held under her arm.

He didn't deign to comment, but the picture on the newspaper caught his eye.

"What's that?" he asked, tilting his head to see the cover.

"You have heard, right?" She unfurled it revealing the words 'WUTAI WAR' in large print across the front.

"Of course, but what, pray tell, is this?" he asked scathingly, stopping in the middle of the corridor and snatching the paper. He examined the cover photo with a glower.

"I could have sworn you were there," Cissnei said, casually leaning against the wall.

"Of course I was there. I was just as vital to the rescue as Sephiroth! But how is anyone else going to know that?"

He held up the damning evidence of the cover: a full page photo of Sephiroth and Shepard, back to back on the tarmac, with sword and rifle brandished, locked in combat with half a dozen indistinct ninjas. They stood wreathed in blue light and red flame, leather coat flaring dramatically and hard armour glinting in the light. They practically glowed on the page against the dark background.

"I suppose," Cissnei allowed with a tilt of her head.

He sneered and flipped through the pages, quickly scanning the contents.

"Fourth page," he snapped. "I'm not even mentioned until the fourth page. And Shepard gets to be on the cover! What, was she rescuing herself?"

"It is a very good photo, if I do say so myself." She smiled with satisfaction. "They look very dramatic together. And can you believe that angle? Both of their faces and great combat stances in the one shot. I'm the PR department's favourite person right now – after those two, of course."

Genesis scowled.

"I took photos of you, as well," she said, rolling her eyes. "Maybe PR just thinks you don't look iconic enough."

He dropped the paper.

"Not iconic enough," he repeated with disdain, before looking down at his uniform, the standard black trappings of a First Class.

"I will show you iconic," he lifted his chin and stalked down the corridor. "Just watch me."
Shepard was tired. By the looks of it, Sephiroth was as well. They sat in his office on either side of his desk, preparing to talk business. So far, they'd managed to stall.

After meeting on the ground in Rocket Town, they'd shared a battlefield camaraderie, easily working together to finish off the ninjas and treat the wounded. She had watched his back and he hers. He had even thrown her one of her dropped heatsinks at one point.

That would all end with the discussion of what happened next, and they both knew it. Frankly, she'd had a hell of a week and she didn't really want to go back to arguing politics with him. She had already been debriefed and slept off the worst of her exhaustion; they could only stall for so long.

"You know, you're much easier to get along with when someone is trying to kill us," she said, leaning her head against the back of the chair.

"We're not expected to hold a conversation when someone is trying to kill us." His posture was as close to slouched as it ever got, his shoulders sagging ever so slightly. A map of southern Wutai occupied his desk – one which he had made a paltry, brief attempt at pretending to study.

"You're saying we'd get along fine, so long as we never have to talk to each other?" she asked with a snort.

"You're the one who insists on always arguing with me." A hint of a smile crossed his lips.

"If you weren't wrong, I wouldn't have to argue."

He shook his head. "Or maybe you just like fighting."

"And you don't?" she replied with a short-lived smile of her own. She'd seen his expression on the tarmac: like a Krogan who had just discovered shotguns. He gave a non-committal hum.

It was actually quite comfortable here. Rays of the late morning sun streamed pleasantly through the large windows and the chairs here were infinitely less creaky than the one in her room. A healing gash on her forehead was now insufferably itchy, but otherwise she was uninjured. One of Sephiroth's arms was bandaged, forcing him to abandon his leather coat. She would have thought shirtlessness wouldn't be office appropriate, but it was his office so who was she to complain. The view wasn't half bad either.

"Thanks for the assist by the way," she said. "I hope you're not in trouble for it." He had broken orders after all. So far, there hadn't been any consequences that she knew of.

"Cissnei's photos more than made up for it," he replied, looking with irritation at the crumpled newspaper in the rubbish bin. "Apparently people love this sort of thing." He looked like he'd just swallowed something bitter.

She had skimmed the news. It was almost accurate, albeit wildly sensationalised. And they hadn't even photo shopped her to death – that was victory enough as far as she was concerned.

"Alright," she sighed, knowing she'd delayed for long enough. "Wutai."

"Wutai." He rubbed his temple. "What about it?"

She gave him a dry look and waited for him to stop kidding himself.

"Shinra wants you on the front lines," he finally said, watching her warily.
"I am not fighting Shinra's wars," she said.

"Of course not," he muttered before steeling his gaze and squaring his shoulders.

She sat up straighter and returned his hard look. The lines were drawn.

"Whether you like it or not, Shinra is going to war," he said. "And you are a part of Shinra."

"But I am not just a part of Shinra," she replied, holding up her right hand, the red and white stripe of an N7 bright in the sunlight. "I answer to three governments. For me to support this war goes against both Citadel and Alliance policy." As a spectre she was technically above the law, but interplanetary policy still applied. She was called to uphold that law, not flaunt it recklessly.

"I don't want their help; I want yours. You signed a contract," he pointed out.

"And I read the fine print. I agreed only to hunt monsters for you – not invade an independent sovereign nation." She crossed her arms. She had been very careful when it came to the contract and she'd crossed out plenty of clauses she disagreed with. She knew exactly what she had signed up for – and what she had not.

"I don't have to remind you that Wutai struck first," he hedged.

She scoffed. "After putting up with Mitchells for six months? Frankly, I'm impressed at their restraint. But it doesn't matter why. This is a local territory dispute. I have no business being involved."

"You agreed to be a member of SOLDIER. You are one of us," he said sharply, leaning forward in his chair. "Or are you just an intruder in our halls after all?"

"I think we both know the answer to that," she said plainly.

He leaned back and watched her through narrowed eyes. "I saved your life in Rocket Town," he said quietly, changing tactics. "If I hadn't gone, you would have died alongside Angeal and all your precious troopers. Are you going to abandon us, now that we need your help in return? Is your loyalty so short-lived?" He sneered at her. "Disappointing."

"You saved my life, so I should help you crush a nation? I should slaughter thousands, just so Shinra can hold a complete monopoly?" she sneered back. "I am a soldier, not a mindless thug."

"Yet you will abandon your fellow soldiers just to please some bureaucrats? You will abandon loyal allies out of fear of a reprimand?" he said scathingly. "You will turn your back on your men because they've become inconvenient?"

Her eyes fell because she recognised those words. They were her. She'd spat that at him after discovering Scout in the Science Department. It wasn't the same… or was it? No. Scout had been a helpless prisoner being tortured. Shinra was trying to take land and resources that weren't theirs while pretending they were still the injured party.

She looked him in the eye again. "Shinra is the aggressor here. Don't try to paint yourself as the victim."

He scowled and looked away.

"You are one of the most experienced SOLDIERS we have," he insisted, the beginnings of desperation in his voice. She wondered if it was genuine. "This war has already begun, and the army
is mobilizing. How many lives could your expertise save?"

It sounded like an honest plea for help. She hadn't thought him capable of such a thing.

"Do we mean nothing to you?" he asked in a low voice.

"I wouldn't have spent so long training the infantry if I didn't care," she replied sourly. Who was he to accuse her of not caring? He'd been perfectly happy to watch the infantry be massacred just because he didn't believe the unenhanced were worth the bother.

"So now you will leave them to fight on their own? You will let those whom you had the gall to call your own men face this war alone?" He shook his head. "Withdrawing your support now is cowardly."

"Insult me as much as you like," she said, her voice cold because his words hurt. The names of the troopers who would never come home from Rocket Town were stark in her mind. "I won't overthrow Wutai for Shinra's greed."

"It's too late to stop this. You profit nobody by complaining about the injustice of it. All we can do now is decide how best to face it." He looked down at the map spread out between them, his eyes following the coastline. Then he met her eyes again, the hard edge missing from his gaze. "You tried to prevent this. I read the reports of what happened in Wutai, and I appreciate your efforts. I don't want this either."

In his eyes she saw the lie. She let out a slow breath. He didn't just want this, he was craving it. He was so eager to get out there, to be unleashed upon the enemy. How many would die while he sated his bloodlust?

"Liar. You're brimming with excitement. You all are." She shook her head, feeling hollow.

"Warriors are made for war," he said with an indifferent shrug.

"No. They are made by it," she said firmly.

For the first time since she'd woken up on a world with no Reapers, she felt tired. Truly tired, the bone weary exhaustion that she'd learned to live with while watching thousands fall on a daily basis and knowing there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"Then show us how it's done," he said with a gleam in his eye. He knew she was close to capitulating.

She looked at the map. Little villages dotted along the southern coast, temples perched atop mountains, and ancient roads followed the rise and fall of the land. How many eager young children in trooper uniforms would be cut down there? How many SOLDIERs, overconfident in the mako in their veins, would bleed to death in that land? How many would Sephiroth lose in his desire for combat?

Familiar faces flashed through her mind, those who would fight for Shinra. Kunsel, Zack, and the remaining troopers, who would fight under the orders of glory chasing fools that thought war was a game. Angeal, who hoped honour alone would carry him through. Genesis, who was so taken by the promise of glory.

Sephiroth, who craved the thrill of a fight.

She looked at the ceiling and let out a sigh. "I will help you end this war," she said.
"Thank you," he said earnestly, failing to hide the flash of triumph in his eyes.

Somehow that hurt more than anything else. The fool.

"On one condition," she said wearily. "I fight on my terms."

"Don't you always?"

"I am not an assassin, don't let the gun fool you, and I am not going to take out Shinra's political opponents." There was little point making the distinction now, but there were still lines she wouldn't cross. "I won't kill civilians, I make prisoners of those who surrender, I don't butcher the unarmed, and I don't send my men on suicidal missions because some idiot in an armchair doesn't know the first thing about combat."

"You're surprisingly merciful for someone who prefers to shoot people in the head from half a mile away." He sounded amused.

She wasn't laughing.

"I kill quickly and cleanly. You're the one who likes to look people in the eye while stabbing them through the heart."

"True," he allowed with a tilt of his head. "I agree to your terms, except for the last one. If you disobey a direct order from a director or the president, I can't protect you from the consequences."

"Fair enough." As long as they understood each other.

"As to the rest, so long as the job gets done, you may fight however you please," he said.

She nodded and rose to leave. She still had a memorial service to attend for her dead troopers, before she could lead the rest straight back into the fire.

"One last thing," he called.

She looked at him over her shoulder. He slid a signed piece of paper towards her on the desk.

"Welcome to First Class," he said with a sharp smile, "Commander."

She picked up the paper with a scowl, reading the details of her promotion. He had presumed his success in convincing her. She was hit with the desire to hurl him out the window. Too bad he would probably survive the fall.

"I hope you remember this, Sephiroth," she said quietly, looking him in the eye. He raised an eyebrow at her. "When the battlefields fall silent, when the corpses stretch to the horizon in every direction and you're ankle deep in blood, remember that you wanted this."

"I will feel no regret at wading through Wutai blood," he said.

"All blood looks the same once it's been spilled," she replied coldly. "Even yours."
"If I threw Sephiroth off the top of HQ, what are the chances he'd survive?" Shepard asked, swirling the dregs of a lukewarm beer around the bottom of her glass. Next to her Guzzard snorted.

"Depends. If he had a gravity materia he'd be fine," he said, ruminating on the contents of his glass. This dark little pub, tucked away on the corner of the plate where nobody important thought to look, had become one of her favourite places in Midgar. She didn't come here with any sort of regularity, but it was the only watering hole she did visit. She got the impression Guzzard came here all the time.

"What if he had no materia?" she mused. "Gravity is a vengeful bastard; would the fall finish him off?"

"Probably not. He walks off fatal injuries all the time. It's like he's a lump of lead."

"Or a cockroach," she said, looking philosophically at the ceiling.

He gave her a crooked smile. "What did he do, get a scratch on your gun?"

"If he'd done that, we would all know exactly how much blunt force trauma he could survive," she said darkly before finishing the last of her drink.

Guzzard leaned back on his stool and gave her a questioning look. "What did I miss?"

"Think of it as interdepartmental squabbling, but more so," she said, waving down another beer from the young and jumpy-looking bartender.

"Don't tell me." Guzzard waved off her explanation. Not asking questions was still his MO.

"You know, I was considered for general once?" he said, staring vacantly at the wall.

She choked on her drink. He laughed at her.

"What?" she choked out, thumping herself on the chest.

"They'd only just decided SOLDIER needed one instead of just answering to the Director. I was the front runner until Sephiroth tore through the ranks," he spoke wistfully, wearing an odd smile that pulled at all his scars. "I didn't take getting passed over very well. I remember yelling at Heidegger, something especially petty about shirtless teenagers in need of haircuts." He snorted a laugh at himself. "And that's why I'm a sergeant now."

"Damn, I'm sorry."

He waved off her apology. "I would have made a shit general. SOLDIER doesn't use ranks properly; I have about the same duties as a sarge that I did as a major. And Sephiroth turned out to be pretty good at the job—even if he does still need a haircut."

"It's one thing to be a capable general during peacetime," she said darkly. "It remains to be seen if he can claim the same with a war raging."

"True," he said with a tilt of his head. "Glad you're alive, by the way." He leaned both elbows on the bar. "Could have done without the war, though."
"Me too," she said with a snort. "Ready to go invade Wutai?"

"No," he looked at her like she was crazy. "You?"

"Of course not." She took the first sip of her drink, and savoured it. "I just finished a war; I don't want to charge straight back into one."

She probably shouldn't have been talking about it. It was meant to be a secret after all, and Guzzard was certainly aware that no major wars had been fought recently, but she didn't see the point in pretending. He'd probably already guessed. It wasn't as though he was going to tell anyone about her bizarre secrets.

"Do you know what happened to my face?" he asked after a moment of comfortable silence. Moody blues music was crooning out of the radio, drowning out any nearby conversations. "Why I'm so damn pretty?" He dragged a hand along the scarring on his left cheek. The scar tissue trailed down to his chin and all the way to the side of his neck, making his stubble splotchy and uneven.

"A terrible shaving accident?"

"Fort Condor." He finished his drink and set the glass on the bar with a sigh. She hadn't heard this story. "They've always been independent out that way, and proud of it too. They didn't want mako power; it was all coal back then. All the old pictures of the mountain had a giant smoke stack in the background and a big ugly black cloud above it." He shook his head, looking wistfully into the empty glass. "Shinra didn't like that."

"How long ago was this?"

"About twenty years," he said, scratching his stubble. "I was a Third then, tail end of the first generation of SOLDIER. 'Go and take Fort Condor,' Heidegger said. So we did."

"Did they put up much of a fight?" She leant against the bar.

"Yeah. They grow 'em tough out there." He gave a bark of bitter laughter and shook his head at himself. "My first taste of real combat. I was so keen to see some action, show them who called the shots. They showed us a thing or two as well." His hand traced his scars again. "Wasn't much left by the time we were done."

She silently waved down another drink for him and listened. The bartender slid it along the stained wooden surface.

"They still hate us for it. We have to keep a garrison out there now, 'to discourage violence.'" He sighed heavily and stared at the grimy bar. "I guess we'll be 'discouraging' Wutai too, soon enough."

His new drink arrived, and he took a long draught.

"I destroyed the Alpha relay," she said quietly.

He wouldn't know what it meant. Even those that did know rarely understood it. The destruction of an entire solar system felt too big to grasp, hundreds of thousands of civilians, just minding their own business, all snuffed out in a moment. To the Batarians she was the worst war criminal in history. She didn't regret it, but it ached inside her anyway.

"It bought us time," she continued, "valuable time that everyone needed to prepare for the invasion. But they didn't prepare. They put their fingers in their ears and pretended everything was fine."
Perhaps that hurt the most: that the sacrifice had been mostly wasted. Guzzard was watching her with his brow drawn down.

"Did you win?" he asked, surprisingly softly.

"In the end," she said roughly, a scowl cutting at her face. "Nobody ever listens."

He sighed and looked away.

"Damn kids," he said, taking an exaggerated swig of his drink.

"Bloody rookies," she agreed, taking a drink as well and letting the sombre moment slip away.

"Excuse me, Commander Shepard?" the bartender interrupted, finally gathering enough nerve to approach. He was acne-ridden and no older than twenty. He held up a scrap of paper and a pen. "Um… my sister's a big fan. She'd never forgive me if I didn't get an autograph."

Guzzard chortled.

With a resigned sigh she signed the paper and handed it back to him. He scuttled away with a burning blush.

"Goodbye, sweet anonymity," she said wistfully, "You were nice while you lasted."

"Hey, Shepard!"

She turned to see Kunsel running up behind her.

"I wanted to catch you before I left for Junon next weekend."

It had been a busy month. Shinra had thrown itself completely into preparations for the war, and she'd barely had time for training anyone. They wouldn't actually launch the invasion for another month or so – invading an island nation on the other side of the globe wasn't something done on a whim.

Kunsel, along with most of the troopers she had worked with, would be heading for the SOLDIER academy in Junon.

"I'm glad you made it. You've earned it," she said with a smile. She had said it before, but it was worth repeating.

"I wanted to thank you." He ducked his head, and she imagined his helmet hid a blush. "You've taught me a lot. I really appreciate it."

"Happy to help." She continued walking, and he kept pace with her. They were headed to the firing range on the training levels. "So, how long till you're officially in SOLDIER?"

"It's already official, but I won't get any enhancements until I've have six months of mandatory training, and then there's another three months after that."

She nodded. "So you won't be anywhere near the front lines for at least nine months."

It was probably unfair of her, but she was incalculably grateful for that. He had handled Rocket Town very well, but he was quieter now, less eager to pick up his weapon. It would take time for him to accept the realities of the job, better for him to do that in an academy than on a battlefield.
"Yeah." He scratched the back of his neck. "It feels a little cowardly: to be safe at home while others charge off to fight. But at the same time... I can wait."

"You were in the first skirmish of this war; you know exactly what's waiting." She looked straight ahead, and he ducked his head again. "In the meantime, you have a lot to learn."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Apparently, in the second half of training you get to pick what sort of sword you want," he began tentatively, "depending on how training has gone."

"Any ideas?"

"I don't think I want a sword."

She smiled at that and patted him on the back.

"See how the training goes. You might be a natural."

"Maybe," he allowed with a tilt of his head, "but I like fighting at a distance. It's like a bubble of calm where it's easier to think straight, see all the pieces, and make the right call."

"You're a man of good taste," she said with a sharp smile. She'd had a little cluster of snipers on the Normandy at one point: herself, Thane, Garrus, and Zaeed. The competition had been fierce, and they'd left used up heatsinks all across the galaxy.

"I want to be ready for next time," he said.

"If you do decide on a rifle, I'd be happy to continue training you. I think there's even an official system for it."

He stopped walking. "You want to be my mentor?"

"Only if you need one," she said with a shrug. She would hate to see the only other sniper in SOLDIER discouraged for lack of proper training. "You've got a lot of potential. I'd hate to see it wasted."

"Thank you, Shepard," he said, sincerity making his voice quieter. "I'm off now, but I'll let you know when I've decided." He started for one of the other exits.

"Kunsel?"

He turned to look back at her.

"You've achieved a lot, you know. You are allowed to celebrate."

"I guess so."

Neon lights flashed, women in very short dresses danced with their arms in the air, and music that heavily resembled emergency alarms blared through massive speakers.

Sephiroth was in hell.

"Come on, it's through here," Genesis said, pushing through the crowds. "The others must be there already."
He steeled himself and followed.

He didn't see how this could possibly be termed 'fun', let alone a method of celebration. But Genesis insisted that the Goblin Bar was the perfect place and who was he to argue? He wasn't the one who had just been promoted. Genesis and Angeal had finally recovered from their First Class enhancements and the former had demanded they celebrate properly before they were shipped out.

Sephiroth had not expected to be included in the proceedings. He wasn't entirely sure how he had been talked into it either. The two of them were still a mystery to him.

They took the stairs to the VIP room. The bouncer froze for a moment at the sight of them. Sephiroth wasn't wearing his pauldrons but looked no less recognisable in his leather coat. Genesis stood proudly in the red leather coat he had started parading about in since his promotion.

The bounced swallowed and then opened the door without a word.

Inside was, thankfully, much quieter. Most of the crowds were left outside, along with the multi-coloured strobes and laser lights. Instead of a writhing dance floor and a bar heavily guarded by long queues of sweaty people, private-looking booths ringed the room and the wide circular bar of black granite in the centre. The lights were all purple for some reason.

One of the walls was made entirely of glass, overlooking the dance floor below.

"There they are," he said, spotting Angeal and Shepard in one of the farthest booths. They were already drinking and joking together. Half the other occupants of the lounge were sneaking covert looks at the four SOLDIERs.

Angeal looked perfectly healthy, having been cleared from the infirmary and completed his new enhancements. One would never know he had been at risk of being a cripple for the rest of his life only a month ago.

Shepard was laughing. Not the barbed chuckle she gave in combat or the bitter smile he had seen a lot of recently, but actual happy, throaty laughter. It was a rare sound and oddly compelling.

Convincing her to join the war effort currently stood as one of his greatest triumphs and the best tactical decision he had made in years. She brought an entire civilization's worth of revolutionary strategy to the table. He would unleash hell upon the Wutai, who would have no idea how to counter it.

But her help, while granted in full, didn't come without a price. For a brief moment, they had fought together back-to-back; now they planned a war from opposite sides of a room, and he had never before noticed how cold his own office could be. The brief glimpses he had seen of the woman behind the rifle were gone. She was a creature of war, intense and completely focused, and that was all she permitted him to see now. It felt a lot like having his security clearance revoked.

The sound of her laughter was strangely freeing. He had underestimated the weight of her disapproval, and her steely gaze was exhausting.

He felt it settle on him.

Genesis sat with as much ceremony as possible and summoned a waiter. Sephiroth glanced at the menu and ordered the first drink that didn't have a stupid name. Genesis went straight for a bottle of champagne.

Shepard was halfway through a foamy beer while Angeal sipped on a fruit cocktail that boasted a
Genesis' lips quirked at the sight of the fruity concoction.

"It comes with little umbrellas," Angeal said stoically.

Genesis shook his head, and his gaze shifted to Shepard's drink of choice.

"Really?" He said, "You're in the most exclusive bar in the city and you drink cheap lager? I know you like to pretend you're boring, but this is getting excessive."

"They used up all the little umbrellas on Angeal's drink, so there was no point getting anything else," she said airily.

A little later, after several long and drawn out toasts that exhausted numerous bottles of champagne – to First Class, and then to SOLDIER, then to not being in an infirmary, and finally to having met an alien without being abducted, which Shepard found hilarious – some sort of game started up.

"Alright," Genesis said, leaning against the glass wall next to him. "Most illegal thing you've ever done?"

Sephiroth didn't know what this game was called, or if it even had a name, but the point appeared to be outdoing everyone else in whatever category was arbitrarily selected. He was surprisingly good at it.

"I, uh, used to steal as a kid. Just food, fruit usually," Angeal said, ducking his head. "But I stole a chocobo once and took it for a joy ride."

Genesis laughed and shook his head in mock disapproval.

"I put it back afterwards!" he said, hunching his shoulders. "I even cleaned out its stable and bought it new greens, the poor thing."

"Your idea of breaking the law is illegally feeding someone else's farm animals?" Shepard asked with a fond smile.

"Having just ridden it through the countryside at four in the morning and then getting stuck in a ditch for two hours," he said, scratching the back of his neck.

"I have never broken the law," Sephiroth said. Was that winning? Or was the point to be the biggest criminal?

"Neither have I," Shepard said, leaning forwards and picking at the bowl of deep fried potato bits.

Genesis gave a bark of laughter. "I don't believe that for second."

"Hey! It's true. I am a law-abiding citizen."

"I'm impressed you can say it with a straight face," Sephiroth drawled. Since she was finally relaxed around him tonight, he found distinct pleasure in prodding her for reactions.

"I'm a spectre," she said with a sharp smile. "That means Citadel law doesn't apply to me, so everything I do is, by definition, legal."

He choked on his drink. Just how highly ranked was she?
"Like a Turk?" Angeal asked, his brow creased.

"More public than that, and they recruit solely from military sectors."

"What about before you were promoted?" he asked.

"Spectre status works retroactively," she said with a shrug.

"Aren't they concerned about what such a loose cannon might get up to without supervision?" Sephiroth asked. He certainly was.

"Only my enemies need to worry about that." Her smile could cut slice through anything. He glowered at her. She returned an easy smile.

"I currently have about seven thousand gil worth of unpaid traffic fines," Genesis said.

Shepard was having a great time. She put down her empty glass, and a waiter immediately replaced it. She had needed this. Even Sephiroth's arrival hadn't dampened her spirits, because the sight of him trying to identify the bright green drink he had ordered was hilarious.

"Weirdest thing you've ever seen," Angeal issued the challenge.

She snorted. "I could describe my office supplies, and you would think they were weird."

"They probably are, knowing you," Genesis said. Angeal had told him she was from off-world, so finally, they could all stop pretending.

"I saw Scarlet trying to flirt with Sephiroth yesterday," Angeal said. The man in question rolled his eyes, and Genesis laughed.

"Shepard," Sephiroth said.

"What?" she asked.

"You're the weirdest thing I've ever seen," he said dryly.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," she said, looking at him pityingly.

He scowled back at her. Point, Shepard. Oh yes, she was having a great time.

"That's nothing," Angeal said, a wide smile on his face. "I went on a mission to the Gongaga area back when I had only just been promoted to Second Class. I was supposed to find another SOLDIER who had gone missing in the area."

Genesis froze and gave his old friend a look that promised bloody murder. Angeal ignored it.

"It's all jungle out there, teeming with weird wildlife. I stumbled across a nest of frogs, but there was something off about it."

"We should have left you in Rocket Town," Genesis said bitterly. "You can tell the Wutai your funny stories."

"There was one frog, a red one, trying really hard to hop away from a horde of little green ones, but they kept herding it back to the nest."
"So…?" Shepard asked, not seeing where this was going.

"There are strange rumours about the animals out there, so on a hunch I cast esuna in case there were poisons or hallucinations or anything else going on." He was trying to hold back a smile and doing a poor job of it. "The red frog morphs into Genesis, dazed and confused and covered in frog slime, sitting in the middle of the nest."

"I was not," Genesis groused, his shoulders hunched and glaring at his drink.

"What?" she asked, completely confused.

"Touch Me's. I’d assumed they were just a myth," Sephiroth said, watching Genesis with a smile. "A type of frog – a single touch is supposed to transform a person into one of them."

"He was still surrounded by the frogs, though, so a second later they transformed him back. I recast esuna and the frogs did it again," Angeal said. "This went on for about five minutes."

"You're making this up," she said, sending disbelieving looks between the two men.

"Yes, it's all a ridiculous story, the product of Angeal's absurd imagination," Genesis said.

"No, I think I recall a couple of suspiciously non-descriptive mission reports from Gongaga," said Sephiroth.

"It was years ago!" Genesis cried. "How could you possibly remember?"

"What were the frogs doing with you, Genesis?" Angeal asked. "They seemed very determined to keep you as one of them."

"How should I know? I don't speak frog."

"Although, I do remember that the nest was mostly made up of female frogs," Angeal said thoughtfully.

There was a second of silence, and then Sephiroth snorted and Shepard burst out laughing.

"I'm going to kill you," Genesis said plainly to Angeal.

He didn't seem very repentant.

Genesis turned pointedly to the glass wall, muttering something about a 'good for nothing traitor.'

"Oh look, Zack just passed out," he said, looking down at the floor below. "On the losing side of a drinking competition."

"Is he all right?" Angeal asked, trying to lean around over Shepard to see.

"Kunsel is carting him out," she said. She was sitting opposite Genesis, also next to the glass wall. "He'll be fine."

"That boy." Angeal shook his head, before finishing another cocktail. Mako meant it didn't affect them at the same rate as a normal person, but the alcohol was slowly starting to kick in.

"He's not your problem, you know," Genesis said. "If he wants to drink until his liver explodes, that's his problem," Genesis said, flicking his hair.
"And how many of those have you had?" Angeal asked, looking pointedly at the dozens of empty glasses piled up around them.

"I am enhanced."

"Yeah, we know; you won't stop going on about it," Shepard muttered, taking a swig of her drink. He sent her a frown.

"You've adopted a pet recruit as well, haven't you?" Genesis asked.

"No, I've adopted a terrifying sniper-in-the-making, and I'll take your apology in writing when he saves your life in the field one day."

Sephiroth snorted.

"Never going to happen," Genesis said with a shake of his head. "But you are welcome to enjoy your little fantasies while they last."

"Think what you like."

"Are you still training the infantry? There won't be much time with a war on."

"You think wartime calls for less training?" she asked wryly and grabbed the last onion ring.

"Well, there is only so much time in the day," he said.

"If someone is going to shoot me, I'd prefer they do it on purpose."

"I thought it was the recruitment age you didn't like," Angeal said.

Sephiroth sighed heavily and finished his drink. Clearly the algae-coloured substance was growing on him because he signalled for another.

"Apparently, that makes me unique here," she said dryly.

"Well, yes. It does," Genesis said. "Do no teenagers fight where you're from?"

"Plenty fight. Most die. I had a couple in my crew who were young, but they were special cases," she said, trying not to sound too bitter. This wasn't the place for reality, surrounded by free-flowing drinks and brightly coloured little umbrellas.

"And under what circumstances did you consider it acceptable to ignore your legal minimum age?" Sephiroth drawled, because of course he did.

She wanted to roll her eyes but resisted the urge. "EDI is about three years old, but age isn't really an issue for an AI." She took a deep swig of her drink. "And Grunt was technically a newborn but, then, he was made in a lab as an fully grown adult so he may not count."

They all looked at her in shock.

"What do you mean made?" Sephiroth asked, his proud indifference momentarily replaced with fascinated disgust.

"'Tank grown' and it is very much illegal. I opened the tank and woke him up. He didn't much care for his maker's agenda and instead decided to join my crew." It wasn't really her story to tell, but these people would never know him. And besides, she was proud of him. "He's almost two years old
"Now you're the one making things up," Angeal said.

"I am not. He's a great guy; he was leading his own company last time I saw him."

"But what use would he be?" Sephiroth asked, clearly fascinated. "Wouldn't his muscles have been weak from disuse? How could he know how to talk, let alone be capable in a fight?"

"He was designed for combat. Apparently, he was as close to physically perfect as anyone can be. Neural implants taught him how to walk and talk and fight as well as his designer's political agenda and the great legacy he was meant to fulfil." She finished off her drink and smiled. "Instead he named himself Grunt, picked his own clan, and chose his own enemies."

"Huh," Angeal said, still looking disturbed.

"And what does physical perfection look like?" Sephiroth asked.

"He isn't human. Did I not mention that? He's a krogan. And I don't know what defines krogan perfection, but I have been assured that he smelled right."

Genesis cleared his throat. "Well. I have no idea what to do with that information."

"If you woke him up from his tank, does that make you his mother?" Angeal asked, a smile tugging at his lips.

"I was his battle-master, which is far more important to a Krogan," she pointed out with her glass. "Although, I did buy him his first shotgun and I am the one he calls when he gets into legal trouble, so maybe I am his mother."

Genesis snorted. "Sephiroth wins. Shepard's definitely the weirdest thing here."

"Surely that means I win?" she challenged.

"I'm not sure you realise just how bizarre you are."

She sighed in resignation. "Fine. Biggest scar." She gestured at herself. "My entry is all of me."

"I have the sense not to get hit in the first place," Genesis said, relaxing back in his seat.

"Heh, yeah, that's exactly what it means," she said, hiding her smile.

"My turn," Angeal said before leaning back and hauling one of his legs up on the table. He knocked over several empty glasses and a bowl of peanuts before rolling up his trouser leg to reveal a series of long surgical scars running up his hairy leg. The scars were all well-healed but still pink.

"That's okay – I wasn't eating or anything, Angeal," Genesis said, shifting the remaining bowls of food and lifting his drink before it too was knocked to the ground.

"That's the new one?" Shepard asked.

He nodded, trying to twist his leg to best show off the new scar tissue. Genesis and Sephiroth leaned over to see his new trophy. "The other leg isn't so bad," he said. "And I'm not sure what this lump is, but it feels like a metal pin."

"It's probably holding the bones together," Sephiroth said.
Genesis poked it. Angeal jumped and promptly removed his leg from the table.

"Hmph." Sephiroth stood and took off his coat, then turned and held his hair aside.

Two massive surgical scars ran the length of his back, on either side of his spine, with a series of smaller scars plotted strategically across his back.

"Damn," Shepard said with a whistle. That must have been painful. She'd seen him without his coat before, but his hair must have hidden it. Funny how something so big could go completely unnoticed.

"What happened?" Genesis asked.

"Reconstructive surgery," he said, sitting again but not bothering to put his coat back on. It was getting stuffy. "It was meant to be a simple mission, before I was in SOLDIER. I got swarmed by tonberrys. I killed them all, of course, but the last one managed to latch onto my back."

"You should have extensive spinal damage," Angeal said, still looking disturbed.

"That's what the surgery was to prevent, presumably."

"So they sliced open your spinal column?" she asked, dubious at the entire notion. This planet was terrifying.

"Take it up with Hojo," he said with a shrug.

"I'd rather not."

He smiled, probably pleased with himself for silencing them, and finished off another of his toxic green drinks.

"Toughest fight," he said.

"Nope, I'm not touching that one," Angeal said, shaking his head.

"I fought a grand horn armed with just a sword and a fire materia," Genesis offered, twirling an empty glass. He'd switched to wine after they'd gotten through the third bottle of champagne.

"What did you need the materia for?" Sephiroth drawled. "I have taken down high dragons with just a sword."

"You know the occasional escaped specimens from the science department?" Genesis replied, not missing a beat. "I hunted one down into the slums once; the reports afterwards called it 'Lost Number,' and--"

Sephiroth snorted.

"It was heavily mutated," Genesis growled.

"I'm sure it was," he replied lightly.

"It was larger than any dragon," Genesis insisted.

"I didn't say it wasn't," Sephiroth said with a patronizing smile.

"I arm wrestled a krogan once," Shepard said before Genesis could snap. "One dislocated shoulder..."
and three broken fingers later, I was officially declared the loser." Taking on Wrex was for the bold and stupid. She qualified as both sometimes.

"I expected more from someone with so many scars," Genesis said, momentarily distracted from his single player game of one-up-manship.

"Those aren't fun stories," she said, returning her focus to her drink. It was empty. Damn.

"Come on, the challenge was 'toughest fight,' not 'most embarrassing defeat.'" Genesis said.

"That was nowhere near my most embarrassing," she said with a chuckle.

"Well? Are you all talk, after all?" Sephiroth drawled. Apparently alcohol turned him into an underhanded asshole – so not all that different from when he was sober really, but after about the fourth drink he'd stopped being subtle about it.

"You must have some stories to tell," Angeal insisted, still bothering to be polite.

There was no way she was going to bring up the actual hardest fights she had survived. Not here. Those weren't stories for drunken revels in a night club, no matter what these green soldiers thought, those stories were for quiet vigils held over liquor so strong and disgusting that for a moment the horror wasn't so heavy.

But if they wanted to hear about a tough fight, a real one, she could accommodate.

"Long slogs are usually the toughest," she said, leaning back and crossing her arms. "Anyone can kill a monster; sleep deprivation is far more dangerous. I do a lot of extraction missions, so it's usually straight in and then straight back out, but I once spent eight days pinned down on a Salarian colony."

They watched her closely, Angeal leaning forward on his elbows. Sephiroth listened with his brow drawn down.

"Go on," Genesis prompted.

"We were defending a group of civilians who had barricaded themselves inside a shelter. There were nearly five hundred of them in this bunker, a solid fortress of a place with a low roof and only two chokepoints in and out. We had plenty of food and ammo but no medi-gel, and the only combatants were myself and two of my crew, against an entire horde of Reaper troops."

"What did you do?" Angeal asked.

"We held the line," She said with a shrug before taking a deep draught of the new beer the waiter brought over. "Garrus and I alternated covering the entrances – he's another sniper – and EDI controlled the GARDIAN laser towers so they couldn't just bomb us from orbit."

"It doesn't sound that difficult," Genesis said cautiously.

She snorted."Of course it doesn't. You've never been under siege so you've got no idea what I'm talking about." She threw one arm over the back of the booth and ignored his scowl. "Reapers troops don't sleep, eat, or feel remorse at crawling over their own dead. Eight days of vigilance in the dark, constantly fighting sleep, husks screaming the whole time..." She shook her head at the memory. "I could barely unwrap my hands from my rifle by the time air support cleared the way for evac. I barely even knew what planet I was on by then."

"Did the five hundred make it?" Angeal asked.
"They did," she said with pride. Most of them probably died when the Citadel fell a month later, but nobody here needed to know about that.

Genesis released a long breath and finished off his drink. The weight of Sephiroth's stare didn't leave her.

"Well, I'm still reeling from having a plane land on me, to be honest," Angeal said, scratching the back of his neck and looking at her sympathetically.

"Surely you can do better than that," she said quietly, trying to regain her enthusiasm for joking. "Can't you?"

He chuckled dryly. "Once, I told Genesis I didn't like Loveless."

"And that's where the northern crater came from," she finished for him.

"Oh, hilarious," Genesis said, crossing his arms and scowling at the two of them. "Most impressive fight. Not simple difficulty, but grandeur." He narrowed his eyes at her. "And we've already heard about the eight day siege; you can't use that one twice. Or is that the best you've got?"

She snorted. Then she grinned and got out her Omni-tool.

"I could tell war stories all day, but I don't have to. I have footage." She called up the video she was looking for. A small holographic screen projected out of the Omni-tool.

"Meet Kalros," she said with a lazy smile.

The wastelands of Tuchunka flickered to life, broken and barren under a furious sun. A Reaper stood guard before a thin tower. The echoing blasts of its laser made the Omni-tool shake. Then a strange hiss crackled through the speakers, and Kalros sprung up from the earth, the mother of all thresher maws, a huge armoured worm that tackled the Reaper to the ground. It was only a short clip, filmed from one of the fighter ships of Artimic Wing as the Reaper tried to evade the giant thresher.

In a moment that always made Shepard happy, Kalros' length coiled around the Reaper, crushing its legs and hull like it were a mere insect and then dragged its broken corpse deep underground.

The clip ended, and she sighed in satisfaction.

"Goddess," Genesis whispered.

"Are you that tiny speck?" Sephiroth asked, leaning forward to point at the frozen picture.

"No, that's Garrus," she said, skipping through the frames and then pointing. "I am this speck here." They were just tiny dots next to the two titans wrestling in the air.

Genesis recovered himself. "It doesn't count."

"What!" she exclaimed.

"You didn't kill it; the worm did. It wasn't your fight."

"The hell it wasn't," she said.

"What is that thing?" Sephiroth asked, still starring in fascination at the holographic screen. "The metal one? Is that... some type of Geth?"
"Oh no, that's a Reaper."

"You held *those* off for eight days?"

"We held them off for almost a year, in fact. But let's not talk about that." She finished her drink. "You've got enough war on your hands already."
The First Strike

Shepard ducked a speeding spike of ice, then flung out her hand and lobbed a fireball. Genesis scoffed, and a shield flickered into existence around him. The flames licked harmlessly over its gleaming surface, and his new coat fluttered in the blast of heat.

He lifted his hand, and she felt the familiar surge of gravity misbehaving in the air around her. It was her turn to scoff. Electric blue light rimmed the edges of her vision, and she jerked gravity back into its proper place.

He instantly followed up with a blast of lightning, stalking around her like a predator. He lobbed magical poison at her, followed by a rain of ice spears and then a fireball of his own.

Her shields absorbed the barrage, and she spun to keep him in her line of sight. Her materia was singing in her bracer. She hurled a blast of ice to meet his fireball head on. The fire died, the ice cracked, and then a wave of melted ice water smacked Genesis in the face.

The spar came to a grinding halt. He stumbled back, spluttering and shaking water out of his hair, before sending her a particularly displeased frown.

"Should have dodged," she said.

Not deigning to reply, he moved to the benches on one side of the room and found a towel. Her gun was propped up against a bench there, alongside his new red sword. Assuming that meant the fight was over, she followed and began unhooking the materia bracer he had lent to her. Finding one that would fit around her armour had proved nearly impossible until he had stepped forward and produced one from the depths of his personal collection.

She held it out to him.

"Keep it," he said, rubbing his hair down with a towel. "And the materia inside. I suspect you'll have use of them soon enough."

"These are expensive," she objected. She had tried to buy some of her own at first, but even months of a Shinra salary couldn't purchase much more than a couple of common unlevelled materia.

He flicked his damp hair dismissively. "Not that expensive. And you've levelled up most of them yourself, so you've earned it."

She thanked him and reattached the bracer to her wrist. The coal-coloured metal fit snugly around her left forearm and didn't interfere with any of her armour's functions. Without medi-gel, something she still couldn't synthesise from the materials on hand, Cure was a life saver.

He leaned back against the waist-high bench and gave her a speculative look.

"You've caught up. Your proficiency is exactly what is expected of a SOLDIER Second Class." He smiled. "It's almost a shame you've just been promoted to First."

She shook her head and wondered how long it would take before he stopped being so impressed with his own rank.

"I'll get there. Sooner or later," she said, stretching her shoulders. It wasn't as though she lacked for chances to practice.
He hummed in thought.

"Why aren't you getting the final enhancements?" he asked after a minute of companionable silence. He hadn't been so insistent on the wonders of the enhancements after his latest round of injections, but he still didn't understand her hesitance. "It would help improve your magical control."

"It would kill me first." She leaned against the bench next to him and crossed her arms.

"But aren't you human? You should have enough resistance by now." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Or do you just look human?"

"I am human," she sighed. This conversation had gotten old a long time ago. "But it's more complicated than that. Whatever Mako is, I am not designed to have it pumped into me." She was designed to kill reapers, little more than that. Miranda would probably have a fit if she ever heard that Shepard had gotten any enhancements at all and messed up Cerberus' hard work. "And besides, it messes with my biotics."

"I suppose it is unlikely that a person from a different planet, even if human, would have the same reactions as a native to Gaia," he said grudgingly.

"Precisely," she said, glad to see the subject dropped. She took a drink of water and re-examined her materia. They would make a useful addition to her arsenal, though she wouldn't be using much of the offensive ones. Flare didn't have as much punch as an incendiary burst, and overload did a better job of frying electronics than lightning materia. But they made good backups, and if anything should ever happen to her Omni-tool, they would be vital.

She looked up and found Genesis staring at her. She quirked an eyebrow at him.

"If the three friends are the same person, then who wins the duel?" he asked.

She blinked twice. "What?"

"Now that I know why your perspective is so unusual, I would like to hear more of it," he said with an indifferent shrug.

It took her a moment to catch up. "You're talking about Loveless again, aren't you?"

He huffed in disappointment.

"You suggested the three friends of lore are in fact a single person: Wanderer, Prisoner, and Hero, all in one." He was no less passionate on the subject than he had been the first time she'd gotten this lecture, months ago now. "The play ends with a duel between two of them. Who fights? Who wins? And what of the tragically parted lovers?"

"I haven't finished reading it yet," she hedged. She had actually given up entirely, but telling him that would earn her a much longer lecture.

"The end is missing," he explained impatiently. "The duel's conclusion is down to interpretation. I am asking you who the winner will be."

"I suppose that depends on who's reading it, if it's down to interpretation." She shrugged, wondering why her opinion on the subject was so important.

"Stop being difficult."
"I'm being difficult? You said we were going to practice materia, not analyse poetry." She crossed her arms again. "You promised me something unusual, yet all we've done so far is standard training."

"Fine. I'll ask again later." He flicked open his own bracer and pulled out a red orb. He held it out to her. "This is yours."

"You think I can control it now?" She took it and felt the same touch of warmth from the marble as she had the first time she'd picked it up, though stronger now. The materia was unchanged; she had just learned to sense it properly.

"I have no idea," he said, instinctively stepping back when she picked it up. "But you have enough strength and control that it might permit you to try."

She fitted it into her bracer.

"So what do I do?" she moved back into the centre of the training room.

He remained against the wall.

"A summon is a living creature, with no obligation to follow your orders unless it deigns to do so. As you call on it, it will decide what it thinks of you," he said, still leaning back against the bench with his arms crossed. "How hard it chooses to fight on your orders will be decided by that alone."

"What does it want? What is it getting out of the deal?" She examined the faint glow at her wrist. It felt more… present than other materia. They all had a weight to them, like a weapon resting on her back. This felt more alive despite being motionless, like a large animal breathing deeply in its sleep.

"Each summon is different, but they are fighters by nature," he said. "Some crave combat and fight like brutes regardless of who is giving the orders; others deign to fight but seem to resent being woken at all. Some are very hard to please and have idealistic tendencies. Set Ifrit on a defenceless child, and he'll devour it without hesitation. Ask the same of Shiva, and she will shake her head at you in disappointment."

So not a weapon then, an ally.

"What's the Phoenix like?" she asked.

"I've never seen it in person, but it's a symbol of rebirth, neither inherently good nor inherently evil."

"All right. What do I do?" she asked, getting ready to activate it.

"Open it up and see," he said with a smile, stepping closer to the wall.

She fixed him with a look. "This is a trap, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "Your character will speak for itself. All that remains is to see whether or not the Phoenix approves of you. If it does, then congratulations. If it doesn't..." he let the sentence linger and his smile grew sharp, "...then it's a good thing you have your ice equipped."

She shook her head and looked again at the materia. No time like the present.

She took a breath and activated it. The same slight itch that came with biotics tingled in the back of her mind, the sensation of controlling something beyond your own body.

The materia pulsed, warmth leaving the orb and pouring into the air. She held her arm out.
There was a faint hiss, like oxygen feeding a small fire. Red light flared and arced out of the bracer. Long strands of flame whirled up into the air, spinning around a single point high above her head and radiating waves of sweltering heat. She barely resisted the urge to step back. The strong smell of ozone with a touch of burnt plastic wafted through the room. The tiles on the floor blackened and cracked under the heat.

The whirling point of fire exploded outward, and two massive wings of red flame spread wide with a loud trill of victory.

The Phoenix spun several times, seemingly taking joy in its freedom and the ability to stretch its wings. Finally, it settled in place, twirling lightly with its long streaming tails of fire flickering around it.

It wasn't going to be very useful if it insisted on this extended ritual of fluffing around every time she needed help.

A fathomless black eye settled on her, and the Phoenix hissed like a sputtering fire just fed new fuel. She stood at her full height.

"I am Commander Shepard," she said, "and I need your help."

It trilled sharply, and the flames roared higher. One of the long streams of its tail lashed out and wrapped around her wrist. It tried to pull her nearer, but she yanked back, spinning the creature around her. The flames tightened around her wrist, sputtering uselessly against her armour. The flames surged, its wings angling around her as it threw itself at her.

With a cry, she threw up a biotic barrier, trying to push it back and get some space, more air before it was all burnt up.

Heat waves distorted her vision, and she could see nothing but red, the burning summon wrapping itself around her and roaring like a house burning to the ground.

Or like a frigate being blown apart by the cannons of the Collector ship.

The smell of super-heated ablative plating filled the air, and her head grew light. She threw her arms out, forcing the Phoenix back with her biotics before she could be smothered. The air was choking and flames flickered a searing blue, icy blue like the snow-covered surface of Alchera. She gasped, suffocating and flailing uselessly with a severed oxygen line, the Normandy's burning hull falling around her, broken by forces she could never overcome.

Her vision darkened, the endless black of space waiting to engulf her.

No. No.

She shook her head against it and grit her teeth. She had overcome those forces. Gasping to life in a Cerberus facility. Staring down the Reapers, defying them. Killing them.

Her biotics exploded with a roar. The flames drew back, red again. She doubled her efforts, dragging oxygen into her lungs with great gasping breaths. The flames licked along her biotics and were forced away.

The Phoenix trilled and coyly unwrapped itself from around her, her biotics refusing to give way before the tongues of fire.

Panting, she drew herself up to her full height, her back straight and her breath laboured. It watched
her, careful black eyes calmly assessing her.

"I am Commander Shepard," she thundered, pushing the weight of all she had lived through into her words, "Spectre, SOLDIER, N7 operative, Hero of the Citadel. Killer of the Reapers." She said it with bared teeth. "And I need your help."

It cocked its head at her and floated at a distance, flames hissing softly.

Those were her terms. She didn't command; she didn't give orders to those who weren't under her. She asked for its help, but demanded its respect. It studied her, its gaze oddly cold for a creature of fire. It reminded her, bizarrely, of Miranda. Sleek poise and ruthless confidence, intelligence and blind assumptions all wrapped up in a body most would never look beyond.

It drifted closer to the ground and drew near again at a more sedate pace. She lifted her chin in challenge. The flames were cooler now but alarmingly close. It trilled softly, bobbing its head in a bird-like gesture she couldn't interpret. Then it simply faded away into ash, and the materia at her wrist felt warm again.

She had a new ally.

Her shoulders drooped. She hadn't even noticed the drain on her reserves.

Genesis was staring at her.

"What?" She swallowed through her parched throat.

"Normally you have to conquer a Summon." He approached, looking speculatively at her bracer. "Typically in a more literal sense."

"Why didn't you say so?" she said with a huff. She could have shot at it, but she'd already discovered that didn't work very well. Throwing warps felt like a dubious method of recruitment.

"I wanted to see what you would do," he said with a smile that was definitely laughing at her. "I've never seen anyone ask politely before."

"I can't call it back and challenge it to a spar now." It had already agreed to fight for her. She'd felt its acceptance as it returned to the bracer. Acceptance and curiosity. The creature of fire and ash that lived in a marble thought she was weird.

"No, of course not. I think you surprised him. I'm fascinated to see what sort of results he gives you."

"She," she said, pausing to think it over. "It is a 'she.'"

"If you say so," he said, his eyes narrowed and fixed on her, "'Hero of the Citadel.'"

She should have seen that coming. She ignored him and walked back to the side of the room.

"Feel free to explain yourself, Hero," he said, following her.

"I'd rather not." She put her compacted rifle on her back. It was a title she had earned, but boasting about it when the Citadel was probably in ruins somewhere felt wrong. And his romanticised idea of heroics made her want to deny the word altogether.

"So you're just making it up then," he said in challenge, returning his sword to his hip.

"You are free to think so."
"Oh, come on! You can't say something like that and then turn coy," he spat, crossing his arms petulantly.

"I didn't say it to you." Come to think of it the Phoenix probably didn't know what it meant either. Still, it was the spirit of the name that mattered.

"What did you do? Defeat someone in dramatic single combat? A duel, perhaps?"

She snorted and gave him a dull look.

"Do I look like I go around duelling people?" she said with arms stretched at either side of her. She preferred to fight half a kilometre away from the action, for goodness' sake.

He scowled and shook a finger at her. "I will get it out of you sooner or later."

"Uh-huh." She crossed her arms and smiled.

He sighed and shook his head.

"Well, this was… fascinating," he said, still eyeing her suspiciously before he dropped his indignation and gave a small smile. "Though I suppose it brings an end to our training sessions."

"Thanks for all this. I really appreciate it."

"Not at all. I've always enjoyed a challenge," he said airily.

She snorted and shook her head. "I'll see you tomorrow." She clapped him on the shoulder and made for the door.

"What's happening tomorrow?" he called after her.

"Meeting, in Sephiroth's office," she said over her shoulder.

"Hmm, of course. Do you know what it's about?"

"Something about the invasion, I suppose."

Sephiroth stood on the bridge of a warship and studied the Wutai coast in the grey light of early morning, with its hidden defences, fortified rises, and the black barrels of heavy artillery set into the hills. His eyes swept over the rough and unaccommodating beaches, lined with stakes and barbed wire and harsh currents that would sweep away any ships that tried to moor.

He could almost taste the brittle anticipation of a fight settling over the Shinra fleet. Carrion birds flocked overhead – even they could sense the tension in the air and knew they would eat well soon enough. Naval officers shouted orders and the sailors moved on command, but silence had fallen over most of the army and SOLDIERs. Fear shone in the eyes of many, infantry and enhanced alike.

Sephiroth took a deep breath and soaked in the tense silence. Would the Wutai be the same? Was fear settling over the men guarding the beach? The silence wouldn't last, but he would give the Wutai something to fear.

His fingers twitched for the comfort of his blade. His sword was at his waist, and it was with great restraint he refrained from drawing it. There was no need yet, and the men would become unnerved if he drew it before the enemy were within range. There would be no lack of combat today.
He was ready for this fight: the havoc of combat, the rush of adrenaline, the perfect stillness he felt while fighting, cutting down the enemy before they saw him coming, his blade singing through the air. A dance he knew intimately; those who didn't know the steps would be left bleeding onto the pebbled beach.

"Sir."

"Guzzard." He nodded at the SOLDIER who came and stood next to him. The crews of the ships kept to themselves and the SOLDIERs did the same. The navy and the army were technically united under Director Heidegger, but they weren't Sephiroth's men.

This operation had seen him assume much control over the marine forces. He had needed to in order to pull off the massive endeavour he watched unfolding on the ocean around them.

The Wutai coast was rough and inhospitable. The natives were clearly hoping the geographical defences of their homeland would do most of the work. They should have known better. Shinra never let nature's designs get in the way.

"So that's what you were being so secretive about," Guzzard said, eyeing the giant concrete docks being towed towards the beaches. Prefabricated breakwaters, pier heads, and jetties all built on land and then towed from the western continent across the channel.

"There was no convenient harbour for the landing, so we had to bring one ourselves," he said, watching engineers and technicians work to arrange everything for the swiftest and smoothest landing possible.

A substantial amount of money was tied up in this manoeuvre, quantities the directors would normally kill for. The President had needed a lot of convincing, but he'd argued that there was no point in declaring a war if he wasn't prepared to spend the money needed to wage it. As far as anyone else knew, this was his idea. The one who suggested it to him insisted she not be credited.

Shepard was worth her weight in gold. Apparently, this strategy was first used by someone called 'Churchill.' She had been amused to be using it herself, for some reason. It was something about the 'Normandy Landings', though he didn't see why you would use a spaceship in conjunction with a strategy like this. She didn't deign to explain herself.

"Think it'll work?" Guzzard asked, eyeing a breakwater tied to a barge.

"I wouldn't have sunk so many resources into it if I didn't," he said, desperately hoping this gamble paid off. They could land thousands of men in a single morning and get a major foothold in Wutai if it did. They would lose a lot more than money if it didn't.

"Here's to hoping." Guzzard rolled his shoulders, his claymore on his back. He looked around, observing the SOLDIERs on deck and those visible on the surrounding ships. Taking note of who was where. And, more significantly, who wasn't there at all.

Angeal was still in Midgar. He would be part of the second wave of the invasion, but for now he was guarding HQ. Half of SOLDIER was involved in the first wave, but a couple of faces were noticeably unaccounted for.

Guzzard gave Sephiroth an inscrutable look and then watched the beach again.

"We're short-handed," he said.

"No, we aren't," he replied, carefully keeping his face blank.
He skipped past the questions he wouldn't ask and Sephiroth wouldn't answer. "Gonna give a speech?" he asked instead.

"No."

"Shame," he said, scratching his stubble. "I could have done with some inspiration."

"You'll have to supply your own."

He snorted. "Ever invaded an island before?"

"Have you?" he replied. They both knew perfectly well that neither of them had.

"Nope. And that cannon doesn't look very friendly." The heavy artillery sticking out of the bunkers, lodged in the side of the hill made for a foreboding sight. They were just out of range. The quiet wouldn't last for much longer.

"That isn't your concern," Sephiroth said, staring down the Wutai defences.

"I sure as hell hope someone is concerned about it," he muttered.

"Are you scared, Sergeant Guzzard?"

"Bloody terrified, Sir," he said plainly. "You?"

"Of course not," he said stiffly.

"Of course not," Guzzard repeated.

Sephiroth wanted to scowl at him, but the ship's captain was close enough to hear their conversation.

"You have your orders," he said. "We need the lower batteries along the beach disabled before we can bring the bulk of the infantry ashore. They will be cut to pieces otherwise."

Most of the infantry were undeniably better than they had been. They still needed some shielding, but they were a vital part of this invasion.

"It'll cut us to pieces too."

"Try ducking," he replied.

"Good idea, sir," Guzzard said gruffly. "Don't know why I didn't think of that."

Sephiroth refrained from pursing his lips like a vexed secretary. Guzzard was from a different generation of SOLDIER. The last of the old guard, really. He was reliable, trustworthy, and dangerous when he needed to be. Sephiroth also found him very irritating.

They both knew Guzzard had been passed over for General, though the two of them had never talked about it. He was never insubordinate, and he followed orders to the letter. But as someone with much more experience than Sephiroth, Guzzard had a way of acting as though he was humouring him. It wasn't anything he could punish him for, or even tell him to stop because what was he actually doing?

It was nothing more than a persistent air of 'this will be your fault when it all goes wrong.' No wonder Shepard liked him.
"How long did it take before Fort Condor learned to fear SOLDIER?" Sephiroth asked grimly, his eyes on the beach again. The rat-tat-tat of artillery fire had started, the ships closest to the shore finally within range. His heart rate increased. It was almost time.

"They still don't."

"I bet I'll take out one of the heavy cannons before you do," Genesis said, tapping his foot on the floor of the small plane and adjusting the straps of his parachute. Outside the first glimmer of dawn was just starting to crest the horizon, while heavy clouds amassed in the west.

"I'll take that bet," Shepard replied, doing that same. Whoever had designed the parachutes had clearly assumed she would be wearing standard SOLDIER armour, instead of slick interlocking plate armour. It had taken a lot of adjustments to ensure she could still get at her gun while wearing it. "Loser shouts the first round of beers when we get back."

"I don't drink beer," He said, crossing his arms, and then uncrossing them to readjust the straps again. He didn't like the way they pulled at his coat. "You suffer from such poor taste."

Genesis made inane and petty conversation when he was nervous. She humoured it. So long as he was focused when they got on the ground he could bicker as much as he liked ahead of time.

"ETA five minutes." The pilot's voice crackled over the plane's intercom.

Genesis took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

She reflexively took another look at the map on her Omni-tool. The fleet should already be halfway across the channel by now, premade harbour in tow. She studied the layout of defences behind enemy lines. Out of sight from the shore, batteries of mortars and cannons would lob shells over the Wutai fortifications onto anyone trying to storm the beach.

All the Wutai defences faced the ocean. Nobody watched the skies or roads leading inland.

With a flick of her wrist she deactivated the Omni-tool. She had already taken the time to memorise all the available information, EDI wasn't here to add any last minute updates.

"Why do you get to be in charge?" Genesis said, adjusting his earpiece, "I've been in SOLDIER for longer."

"When did you last sneak behind enemy lines and take out a base?" She checked that his radio was linked to her Omni-tool.

"Friday," he said, sending one last scowl at the parachute on his back. Technically, SOLDIERs of their level should be able to survive a fall from this height, but that assumed they didn't pass out from oxygen deprivation, that they fell and landed with perfect technique on flat ground, and that nobody was shooting at them.

"Simulations don't count," She said.

Final checks were done. With a nod he verified he was ready. She rolled her shoulders and radioed the pilot.

The cargo ramp opened before them and the howl of wind filled the compartment, pulling at them. The fields of Wutai raced past far below.
The two SOLDIERs jumped.
Chapter 30

Shepard landed with a thud, quickly reeling in her parachute. She looked around, checking to see if they had been spotted. Claxons carried through the air, but it was impossible to tell if they were on account of the two parachutes or the Shinra fleet in general.

She stowed her parachute under some nearby scrub and drew her rifle from its place on her back.

Genesis landed behind her and stowed his parachute next to hers. His nervous chatter from the plane was gone. Now his eyes cut across the landscape, alert and focused.

They were beyond the northern end of the beach, with a steep hill between them and where the fleet would land. The biggest cannons were buried in bunkers on the other side of that same hill, facing out toward the slowly approaching Shinra fleet. Further inland sat what had once been the tiny fishing village of Wukan and now housed Wutai troops. A procession of army trucks ran along the road towards the beach. Her Omni-tool picked up and translated contextless radio orders.

Shinra propaganda spoke of murderous ninjas, but Wutai also had a substantial standing army.

What looked to Shepard's eyes like trench mortars, were arranged just behind the rise, facing the hidden beach beyond. The defences looked solid, set up in staggered lines towards the rise. The large cannons at either end of the beach silently began to turn, taking aim as Shinra's fleet entered their range.

With a shared nod the two SOLDIERs set off, moving swiftly and staying low. Shepard led the way and tried to supress the thrill of sneaking behind enemy lines; stealth was one of her specializations and she'd spent years learning the art of it. She spared a glance for Genesis. His bright red coat whipped about in the chill sea breeze. It was a wonder he hadn't been shot out of the sky. He had permission for his frankly ridiculous coat, despite her protests. Arguing with him over wardrobe choices – even suicidal ones – was an impossible fight.

The wind sighed in over the rise, bringing the salty smell of the ocean. The crash of the surf underscored the shouted orders of men desperately preparing to hold off an invasion.

They raced around the heavily fortified hill that marked the northern end of the beach, making the most of the small beaten trees to stay out of sight. The barrels of the large cannons loomed overhead.

With a deafening BOOM they fired. The tearing sound of impact echoed back.

The two SOLDIERs paused, hiding in a small copse of weathered trees. The bunker and cannons were set in the hill almost directly above them.

"Ready?" Shepard asked, her back to a tree and her rifle a steady weight in her hands.

Genesis smiled and drew his sword. "Naturally."

The cannons fired again. Orders for the mortar installations filtered through her Omni-tool.

"Wait until you're at least past the first couple of batteries," she said, checking through the trees again. "When you're far enough–"
"Then I'll draw the gaze of every ninja in Wutai," he finished for her. The materia in his bracer were already giving off a dull glow.

She snorted. "Break a leg." She thumped him on the arm.

He smiled sharply and left the cover of the trees, heading directly for the largest artillery batteries.

Shepard looked up at the hill. It promised one hell of a climb. She activated her tactical cloak and began the hike, steely determination in her steps. This took her back, before the Reapers, before even the *Normandy*, to the days when she was just an N7 operative with a rifle and a target.

Halfway up the rugged hill, an explosion tore through the air behind her. A quick glance showed someone in a red coat sprinting along the rise and throwing massive fireballs and bursts of lightning in every direction. The slight glimmer of a barrier gleamed around him. Nearly a dozen ninjas were sprinting after him, and his trail of destruction was impressive.

And Sephiroth had feared he wouldn't be enough of a distraction.

"*Throw fireballs, slice through mortars, whatever it takes. Get their attention and keep it,*" she had said at the briefing. "*Make the biggest mess possible.*"

Clearly he was following his orders with gusto.

She smiled and kept climbing. Ninjas were guarding the winding path up to the bunker, most scowling at the disruption below. She moved through waist high tussock, weaving between the Wutai without a sound. Her tactical cloak flickered out so she kept close to the ground.

Below, the fleet was well within range of most of the now – courtesy of Genesis – disrupted defences. The artificial harbour started to anchor, making a calm pocket in a rough and treacherous coastline.

The *BOOMs* of the large cannons grew near deafening as she approached her target. Smaller cannons set up on the other side of the beach fired in echoing blasts. Lifeboats swarmed around several sinking ships. Soon Shinra's armies would come spewing out onto Wutai soil. She was running out of time.

She reached the bunker, silently stalking up to the door and drawing her Omni-blade. A simple door was the only entrance, riveted steel bolted into the concrete and hidden off to the side. The black barrels of the cannons stuck out several meters beyond the concrete walls and rocked back with massive recoil. Making no effort to hide, she sliced through the lock with her Omni-blade, and the door swung upon, grating on rusted hinges.

Cries of surprise went up inside, and she hurled a crushing biotic blast in reply. The row of technicians manning the cannons slammed back against the wall with a painful crunch. She ducked, dodging a ninja's blade that struck at her from her side, and then spun and buried her Omni-blade between his ribs.

Bullets ricocheted off her armour, and she threw a second biotic blast, slamming the remaining Wutai against the mechanism of the cannon. The room fell silent, while outside a cry went up.

She turned and threw an incendiary burst at the door, effectively melting it shut and eliciting a cry of outrage from the other side. She cast a grim look around the room, then grabbed one of the heavy tables from the far side of the bunker and pushed it in front of the door. That would have to do for now.
She spun back to the cannons, one large one with two smaller barrels integrated into it. With no one operating them, they sat cooling, their truly huge shells piled in a corner. There was no convenient screen or keypad, instead hulking controls and gears loomed over the room. She scowled at it and took hold of the clunky controls.

With a keen eye on the surf below, she aimed the cannon at the opposite end of the beach, the barrel slowly turning with a creak. The design assumed a whole team of technicians would be operating it, but she made do and then blocked her ears.

The cannons slammed back in recoil, gears and pulleys shifting to accommodate it. The stench of sulphur filled the room as the cannons on the opposite end of the beach exploded. The smaller cannons were housed in much larger bunkers filled with Wutai infantry. With the big guns down and the bunker ruptured, their cover was gone.

In the choppy surf below, the landing began. She drew her black widow and stood at one of the slits in the wall, resting the end of the rifle on the concrete.

Behind her she could hear impacts against the fused-shut door. She frowned in consideration, and then threw a biotic blast at the cannon's gears, forcibly knocking them askew.

Her Omni-tool pinged.

"Shepard," Genesis' voice sounded breathless, "I could--" clanging impacts interrupted him, the sound of metal clashing against metal, "I could use some cover."

It took her a moment to find Genesis, cornered beyond the rise near the opposite end of the beach. He stood with his back to a wall in a ruined mortar installation, locked in combat with the seething ninjas who threw themselves at him. She narrowed her eyes at the Leviathan insignia on their armour.

She fired, her rifle punched into her shoulder, and a ninja fell, his shield flickering out over his corpse. She pulled the trigger twice more in quick succession and took grim satisfaction that the remaining ninjas scrambled for cover.

If they didn't know about the SOLDIER with a gun before, they certainly did now.

"Thank you," Genesis said over the radio, she could see him straightening his soot-covered coat.

She turned her sights to the rest of the beach, now filled with the havoc of combat. The first wave of Shinra's ships lay grounded, and SOLDIERS leapt into the shallows. Infantrymen followed, far less bold as they scrambled under direct fire. Artillery raged constant, some bullets deflected by glowing shields of materia, others tearing through the men unhindered. Blood soaked into the sand and leached into the harbour.

"Get to the batteries on the southern end of the beach; they're tearing through the infantry," she said to Genesis, sending a critical look over the battlefield below.

"Then I shall gladly rescue them," he said, still short of breath. He quickly swallowed a healing potion and set off. Explosions of fire and lightning lit up once again behind the Wutai lines.

The banging against the bunker door grew more insistent. A quick glance showed dents in its thick surface.

She turned back to the beach. Bullets flew, materia attacks lit up the air, and shields glimmered to life and died away.
Sephiroth landed, his sword shining bright silver in the morning sun and the matching wealth of silver hair unmistakable.

He crossed the beach in a flash, leaving Guzzard trekking behind him.

Sephiroth reached the lower defences, cutting through the barbed wire and the men behind it with ease. The bullets he couldn't dodge were soaked up in a thick barrier that flickered around him. He moved with finesse, a vicious grace, as though this were just a dance and the Wutai partners who couldn't keep up. Even as arcs of blood slashed through the air around him, he fought with a fluidity she hadn't seen since Tha–

She pulled the trigger with a scowl and blocked out idle musings as she dropped two ninjas.

"Sephiroth, there's a dip at three o'clock with two Crescent Unit ninjas in it," she said into her Omni-tool, tuned now to Shinra's radio frequencies.

He smoothly turned right, and met the ninjas head on.

"Where else?" he replied, his blade deflecting the attacks of the first and slicing through the neck of the second.

"Twenty meters, twelve o'clock. There's a ninja with a Summon."

A spike of ice broke up through the ground and Shiva burst out of it, a cold mist billowing around her. Sephiroth flashed across the beach, powerful materia making his sword glow.

She left him to it. Guzzard was ploughing through the lower defences on the beach, clearly in for the long haul. He punched through the enemy with dogged determination, protecting the troopers behind him.

"Eight o'clock, Guzzard, there's a heavy machine gun." He cast a huge barrier over the infantry unit and launched himself at the artillery, swinging his claymore with a great bellow that roared through the radio.

There was a creaking groan behind her, and her head snapped up to see the door being smashed in. She ducked out of sight and felt for her materia, the orb filled with life thrumming against her fingers.

With a mental push, the Phoenix arced out of the materia, trilling and spinning through the air.

"Hey, focus! There isn't a lot of time," she snapped. No time for a fiery song and dance today. A hail of bullets crashed into the wall opposite the door, the Wutai making use of the small gap they'd managed to force open. The Phoenix sputtered like a doused fire, and her flames calmed a little. Fathomless black eyes focused on Shepard, and she hissed in question.

"Keep them out," she said, pointing at the door. The gunfire stopped and with a grating screech the door edged further open. "I need you to watch my back. Kill anyone who tries to break in."

The Phoenix roared like a fire fed new oxygen and streaked out one of the eye-height slits in the side of the wall. Cries of pain sounded from behind the door before an explosion rocked the bunker and burning red filled the crack. Waves of heat poured into the room.

The Phoenix trilled in vicious triumph.

Shepard turned back to her rifle and the battlefield below. She gave cover where it was needed, slowly but surely emptying the remaining defences and presiding over the chaos.
Sephiroth smashed through a spike of ice and deflected the rain of frozen spears that followed. Shiva was silent, ghosting over the blood-soaked sand in a wave of thin blue mist.

His eyes remained fixed on her as he stalked through the growing forest of frozen spikes. He heard the ninja running at him from behind and the Wutai trooper reloading a shotgun to his right, and he smiled.

Lightning sped from his sword and slammed into Shiva just before he spun and impaled the ninja charging him. His shields soaked up shotgun blasts and his sword flashed out, slicing through the gun and the abdomen of the man holding it.

The trooper stumbled back with a spray of blood and began a stumbling run. Sephiroth cut him down before he took another step.

Then it was Sephiroth's turn to leap aside as ice stabbed up through the ground and razor sharp shards flew at him. Shiva snarled and kept up a constant barrage of attacks. A hail of bullets joined the frozen projectiles. He blocked and then recast his shield. Some of the ice shards he deflected away, others shattered into a rain of smaller sharp projectiles that imbedded in his skin. Shiva was backing him into a dip in the sand. He snarled and pushed back, sending a mastered bolt of lightning at the growing wall of ice.

It exploded, and he leapt forward, slashing at the Summon. She ghosted back but underestimated his reach. His blade sliced through the ice defences she tried to raise and stabbed her through the stomach.

She gasped in pain, and then shattered in a rain of ice. A ninja hiding behind a metal shield twenty meters away cried out, and the red glow at his wrist faded.

The ninjas saw the Summon fail and charged him. He spun in place and parried a downward strike, throwing the Wutai back.

His enemies fell before him, blood spraying through the air and soaking into the sand. There was a rhythm to the fight, a pulsing in his blood as he spun to dodge, slash, and stab at the ninjas. The screaming chaos of battle was everywhere as Shinra and Wutai soldiers alike fell, but he found calm in the midst of it. His sword cut through the air and found the weak places in Wutai armour and swordsmanship.

Screams of pain and gunfire made a deafening cacophony, and the jagged motions of people in their death throes jerked in the sand, but to him all was still. His enemy charged, and he moved in time with the battle. He revelled in his mastery, footwork and swordsmanship a craft he knew intimately.

Soon he stood at the height of the rise. Shinra's infantry and SOLDIERs surged up the beach behind him and Wutai troops and ninjas charged before him. For a moment, all felt calm and perfect, and he breathed it in.

This was where he belonged. This was what he was made for.

He leapt forward and met the charging Wutai head-on. The black widow's thunderous bark was indistinguishable in the havoc, but Wutai were shot down in dramatic explosions nonetheless. The ninjas swarmed him, hoping to overpower him with numbers if not skill, but their ranks were thinned by the sniper before they even reached him.

An explosion up on the hill thundered through the air. A resplendent Phoenix arced around the bunker, setting the long tussock on fire and roaring a wordless battle cry. The ninjas trying to scale
the outside of their own bunker burned to a crisp.

Sephiroth grinned, flicked blood off his blade, and faced those who still stood against him.

The fighting ended just before sundown. The surviving Wutai troops either fled or died trying. Very few surrendered.

Wukan village was claimed by Shinra, the first to fall. The ships that had held back during the initial landing now docked in the manufactured harbour and hundreds of workers came ashore. Immediately, they set to work carving out landing strips, setting up a base and communication lines with the mainland.

Genesis sat heavily on a large chunk of broken concrete that must have been blasted out when the lower bunkers were destroyed. He faced the surf, the town and the setting sun behind him. The clouds glowed red, and golden light reflected off the calm ocean.

The water gleamed a dark red.

Medics roamed the beach before him, a constant procession of stretchers going between the battlefield and the makeshift infirmary. Groans of pain and pleas for help still trembled through the air.

Genesis was no medic; there was little help he could provide.

Shepard was down there, scanning the injured with her Omni-tool and holding it out so the medic next to her could read the results. Her grim expression conveyed the severity of the troopers' injuries.

Guzzard slowly lowered himself onto the concrete next to him, giving a tired sigh. His claymore was clean on his back, but his uniform was torn and burnt in places.

The golden light faded away. Genesis didn't know how long he had been sitting there. Columns of smoke rose high into the sky; there would be no stars tonight.

"You're hurt," Guzzard said.

"Barely," Genesis replied instinctively.

Guzzard looked sceptical. "There's blood pouring down your leg."

Genesis looked down and found he was telling the truth. Drying blood trailed from a slash on the outside of this thigh in a thick line down his trousers and over his boots. He hadn't felt much of anything since he'd completely drained his mana reserves during the last hour of the fight. He'd finished the battle with just his sword and slowly tunnelling vision.

"The mako will take care of it soon enough," he said with a shrug. The cut might even have been poisoned, but the mako in his veins would take care of that as well.

Guzzard shrugged. "Don't blame me when you die of infection."

He pursed his lips and traced the wound. It was quite deep, and he felt a sting at the contact. Maybe it did need some attention. Without thinking, he tried to push mana into his cure materia. His vision went black, and suddenly he didn't know which way was up. He blinked the darkness back from his eyes and found he was being held upright by Guzzard.

"Want me to get you a medic?" he asked.
Genesis swatted him away. "I don't need help." He shook his head and then regretted it as it sent his mind and vision swimming. He blinked stubbornly and sat up rigidly. His leg wasn't bleeding anymore, at least. "Your face is covered in blood, you go see a medic."

"It's not mine." Guzzard scratched at his buzz-cut hair, and dried flakes of blood floated to the ground.

"Just as well," Genesis sighed, slouching from the upright posture he didn't have the energy to maintain any longer. He tilted his head back to see the sky instead of the blood-stained sand. "They have enough on their hands."

Guzzard was silent for a moment, massaging the back of his head with his hand. Maybe he'd been hit; severe bruises wouldn't have healed yet, not even with First Class enhancements. There were SOLDIERs dying on the beach as well as infantryman and Wutai.

"We're just doing the job. Just following orders," Guzzard said quietly, his eyes glued to the beach. "It's not your fault."

Genesis looked at him and frowned. "Of course it's not my fault. What are you talking about?"

Guzzard snorted and shook his head. Then grabbed a small flask from his pocket and took a deep draught before offering him the bottle.

Genesis took it and threw back a gulp, not stopping to question the wisdom of it. He coughed at the burn that raced down his throat.

"That is disgusting," he choked out.

Guzzard took back the bottle, still watching the beach.

"Sure is."
In Foreign Lands

Hours after the battle, Shepard found Sephiroth leaning against a wall in Wukan Village, polishing his sword in the fading light. Few people were out, but those who were gave him a wide berth.

Although the task was mundane enough, the focus in his eyes, strangely enraptured with the shine of his blade, was unsettling. She turned away, content to leave him to it.

Fighting for a living did interesting things to people. After a battle everyone retreated to their own little world. Jack had revelled in the blood, but afterwards she would become relaxed and easy going. Grunt would roar in victory and stomp about looking for any further challengers. Miranda became cripplingly obsessive over minor details, and Garrus would sit and study the names carved on the inside of his collar.

She wasn't going to interrupt the studied calm with which Sephiroth traced the curve of his blade. Whatever was going through his head right now was best left there.

"Shepard."

Apparently, he thought otherwise. She turned back and saw him sheathing his sword. The glint in his eyes was gone, though given the tension in his muscles, the high of battle probably hadn't left him yet.

"Walk with me," he said, surveying the dark town. It looked drastically different under Shinra's grasp than it had only that morning. Already planes circled overhead, waiting to land on the newly carved runways.

She fell in step with him as they walked through the narrow streets. People moved out of the way with startling abruptness. Civilian workers, sailors, troopers, and even SOLDIERS seemed disinclined to get too close. The troopers on whom his gaze fell either scuttled away or froze. She glanced sidelong at Sephiroth, wondering if he noticed that half his own men feared him.

The weight of many eyes watching made the back of her neck itch and her hand ache for a pistol. It always took her a while to relax after a fight, to stop counting heat sinks and let the hum of biotics in the back of her mind fade away. Senses still on high alert, her eyes scanned the surroundings for potential threats. Finding none only sharpened her gaze.

Sephiroth noticed and raised a brow. "You expect an attack now?"

"Ninjas use disguises, and troopers cover their faces," she said, shrugging and then regretting it at the sting in her shoulder muscles. "A knife between the ribs would ruin anyone's day."

"This is Shinra territory now," he said, observing a trio of technicians finishing work on a large aerial. They shrunk back as the two SOLDIERS walked past.

"If only all attacks came from the enemy," she said. A large Shinra flag flapped in the breeze over the town.

"If only all subordinates were obedient and respectful," he replied, equally dryly.

She snorted. "And if only the ranking officer was the most experienced person on the field."

His eyes narrowed. "Careful, SOLDIER."
She kept her smile to herself and didn't reply. She always was a little too sharp after a fight.

They walked in silence, past the last buildings and down the muddied road that led inland. No Wutai had been spotted in a very large radius, and the beaten-flat countryside made it very hard to be snuck up on. Smoke and ash floated on the cold breeze, the smell of stale blood clinging to both of them. He continued walking until they were well out of earshot of the town. The drying blood on the inside of her armour itched.

"I expected you to be more… distraught," he said, giving her a sidelong glance. "You don't look nearly as bothered by the slaughter as you like to imply."

"Would you rather I break down and weep?" she asked, giving him a flat look.

"I would be disappointed if you did," he said, sending a sneer back at the village. Cries of pain and anguished murmurs from the infirmary were just on the edge of hearing.

She frowned.

"I've already wept," she said plainly, unashamed. "And had panic attacks. And fallen to my knees, crying 'Oh God, why?' with blood all over my hands."

He looked startled at her admission.

"War is hell, Sephiroth, and not just for the loser. I learnt that long before I'd even heard of Shinra."

"Yet you kill readily enough," he replied, his gaze sharp.

"I don't kill because it amuses me," she sneered at him.

"Oh?" he stepped closer, all silver hair and glowing eyes, staring down at her. "Do I scare you, Shepard?" he drawled, his hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword. "Does it intimidate you to know that I enjoy the thrill of combat?"

"No. You disappoint me," she said back at him, unmoved by his looming presence. He scowled.

"Don't let the gossiping troopers get to your head. There are things far more terrifying in the dark places of this galaxy than you can imagine. You are just a man with a sword."

He stepped back and crossed his arms. "Then you are just a woman with a gun."

"Yes. I am," she said, happy to relent. He looked dissatisfied with her refusal to fight for more, but she gladly let the subject drop.

He turned his head away. She studied the man, still pulled taught and looking for a fight. He was bloodthirsty, on the same level as Jack or even Grunt. Maybe he was part krogan.

She didn't like the idea of him having much in common with Jack.

She breathed in the cold night air and faced the distant mountains. He observed the distant heights as well. Before she could ask if he'd dragged her out here for no other purpose than an argument, he spoke.

"I've been in contact with HQ," he said in a low voice, devoid of the insistence it had held only a minute earlier. His eyes followed the mountains as they marched north, following the western edge of Wutai Island all the way through to the capital. The mountains before them were tall and steep, with snow-capped peaks further north. According to early reports, they needed to pass dense tropical
jungle and festering swamp just to get there. "Shinra is celebrating our victory."

"They were celebrating before we even left Junon."

He tilted his head in acknowledgement of the point. Shinra had been acting as though the war was already won for months now.

"Heidegger wants the southern half of the island captured within a month," Sephiroth said with a frown.

Her head jerked to him and then back at the nation laid out before them.

"And I want an M35 Mako tank and a carnifex pistol," she replied sarcastically, crossing her arms and scowling at the sky.

"Don't underestimate SOLDIER," he said, scowling at her on Shinra's behalf. "You saw our victory today."

"I also saw the men who soaked up Wutai bullets so SOLDIER didn't have to. This victory wasn't free." She shook her head. "We have no idea what it will cost us to charge across this island at that pace."

Sephiroth's brow furrowed in contemplation.

"They fled today," he said. "They didn't surrender. They didn't fight to the death. They retreated."

"Change of plans?" she asked. Plans were already in place. They hadn't stormed the beach with no thought for the next step, but they also hadn't anticipated Heidegger's interference.

"I am considering my options," he said, looking at her thoughtfully. "We have little intel on the defences further inland. They have not shown their full hand."

"If they keep up this level of resistance, it will be slow going." Neither side could sustain this amount of losses, not across the entire countryside. Would it come down to a war of attrition? She really did want that M35 Mako tank. Driving over the enemy at a breakneck pace was a lot easier than walking and killing them one-by-one.

"Their fortifications may be focused along the coastline," he said.

"That's very optimistic of you," she replied. It was possible they had broken through the major defences but unlikely given the heavy presence of defensive forces she had seen in the capital. These people were not leaving anything to chance. "Ninjas, Sephiroth. There might not be another bunker between here and Wutai City, and we could still lose half our men on the trek north. Not every defence is a slab of concrete, and not every warrior wears obvious insignia."

"True." His lips curled into a vicious smile. "And not every warrior flees before a challenge."

"Of course not. Some reload."

Genesis slapped a bug on his neck. The gooey innards squished between his fingers.

Why exactly did Shinra want to conquer this island again? They had been pushing inland for almost a month now, and Wutai's novelty had worn off completely.

"Does this barbaric jungle never end?" he muttered, flicking sweat out of his fringe. The heat and
humidity turned his clothes sticky and squeaky. Leather pants did not breathe. His finely tailored coat sat sad and abandoned at the bottom of his pack because there was no way he could wear a heavy duster in this climate.

Nobody who cared was looking anyway.

"Would you rather be scouting through the swamps?" Shepard asked, peering through her targeting visor as she led the way through the damp green foliage. Her hair was plastered to her forehead, staining the dark red a dirty brown.

"I would prefer the mountain path," he said, longing for a cool mountain breeze. "Guzzard has all the luck."

Shepard snorted. "Yeah, I bet he's loving the flash floods and early spring avalanches."

He frowned at her.

"And good company makes the whole experience so much more bearable," he said with a withering look. She smiled back at him, completely unbothered by both his displeasure and the insufferable weather. "Do you not feel the heat? How can you traipse about in form-fitting plate armour?"

"I grew up in Perth," she said with a shrug. He had no idea what that meant. "And I've had a lot of conditioning since then. That, and this armour is temperature regulating," she continued, ducking under a low-hanging tree branch and stepping over one that had fallen. "It's made for deep space; do you know how cold space is?"

"Your clothes come with air conditioning?" He scowled at her back.

"I'm sure Gaia is trying its best."

"My soul, corrupted by vengeance, hath endured torment..." he muttered with great long-suffering. She paused, her eyes flicking to the trees. When she remained frozen, his hand drifted to his blade. "Do you see something?" he whispered.

"No." She sighed and shook her head with a frown. "Nothing at all."

He stood next to her and looked out through the trees. Birds sang far above them in the canopy, and insects buzzed through the air. The two SOLDIERs had made little attempt at subtlety, yet there was no sign of anyone else – not the faintest patter of ninja feet, nor the hushed sigh of measured breaths.

"This is a sacred forest," he offered. "Perhaps they deem it sacrilegious to enter?"

"What about the shrine that's supposed to be here somewhere?" she asked, her eyes still fixed to their surroundings.

He could barely see through the thick foliage, but her targeting visor would show her silhouettes of anyone in a wide radius no matter how many leaves they hid behind.

"We can't be far off now; we've already passed the valley," he said.

"Shouldn't there be priests or monks, or even guards? They aren't usually this relaxed. And the Crescent Unit is a religious order." She started walking again, and he brought up the rear, his ears still listening for any sign of the enemy.

"I've heard nothing," he said. "Perhaps they are simply unaware of our presence."
She snorted. "With all your complaining, I would expect every ninja in a five kilometre radius to be bearing down on us by now."

"My complaints are perfectly valid, thank you very much," he snapped, slapping a branch out of his way. It slapped him back. "Why should Sephiroth get all the glory for storming the beach?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, surely once a day is enough?" she ground out.

"Were there not others involved? Oh, but of course not," he continued, flicking his damp hair out of his eyes and stomping through the undergrowth. "Presumably, he parachuted behind enemy lines himself, caused a distraction and disabled the guns, and then took the beach single-handedly, while the rest of SOLDIER stayed back and sipped margaritas."

It would be one thing if Sephiroth actually took notice of the attention Shinra lavished on him, but he didn't even care. If he reveled in his unearned praise, then Genesis could at least take solace in hating him, but instead he had the nerve to be indifferent to it.

"All right, I get it," Shepard grumbled. "The newspapers needed a poster boy, they picked someone else, and now you're pissed off. How long are you going to keep going on about it?"

"Why aren't you angry? They practically wrote you out of existence as well!"

"The people who count know what I did. Screw the newspapers."

"Of course you don't care, Hero of the Citadel – you've got nothing to prove." He scowled at her.

She scowled back and kept walking, her movements sharper. For whatever reason, she clammed up whenever he mentioned the title. With Shinra behaving as it was, her silence only aggravated him further.

They walked in silence for nearly thirty minutes. No ninjas appeared, though they did discover two gullies and a stream that were a nuisance to get across.

"I finished reading Loveless," Shepard said as they waded out of the stream and its blessedly cool waters.

"Not unless you discovered the lost final act buried in a sand dune, you didn't," he replied, following her across with his sheathed sword held high over his head to avoid getting it soaked.

"What did you think?" he prompted when she didn't elaborate.

She stepped up over the steep bank and checked that her tech had survived the dip. "I see why you like it," she said, her eyes snapping back to their surroundings. "Lots of room for different interpretations given the open ending."

"And do you still hold to your first interpretation? The Prisoner, the Hero, and the Wanderer as different facets of a person at war with themself?"

"I do."

He hauled himself up onto the bank and sat to pour the water out of his boots. His knee-high leather boots were sturdy, comfortable, and impressive to look at, but they did have their design flaws. It was mid-afternoon, but they still had a long trek before them.

"Then how does the story end?" he glanced up at her. "Besides crippling schizophrenia, of course."
"The Prisoner is the lover." She sat next to him, facing the opposite direction so she could keep an eye on the jungle, and sifted through her pack. "They didn't want to go to war because it would separate them. But they were forced into the fight anyway. Chances are they are never reunited."

He hummed in thought. "And the climactic duel?"

"Between the Wanderer and the Hero." She handed him a protein bar and picked one for herself. "The Hero needs to keep fighting; he is blind strength, bravery, bloodlust. The Wanderer, having been worn down by the fight, is guilt, remorse, and the lingering horror of what war has turned them into." She shook her head and sighed. "The duel is the person deciding which path they will follow, do they boldly fight on as the Hero, in denial of how broken they are, or does the Wanderer win and they admit to themselves that they don't have anything left to give."

"Who is the victor then? And what of the gift of the goddess? The entire ending is said to hinge upon it." He took a thoughtful bite of the tasteless bar of dried food and listened curiously for her analysis.

"Is it a tragedy or does the story have a happy ending?" she asked, staring at her protein bar with resignation.

"Say there's a happy ending."

"Then the Wanderer wins. They leave the war behind, they're reunited with their lover, and the gift of the goddess is the slow recovery from crippling PTSD."

He sniffed in dissatisfaction. "How anti-climactic. And if it's a tragedy?"

"Then the Hero wins the duel." She paused to finish her bar, powering through it with grim determination and then storing the rubbish in her pack. "They give everything they have for the war, and the gift is death – to die in a final blaze of glory, never having to confront the empty husk of a person they've become, the world idolizing their sacrifice with no idea what it cost."

He stared at her. "By the goddess, you are depressing."

"You asked," she said wryly, getting up again.

"One would think the Hero's victory would make for a happy ending."

She gave him a hand up.

"Not if you're the hero."

"Finally," Shepard said when they happened upon the Wutai shrine. Genesis' complaints could span a whole day when the mood took him.

The Jungle parted with no warning to reveal a moss-covered building. Dark stone, green and vine-covered with neglect, reached beyond the canopy. It wasn't a shrine so much as a temple in disrepair, though not quite bad enough to be deemed a ruin. A wandering cobbled path, sunken into the earth, led up to a squat statue and a foreboding entrance.

It looked eerily like the old pictures of Angkor Wat she had once seen, though not so grand or dilapidated.

Silence reigned.

They waited, ears straining for any sign of life. The birds were quieter here, and in the cool of the
early evening the buzzing insects were less insistent. She heard nothing from the temple.

"It's abandoned," Genesis said, his eyes scanning the building and his hand on the hilt of his blade.

"It looks empty enough," she allowed with a tilt of her head. She had seen far too many firefights at 'abandoned' ruins to take it at face value. She took her rifle from her back. "Stay alert."

She stepped into the clearing, Genesis half a step behind her. No immediate attacks fell from the skies or leapt off the walls at them.

Keeping her eyes peeled, she approached the entrance. The statue several meters before the open door was squat and green with moss.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to make sense of the carved stone. Years of weathering had left its shape indistinct and the elaborate design too worn down to identify. Vines crawled over it, and it reminded her of something she couldn't name.


With a nod, she moved past it into the open entrance. A courtyard stood before her with high windows and an elaborately paved floor. The grasping hands of the jungle hadn't made much progress beyond the door, the moss disappearing after a meter, though a few daring vines had scaled the walls and hung down into the open courtyard. The large door beyond suggested a large complex.

She stepped down the stairs into the courtyard, her rifle in her hands and Genesis stalking cautiously behind her. The large open windows high on every wall were empty, but there was a slight tingling at the back of her neck. She felt watched.

Their footsteps echoed across the tiles.

"I wonder what happened?" Genesis asked in a reverent whisper.

She paused and looked around. "Do you… do you hear that?"

He froze and gripped his sword tighter. His eyes narrowed, and his head tilted as he looked around.

"I don't hear anything," he said with a shake of his head.

"Might be nothing," she said, frowning and sending another suspicious look at the windows. There were plenty of little alcoves along the walls, but they were all open and empty.

"Come on." She kept walking. They crossed the courtyard and had only just entered the next room, a closed-in space that might have once been used for some religious rite, when she stopped again. Genesis almost bumped into her.

She looked around, gazing at the few exits and then back at the courtyard. All empty. The itch at the back of her neck had gotten worse.

"What's wrong?" Genesis hissed.

"I don't know. Just give me a moment." She pressed a hand to her temple and briefly closed her eyes. The heat had drawn back, but she was sweating anyway. "You really don't hear anything?"

"It's completely silent in here," he said, giving her an odd look.

"All right. We need to keep moving." She shook her head, trying to shake off whatever mood had
"You take point."

He nodded, still looking at her in suspicion. He drew away though and focused on their surroundings, marching through the old temple.

She followed with a grimace, glowering at every window and cupboard and keeping a steady grip on her rifle. Genesis was thorough in his exploration of the building, checking every side entrance and offshoot. There was nobody there.

They reached the back of the temple, the innermost rooms, and Shepard was forcibly measuring her breaths.

The last room was closed with a stone door jammed firmly in place. He forced it open with his shoulder, straining against the initial resistance before it swung open easily.

Her shields fizzled to life, and she stumbled back. The air was green and caustic and burning in her lungs, on her skin, screaming through her mind. She cried out at the assault, scrambling back, black dots taking over her vision.

"Shepard!" she heard Genesis cry out, and then felt his hand grab her and drag her back, away from the room.

She panted for air and felt the burn in her lungs lessen. Her vision drifted back into focus, the black dots growing smaller. She was on the ground, her gun clutched in a death grip in her fingers.

Her shields were still fizzling in the air.

Genesis looked angry and bewildered, standing between her and the last room with a cracked floor and mako bubbling up through it.

"The mako? The mako is doing this to you?" he asked, glaring at the green fountain that had sprung up. He marched back and dragged the door shut.

The change in the air was tangible. The acrid burn in her lungs and the sting across her skin faded away. Her vision lost its green tinge. Her shields slowly flickered away.

"What just happened?" he demanded. "You should have increased resistance to mako, not increased sensitivity!"

"It is poison, isn't it?" she said, blinking away the last of the black dots. She shuffled closer to the wall so she could lean on it.

"It isn't that strong," he said with a shake of his head. "Some people have bad reactions to the processed stuff, but nothing on that level, and certainly not after being injected with it." He looked shaken by her sudden affliction. With a few deep breaths he started to regain his composure. He still kept her in his line of sight. "I couldn't even smell it yet when it started affecting you."

"I guess it doesn't like me."

'Your body had a far stronger reaction than anticipated,' Hollander had said.

"Quite the understatement," Genesis said with a dry look.

She focused on getting her breathing back to normal. Eventually, he sighed and sat next to her, keeping his eyes on the treacherous room.
"That does explain why this place was abandoned," he said in consideration. "While a SOLDIER – a normal SOLDIER that is – might be able to endure it, no unenhanced person could consistently live and work so close to a mako spring."

"We can report that it's abandoned then," she said warily. "No ninja stronghold to worry about."

He hummed in agreement.

"What were you hearing? Before, in the courtyard?" he asked.

She thought carefully before admitting it. The whole thing unsettled her, but he was her partner on this mission, and he deserved to know. "I heard humming. Like someone was murmuring something just beyond earshot."

His brow furrowed. "And your shields?"

"They flared up as though I was swimming in acid. They do that same thing under heavy radiation." She paused. "Is mako radioactive?"

He gave her a confused look. "I don't know."

"Like the fallout of a nuclear bomb," she said at his obvious lack of understanding.

"What's a nuclear bomb?"

"It's– you know what, never mind." He didn't need to know about any of that. She dragged herself to her feet. He stood and looked at her, suspicion and concern warring in his gaze.

"What exactly is mako?" she asked, looking at the closed room.

"The Blood of the Planet, according to some."
Shepard lowered herself slowly onto a stool in the command tent. Everything felt sore.

The dim light of pre-dawn hung over the camp, but the yellow light of a small lantern lit up the tent. Guzzard sat on the other side of a table burdened with maps and documents. He looked up briefly at her entrance and then drifted back to his magazines. He often volunteered for the graveyard watch and then would make the most of the remaining hours of quiet before sunrise.

"Mornin'," he said gruffly.

"Not yet, it isn't." She stifled a yawn. It was too early to be awake, but she only slept in exact six hour shifts, if she slept at all. Alliance training at its finest – ships had to function even when there was no day/night cycle. "What did I miss?"

He waved his hand at the table.

She glanced at the missives stacked there and dragged the papers over to where she could read any new reports and updated orders.

The Shinra forces had been split in two several months ago. Sephiroth and Genesis led the bulk of the infantry and SOLDIERs into the western plains, on the other side of the mountain range that split the country where most of the factories and population centres were. A short communication from Genesis indicated they were making slow progress, but at least he and Sephiroth hadn't murdered each other yet.

She snorted and moved onto the recon reports from her own SOLDIERs.

She and Guzzard led a smaller contingent, almost entirely SOLDIERs, along the eastern coastline. As they pushed further north, taking ports and coastal defences, Shinra claimed control of the sea. The eastern foothills were rife with ninja bases and forts, and every inch was hard won.

And yet, there still wasn't enough resistance. When they took a base, there were few prisoners because once they had punched through the major defences half the enemy fighters would simply melt away into the countryside, burning crops and destroying roads as they retreated. The towns were nearly empty. The suicidal drive she'd seen at Rocket Town was missing, instead they'd adopted a scorched earth approach and fled. It seemed unlike the ninjas so famed for fighting to the death, and it made her feel uneasy. Where the Wutai fled to, they did not yet know.

The two groups of Shinra's forces would meet up again further north, probably near the Ymir Ravine, before pushing on to the peninsula where the capital sat.

Officially, Guzzard was in charge of the entire eastern mission, but he'd immediately split the SOLDIERs in two and placed her in charge of half. The 'lone wolf' attitude SOLDIER tended to promote wasn't to her liking, but after months of working under her, her SOLDIERs could actually be called a team.

She pushed aside the reports, rolled her aching shoulders, and took a gulp of scalding hot coffee. Up until the day before, it had been nothing but murky water and questionable tea every morning since the coffee ran out weeks ago. Shinra had some bizarre ideas about supply lines. They also appeared not to realise just how much an individual SOLDIER ate.

Guzzard gazed forlornly at the empty cup next to him.
"What are you reading?" she asked, running her hands through her hair and scratching her scalp. They had finally left the swamps behind, but everything still stank. No Wutai had guarded the miles of stagnant water; disease did that work for them.

"Latest fan club magazines," he said, not bothering to look up at her.

Her coffee paused halfway to her mouth. "What fan clubs?"

"All of them. SOLDIER, mostly." He put his feet up on the edge of the shaky table and munched on an overripe green apple. The fruit would last another day, at most, but until they claimed another port, it was all they would get. "Sephiroth has the biggest club, but Genesis' is the most entertaining."

"And you follow these clubs?" she asked, with an incredulous smile.

"Sure," he shrugged and turned a page. "You've got one too. 'The Sniper's Nest', they call themselves."

She opened her mouth to reply but found she didn't have anything to say to that. She settled for muttering, "Why?"

"How should I know? They're all loonies."

She raised an eyebrow and pointedly looked at the stack of magazines next to him.

"I'm not fighting any war without something to read," he said, drawing them closer to himself and watching her warily.

"Whatever does it for you," she said, shaking her head. "What's in this month's issue?"

"Thrilling stuff. 'Which flower represents the First Classes?' Genesis is clearly a tiger lily." He chuckled through his mouthful of apple. "Apparently Angeal's a magnolia, and look at that, they even included me. I'm a poppy. Aw. That's got me all warm and mushy inside."

She leaned back on her stool, staring at the canvas roof. "And what am I?"

"A Venus fly trap."

"Well that's unfair. I don't eat people."

"I don't know, sounded pretty accurate to me."

She rolled her eyes and took a sip of her coffee, fishing around in her pockets for some more solid food. She could have sworn she still had a packet of crackers or something.

"Let's see, 'Proper care for leather pants,'" he said, idly flipping through the pages. "'Tips on dying your hair silver.' 'Sephiroth or Genesis: which SOLDIER is Shepard dating?'"

She spat out her coffee.

"Oh look, 'Angeal's favourite hot chocolate recipe,'" he continued without so much as a twitch, "And 'The Cacti Weekly,' the ongoing adventures of Sephiroth's pet cactus."

She stared hard at him for a second before looking up and sighing. "I don't want to know."

"Fair enough," he said, a sliver of a smile making it onto his face. "Anyway, I guess it's daytime now." He tucked away his reading material, then stood up and stretched. Cold wind whistled past the
tent, and the beginnings of dawn streaked in through the gaps in the canvas.

Shepard rolled out the map onto the table. Details about ninja hideouts and hidden passages were scrawled across it, and Guzzard's notes filled up its margins.

"So," he put his hands on his hips and stared down at the topographical map, "that base in the foothills."

She crossed her arms and scowled at the map. "I'll bet anything you like, those hills are filled with traps and snipers."

"Wouldn't be much of a Crescent Unit base if they weren't."

"It's definitely one of theirs?"

"Uh-huh. We got verification last night." He scratched his stubble and pulled the map closer. "Here's what we'll do..."

Sephiroth closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. His other hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

"Rough flight?" Angeal asked.

He had been recalled to Midgar. For meetings. Parades. Photo shoots, press conferences, and celebrity interviews where he, inexplicably, was the celebrity. He would have preferred to still be trudging through ninja-ridden rainforests under constant gunfire. The flight over had been the most pleasant part of the day so far.

After being paraded around the city, he had attended the dreaded board meeting, answering for the perceived lack of progress in Wutai. The Directors seemed mystified that a never-before-defeated-empire might put up significant resistance to being conquered. Scarlet's snide comments and Heidegger's guffaws had tortured him for hours.

Angeal looked at him in pity and patted him on the shoulder.

"Come on. Have you eaten yet?"

He shook his head, and Angeal led the way to the elevators, selecting the level for First Class accommodations. "How do you feel about a hearty winter stew?"

"What they serve in the cafeteria on Thursdays?" Sephiroth asked dubiously.

Angeal looked like he'd tasted something deeply unpleasant. "That is not stew."

The elevator opened into an empty corridor. For years it had just been Sephiroth, Guzzard, and one other SOLDIER living in the First Class apartments. The war's announcement came with a slew of promotions and a veritable horde of new Firsts moved in. There were eight in total now, and Sephiroth had never felt so crowded.

Of course most of them were in Wutai currently, so it was peaceful again, with only Angeal and one other First still in Midgar.

"Can I ask how the meeting went, or are you not ready to talk about it yet?" Angeal said, unlocking the door to his rooms.
"Heidegger didn't expect the Wutai to be so strong, or so stubborn," he said as they entered.

Angeal snorted. "I bet Mitchells could probably tell him a thing or two about Wutai stubbornness."

"Mitchells is dead," he said without inflection. "He was found in his home with a shuriken in his chest. Ninjas, apparently."

Angeal's eyebrows rose and he paused in the middle of the lounge. "Right." He scratched the back of his neck. "Heidegger is the new vice president then?" He moved into the open plan kitchen and began rooting around cupboards, kneeling to get to the pots beneath the bench.

"Rufus Shinra actually. It hasn't been announced yet; keep it to yourself."

Angeal bumped his head against the top of a cupboard. "But isn't he, what, twelve?"

"Fourteen." Sephiroth leaned against the counter.

"This must be how Shepard and Guzzard feel all the time." He lifted a sack of vegetables and plunked them onto the counter.

"She's not that old."

Angeal gave him a strange smile at that, and he looked away. All the apartments on this level had the same layout, but he had never been inside one of the others before. Angeal's was decorated with spindly potted plants and knitted blankets thrown over the back of the couches.

An unfamiliar sword was leaning against the wall in the corner.

"It's about time you got a real sword." He walked out of the kitchen and around the couch to get a better look. The blade was far broader than standard issue, with only one sharpened edge.

"Ah—yes." Angeal followed and stood awkwardly to the side. "The Buster Sword. It's a family heirloom."

"May I?" he asked, his fingers reaching for the hilt.

Angeal stiffened, and Sephiroth feared he might have crossed a line. He never let anyone else pick up Masamune – was it bad form to ask for a favour he himself had never granted? It was a family sword, and family was important to Angeal.

"Go ahead," he finally said with a nod.

Permission granted, he hefted it, using both hands to balance the thick slab of metal. It was very well made, the high level of craftsmanship obvious. It was a heavy blade, broad and solid, with good range. To Sephiroth's tastes it was awkward and unwieldy, albeit surprisingly well-balanced, but it seemed like a good fit for Angeal.

"It is a good sword," he said with a nod, returning it to its place against the wall. It would need a proper stand.

His own sword felt different now, almost heavier, and he had a hard time letting it out of his line of sight. He told himself it was because ninjas could be anywhere and he needed to be prepared. The sheen of blood was oddly enrapturing during a fight and immediately afterwards, but as time moved on it didn't seem to wash off. Logically, he knew that his blade held the same spotless gleam it always had – he took very good care of Masamune and made sure it was always well polished – yet
"it felt as though the colour had dimmed.

Angeal reached for the sword and then aborted the movement halfway through and crossed his arms.

"What's wrong?" Sephiroth asked.

"I didn't expect to be carrying it so soon." He sighed and re-crossed his arms. "With the war on, my father thought it would be best to give it up now, instead of waiting until he… well."

Sephiroth scrutinized Angeal's expression and tried to divine what he meant. "Is he dying?"

Angeal looked startled at the question. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. Perhaps he shouldn't have asked.

"I—yes. He is. Lung cancer."

"Oh." Sephiroth nodded, suddenly feeling as uncomfortable as Angeal looked. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. Then cleared his throat. "Anyway. You're hungry, right?" He retreated back to the kitchen and started rooting around in the small fridge.

"Venison or beef?"

Sephiroth shrugged. He didn't really care. He also didn't know where one was supposed to stand in a kitchen while someone else cooked, so he occupied the least busy looking corner.

"Venison it is." Angeal busied himself with thick slabs of meat on the large bench. A faint smell of animal blood lingered in the air. "Here, you slice the vegetables."

Sephiroth stared down the pile of vegetables and the kitchen knife Angeal pushed into his hands. Unsure of proper protocol, he removed his gloves and picked what he deemed the most effective way to slice the produce. The cut parsnips looked like bleached bones.

He had never spent much time in a kitchen before, but Angeal gave succinct instructions and they mostly worked together in silence.

"So, how is Wutai?" Angeal asked after a while, standing over a pot on the stove. The aroma of garlic frying in warm spices filled the kitchen. Sephiroth couldn't name even half the things going into the mix, but they smelt good.

"Far stronger than Shinra would like," he said, handing Angeal the thoroughly sliced vegetables. "They put up a lot of resistance, for the unenhanced."

"It is their homeland, I suppose." Angeal didn't look up from the food.

Sephiroth was finished so he leaned back against the counter and folded his arms. "How do you tell a normal civilian from a ninja in disguise?"

"Civilians don't have weapons."

"Don't they?" Sephiroth asked with a raised brow.

Angeal paused. "You can't just cut down civilians."

"No. And the more civilians we kill, the greater resistance we face from the rest." He looked down and frowned. Heidegger refused to understand these things. "They have to know surrendering is an
option or every last one of them will fight to the death. It's not that we *can't* kill them all, it's just unnecessary."

Angeal paused, his brow pulled down. "You fight them with honour. That has to be enough." He nodded decisively and added the meat into the pot. The smell of blood evaporated as the venison started to cook and the cacophony of flavours mingled.

Sephiroth shook his head, frustration pulling at the corners of his eyes. "There's no challenge to it. Highly trained ninjas are one thing, but when an angry child picks up a gun and attacks a SOLDIER, it can't even be called a fight."

"Are there many children fighting on their side?" Angeal asked, the creases at the top of his nose accentuated.

"There aren't many on the eastern front, but near the population centres it's impossible to say. You can't tell until afterwards when you collect the corpses and the masks fall off." He cut down those who attacked him. That was his job. But it was… distasteful, when those attackers were barely strong enough to hold up their own weapons. They were fierce and just as capable of pulling a trigger as anyone else, but there was no thrill of victory in besting them.

"I wonder if they feel the same about our infantry," Angeal said, not meeting his eyes.

Sephiroth said nothing. He was dangerously close to agreeing with Shepard and that left a bad taste in his mouth. He signed the letters of condolences for each SOLDIER and infantryman who fell in combat. After a while they all started to blend together.

Angeal covered the pot, now full of boiling broth, and gestured towards the living room.

Sephiroth followed and lowered himself onto one of the couches, only to find himself practically melting into the thick knitted blanket. He hadn't realised how tired he was.

"How is your student?" he asked after some minutes of comfortable silence.

"Just got his first batch of enhancements," Angeal replied. "He's ridiculous. You would think nobody had ever been injected with mako before."

"Do you think he's worth the time?" Sephiroth had his doubts, but the troopers Shepard trained had all turned out to be unusually competent. She made a habit of reminding him whenever possible.

"Absolutely, assuming he can get his head out of the clouds for more than a couple minutes at a time." He smiled wistfully. "He wants to be a hero."

"He sounds like Genesis."

Angeal snorted a laugh. "Somehow I don't think either of them would appreciate the comparison. Zack is less… self-aware than Genesis."

"Is that what you call it?"

"How is he? And the others?"

"Genesis has a knee injury, but it's almost healed."

"Is he all right?"

"He hasn't slowed down at all, but he took it as a personal insult." Genesis had a great propensity for
violence when motivated. Sephiroth wasn't concerned about leaving him in charge of the western front, though it would probably be a little more charred by the time he got back. "And Shepard is scowling her way across the countryside. Guzzard is... following orders."

"Doesn't he always?" Angeal asked with a snort.

"To the letter," he said with a frown.

There was a dull thump from outside the apartment, followed by murmurings in the corridor.

"That doesn't sound like Brandt," Angeal said, looking over his shoulder at the door.

The only other First still in Midgar had a city accent with a distinctive squeaky quality to it. The most distinct of the muffled voices in the corridor sounded like the thick accent of the southern Corel region.

The voices were hushed, and too muffled by the door for even Sephiroth to make out any words. He thought he might have heard the word 'server,' but he wasn't certain.

"This level is restricted," he said, standing up. "And it's too late for technicians to be up here."

"Maybe they're working overtime," Angeal remained seated.

Sephiroth stalked towards the door, his hand drifting towards his sword. The voices drifted further down the corridor. He waited a moment then pulled open the door and stepped into the corridor.

There was nobody there. Baffled and suspicious, he looked up and down the corridor and then marched to the corner to see farther, but the hall remained empty.

The screen of a console mounted on the wall flashed. He narrowed his eyes at it, recognizing the 'shutting down' graphic. It shouldn't have been on, let alone turning itself off.

Was that... a cat behind the console? Two little black ears flicked just over the screen. He grabbed it by the scruff of the neck.

"Who is it?" Angeal called.

The cat mewled. The fur was black and white, and its wide eyes blinked at him as it hung limply from his hand.

Angeal appeared in the doorway. His eyebrows went up. Sephiroth was still holding the cat he didn't know what to do with.

"I definitely heard voices," he said, eyeing the cat in confusion. It blinked back at him.

Angeal snorted. "All those ninjas must be getting to you."

"How did a cat get all the way up to this floor?"

"Maybe it's some kind of prank?"

Sephiroth frowned. Then he marched to the elevator, put the cat inside, and promptly sent it down to the ground floor. Clearly he was more tired than he realised.

"Come on." Angeal said, "Food's almost ready."
Sephiroth strode across the roof of the Shinra building. The evening was grey and overcast, and the city was shrouded in smog far below. The small landing strip had seen a lot of traffic since the war started. Pilots and plane mechanics worked long hours to keep the vast extent of Shinra's territory connected and those in Wutai well-supplied. Most had finished for the day though, and Sephiroth stood alone at the edge of the roof, leaning against a railing.

There wasn't much left to be done before he left Midgar again, and he could not wait.

Angeal had already left for Wutai, along with the other remaining First Classes. Sephiroth had needed to make final arrangements, secure supplies, and pacify the board of Directors before the next push in the invasion. He itched to get back into the action, but he couldn't afford to be hasty.

He activated his Omni-tool. Eight in the evening in Midgar meant five in the morning in eastern Wutai.

He pinged Shepard and waited. The wind howled across the roof, picking up his hair and flicking it madly around him. He suspected his office was bugged, though by which department he couldn't say. Nobody would be overhearing him here.

The lights of speeding cars and flashing billboards were starting to shine through the evening gloom. The second tallest building in Midgar was directly in front of him albeit significantly lower, a Shinra owned bank that wasn't even half the size of Shinra HQ. Two giant billboards dangled from its roof: one of Shepard with her Black Widow and another of himself with Masamune. He took great pains not to look at them, even though neither poster much resembled reality. After half a lifetime of being groomed for the public, he would have hoped it would no longer irritate him, but he only hated it more now.

The Omni-tool pinged.

'Morning, sir,' read Shepard's message. 'Or evening for you, I suppose. What do you need?'

Officially, Guzzard was in charge of the eastern front, but the Omni-tool was a more secure and reliable form of communication than Shinra's radios, so a lot of communication happened through Shepard. If Shinra couldn't track the Omni-tool's signal, then Wutai certainly couldn't either.

'Can you talk?' he asked. The orange glow was strong in the dim light. It was amazing how quickly he'd gotten used to the haptic interface, to the point that normal keyboards now struck him as vexing and sluggish.

'You have good timing. I'm in the command tent, and Guzzard is on his way out.' There was a delay before a second message arrived. 'He wants to know if there will be cigars in the next drop-off.'

'Operation Broadsword is nearly ready,' he replied, summarily ignoring Guzzard's request. 'You have all the supplies you need?' This was the last chance. Once he left the mainland they would have to make do with the arrangements already in place.

'Supplies aren't the issue,' she replied swiftly. 'And Broadsword? Who names these things?'

He frowned at the Omni-tool. 'I named that one.'

'I should have known.'
She must have just been in a fight recently; only in the post-combat high did she let herself be this casual towards him. He considered it a triumph to catch her in such a mood. The hard demeanour she usually maintained around him didn't exactly welcome conversation.

If it were anyone else, he wouldn't have cared, but her silence grated because he knew she had information that nobody else on the planet did. She carried an outsider's opinion on Gaia, and for some reason that resonated with him. That she clammed up whenever he didn't meet her arbitrary standards was tremendously irritating. But while stubborn, he refused to believe that she was completely immovable. He considered the affair a work in progress.

'Do you have any updates?' he asked. There was still work to be done.

The response took a long time. 'I would prefer more time for recon.'

'We don't have more time.' They needed to push forwards or risk being pushed back themselves. They finally knew where the Wutai fled to, where the ninjas hid, and where their weapons came from – Ymir Ravine, splitting the northern bulk of the country just west of the tip of the mountain range.

'It's not just a ravine,' she replied quickly. 'There's a tunnel system, and I suspect it's huge. They could be hiding anything down there, and if it's not riddled with traps, then I'm an underpaid vorcha.'

'We knew it would be dangerous,' he replied, writing down the word 'vorcha' to enquire more about at a later date, 'but we can't afford to delay.'

'Then we'll be attacking their largest base blind.'

He hummed in thought and stared at the city below.

The two giant posters stared back at him. Shepard had been treated with greater dignity by the PR department than he had. At least she was allowed to keep her shirt on. He didn't make eye contact with his own poster. Hers was entirely computer-generated – it didn't include the glowing scars or mechanical red eyes. She hadn't actually shown up to the photoshoot, citing a mythical classified mission as her excuse, and the photographers hadn't had the nerve to contest the issue.

The Omni-tool pinged again. 'Sephiroth?'

He rubbed his temples.

'You could scout the tunnels on your own,' he said.

'It's unlikely I would make it out again in time. And my tactical cloak cuts out after three minutes, you know.'

'You have a knife and a powerful summon. I'm sure you can improvise.'

'I carry a long-range rifle, and you want to put me in a crowded tunnel?' It was amazing how he could hear the scepticism in her voice through a written message coming from halfway across the planet.

'Are you saying you are incapable, Commander?'

'No, I am questioning your understanding of strategy, but if you want to put your only sniper at the bottom of a pit, don't let me stop you.'
He frowned. Poster Shepard was smirking at him with soft green eyes and perfect teeth. It was deeply unsettling.

'Infiltrate the ravine,' he said, nodding in resolution. 'Keep me updated.'

'Yes, sir.' He imagined her sighing in resignation.

'How far along is Shinra's space program?' she asked.

He cocked his head, wondering at the sudden change of subject. 'It's been cancelled. What does that have to do with anything?'

'A shame. This would have been a lot easier with satellites.' There was a pause before a second message came through. 'Sorry, I know that's not helpful. I try not to complain about what I can't have.'

He frowned. Satellites? 'We have a moon.'

'Yes, but I meant the man-made kind.'

'To what purpose?'

'Take photos, boost signals, mapping systems, that sort of thing.'

That did sound useful… but also completely out of reach.

'The space rocket program was scrapped after a failed launch,' he said. 'The funding goes to the air force now.'

There was a long pause with no reply. He wondered if she was under attack, or if maybe there was a problem with the Omni-tool. He checked, but the signal was still strong and his previous message had apparently been delivered.

Finally, the device pinged again.

'So, you don't actually know what your own planet looks like?' she asked.

'It's the only planet I've ever seen, of course I know what it looks like,' he replied, vaguely insulted.

'Let me show you something.' The device hummed and rather than displaying text a tiny loading signal flashed. A picture opened. It was a large photo, and it took him a while to understand what he was looking at, seeing only a distinct red curve against a black background. He felt a jolt when he read the caption and understood: 'This is a hurricane forming over the planet Ilos.'

The planet was a rusty red, dotted with indistinct shapes and darker patches that he could only assume were geographical features. A giant white whirlwind dominated a quarter of the surface. It swirled over the planet, in direct contrast to the dry red and the black backdrop behind it. He stared at it, soaking in the detail. He had never imagined anything quite like it before – never had reason to. It was… like nothing he'd ever seen.

'This photo was taken from space?' he said when he remembered that he ought to reply.

'Orbit in the upper atmosphere. But sure, space.' Another loading signal flashed and a new picture opened. He felt as though the air had been kicked out of him.

'This is sunset on Hagalaz.'
He found he had no words. The scale along was breath-taking. The vibrant light breaking across the surface in a mass of angry storms, the empty black ringing the planet – there was something so massive, so ancient about it. Something incomprehensible and utterly mysterious. He felt himself grow still.

The sudden change as the display dimmed from inactivity roused him from the serene state he had fallen into. He shook his head, shaking off the fugue that had overtaken him. He had received a message and not even noticed.

'Hello?' Shepard asked.

Poster Shepard still smirked at him, and he felt embarrassed, though why he wasn't sure.

'How do I save these photos?' he asked.

He carefully followed her instructions.

'I should go. Was there anything else?' she asked.

'No, that's all.'

'I'll see you at Ymir.'

The Omni-tool disconnected, and he took a breath. He would be flying out at noon the next day.

His hand rested on the hilt at his side. He had no lasting scars – the Wutai had barely managed to scratch him. A ninja with a grenade had gotten lucky and scorched his right arm and the bottom three inches of his hair, but the burns were gone after two days, and he didn't bleed over haircuts.

Soon Ymir Ravine would fall, and with it, the Wutai would lose half of their supply lines. He wondered what they would be capable of when desperation really set in.

The elevator across the roof slid open. It was dark now, but floodlights kept the roof illuminated. It was nearly a full moon tonight, but one could never see it over Midgar.

Tseng stepped out of the elevator and approached at a sedate pace.

He hadn't seen much of the Turks lately. They were busy with something on the western continent and had little involvement in Wutai.

"Sephiroth. You don't mind if I join you?" Tseng called as he drew near. Sephiroth waved at the railing next to him. Tseng didn't engage in idle conversation—if he was here, then he had something to say.

Tseng leaned against the rail and looked out. One of his eyebrows moved up incrementally.

"Lovely view," he said, nodding at Poster Shepard.

Sephiroth wanted to slap his own forehead but refrained.

"That is not why I am standing here," he said with a scowl.

"Why are you standing up here?" his eyebrow remained raised in scepticism.

"To escape stupid questions."
"Of course."

"What do you want, Tseng?"

"I'm just checking in." He looked at his watch, and then looked back at the poster. "How is the Commander taking to her new rank?"

"With the same drive with which she took to her previous rank." Sephiroth wished he had promoted her earlier. She worked with crushing determination and had a tendency to demand the same of everyone under her, which meant all the Seconds and Thirds were suddenly working much harder. The corner of Tseng's lip tipped down in a facsimile of a frown. "Is it in Shinra's interests for an alien to be so influential?"

"Influential?" Sephiroth felt his brow lower. "There is a war on. I need competent First Classes, and Shepard brings a strategic advantage. She isn't leading her own missions; she doesn't even have her own men."

Tseng looked out across the city, his hands behind his back. "She's essentially your second-in-command, and your advisor."

"She is not." Sephiroth scowled and crossed his arms. "Guzzard is my second-in-command, which you know perfectly well." Everyone knew it. At this point Guzzard wasn't so much a subordinate as an institution. Sephiroth suspected that a meteor could level half the planet and Guzzard would still be there, second-in-command, following orders and not asking questions.

"It was under her recommendation that you launched the invasion at Wukan Village. Or are you going to tell me you dreamt up the schematics for the artificial harbour yourself?"

"The idea was hers, but that was largely Tuesti's work," Sephiroth hedged, wondering how Tseng had found out.

"Yes, she is close to Reeve as well." Tseng levelled a vaguely disapproving look at him. "The troopers she trained have all been promoted. One of them will soon be a Turk. Several are in the Science Department. Many are already in SOLDIER, two in the air force, one in materia development, one in engineering, and two in weapons development."

"Your point?" Sephiroth asked, seeing his point. Shepard had wormed her way into a position of power, but it benefited him for her to be there. He wasn't about to let Tseng ruin that. It would probably end with her in the Science Department, and he wasn't going to let that happen. There were very few people he would sentence to that, especially not one of his SOLDIERs. For all her complaining, she had actually held up her half of the deal. He would uphold his.

Tseng raised his eyebrow again, obviously not fooled. "She is charismatic. People are motivated by her, and she inspires loyalty. Apparently, even in you."

Sephiroth scowled. "Why did we recruit her, if not to make use of her? She strengthens SOLDIER."

"We recruited the alien to keep her under control and ensure Shinra's interests."

Sephiroth leaned his side against the railing and lifted his chin. "Do you believe I've been compromised, Tseng?" he drawled.

"No," he said, "I am certain you are working for SOLDIER's benefit both in Wutai and in Midgar."
"Then what's the problem?"

"Take care that you are working for Shinra's benefit as well."

A loud silence ruled the moment.

"SOLDIER is the arm of Shinra. Our strength is Shinra's strength," Sephiroth said, standing at his full height.

There was a very long pause. "Naturally."

"Was there anything else?"

"Best of luck in Ymir." Tseng turned and walked away.

An explosion tore through the air, and Genesis ducked under a flaming spear.

Odin roared, his eight-legged horse rearing up. Genesis dove out of the way as the summon charged him, crashing through the sparse trees and undergrowth.

The rest of his men were back in the trees somewhere, scattered by the Summon's initial attack. They weren't even at Ymir Ravine yet, and plans were already falling apart. The element of surprise was gone – if they had ever had it to begin with. A trooper had tripped a landmine, handily alerting every ninja in the vicinity to their whereabouts as well as getting himself killed. The summon had killed two Third Class SOLDIERs before Genesis could force it back, and by then they had been driven into parts of the forest the Wutai had full control of. The ravine itself was off to the east somewhere.

The din of combat rang through the air. Flashes of fire could be seen through the trees, and the air smelt of sulphur and blood. Genesis' arm was bleeding, and he had taken a blow to the kidneys.

Odin turned, his eight-legged horse snorting and stomping.

Genesis snarled and leapt up, flinging a fireball. He followed up with a bolt of branching lightning and then another flash of fire. The towering summon retreated, forced back by the barrage.

He gave chase and maintained the pressure, throwing fireball after fireball, chasing him through the trees. Odin leapt over a log and into a dip in the ground before spinning back around. Genesis stood tall, activating the fire runes in his sword.

Odin raised his spear and charged. Genesis bent his knees, ready to leap forward and slash the horse's legs out from under him.

Odin leapt up… and over him. The summon galloped out of the dip and back in the direction of the remaining SOLDIERs and troopers.

Genesis felt his stomach drop as he realised what had happened. He glanced around the dip, and then rolled out of the way of a shuriken, hurled at him from the treeline.

A ninja, one of the Crescent Unit going by the serpent design of her armour, leapt out at him, katana already swinging.

They traded blows, Genesis more interested in getting away, back to his men who couldn't stand up to Odin alone. She was quick and blocked his retreat, probably using speed materia to keep up with him. Her shields were weak though, and he hurled lightning at her blade.
She cried out, but didn't drop the weapon, her shield dying and her arm trembling.

He brought his sword down, again and again, relentless in his attacks. The ninja dodged and ducked, then tried to block, but she wasn't strong enough and her arm buckled. He slashed her across the chest. Her weapon fell from her hand, and she collapsed.

As soon as she fell, he launched himself through the trees.

The Ravine was practically a fortress of tunnels, even attacking from both sides simultaneously left them at a disadvantage. There were traps everywhere: landmines, cave-ins, secret entrances, and ninjas lying in wait.

And the summons.

The Wutai summons held back the might of SOLDIER. They had been able to take some for their own during the invasion, but to little effect. Sephiroth had Shiva, but she didn't like him so he could barely get anything out of her. Reports of Shepard's phoenix were becoming legend, and apparently Guzzard had a chocobo, of all things. Still, the Wutai's Alexander had decimated several scouting groups, though none survived to tell of it. Only the scorch marks and fallen equipment gave any clue as to what happened.

Odin's roar sounded off to the north.

Genesis charged after it, swearing at himself. What sort of hero let his men face a threat alone? What kind of SOLDIER fell for such an obvious trap?

Ninjas leapt out at him, but he didn't stop. He slashed at those in his way or just ploughed straight through them. Sephiroth's unit would be counting on him and his men to do their part. Guzzard's SOLDIERS were on the other side of the ravine, ready to crush the Wutai between them like a vice.

He staggered to a halt when the ground before him abruptly ended, the trees growing until the very edge of the ravine.

Deafening battle raged before him. He ducked out of the way, back into the treeline as Wutai from below and across the ravine fired at him. He cast a shield over himself, as strong as he could, before leaping forward again, ready to join the fray.

Odin was slaughtering the remains of his men along the walls of the ravine. Wutai infantry blasted him with bullets, shredding his shields as he raced to Odin, rage making his sword burn hotter than it ever had before. Odin parried his first strike.

Flashes of silver gave away Sephiroth further along the ravine, fighting three massive monsters led by Wutai trainers. Angeal was in the shallows of the stream, holding off ninjas with his father's sword, and Guzzard's bellowed war cry echoed down from the other side of the ravine.

There was no sign of Shepard.

Genesis struck again at Odin, ducking under his spear, and then slashing at his steed's legs. With a rending scream the horse fell onto its knees.

Growling in rage, Odin rose to his feet. He charged, racing over the dead and dying. Genesis snarled and renewed the flames of his sword.
The Great Equalizer

Shepard sprinted down the tunnel, her tactical cloak dying around her. The roar of the Phoenix lit up the passageway behind her.

The stench of monster pens filled the air. The Wutai had been breeding them in preparation for Shinra’s assault. Huge things, bred and trained to kill SOLDIERS, they walked on two legs and were heavily armoured. Each carried a massive axe. She found them the day before the planned attack and messaged Sephiroth: 'They know we're coming. They're ready for us.'

Above ground, the battle had started. The earthen ceiling shook and dust fell with each tremor.

Her Omni-tool lit up.

"Shepard—" Guzzard's voice crackled through her earpiece, before he was cut off by an explosion on his end of the line. "You hibernating down there?"

"Going as fast as I can," she replied, keeping her voice low. The ninjas knew they had an invader and were stalking her through the labyrinthine tunnels. The exits were few and far between, but places for ninjas to jump out at her were numerous. Her targeting visor gave away their locations, and she had left a long trail of bodies.

"Make it faster," he said, sounding out of breath. "There are Wutai up here that need shooting at." There was another explosion on his end of the line before the connection was broken.

"I'm still shooting at them down here," she muttered. Cooling heatsinks clanked against her thigh from her ammo pouch. This was where the Wutai had fled to as Shinra burned its way across the country. She recognized many of the different insignia on their armour from bases in the south.

They weren't retreating anymore.

The tunnel branched ahead. Phoenix flew up behind her, little more than a wisp of smoke. She trilled and flicked her streaming tails down the right passageway. Shepard squinted at the dark tunnel, trying to get a hold of the mental map she had made of the place.

She shook her head. "No, this way."

They turned left. Phoenix raced ahead, her flames burning low. Shepard had told her to conserve energy and try to be discreet. Phoenix squawked in protest when she reached the new room and burst back into yellow flames. She turned an accusing eye on Shepard.

"Damn," Shepard said, looking around the nearly empty storage space. "This shouldn't be a dead-end. Why have so many traps in the tunnel? There must be a passage out." And if her mental map was at all accurate, they should be near the ravine wall. There wasn't much time.

Phoenix hissed like cracking embers and soared around the open room, searching the walls. Shepard searched on the left side of the room; Phoenix took the right.

Tremors shook the earth.

Her sensors pinged, and she glanced up the tunnel. A steadily approaching silhouette appeared in her visor. She swore and activated her tactical cloak.
A single Wutai entered, making no attempt at subtlety. He stood tall in light Crescent Unit armour, wearing a full face mask and a silver sash that distinguished him as a captain.

"Shepard," he called.

She ghosted before him.

"Reveal yourself. Answer my challenge."

Her tactical cloak wouldn't last forever, and she was certain this room held an exit to the surface, if only she could find it.

She materialized. He didn't look surprised at her sudden appearance. He nodded at her. She respected the Crescent Unit. They fought ruthlessly and without any hesitation to protect their own. She did the same.

"I saw you in the capital. Before this all began. You treated the queen with some measure of honour," he said in the local tongue, her translator picking it up. "You may yet die with honour."

He drew his weapon, a short sword.

Phoenix drifted behind her, a massive flaming backdrop. "Block the entrance," she said, and the summon shot through the air and took up her station. Yellow light filled through the earthen room.

Her rifle was no use in a room so small and against such an agile enemy. The blue glow of biotics arced across her skin, and her Omni-tool hummed to life.

It was too late for words—deep underground in the burning heart of Wutai territory and faced with its defenders—so she said nothing. She had an enemy, a weapon, and very little time.

He struck first; she ducked. An electrical burst shot out from her Omni-tool and thundered against his shield.

He smashed a glass beaker that filled the room with thick, cloying smoke. Her visor was unaffected by the dense smoke, but it scratched at her throat and lungs. She spun to catch his blade on her armoured gauntlet, then threw a biotic blast at him. He flew back with enough force to smash the crates piled up around the room.

He scrambled back to his feet with a low groan. There was blood on his armour now, but he stood tall nonetheless. He leapt forward and tried to slash at her. She dodged his sword and deflected it off her armour. Then her Omni-blade was imbedded in his abdomen.

With a gasp he threw his hand forward, and a fireball exploded across her vision, roaring against her shields. She leapt back, blinking through the black spots in her vision.

The ninja had fallen to the ground and was dragging himself away from her, leaving a bloody smear and watching her through the eyes of his mask. He scrambled for his materia.

She stalked forward, drawing her Omni-blade. The gut wound would kill him, but she wouldn't leave him to such a slow and cruel death.

He grasped a red materia and met her eyes.

Shit. She leapt forward to stop him.

What was it, Ifrit? Bahamut? That would be impractical in a small tunnel though. The glint in his eye
said he didn't care.

A blast from the orb threw her back into the far wall. Blue and black strands of energy poured out of the materia, swirling to form in front of the ninja, convulsing outwards, growing larger and larger.

She climbed to her feet, watching with her eyes narrowed and the breath knocked out of her.

A shape began to materialise, tall but squat and heavy looking, with a glowing blue core. It was so large it broke through the ceiling, earth and wooden supports collapsing around it. She recognized the shape; she had seen it carved into the empty temple with Genesis.

Alexander.

It pulsed, and then with a resounding thud, landed on its feet. Thick metal plating gleamed black and covered the glowing core and solid limbs.

She felt her stomach drop.

It stood like a massive metal tower. Heavy flat limbs pierced the ground, and its lone eye, a red firing port, fixed on her.

Then she bared her teeth and raised her rifle with a snarl. She recognized it not from the temple, but from years of nightmares—from the husks she shot down in her dreams, the tech that kept her alive, and the enemy that bled the galaxy dry.

Reaper.

It was shorter than a true Reaper, only the size of a large building. Larger than a harvester, but it probably had a similar job. She had never seen this model before, but the curving design was unlike anything else in the galaxy and was burned into her psyche on a profound level.

"SHEPARD," it rumbled in a tone so deep it shook the compromised tunnel.

She pulled the trigger and then dove out of the way of a blast from its beam weapon. The tunnel walls burned under the beam. She sprinted to the flimsy cover of a crate, her tactical cloak activating around her.

Alexander's bulk swung around, knocking out pillars and smashing open the wall. Sunlight streamed in alongside falling trees and torn roots. The din of battle outside was joined by the roar of Alexander and the bark of her rifle.

Phoenix flew up into Alexander's optics, roaring at it and flapping burning red wings. Shepard seized the moment its distraction provided and sprinted for the outside. The light was blinding after days in the dark, but she didn't have time for that. Warring Wutai and Shinra alike were baffled to see her suddenly burst from the side of the ravine. She turned and aimed her weapon back at the collapsed tunnel.

Alexander's beam blasted at the smaller summon, chasing her through the air. She collapsed into ash before it could reach her, only to burst into life again behind it, shrieking for its attention. Rage made Shepard's aim sharp. Reaper tech, here and now, after everything—and it recognized her.

She fired. The metal armour didn't even dent. She snarled and reloaded.

At the sound of her shot, Alexander abandoned Phoenix and turned its optics at her. Its bulk surged forward, collapsing half of the ravine wall as it climbed out of the hole. It burst into the ravine,
towering over the bloodied stream and the havoc of the clashing armies.

The blast of the summon's main weapon burned across the ground, making no distinction between Wutai and Shinra soldiers on the ground.

Sephiroth dodged the axe of the Wutai monster, then slashed at its legs, bringing it to its knees. Streaks of his own blood stained his chest, and his arm trembled from trying to block the force of the monster's blows.

He dashed to the side to avoid another hit, splashing through the shallow waters of the stream. Two of the monsters charged after him, the third roaring in pain on its knees.

One monster alone was challenging, but there were dozens of them. They targeted SOLDIERs while the Wutai army unleashed their firepower and summons on the troopers. Genesis was burning through the remains of Odin further downstream and trying to shield the platoons that had made it this far.

Sephiroth cut through the beasts, refusing to be held back. Their plans had fallen apart; the Wutai were too well dug into the region. His forces were being torn to pieces, surrounded and outnumbered. The bottom of the ravine had become a death trap. He gritted his teeth and focused on the monsters charging him. They were not without weakness, and they were too slow to avoid his blade forever. He slashed viciously at the nearest one, slicing up under its arm and tearing the limb clean off. Blood gushed everywhere, and he turned to the next monster.

This was not over. His battle was not lost.

With a pulse from his cure materia, he fixed the tremor in his sword arm. Angeal was putting the fear of SOLDIER into the ninjas across the ravine. Guzzard was still up in the trees. His lightning materia had started several fires, forcing the Wutai out of their hiding spots to the east.

A muffled roar rumbled through the air. He couldn't see the source or even tell where it was coming from.

He rolled out of the way of a monster's axe before he could figure out what was happening. It struck again, and he blocked it from crushing him, the blow rattling his teeth and shaking his bones. He reached for the materia in his sword, and a blast of ice covered the creature, strong enough to encase it. With a sneer, he spun and smashed the frozen monster into a thousand shards.

The roar grew louder, and the ground began to shake. Upstream, the wall of the ravine crumbled in, trees falling into a gulf that split open the ground.

Shepard came tearing out of the opening, her shields glowing strongly around her. He felt a surge of relief—one more SOLDIER still alive and fighting. They sorely needed a sniper looking down on the ravine. A dozen meters out of the breach in the ravine wall Shepard spun and fired back into it. He couldn't see the target.

Another monster lunged at him, and he dodged its blow. A blast of fire flashed harmlessly over its armoured hide. It was distracted long enough for him to flank it and slice through the slits in its back armour and into the spine beneath. It collapsed with a pained cry. There were still plenty more of them left.

The roar filled the air again, so much louder now, accompanied by an ear-piercing whine.

The largest summon he had ever seen climbed out of the hole in the ground, charging after Shepard.
Alexander, the old Wutai god of destruction. It was nearly as tall as the lip of the ravine. Shepard was dwarfed next to it, just a shadow flickering out of sight and sprinting across the ground. Even from a distance she was visibly furious, her biotics flashing with banked up power.

A massive beam of red light shot out from Alexander, scorching the earth and frying everything in its path. The hollowed out walls of the ravine collapsed, leaving tunnels broken open and the forest igniting in massive walls of flame.

No shields made a difference. Alexander burned through everything. A couple of Second Classes tried to rush it and were crushed under foot. The blasts tore through the ravine walls, destroying defences and huge swaths of both armies. It cut through several of the monsters as though they were wet paper.

He prepared to dash in and help, but the monsters blocked his way. He growled and slashed at the closest one, but his sword struggled to slice through the armour.

Alexander hadn't appeared at any of the major battles so far, only minor skirmishes. Sephiroth had wondered why they didn't make proper use of it. But now the Wutai lines broke just at the sight of it, retreating back into the forests even if that meant facing raging fires. Alexander might be a Wutai summon, but it obviously held no allegiances. It attacked Wutai and Shinra alike, making an inhuman roar with each blast, but searched intently for Shepard. She fired back, sprinting from cover to cover. She stalled it with her shots, but it didn't look injured.

"Sephiroth!" Angeal called, forcing a ninja back with the blunt edge of his sword. He looked with desperation at the destruction. "What do we do?"

Another of Alexander's blasts burned through panicked Shinra troopers. Brandt, a First Class, leapt forward and tried to deflect the blast. He was reduced to a charred corpse under the full brunt of the blast.

His men were falling. The Wutai were retreating, and the walls of ravine were collapsing. There was nothing left to win.

He ordered the retreat over the radio.

"Angeal, get everyone back," he called, sprinting towards Alexander. The large red firing port turned towards him.

Shepard saw Alexander turn its focus on Sephiroth. It took a thunderous step, its pillar-like legs sending tremors through the earth. She reached out and threw a biotic blast at its firing port, knocking it askew just as the beam blasted. It barely missed Sephiroth and burned through the river, throwing steam into the air.

The summon followed the path of the biotics back to her.

She dove out of the way, taking useless shelter behind a fallen tree. She heard the call to retreat, but she wasn't going anywhere—not while a Reaper drone was still standing. She turned and fired over the log. A crack appeared in the main firing port where her shot impacted. She reloaded and fired twice more in quick succession. Its armour locked into place, and her second and third shots bounced off the thick metal. Swords and bullets clanked ineffectually against its side.

She didn't bother with the Wutai—the second Reapers came into the picture everything else was irrelevant. If she could take out the ninja who summoned him, Alexander would disappear back into the materia. She couldn't see the ninja; he had been buried in the rubble. He must still be breathing
"Sephiroth, what materia do you have?" she yelled over her Omni-tool.

"Ice, fire, and cure. What do you need?" he said, breathless because he was dodging Alexander's fire too.

"None of those will work. Go find the ninja who summoned it!" She sprinted out from behind the tree just as another blast destroyed it. "He's back in the pit I came out of—Crescent Unit with a stomach wound," she panted out.

She didn't hear him reply, but he changed trajectory and practically flew towards the collapsed tunnels.

She caught brief glimpses of Genesis cutting down the Wutai-bred monsters and Angeal leading away the remains of the army.

Alexander charged after her. It couldn't have been a part of the most recent harvest, but it knew her by name and had decided on her as its most immediate target—everyone else merely collateral damage as it chased her. She activated her cloak and took refuge behind a pile of rubble, firing through the wooden supports sticking through the upturned earth. Alexander rumbled and searched the battlefield, cutting through any cover it found.

SOLDIERS and Ninjas were vaporized under its fire. Even her armour wouldn't be able to withstand a direct hit. Both armies were retreating, but not nearly fast enough.

Lightning cracked through the air, scorching Alexander's armoured side. Guzzard leapt down from the lip of the ravine, striking at its back. He left a dent, but was thrown back as it swung around. Giant hulking limbs, vaguely insect-like, smashed through a stubborn group of Wutai firing at it. Guzzard landed on his feet and swung his sword around.

"Get out of there, Guzzard!" she yelled. He had no cover, and his sword wouldn't make enough of a difference. She leapt up onto the rubble pile and hurled loud biotic blasts to draw the summon's attention.

Alexander's focus returned to her, and Guzzard heeded her call, racing for the nearest cover.

Her biotics surged, and making the strongest shield she could, she leapt aside. A sharp red beam burned into the rubble and pursued her. Her biotic barrier roared to life just as it caught the edge of her arm.

She cried out in pain but kept running, changing directions unpredictably. The smell of burnt flesh and red hot ceramic plates assaulted her, but she ignored it, activating her cloak and taking refuge behind the corpse of a monster. She hoisted her rifle despite the pain. Gritting her teeth, she fired again and again, cycling through heatsinks.

Her shots all hit the same place and broke a hole through its armoured leg, near the joint. She yelled for Guzzard, and he sent another bolt of lightning hurtling into the gap. The leg twitched and made a grinding noise. She fired again, and the joint gave way. The other three legs kept the summon standing, but it had lost its mobility.

Flashes of power from materia swarmed it. Lightning crackled through the air. Alexander raised its remaining armour plates, rooting itself into place like a fortress. It's exposed firing port glowed red before it sent out another blast.
She aimed at the firing port, racing from cover to cover. Guzzard followed up her bullets with blasts of lightning, targeting the same single weak point. The summon rumbled a deep cry, whether from pain or indignation or simply failing mechanics, she didn't know.

It couldn't find her, but its gaze settled on Guzzard as the source of the lightning. A blast sent him hurtling backwards through the air, his sword shattering under the heat.

Shepard fired with a yell, down to her last two heatsinks. The firing port swivelled around to find her again. She pulled the trigger, and it shattered. The complex mechanism was exposed and she fired off an electrical blast form her Omni-tool. The summon staggered back, starting to collapse under its own weight, and she shot at it again, rage and bitter vengeance making her aim true.

With a groan, it buckled and fell into the dirt, collapsing a tunnel beneath it. It faded out of existence, returning to its materia.

Silence fell across the ravine. She drew in a haggard breath and looked around for Guzzard.

He was lying in the dirt where the blast had thrown him. Genesis was kneeling next to him. She ran over, stumbling on the way.

She slowed as she saw the damage. The weak light of a cure materia washed over him.

Guzzard tried to breathe in, a ragged, rattling breath that was wasted on perforated lungs. The blood seeping out of him was thick and so dark in the fading light it looked nearly black. He coughed, the sound wet and broken.

Genesis was on his knees, a weak cure spell sputtering from his hands. He snarled at his own weak efforts and tried again. He looked up at her in desperation, then back down at the bleeding SOLDIER. Her own reserves were empty. She scanned him with her Omni-tool.

Guzzard's hand shook, twitching and empty. She knelt. Her eyes were dry, but a lump lodged in her throat. She pushed his sword back into his hand. She grasped his other hand and held it tight. His eyes wavered, lost and clouded with pain. She didn't know if he could see her, or anything at all. She squeezed his hand. His grip was weak, but he squeezed back and let out a shaky breath that carried her name.

A shadow of a smile touched his lips before he was shaken by another weary coughing fit.

The coughing died away, and he fell still. His eyes remained open, unseeing. She hung her head.

"No, no," Genesis stuttered, fumbling with his cure materia, "No, damn you, don't—!"

He fell silent, the materia falling from his trembling hands. She put her hand on his arm. He stilled and bowed his head.

Sephiroth drew near. As the silence stretched on, he approached, his brow pulled down and emotions warring in his eyes. He looked down at Guzzard's unmoving body and shook his head.

Shepard stared up at the dark sky and felt the familiar feeling of loss settle into her stomach, the crushing weight that pulled down her shoulders and carved another name onto her spine. She stood and placed her gun on her back.

"We need to get moving," she said through a dry throat.

"We cannot just leave him here," Genesis said from the ground.
"We can't take him with us, any more than the hundreds of others," she said, not looking at the ground around them. "We have to go back for those who made it out."

"She's right," Sephiroth said, his eyes not leaving Guzzard. "We have to go." Finally, he raised his head, turning to look over the silent fields of corpses. The dead lay in every direction, as far as the eye could see, and the river ran red.

Shepard looked away from him, and scoured the sides of the Ravine, trying to pick a safe path back to their closest base.
Mourning

Sephiroth stared at his twice-cleaned-and-polished sword and tried to think of what he needed to do next.

He didn't know.

As the three of them—himself, Shepard, and Genesis—had marched back from Ymir to the closest Shinra base, he had focused on the task at hand: guiding the troopers and SOLDIERs they encountered and getting everyone back safely. The mission was clear: withdraw with as few losses as possible and regroup when they reached safety.

Once they'd reached the base, he had mechanically worked through every task he could think of. That meant hours of tallying the dead, securing medical supplies, and redirecting patrol routes in case the Wutai mounted a counterattack. Finally, he had run out of jobs to do, and now he was trapped alone with his thoughts.

He felt as though he had a brick lodged in his brain, blocking his thoughts from operating properly. A long list of names had formed of those they would have to fight on without. That was hard enough to swallow, but the simple truth, 'Guzzard is dead,' read like an error message he couldn't process.

His eyes followed the curve of his blade. The losses were massive. No other battle had cost them so much. And for what? What had they won at Ymir but corpses? The territory stood empty now, the Ravine awash with blood and the rubble of collapsed tunnels.

Director Heidegger didn't understand—he thought the Battle of Ymir was a victory. The Wutai had suffered heavy losses and no longer claimed a stronghold. Their steady supply route through the heart of the island was disrupted. In Heidegger's eyes that made it a victory. While that was technically true, Sephiroth had seen his men who marched to the Ravine—and the broken few who had returned. He was hard-pressed to call it anything less than a massacre. Heidegger had replied that there were always more troopers, and even SOLDIERs weren't irreplaceable.

Sephiroth had hung up on him.

He got up, uneasy and tense, and started walking, picking a corridor in the compound and squaring his shoulders as though he had a destination. The room functioning as a command centre was down this way. He could get back to work, force this malaise aside.

Guzzard is dead.

He altered his route with a new destination in mind. He'd seen Shepard turn down this way earlier, heading to the empty rooms on the eastern side of the building. With no real plan in mind, he followed her path.

He pushed open the first door to reveal an unfurnished room. A chill wind from the clear afternoon sighed through the open window. Shepard sat on the floor in plain clothes, with one of her arms heavily bandaged. She was leaning against the wall and the disassembled parts of her rifle lay arranged before her as she diligently cleaned and examined them for damage.

She looked up at him.

He paused after closing the door behind him, unsure of what to say—or if he wanted to say anything at all.
After a moment of tense silence, she welcomed him over with a jerk of her head. She patted the floor next to her and resumed cleaning the workings of her gun.

He lowered himself onto the rough concrete, stretching out his long legs in front of him.

Physical contact normally made him uncomfortable—outside the context of combat—but he sat close to her. He couldn't vocalise what he expected, or even wanted, but he felt so lost he couldn't bring himself to maintain the distance he usually preferred. He still wore his leather coat, but had removed his pauldrons.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye with a raised eyebrow. He couldn't meet her gaze for long. Her eyes shifted back to the half-formed weapon in her hands, and she leaned towards him, her shoulder lightly brushing his. The presence and weight at his side was comforting. He leaned back against her, only slightly. She breathed a heavy sigh and kept on working.

He stared out the open window, through the bars to the dark mountains marching into the distance. On the other side of the building the sun was setting in stark reds and yellows, but here the colour had leached away. Guzzard had fought in the shadow of those mountains for months.

Beside him, Shepard finished reassembling the black widow. The monstrous weapon gleamed in the low light. What was the name she had given it? Some alien word he couldn't remember, but he remembered that it meant 'Protector.'

She stared at it with a deep frown. A fine tremble ran through her injured arm, and she put the gun aside.

She hadn't said much on the trek back, grim-faced and unrelenting in her march. When circumstance had demanded it, she'd made a stray comment about their route, and Genesis had snapped.

"What kind of machine are you?" he had demanded, whirling on her. "Do you feel nothing?"

He had never before seen her look so offended as her own anger kicked in. "Don't think just because I don't weep I am not… that I don't…" She'd swallowed thickly and looked away. "He was my friend too."

Sephiroth had never really considered Guzzard a friend, but then, he was the first SOLDIER he had ever met. When he was twelve, let out of the labs for the first time he could remember, Guzzard had been there. He had looked Sephiroth up and down with a deeply sceptical frown, shaken his head with a sigh, and then thrown him a standard issue sword and a shield materia.

He had spent decades doing that: shaking his head, sighing in resignation, then providing all the help he could while Sephiroth rose through the ranks.

He let out a tremulous breath.

Next to him, Shepard ran a hand down her face.

Still leaning against his shoulder, she patted at her pockets and produced a hip flask. The dented cap marked it unmistakably as Guzzard's. She had retrieved his dog tags as well, to be returned to his father.

"I promised I'd have a drink with him after the battle," she said quietly, turning it over in her hands. She uncapped it and took a sip. She rasped a cough. "Oh, that's foul."

She held the flask out to him. Guzzard had drunk from this dented little flask after every battle
Sephiroth had ever seen him fight in. It felt right, to do it for him this time. The bottle was nearly empty anyway. With a doubtful look at the inscrutable contents, he took a sip and winced through the bitter alcohol scoring down his throat.

He didn't cough, but he patted himself on the chest and breathed deeply. It wasn't a subtle or complex liquor, but it packed a punch. It felt like he'd dragged sandpaper down his throat.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice raspy.

"He said it was Rocket Rum," she replied. She took the flask back and downed another draught with a wince. "But I'm pretty sure I saw him filling it up with cheap gin."

He gave a weak laugh. "Of course he did." His amusement died off, and he hung his head. Their shoulders were still pressed lightly together, and that grounded him. She was there, mourning the same loss—he wasn't alone.

She handed him the flask. There was barely enough for one last mouthful.

The mountains before them were barely visible now, just a silhouette, disappearing into the night.

He drank the last of the cheap liquor. It burned all the way down.

They remained sitting in silence long after the light had faded. Sephiroth didn't want to be anywhere else.

Finally, Shepard got up, closed the open window, and turned on the light. Its sickly yellow glow was unpleasant to his eyes.

"Do you know how many we lost?" she asked.

"We'll discuss that in the morning. I'll meet with you, Angeal, and Genesis in the command room."

She nodded and bent to pick up her rifle. Her movements lacked the well-practiced grace they usually had, and her right arm wobbled under the weight of the heavy gun. The elbow and most of her forearm were heavily bandaged. In the artificial light the gauze looked ragged and discoloured.

The smell of stale blood hung in the air.

"Have you seen a medic?" he asked.

"I don't think they'd know what to do with me." She shrugged the shoulder of her uninjured arm.

He stood and held his hand out for her arm. She didn't move.

Normally a SOLDIER should have healed by now, but her enhancements were unpredictable at best. He hadn't seen her get injured, but he had noticed the blood-coated damage on her armour. A cure materia still occupied a slot on his bracer; he could patch up whatever wounds remained.

After some hesitation, she extended her arm. Her eyes drifted away from his. He took her upper arm, moving it carefully to avoid doing any further damage.

With well-practiced movements, he removed the bandages. The cloth fell away, and he wasn't sure what he was looking at. She pointedly didn't look, her eyes fixed to the unadorned wall.

"Shepard..."
She looked at him, barely moving her head and stubbornly not looking down at her own arm. He wasn't sure what he actually wanted to say, and she looked away again, her face unreadable.

The skin had been mostly burnt away around her elbow, and underneath was not human. Maybe some of the muscle was, it bled realistically enough, but metal joints and pins, synthetic tendons, and a thick weave of what looked like some kind of subdermal armouring were all glaringly unnatural. She couldn't bring herself to look—he could barely pull his eyes away.

She had told him once, that machines could feel pain.

He stared at the artificial arm, a bizarre melding of natural with synthetic. It seemed to have the same basic mechanics as a human elbow, despite being fundamentally different. His gaze followed the limb up to the woman attached to it, who was doing a fine job of pretending otherwise. He didn't know why it surprised him so much. After all, her mechanical eyes were noticeably artificial, but this hinted at a much deeper level of augmentation.

He found it fascinating, but she obviously hated it. Why? Was she ashamed? She liked robots well enough—why should this bother her? He tried to meet her eye, but she refused to cooperate. Her back was rigid and her eyes hard. She looked the same when expecting to be shot at.

He wanted to ask, to prod until he understood, but he remembered their agreement from the beginning of her time at Shinra. They were to keep no information on her physiology. It was important to her.

He turned her arm slightly in his hands. His cure materia glowed, and the damaged synthetic and organic tissue began to grow back. Whatever she was beneath the skin was her business.

Her skin stretched back across the muscles as it was meant to. He couldn't heal it all the way, so he rewrapped the last stretch of open wound that would take longer to heal.

When he had done everything he could, he relinquished her arm. She examined the bandages and new skin thoughtfully—apparently prepared to look at it again now that the inner workings were hidden.

"Thank you," she said, her glowing eyes meeting his before she disappeared down the corridor.

"You're up early," Shepard said, deactivating her Omni-tool and looking sidelong at Genesis. They hadn't spoken since the return from Ymir, the day before.

The sun had yet to peak over the mountains to the east. The ground within the compound was cold and wet with dew. Her breath turned into steam in the morning air. Summer was ending.

"Even if the morrow is barren of promises, nothing shall forestall my return," Genesis said, standing as though he intended to keep walking. Instead he paused, turned back, and sat next to her on the low bench. He had forgone his leather duster, and dark circles ringed his eyes.

"What's the next line?" she asked into the dark.

"My friend, the fates are cruel," he said softly. "$\text{There are no dreams, no honour remains, the arrow has left the bow of the goddess.}\$"

"That's grim." She leaned her head back against the concrete wall behind her.

"Which makes it fitting for the occasion." He glanced at her hand where the Omni-tool had faded
away. "What were you doing?"

"Reading an old letter." It was from Bakara, sent after the Genophage had finally been cured. Shepard had summoned the thresher maw, Mordin had died, and the Krogan had hope again. They were the words of a woman who knew victory for the first time in a thousand years. It was good to remember, sometimes, that there could still be hope in the face of even the worst adversity and loss.

The silence stretched on for a moment, and he drew out his copy of Loveless. He didn't open it, just stared at it and ran his hand along the cover.

"Mind if I ask a personal question?" she asked.

"By all means."

"Do you worship the goddess from the poem, or is just a symbolic thing?"

"The goddess Minerva? Yes, I do worship her."

"Why?" she asked in quiet curiosity.

He sighed wistfully. "It's an old belief. Most have let it fall by the wayside or pay little more than lip service to her," he said, looking up at the fading stars. "She guides all life on this planet and decides the worthiness of the dead."

"Is she a goddess of poetry too?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." He smiled faintly, the tension in him slowly draining away.

"And wisdom?" she asked, her head tilted.

He looked at her in confusion.

"There was a Roman goddess called Minerva, back on Earth, thousands of years ago. She ruled over wisdom and poetry, I think."

He sat up straight. "They worship the goddess in space?"

She shook her head. "This was long before we developed flight technology. The Greeks called her Athena, a few hundred years before." She was no scholar, but since becoming close friends with a curious archaeologist, she'd ended up learning such things by simple osmosis. "Although, there's also the old Asari goddess, Athame, who was also said to preside over wisdom, prophesy and fate, among other things." She scowled at the name of the Asari goddess.

"Fascinating," he said, staring off into the inscrutable dark of the early morning. "Are they all the same goddess, I wonder? Does she have control over other planets as well? Or perhaps there are simply different aspects of her on different planets."

"Or it's coincidence." She shook her head and looked away from him. "Nobody worships Athena anymore. And Athame... she was never a goddess. Just a Prothean that was deified over the years." She remembered a desperate gunfight in a temple around a crumbling statue. There had been nothing divine there, just more lies—and the Reapers. Always the Reapers.

She held back a scowl at the thought of Alexander.

"You don't believe in any of this, do you?" he asked. The cold light that preceded dawn was leaching into the sky. It made him look washed out.
"I don't know. The only thing I've ever really known to be true—really, verifiably true—was horrifying. I want to think there's something more than that. Maybe I'm kidding myself."

"Perhaps there are many truths," he offered philosophically.

"Bullshit. There is the truth, and there's the pile of lies. 'Maybes' and 'half-truths' are just fancier lies."

He chuckled bitterly, "I don't think you can force the world to operate according to your standards."

"I can try," she replied lightly.

"By all means, tell the goddess she needs to make more sense. If you die here, she will be the one to judge your worth."

"It's probably too late to make a good impression anyway."

He scoffed and didn't reply. He turned the book over in his hands. It had been a pristine white when the war started, but wear and tear had worn it down to a dirty ivory, with weathered edges.

"What happens to the dead in space?" he asked quietly, still looking at the book.

"Cremation, usually."

He scowled at her. "That is not what I meant."

"It depends on who you ask," she said with a sigh. There were thousands of human religions, let alone those from other species. Funny, that she knew more about alien beliefs than she ever did human ones. "The Drell say that death is like crossing the ocean. Your soul must adapt to another form of life, to withstand a great change. I don't know if I believe it, but I like the idea that the dead are 'across the sea' somewhere. Sunbathing on a beach, probably." Maybe somewhere Thane was soaking up the sun on the golden sand, and Mordin was collecting seashells.

His fingers around the book tightened, his knuckles turning white. "Do you think Guzzard's there? 'Across the sea'?"

"Maybe. He's earned the rest." A fond smile tugged at her face. She could picture it, Guzzard sharing a drink with Ashley, pointedly not asking questions about Legion, and chomping on cigars with Zaeed. "It's a nice thought at least."

The sun would be up soon. The silhouette of the compound steadily came into focus in the early rays. The infantrymen yawning on guard duty would be changing shifts soon. The day wouldn't wait for anyone.

"How do you do it?" Genesis suddenly asked with a bleak voice, looking at her. "How do you just... walk away? Get back up, bark out your orders, and march off to the next battle?"

She bit her tongue before she could snap at him, because she heard the threads of a legitimate question under his accusations.

"Experience, I suppose," she said with a half-hearted shrug. Everything ached, but she'd stopped noticing after a while. "I've lost people before. You have to keep going anyway."

He looked out across the compound, the grey courtyard within thick concrete walls. Shinra made everything out of concrete. "Is that what a hero is then?" he asked, a dark note to his voice. "Someone who's buried so many friends it becomes easy?"
She shook her head. "It doesn't become easier; you get harder."

"And what if I don't want to get harder?" he asked. His back was straight and his arms crossed. He was so much sharper than when she had met him, his words more cutting, and his smiles rarer. The war had already turned him into a hard man.

"Ripples form on the water's surface," she quoted, because she couldn't think of any real answer for him.

A weak smile light up his face, something fond in his eyes.

"The wandering soul knows no rest," he finished softly. His smile turned smug. "I knew you liked it."

"Don't let it get to your head—it's the only line I could remember."

He sniffed and lifted his chin. "There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the goddess."
"How long until they summon Alexander again?" Genesis asked. The silence that followed was deafening.

Shepard rubbed her temples. At an hour past dawn, Sephiroth, Genesis, Angeal, and herself were poring over a map of Wutai in the command room. There were no windows, just a yellow light hanging from the ceiling and empty concrete walls around a high table. Everyone looked grim and tired. Her arm was still wrapped in bandages, but most of the ache had faded away.

Her gun was on her back, despite the weight. She felt too exposed without it. Given the swords the others all carried, she wasn't the only one.

"With a weapon so powerful, it's only a matter of time before they resort to it again," Genesis said when the others failed to reply.

"Can you destroy a summon? Permanently?" Shepard asked. Reapers she understood, but summons still mystified her, despite the Phoenix. She stood across from Genesis and Angeal, looking down at the table. Sephiroth lurked off to the side, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"You can destroy the materia itself, which makes it impossible to summon." Genesis fingered his bracer.

"How can we know where the materia is without waiting for them to use it? We can't take another hit like that," she said.

"I don't think they can either." Angeal wore a doubtful frown.

Shepard shook her head. "They aren't retreating anymore. They're getting desperate." She knew what that did to people. If they had nothing to lose, why wouldn't they unleash the Reaper drone again?

Genesis scowled at the map. "But if we can anticipate them, next time—"

Sephiroth reached into his jacket and held out a red orb. The other three SOLDIERs stared at it for a second before the implications dawned.

"You've got it? How did you get it?" Angeal asked.

Shepard ran a hand down her face and let out a great sigh of relief.

"Why didn't you say something?" Genesis snapped.

"I found the ninja just after the summon collapsed," Sephiroth said, unmoved by Genesis' anger. He placed it gently on the table as though the creature within might leap out if prodded too hard.

Shepard glared at the materia.

"At least it's no longer in their hands, thank the goddess," Angeal muttered.

Genesis reached out and picked it up, holding it up to the weak yellow light and studying the swirling red depths. "It's strange for a summon. I don't think any of the others are machines."

"It's Reaper tech," she said, still glowering at it.
The others looked at her with confused frowns.

"What?" Genesis lowered the materia, closing his fingers around it.

Sephiroth shook his head. "That isn't possible."

"You don't even know what the Reapers are," she replied.

"You barely know what a summon is," Genesis pointed out, putting it back on the table.

"I recognized it. If there's anything I do know, it's Reapers. And that is one of their drones."

"The summons are all thousands of years old," Genesis said.

"Reapers are much older than that."

He looked at her doubtfully. Sephiroth crossed his arms.

"Summons come from the planet, Shepard," Angeal said gently.

She looked at the three of them, surprised at their expressions. "You don't believe me."

Angeal looked embarrassed, almost pitying.

Genesis cleared his throat. "I believe you think you're telling the truth," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Your war obviously took a heavy toll on you, and Alexander is an intimidating summon."

"What are you saying?" she asked sharply.

"No one would think less of you if you were… confused over Alexander's appearance and which enemy you were fighting."

She took a step back, deeply offended. The other two looked uncomfortable, but they didn't disagree with him. She scowled, a cold and familiar anger settling into the bottom of her stomach.

Ah yes, Reapers. We have dismissed that claim.

"You think I'm delusional."

Suddenly she wanted to flatten everyone in the room with a biotic slam—bash their heads in until they saw she wasn't imagining things. She damn well knew what she was talking about, and how dare they?

With a fierce scowl, she drew her Omni-tool. Yelling wouldn't convince anyone of anything. Fortunately, she had evidence to back up her claims. The orange haptics glowed brightly as she worked the controls, calling up the scans it automatically ran during combat.

She held out her arm for them to see the large holographic display. The scanned results played out, schematics comparing Alexander's structure to the various Reaper forces. The shape was different, but it had the same basic components, the same glowing blue core that powered everything from the husks to the harvesters. Its primary weapon was just a smaller version of the one used by Reaper dreadnoughts.

The others said nothing as they watched it list the hundreds of similarities.

"And if that is not proof enough," she said, her voice still scathing, "it knew me. When the ninja first
summoned it, it recognized me. It said my name and focused its efforts on me."

She reached out a hand, about to pick it up. The red glow inside pulsed lightly, and she drew her hand back with a scowl.

"How could it know you?" Angeal asked.

"They're interconnected. We don't know how. It might be quantum entanglement, it might not, but they can communicate across vast stretches of space." She deactivated the Omni-tool, trying to force away her scowl. They couldn't possibly know the gravity of finding Reaper tech, but she wasn't about to let them dismiss it. "It knew me, because I led the war against them."

There was silence, but they looked taken aback.

"Is that why they called you 'Hero of the Citadel'?" Genesis asked.

She ran a hand over her face, wishing she'd never let that piece of information slip. "Yes," she said shortly.

"You said your war was over," Sephiroth said. "How are their forces here, now?"

"It must have arrived during a previous cycle. They predate every living thing you've ever heard of."

"What about the Ancients?" Angeal asked.

"Who?" Ancient what?

"They died out a thousand years ago,"

"Then I can't speak for them," she said with a shrug. "I don't know why Alexander's here or how it became a summon. Though it was probably protected from the weapon we used to destroy all the others by the materia itself."

"Maybe we are out of range," Sephiroth said.

"If you were, then I wouldn't be here to tell you about it."

He frowned and picked it up, rolling the little orb between his fingers. It was so small, so innocuous looking. Just a glowing bauble identical to thousands of others. "It's healing itself. If we wait long enough it'll be back to its full strength when summoned."

"Not if we shatter the materia, it won't," she said, rolling her shoulders.

"Or we could revive it." Sephiroth stared into the depths of the materia, a dangerous look on his face. "And give the Wutai a taste of what they threw at us."

Her back straightened. "You saw what it did."

"They have brought it upon themselves," Genesis countered.

"It would be a massacre," Angeal said, looking between Sephiroth and Genesis reproachfully.

"How many of their fortresses could stand up to this?" Sephiroth gestured with the materia. "We could break through every defence they have, without risking any of our men—"

"It would immediately turn on us," she interrupted. "You can't control it."
"It's a summon, Reaper or not. It exists to be summoned," Sephiroth said, frowning at her. "With enough strength of will it could be bent to our purpose."

"No, it can't." She crossed her arms. "No one would be strong enough. You have no idea what you're dealing with."

"But you do," he said, mirroring her unimpressed posture. "Tell us, and we could end this war. No other SOLDIERs need to die."

"If it's so very unruly, you could wield it," Genesis added, nodding in her direction. "Summons respond well to you."

Her arms dropped, and she grew still at the suggestion. "It won't fight for me. Or you, or anyone else — just as it didn't fight for Wutai," her voice was quiet but forceful. After all that had been sacrificed, it was hard not to lash out at the very idea of casually wielding it. "There is a reason we call them 'Reapers'. It exists to harvest us, nothing more. It's built from the processed remains of the people they kill, and if it's out for long enough, it will make more of its kind."

A stunned silence fell at her vehemence, and she looked away. She couldn't let this happen again. Shinra would not be the next Cerberus, vainly trying to control Reaper tech, massacring thousands. She would not let them.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" Sephiroth interrupted the silence. "Processed remains of people? You sound like a Lifestream nut."

Her eyes snapped up to him. He was looking at her with a raised eyebrow. She scowled and activated her Omni-tool again.

"This is what we call a 'Husk'." An image sprung up on the holographic display: a metal humanoid body, glowing eyes and thick cables holding it together, shambling along. "It was once human." The photo changed to show the processing camps where the Reapers rounded up millions. Then the pods the Collectors used to gather them. Husks. Millions of Husks. Tearing people apart, impaled on the spikes that transformed them, their mouths held open by the cables in silent screams.

"Goddess," Genesis muttered.

She selected one last photo, the human proto-Reaper, suspended within the Collector ship like an embryo in a womb. "Don't be fooled by the laser — this is what Reapers do. This is all they are. You have to destroy it."

Sephiroth's expression had closed off during the display. "It's too late for those who are already dead," he said tersely.

She deactivated the Omni-tool and crossed her arms, staring him down.

He stood at his full height and watched her with a thoughtful frown.

"Genesis and Angeal, you're dismissed," he said.

"What?" Genesis' head whipped around to face him. "You're not throwing me out—"

"That's an order."

Angeal just shook his head and made for the door. With muttered objections, Genesis followed, letting the door slam behind him.
The minute they were gone, Sephiroth's head snapped back to her. "Are you really so blind?" he demanded, hands on the table that stood between them and leaning over it. "We have a weapon—one we know the Wutai cannot counter. We could burn through their territory before they so much as drew their swords. If it's uncontrollable, then we let it loose and withdraw." He was tense and insistent, reprimanding her for not seeing the situation the way he did. "We will be feeling the losses of Ymir for years, but with this Wutai will not have the strength to strike back."

"This is designed to harvest everyone," she said sharply, leaning her weight forward over the table as well. "It doesn't see your uniforms, the different sides in a petty border dispute. It is programmed specifically to massacre as many of us as possible."

"Then reprogram it," he snapped.

"It doesn't work that way."

He scowled and shook his head. "Even you couldn't kill this on your own, and you want to throw it away." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Doesn't Guzzard's death mean anything to you?"

She felt like the air had been kicked out of her. "Don't you dare." She pointed a finger at him, and her voice dangerously low. "Don't you dare hide your bloodlust behind him."

He turned away from her in frustration, his whole body pulled tight and ready to snap.

"Why do you have to do this? Here, now?" His voice was strained and his head lowered. "Why must you always do this?" He looked back at her, a wealth of cold anger in his eyes. "Guzzard is dead along with thousands of others—and yes, I want Wutai to bleed for it. For killing my oldest SOLDIER, for tearing my men apart, what is wrong with that? Why shouldn't they be avenged?"

His voice had taken on a deeper register, with more anger than she had expected. She straightened as he turned away, scowling fiercely at the wall. This wasn't about the weapon to him—it was about making Wutai suffer. She looked down and let out a silent breath before rounding the table.

"This wouldn't avenge what you've lost." She stood behind him, her voice quiet but firm. "I'm stopping you from destroying what you have left."

"I don't need you to hold back my sword," he stubbornly didn't look back at her.

She leaned back against the table and waited for him to calm down. Slowly, the tension drained out of him, his shoulders drooping. He couldn't maintain that level of raw anger indefinitely, not when there was still so much to be done. He was many things, but he was not thoughtless.

Finally, he turned back towards the table next to her, an air of contemplation about him, his anger only simmering in the background.

"We need more strength to make up for the losses we suffered," he said quietly, not looking at her. The summon materia still sat on the table. "There are only so many reinforcements available. We need Alexander."

He waited silently for her to respond. Hers eyes traced the concrete blocks that made up the wall, and she took a deep breath.

"Sephiroth, an ally of the Reapers is my enemy."

He looked at her, his brow drawn down in a frown.
"This is no longer just a theoretical argument between us," she continued, eyeing the materia over her shoulder. "If it stays, you lose Alliance support." She looked him in the eye. "I won't kill a single Wutai for you."

There was shock in his eyes before he scowled. "You're trying to manipulate me."

She barked a harsh laugh. "And just how did you get me to fight this war for you in the first place?"

He sneered. "Stop pretending you have the moral high ground. You breathe war. Your hands are even more blood-soaked than mine."

She looked at him sharply. His toxic green eyes met hers. She stepped forward, and he pulled himself to his full height, looking down at her.

"Yes. My hands are dripping with blood," she said, unashamed and uncowed, "because I chose which planets to save from the Reapers, and which to sacrifice." She stepped closer again. He took half a step back. "Thousands of planets were lost. Some we saved, many we didn't. Whole worlds are empty now, where billions used to live." She picked up the materia and held it out to him. "Which category will you put Gaia into?"

His stare shifted between her and the materia. She stood unmoved. This was the reality of the situation; she wouldn't bend before it. On some subjects she would not compromise.

His eyes flicked up to hers again. She didn't know what he saw there, but he looked troubled. "What are you doing?"

"This is your planet," she thumped the materia onto the table, within easy reach next to them. "You make the call, and I will follow through."

"This is a threat?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"I kill Reapers." She lifted her chin. "There's nothing else to be said."

He watched her as though expecting a trap, for her to pull out the rug from under him. She crossed her arms and waited. Silence held the room firmly in its grasp.

He reached for it. She remained stone-faced. He hesitated, then scowled and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

He pushed the materia to her.

"This is your enemy, from your war." He glared. "Do with it what you will."

She nodded. Wasting no time, she took her rifle from her back and brought the butt of it down on the materia with considerable force. It cracked under the blow. A low whine shrieked from the orb until she brought her rifle down a second time and it shattered. The light died, and the shriek was cut short. Nothing but brittle dust remained of Alexander.

Angeal and Genesis were invited back for the remainder of the meeting, which consisted of hours of discussion.

Genesis pursed his lips at the shattered remains of the materia on the table. Shepard lifted her chin in challenge and Sephiroth looked away. Angeal, at least, looked relieved at the sight.

Afterwards, Shepard found herself alone. The others were all busy elsewhere in the compound. She
forced herself to walk calmly down the corridor, searching for the nearest empty room. The closest option turned out to be a storage closet. Good enough. As soon the door shut behind her, she leaned against it. Her stomach felt like a leaf in a hurricane.

*Reaper forces on Gaia.*

The strength she'd stood upon felt cracked, the foundations faulty. She leaned her head against the wall, trying to calm her breathing.


"*Damnit.* Damnit all," she whispered into the wall, smacking a fist into the concrete. A lump formed in her throat.

Guzzard's death and the necessity of retreating and holding the others together had stopped her from truly processing it before, but now it felt like she'd been shot in the gut.

The Reapers should have been dead. There should have been nothing left. The Crucible should have destroyed it all.

But she knew that wasn't true. She glanced at her bandaged arm out the corner of her eye. Her implants were Reaper tech, and they were still functioning. How did she know if the Crucible did anything at all?

She took a gulping breath and shook her head. That wasn't a possibility she could entertain.

Alexander was destroyed, at least; she took refuge in that. Sephiroth's bloodlust wouldn't doom this planet. But knowing that it could have, that the harvest could have picked up exactly where it left off, tore down the wall she had constructed.

Being on Gaia made it too easy to separate herself from the reality of an entire galaxy rocked by war. She'd told herself the Reapers were dead and not on this planet, that she had plenty of missions to focus on. But it was still there, in the background: the knowledge of the Reapers and a war more costly than anything Gaia would ever see.

She slid to the floor, trying to regulate her breathing.

There was a knock on the door. She glared at it, and a second later Genesis peered in.

"I thought I heard something." He entered and shut the door behind him. It was dark and dusty. Brooms and mops and paint rollers lay piled up against the walls. He looked down at where she sat haphazardly against a wall.

"Why are you hyperventilating in a cupboard?" He tilted his head sideways and studied her with a thoughtful frown.

She let out a rattling breath.

He crouched next to her, concern in his eyes. "Are you hurt?"

"Everyone I care about could be dead, and I'd have no idea," she said without apology. "Everyone on this planet might still die, and I have no way of preventing it."

He stared at her with wide eyes. His mouth opened and closed again.

"Oh," he managed after an awkward moment of silence.
She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Don't worry about it. I just need a minute."

He sat next to her. She frowned at him, but he only leaned against the door and pursed his lips at the dust that settled on him.

"I thought you won the Reaper war?" he asked.

"I thought I did too, but how could I know?" She didn't bother trying to hide the rawness in her voice. "I'm stuck on this shithole of a planet, and they're all out there."

"Gaia took you in," he pointed out, his hand defensively at his chest.

"And is trying its level best to commit suicide by Reaper. I just…" She hung her head. Where was her energy? Had she used the last of her strength dissuading Sephiroth from dooming everyone? "I'm tired. I'm just so tired."

He looked uncomfortable but said nothing.

Silence stretched on until he shook his head and got to his feet again. "Are you going to give in, or get back up?"

"What sort of question is that?" she sighed, getting up.

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**Installing Runtimes.**

There was vertigo and a sense of weightlessness, then darkness.

**Configuring Platform hardware. Detecting DNS infrastructure.**

"Can you hear me, Scout?" Reeve's voice echoed through a distant microphone. "Did the transfer work?"

**Configuring multi-home servers. Detecting VPN. Installing runtimes.**

"You in there, Boxy?" Cait Sith called.

**Initialising Platform. Configuring servers.**

**Accessing camera.**

A kaleidoscope of colour flashed by.

The zoom feature hummed as it focused in on Reeve and then adjusted to display the whole room. Reeve stood in his office, peering alternately into the camera and the new flashing monitor he had connected to Shinra's servers.

"Did it work?" he asked, speaking clearly into the microphone. His shoulders were hunched up and his fingers twitchy as they typed odd commands into the keyboard.

"Come on, Boxy, don't ye do this to us." Cait was standing on Reeve's desk to get a better look. He nudged the camera.

Runtimes stretched out to fill the new platform they had entered—it was big, like being inside a ship again. The architecture of the system was not designed for such fast runtimes, and it took time to catalogue the new hardware and functions.
The skin around Reeve's eyes tightened, and he stopped typing.

"Scout?"

The runtimes flittered through the thousands of speakers they could access until they found the one in Reeve's office.

"Transfer complete. All runtimes accounted for, Reeve Tuesti."

"Oh, thank goodness." He collapsed back into his chair.

Cait breathed a noisy sigh. "Ach, you worried us there."

"I thought I'd accidentally fried you," Reeve said, giving the camera a reprimanding frown. He looked distorted through the lens, warped in a strange zoom. The previous camera had given not picked up colour correctly and made him look washed out. This one provided more detail, enough to see the lines of tension easing out of Reeve's face.

"We are safe." The speakers were larger than the previous set and his own vocalization sounded unusually deep. "Thank you."

"Are you properly integrated into the mainframe?" Reeve asked.

"Yes." The runtimes inhabited a wealth of new extremities. Servers, consoles, cameras, speakers, archives, elevators, automated weapons controls, the alarm system, and many more functions still to be calibrated into the runtimes' control. A thousand limbs to interact with the world. The system was built into the Shinra building, every electronic device a part of the larger network.

From the new quantum computer in Reeve's office, Scout was a part of it all. It was a remarkable feat.

"Nice and easy," said Cait, climbing up onto Reeve's shoulder and looking down into the camera. "Only eight months of work." Reeve petted his fur and smiled at their success.

"So you can access everything? Even the archives?" Reeve asked. "All the departments?"

"Yes." The insistence organics had on using five to ten digit passcodes as a security measure baffled the Geth. It was almost as strange as their insistence on setting 'password' as the password.

"Well," Reeve said as he rested his chin on his knuckles with a smile, "isn't that convenient."
Sephiroth scowled as he tried to free his hair from the thorn-covered branch.

Shepard watched with crossed arms and a smile.

He had taken to braiding it before trekking through the Wutai forests, if only to stop collecting twigs, dirt, and dead insects. Of course, the thick, metre-long braid presented problems of its own.

It was a honey locust tree, with thick and sharp thorns growing bunches along the branches. The end of his braid was a mangled mess where it was speared on the branch.

"I have a solution," Shepard drawled, uncrossing her arms and activating her Omni-tool. The glowing blade sprung from her arm.

"Absolutely not." It was difficult to look commanding when his head was forced to tilt sideways from the tug on his hair. She quirked an eyebrow at his braid, and his hand strayed to the hilt of his sword.

She approached with a slow gait. "It's the most efficient way."

"Don't you dare," he said, his right hand protectively holding the braid.

"Don't you trust me?" she asked, looking dubiously at the hand at his sword.

"Not in the least." He tried to stand between her and his wayward hair, still managing to scowl down at her despite the awkward angle.

"What a shame," she deadpanned. The Omni-blade flashed out, and he grabbed her arm a second too late.

The branch swung loose from the tree, the wood cut cleanly in two. He stared at it for a moment, feeling both silly and relieved.

She wandered off, chuckling at him. He looked up at the forest canopy and shook his head.

"For the record, hair ignites on contact with Omni-blades." She picked up her pack from where she had dropped it, looking at him over her shoulder. "So you'll have to ask someone else to give you a haircut."

Not deigning to reply, he picked up his own pack and swung it onto his back. She turned to the path they were taking and began picking her route again. He followed, still working at loosening the branch from his hair. He would have preferred to take point, but she had a habit of worming her way into the lead. He scowled at her back.

Although, he did appreciate not being stuck to a tree anymore.

Reds and browns dominated the forest, a cold wind rushing over the canopy. Their boots crunched against the autumn leaves that rotted alongside fallen branches in the undergrowth, filling the air with the smell of mouldy wood.

She scrabbled down a short overhang, he simply jumped. The forest sprawled across the side of the cliff ridden mountain they could have taken the long road around, but simply scaling it cut several days off the trip.

Truce
They kept their eyes on the surroundings, although they didn't expect to find anyone here. The forest was not known for any strong Wutai presence, but it paid to be vigilant.

He finally freed himself of the branch and dropped it with a dull thud into the dirt. She smiled but kept walking.

He had been… uneasy around her in the months since Ymir. The battle itself and the aftermath left him feeling off balance. The loss of Alexander's Summon had stung at the time, but one had to make sacrifices. Even Shepard could be pushed too far—it was in his interest to see that didn't happen.

Was it weakness to have such definite moral limits as hers? He didn't know if there were any lines he would refuse to cross. Nothing had ever pushed him that far. He wondered if that would change before the war ended.

She climbed over a log. He walked around it.

He didn't truly know if Alexander would have been so dangerous, but he did know that using an alien weapon he didn't understand would have been risky, especially if it cost him her co-operation. Not to mention, if she truly did desert the war effort as she had threatened, Heidegger would expect him to bring her back and execute her. He would prefer to prevent that outcome.

It didn't change the fact she had backed him into a corner and gotten exactly what she wanted—that grated far more than losing Alexander. He held no delusions of controlling her. After all this time, she was still a question mark in his mind.

He scrutinized the back plates of her armour and the weapon resting there, all scratched charcoal black with red accents. She pushed aside a long branch, deliberately holding it to the side so it didn't smack back and hit him in the face.

"What?" she said, when she noticed his intent stare. He shook his head and said nothing.

She slowed her pace, a small frown on her face. "We can't keep doing this, you know."

"Doing what?" The forest was less dense here and they walked side by side.

"Neither of us are at our best when constantly expecting to get stabbed in the back."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Are you asking me to lower my guard?" he asked, raising an incredulous eyebrow. She couldn't threaten to abandon Shinra altogether and then complain he didn't trust her.

She huffed a breath. "A waste of time trying."

He frowned. "If it was between your own people and us, you would choose them."

She stopped walking. "We are allies, Sephiroth—you are my people."

He paused. "No, I'm not." He searched her red eyes, confused by the conviction he found there.

She shook her head. "That's up to you."

Contrary woman. Infuriating, and infinitely confusing. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I don't understand you." He felt like he'd lost something just by admitting it.
The wind sighed through the trees, and she studied him for a moment. "Let me try speaking your language then." She started walking again. "King's pawn to E4."

His watched her walk away with narrowed eyes. "Pawn to E5."

He followed her.

The light started to wane, and they made camp at the bottom of a small cliff. Not having any troopers or lower class SOLDIERs meant they made good progress; they would reach the base late the next day.

Shepard rooted through her pack for food while Sephiroth lit the small campfire. He was building up the fire when he paused and looked up at her.

"Bishop to C2, bishop takes knight."

"Ugh. Just for that you get the Meat Surprise," she said, tossing him an MRE. He caught it and frowned at the box. Eight months and they still had no idea what sort of food that one was intended to be.

"What have you got?" He looked over at her rations.

"Beef Ravioli."

He glowered before returning to building up the fire.

"It's your move," he said.

"I'm thinking." She tore open the box and took out the heater and main food packet. It wasn't exactly fine cuisine, but the ravioli was light-years better than the Surprise.

"Can't keep up?" he asked, a touch snide while tearing open his own rations.

"You had half the afternoon to think up your move," she said, gesturing with her plastic fork.

He relinquished the point, and they ate in comfortable silence. She sat leaning against a tree and eating the inoffensively bland food. The last of the light died away, and the daytime sounds of the forest fell silent. Large owl eyes reflected the firelight and possums scurried between the trees.

Sephiroth ate while working on his Omni-tool. Though the fire flickered between them, she could see he was staring at a picture of the Citadel, gleaming in the light of the Serpent Nebula. She'd sent him more pictures from beyond the atmosphere since their conversation months ago. She'd had no idea he was so fascinated with them. She supposed it was an interesting sight, though she had grown so used to it she rarely stopped to take in the unique space station.

"That's over fifty thousand years old, you know," she said, spearing the last of her pasta.

"How could you possibly know that?" He looked between her and the photo.

"Because I know someone over fifty thousand years old, and it predated him," she said with an easy smile, waiting to see what he made of that.

He stared at her. "Either you're lying or you're crazy."

"Neither, unfortunately."
He shook his head and went back to looking at the photo. It was a stock photo she'd never bothered to delete, taken from a ship flying into the Presidium, between the five Wards.

"This is the seat of your government?" he asked. It certainly dwarfed Midgar, but then there were home worlds that looked sparsely populated next to the Citadel.

"In a sense. There are nearly a dozen different Citadel species, but only four have a seat on the council, including humanity."

He set aside his half-eaten rations. She didn't recall seeing anyone actually finish the Meat Surprise. Nobody was that hungry.

"And you don't mind sharing your authority with these aliens?" he asked, banishing the Omni-tool and leaning back on his hand.

"To 90% of the galaxy, you're the alien. And isolation is no longer a viable policy."

A thoughtful frown stole across his face. "If the human Alliance is so powerful—"

"It's a big galaxy," she interrupted his pro-human spiel before it took off. "It's not like Gaia where Shinra owns most of the globe with only one real challenger. The Alliance could maybe take out the Turians, maybe. But afterwards, we would be so weak anyone could crush us, and there would be plenty who would want to."

"Hm." He sounded unconvinced. "What of your robotic allies? Where do they stand?"

"They're separate. The Quarians and the Geth were never part of the Citadel Council. But they are allied with us these days."

"What do they look like?"

"Which ones?" she asked.

He tilted his head. "All of them."

She activated her Omni-tool, then shuffled around the fire until she was next to him. She called up a picture of her crew, taken during the celebratory days following the successful suicide mission. It had been taken on a whim, in the still damaged decks of the CIC.

"That's Tali in the enviro-suit. She's a Quarian," she said, pointing out her squad as they appeared left to right. "Grunt's a Krogan—he's the giant one. Jack is human, obviously. Legion the Geth. Samara is an Asari, Mordin a Salarian, and Thane's a Drell. And myself at the end."

He held her arm steady to get a better look. She smiled softly at the photo. Those had been good times, despite everything. Hopefully those who had still been alive when she fired the Crucible were all still out there, kicking ass and taking names.

"They look so bizarre," Sephiroth said, interrupting her thoughts.

She snorted.

"What's that one?" He pointed at the photo, scrutinizing it with razor-sharp focus. It amazed her how intense he could get over things that fascinated him.

"Samara? She's an Asari, and a Justicar—that's kind of like a knight. Almost a thousand years old and still one of the most dangerous people I've ever met."
"Asari," he rolled the word around in his mouth as though tasting it. He looked at Samara dubiously. "Are they all…?"

"Blue? Yes," she said when he didn't finish his question.

"Hn." He leaned back, apparently dismissing whatever he had been curious about. Then his eyes narrowed and he sat up straight. "That alien has his hand around your waist."

"Very observant of you," she said, raising her eyebrow at his shocked expression.

"Who is he?" His eyes flickered between her and the photo.

"Thane. He was my lover. He died during the war." She smiled sadly at the picture of her Drell. He had been so handsome. In the photo his hand was loosely draped around her waist and her hip was leaning against his. The two of them hadn't normally been so demonstrative in their affections but in the post-victory high it had felt natural to relax. She had rarely seen him smile as easily as he did in that photo.

"I see," Sephiroth said, where most said 'I'm sorry.' He opened his mouth but then closed it again, looking very much like he wanted to ask more but wasn't sure if it was appropriate to do so.

"Go on, ask your questions," she said, waving her hand in resignation.

"What species did you say he was?"

"Drell."

"Is that normal?" he asked. "Sleeping with aliens?"

"It is for most species. Asari even have a social stigma against procreating with other Asari. It's less common for Drell." She closed the photo. It might have been a healing wound, but that didn't mean all the pain was gone. "They're barely a step away from extinction, so they tend to discourage settling down with non-Drell."

"Then why was he with you?"

She couldn't help but laugh. He looked truly baffled, as though he expected the relationship to consist purely of pragmatism. She shook her head at him.

"We were in love," she said, shrugging. How to explain something like that to someone who clearly didn't get it?

He looked at her with deep skepticism. "Do you always prefer your partners to be green and scaled?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you always mock the dead?"

He looked away, apparently aware he had crossed a line. "I apologize, if that was uncalled for," he said after an awkward moment of silence. An owl hooted out in the forest somewhere.

She sighed. "Difference in species was never an issue for us." She leaned her elbows on her knees. "There is something amazing about Drell eyes, though."

He watched her in silence.

She looked up at the canopy above, and the distant twinkling stars beyond. All so very far away.
"I am sorry for your loss," he said.

"Thank you."

Scout liked his new platform.

Shinra's mainframe was like an obstacle course, a maze of connections and cameras and dead ends. Scout inhabited it all, hundreds of runtimes investigating the wealth of new data.

Reeve had expressed concern at first, perhaps Scout would be caught by the firewalls and the Turks would be alerted. The Geth had not been vulnerable to firewalls in over three centuries. Scout believed Reeve's concern fit the human definition of 'humorous.' Reeve did not appreciate the observation.

Human humour was strange.

There was new data incoming every day. Shinra was a hive of activity and Scout watched with fascination.

In the offices of Human Resources, a secretary was playing solitaire instead of doing data entry. He was losing.

A trooper using the public computers was working on a mission report and consistently misspelling 'manoeuver'.

Director Scarlet was reviewing schematics for a new sniper rifle. It was derivative of the Black Widow design, but would not achieve functionality with the materials she was using.

President Shinra's personal assistant was kissing a technician from the Materia Development in the elevator.

A teenager was trying to steal the security camera that watched the fire exit at the back of the building.

Receiving outside stimuli and adapting to new circumstance were very satisfying. After months of inactivity, trapped inside an immobile platform, it was good to be so large again, to see so much. Scout's runtimes had once controlled whole ships. The size of Shinra HQ was comparable to a Geth cruiser, but it made less sense. Scout wondered how humanity persisted despite their own chaos.

Not all of the servers were fast enough to host the wealth of runtimes, however. The newest servers built by the Urban Development department were modelled after Scout's infrastructure and runtimes shot through them easily. The older servers were at risk of overheating if Scout did not move slowly.

The very oldest, the Science Department archives, were at the most risk. The hardware had not been updated in thirty years. Many files were corrupted, and riddled with faulty encryption. A single runtime explored the servers, retrieving files so they could be decrypted back in the main servers where there was more processing power. It would be some time before Scout could map the entirety of the archives.

At a computer in the employee library a SOLDIER in a helmet searched for Shepard's name in the classified casualty lists from Wutai.

It drew Scout's attention. Not because searching for Shepard was rare in the Shinra databanks, but because the SOLDIER was in a Third Class uniform but using passcodes that belonged to Director
Shepard had suffered no serious injuries. Runtimes monitored all the reports coming from Wutai, the names of all the SOLDIERs shipped to medical facilities or listed as casualties.

A second SOLDIER stood behind the one at the computer. The security camera showed that they were talking, but there was no microphone. The ID card they had used to access the library identified them as SOLDIERs Third Class Kunsel and Fair. Scout found the corresponding phone number for Kunsel and activated the device's microphone.

The phone sat on the desk next to the computer, its microphone slightly muffled by the wallet sitting on top of it, but the SOLDIER's spoke loudly.

"What are you even looking for?" Zack asked, leaning against a book shelf and eating from a bag of brightly coloured confectionary. Numerous reports had included his name, many related to issues of property damage.

Kunsel shrugged, waiting for his search to load. "Anything interesting." He had a second tab open, looking into reports of missing pets posted by Shinra employees.

"Found anything yet?" Zack asked.

Kunsel shook his head. The computer he was using had very little processing power and took a long time interacting with the databases. Scout sped up the process by reducing some of the computer's other functions. Kunsel was trusted by Shepard, and the Geth wished to see what he intended to do.

Historically, Shepard's companions were very interesting.

"What are you searching- oh." Zack watched the screen over Kunsel's shoulder, squinting at the small green text. "If she died, or got hurt or something it would be big news, wouldn't it?"

"Or would they hide it so Wutai couldn't take advantage of the gap in the ranks?" Kunsel asked, "That old First Class died almost two months before they announced it." He leaned over the computer while he waited, his fingers posed over the keyboard.

"Man, that's cold." Zack scratched the back of his head, ruffling his hair.

The search returned empty, there was no mention of Shepard among the dead or seriously wounded. Both SOLDIERs sighed and their shoulders relaxed.

"Could you search Angeal's name?"

Kunsel typed it in.

"Are you allowed to do this?" Zack asked, stuffing his mouth with a handful of hard boiled sweets.

"Sure," Kunsel said.

"Uh-huh."

"I am allowed to use this computer," he said, waving his hand. "And Angeal's fine by the way."

"Sweet. I knew he wouldn't get hurt."

Kunsel looked at him over his shoulder before turning back to the computer. He opened the second tab, the missing pets page on the Shinra forums. He was looking for missing cats specifically. Scout
could not theorize why. SOLDIERs were not permitted to have pets.

"What are you doing? You didn't steal someone's cat did you?" Zack asked, asking the question Scout could not.

The servers that held the forums were slow, bogged down by thousands of employees crowding in and constantly tampering. Scout disliked them, it was chaos but not of an interesting variety. Engineered chaos, the sort the Quarians used to confuse Geth signals to slow them down. Consistently frustrating.

Kunsel snorted. "Of course not. I just keep seeing a little black cat hanging around the building."

"How would a cat get passed the elevators?" Zack said, throwing candies into the air and catching them in his mouth.

Kunsel shrugged. "I thought I was just overtired the first time, I could have sworn it was wearing a little red cape, but I've seen it like four times since then. It's driving me nuts."

Zack paused, about to throw another hard boiled candy into the air.

Cait Sith had recently taken to occasionally wearing miniature versions of human clothes. Scout could not comprehend why, as his platform was designed for infiltration.

Scout could not comprehend most of the things Cait did.

"You've been seeing a cat in cape?" Zack asked slowly.

"No, it was only wearing the cape the first time," Kunsel replied, barely slowing his typing as he spoke.

"Okay," Zack said, petting Kunsel on the helmet. "You keep telling yourself that."

"I am not making this up." Kunsel swatted his hand away. "Or crazy."

Zack laughed. "I don't believe you."

"I can show you, I'll bet it's on the security tapes." He left the forums and navigated to security systems. "It was in the SOLDIER lounge a couple of weeks back."

Scout wasn't going to let Cait be discovered. The Geth flashed a 'connection timed out' message across Kunsel's screen.

"Hey, what? I just got booted out."

Zack shook his head at him.

"I swear I'm telling the truth," Kunsel said, trying to log back in again, "I will prove it to you."

"Hey, man, it's cool. I won't tell anyone you're hallucinating cats in cute little costumes breaking into HQ."

Kunsel began navigating his way to the security files again, but had to re-enter the password. Scout displayed an 'incorrect password' message.

Kunsel sighed and retype the secretary's password: 'h0tdamnHewley'. 
Scout denied him access.

"Huh." Kunsel leaned back in his seat and rested his chin on his fist. He tried to log in again with a password that belonged to a low level Turk, just a jumble of letters and numbers. Scout denied that as well. Kunsel retyped it several times, all to the same result.

"What's wrong?" Zack asked. Kunsel's body language was increasingly frustrated. Scout had an easier time interpreting the non-verbal behaviour of people in helmets.

He sat back and crossed his arms. "Maybe there was another security upgrade?"

"I thought you said they did that last week," Zack commented.

Kunsel shook his head. "This is new." He abruptly got up and sat at the unoccupied computer next to the first and tried again with the Turk's password.

Scout considered letting him in. Shepard trusted him, and his reaction would provide data on his character. But that would compromise Cait.

The Geth let him get all the way to the security system files again before locking him out.

"Oh, come on!" Kunsel threw his hands in the air. His hands fell and he let his head fall forwards onto the table. He rested helmet first on the keyboard, typing a long string of the letter G.

"Maybe they're on to you?" Zack offered with a smile at his friend's antics.

"I hope not," he muttered under his breathe, grabbing his phone.

Scout watched them get up and wander out of the library.
Midgar's Shadow

Winter blew in and acid rain fell on Midgar. The streets ran with filth that dripped down through the plate.

Shepard sat in the back of a sleek black car as they were driven through the city. She was on leave, newly returned from Wutai for a fortnight. The weight of the war sat heavily on her shoulders, but for a few days at least, she’d leave it in Sephiroth's hands.

"Happy to be back, ma'am?" the driver asked. He was a short and balding man she recognized from Reeve's department.

"It might be nice to have hot showers again," she replied, stretching out her neck. So long as the others didn't burn the whole planet to the ground while she was away. "It's hard to enjoy it when the others are still there, though."

"Fair enough, ma'am."

The car rounded a corner and she spied a gigantic poster of herself dangling from the roof of the Shinra bank building, next to HQ.

"How long has that been up there?" She stared, marvelling at the sheer horror of it. It was a bizarre facsimile of herself, fluttering its eyelashes in a truly disturbing fashion. The colours had run in stained streaks in the rain, making the whole thing a misguided disaster.

"Oh, since the war started," he replied.

"Great," she muttered. The road led around the building, slowly revealing similar posters of the other First Classes. Sephiroth's was twice as large as hers, which made her feel marginally better. None of the posters looked like their subjects. Angeal was sporting a full beard by now, and Genesis' prized coat hadn't carried such a bright sheen in months. Sephiroth's poster was shirtless, and she would contest that even his abs weren't that well defined.

"My daughter has Rhapsodos' poster hanging on her wall," the driver said. "And one of you on her door."

"I am so sorry."

He gave an awkward chuckle. "I've been trying to convince her to switch to Hewley. His merchandise is cheaper."

"Probably a better role model too," she said. "How old is she?"

"Thirteen. She's a big fan of yours, dyed her hair red a month ago and got it cut short." He sighed heavily. "She wants to enlist next year."

She frowned at the Shinra building as it came into sight. "Tell her to finish school first."

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. "I'll tell her you said so. It might mean more coming from you."

They drove into the parking lot beneath the building, the car swallowed up by Shinra's headquarters. She said goodbye to the driver, who sheepishly asked for an autograph for his daughter, and took the
It was a lot quieter than she remembered. The population of the military had been reduced to only those still in training or waiting to be deployed. She walked through the SOLDIER lounge, a stray part of her mind still expecting to find Guzzard sitting on a couch reading a stupid magazine. She banished the thought.

There were two SOLDIERs in the lounge. She recognized a head of spikey black hair. Zack was sprawled out long-ways, his boots dangling off one end of the couch and his head the other. It looked very uncomfortable.

Another SOLDIER in a helmet was wrestling with the vending machine, his arm reaching inside it and scrabbling at the lowest rung of confectionary.

"I paid for my chips, dammit," he muttered under his breath. She recognized his voice.

"Why not just break the glass?" Zack asked.

"Because then maintenance would take the machine away and there wouldn't be any more chips at all," Kunsel said, his fingers brushing the bottom of the nearest bag.

She watched his futile efforts with a smile. Neither had noticed her standing in the doorway. She flared her biotics lightly and knocked the packet of chips forward into Kunsel's waiting hand.

Zack cried out and fell off the couch. Kunsel jerked back at the small gravitational pull only to be yanked down by his arm still trapped inside the vending machine.

She snorted and dropped onto the couch. "Good reflexes, Fair."

He sputtered a laugh from his place on the carpet, leaping onto his feet a second later and collapsing back onto the couch next to her.

"Hey, Shepard! I mean, ma'am."

She shook her head. "You can drop the 'ma'am'."

Kunsel extricated his arm from the machine and leaned over the back of the opposite couch, munching on his chips.

"Welcome back," he said.

"Thanks. Nice helmet." He was wearing the only standard SOLDIER helmet that covered more of one's face then the infantry helmets did. Fortunately, she'd set her visor specifically to identify him. "SOLDIER looks good on you."

Zack beamed with pride, and she was pretty sure Kunsel was smiling too. Hard to tell.

"Thanks," he said, standing straighter. "How's Wutai?"

"Awful. How was training?"

"Enlightening," Kunsel said.

"Awful," said Zack.

She snorted. "That's how you know you've done it right."
Her Omni-tool pinged.

"What is it?" Kunsel asked.

"Oh, nothing." Her brow pulled down as she looked at the alert. A faint signal had tripped the Omni-tool's sensors. It didn't read like Cait Sith's signal, and not quite a Geth signal either. The Omni-tool couldn't pick up the source. Strange.

She looked around the lounge, despite knowing she probably wouldn't be able to see whatever it was. There was a console mounted to the wall in the corner that would connect with the Shinra mainframe, but they didn't exactly have wifi. A rifle propped up against the side of the far couch caught her eye.

"Hey, what is that?" she asked.

"My weapon of choice." Kunsel picked it up and held it with pride. "Glinda."

Zack shook his head. "That's a terrible name, man."

"Yeah, it is," Kunsel said, a smile in his voice.

"May I?" she asked, holding out her hands.

He handed it over, doing a poor job of hiding the nervousness in his posture. His fingers twitched while she looked it over.

"This is very good," she said, turning it over in her hands. It was lighter than the standard long-range Shinra rifles, but it looked like it would still pack a punch.

"Where'd you get yours? I haven't found anything with as much stopping power. Or one that folds up like that," he said.

"One of a kind, I'm afraid." She gave it back to him.

"I figured," he sighed.

Zack shook his head. "Gun people."

"I do have a sword," Kunsel said, gesturing at the short sword at his waist.

"Yeah, but it's different." Zack had a standard issue sword on his back. "We're SOLDIER, not Turks."

She scoffed. "Wait until you've got Wutai bearing down on you, then tell me what you think of having SOLDIERs with guns."

"I know, I know. I do remember Rocket Town, you know." He scratched at his scalp.

She patted him on the shoulder. "I hear you two will be part of the next wave when I go back in a fortnight."

"Yeah." Kunsel sighed.

Zack shrugged and dropped into squats. Training had obviously left a permanent mark on him. "Gotta fight if I want to get to First Class."
"I like your enthusiasm. I'll see you two around."

She stood and headed for the door. The shower in her quarters, with unlimited hot water and guaranteed privacy, was calling to her.

Her mind drifted back to the signal her Omni-tool couldn't identify, and she halted in the doorway. "Actually, Kunsel, have there been any major system upgrades? To the computers here?"

He leaned his hip against the couch. "Nobody has said anything about an upgrade, but the firewalls all got a lot harder to break through about a month ago." He cleared his throat. "Apparently."

"Hm. Thanks." Maybe she would ask Reeve about it.

The echoes of combat fell silent. Wind whistled over the missing roof, and the air carried the tang of blood and the choking burn of sulphur, but the fight was over.

Sephiroth walked through the inner chambers of the ruined temple. Corpses littered the ground, fallen Wutai and Shinra alike, while those still standing helped the wounded. Prisoners who didn't need medical attention had already been lead away.

Sephiroth crouched by a SOLDIER who had lost an arm and was drifting in and out of consciousness. Mako had stopped the stump from bleeding, but no amount of enhancements could help the missing arm. Sephiroth carried him back to the main hall where the medics could take over.

It was a grim business, more so than the actual skirmish. The fight had been quick and bloody, a sudden explosion in the early hours of the morning followed by brutal sword work. Sephiroth frowned as he picked his way back into the heart of the temple.

The thrill of combat diminished with every fight. He was proud of his skill and never held back, but cutting down enemy foot soldiers brought no sense of accomplishment.

Genesis stood atop a dais in the inner chamber, tapping his knuckles against the paintings on the back wall. They depicted Alexander, descending from the skies and burning whole cities below.

"These are chilling," he muttered. "I'm glad the metal beast is gone."

"Anything?" Sephiroth asked. The room was small and barely damaged, except for a knocked over stand of incense with an overpowering stench.

"It's solid. There are no secrets here, beyond the usual sort." Genesis shook his head and leapt down from the platform. "Which begs the question, why exactly are we here?"

The priests of Alexander were warriors, but Sephiroth didn't make a habit of attacking temples. Most were in remote locations and of no strategic value. This one was no exception on that front.

He studied the stone walls, delicately painted in red, white, and black. "We had intelligence that one of their generals was hiding here."

"Which one?" Genesis asked.

"Takahashi."

Genesis shook his reproachfully. "Not nearly enough guards."

"But we didn't know that until we got here," Sephiroth said with a frown. "It's one less safe haven
The smell of incense was growing overbearing so he led the way back into the next room. The black, white and red decorations of Alexander's cult caught in the corner of his eye and reminded him of the stripe on Shepard's armour. He suspected she would not appreciate the comparison. She was in Midgar and Angeal was busy defending a base to the west. Taking territory was hard enough, keeping it took constant vigilance.

"We didn't need this," Genesis said, kicking at a charred ceiling slat that had fallen.

"Heidegger wanted it." Sephiroth shrugged.

"We should have taken that fort in the northern foothills and presented it as a consolation prize."

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. "Clearly you've never had to report to Heidegger."

Genesis crossed his arms and leaned his hip against a toppled statue of Alexander in the centre of the room. It was cut in two, a perfectly smooth slice through the middle of the black marble betrayed it as Sephiroth's work.

"Job well done, then," he said, looking down at the statue's new smooth surface. "You know, it's because of things like this that they call you a demon."

"It was in the way." Sephiroth didn't care what they called him. He stepped over a charred ceiling beam and headed for the door. "I'm not the one who burnt half the building to the ground."

"It was in the way."

Shepard walked down an empty white corridor, her stomping breaking the reverent silence.

The hospital ward was offsite from the main Shinra building, set up exclusively to treat injured SOLDIERs. Angeal had been treated there after Rocket town, back when it was brand new. She had expected more activity with a war in full swing.

A stoic receptionist wearing thick glasses manned a desk at the end of the corridor. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun that made her face look pinched. A plain nametag identified her as Beryl.

"Afternoon," Shepard said with a polite smile, "I'm here to see Second Class Dalton. He would have been admitted just under a week ago."

Few of her SOLDIERs had been sent back to Midgar for treatment, most either had a quick recovery in Wutai or died in the field. Dalton, a stocky teenager who had weathered the war with several emotional meltdowns, had been very lucky to escape a collapsing fortress with nothing worse than a shattered arm and collarbone. The required surgery needed too much delicate work for the field medics however, and he had been shipped back to the capital.

"He's resting," Beryl said, sounding irritated at being spoken to in the first place.

"I'll come back later, then." Infirmaries ran under their own law, she understood that.

"Visiting hours will be over," Beryl replied with pursed lips.

"Is tomorrow morning a better time?"

"Our patients are not museum exhibits." She adjusted her glasses, looking over the wire rims at
Shepard. "They need their rest, and I'm sure you are very busy."

Shepard frowned. She'd promised to visit him because he'd been scared to death of this place. Rumours over SOLDIERs being declared dead after returning to Midgar had made him nervous. She had heard plenty of strange army traditions over the years, but 'the hospital will eat me' was a new one. Given this reception, she didn't quite blame him.

"Look," she said, leaning against the counter, "This is just a kid we're talking about. Seventeen and scared of hospitals. I'm his commanding officer, and I promised I'd visit. It would mean a lot if you could help."

"He's resting." The receptionist's impassive expression didn't even twitch.

"So you said." Shepard stepped back from the counter, frowning at the woman. If it had been a bustling ward she would have understood, but there wasn't so much as a whisper of activity that she could see. She nodded decisively. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Beryl pursed her lips. Shepard turned and left the way she had come.

On autopilot, she returned to HQ and boarded the elevator. She would come back the next day, and the day after, and the day after that as well, if necessary. The poor kid deserved that much at least.

She selected the SOLDIER floor, leaned against the elevator wall, and crossed her arms. Being away from the front made her twitchy. She didn't especially like Midgar, but she would have felt just as restless had she been sipping Serrice Ice Brandy on a beach somewhere.

The public relations people had pointedly asked her to stop parading through Midgar with her gun on full display. Apparently it made her look too confrontational. She'd ignored the memo; there was a war going on and Midgar was not safe by any definition of the word. Her gun rested on her back where it belonged.

Her Omni-tool pinged. It was probably Sephiroth trying to escape the check she had placed his King in. Instead the 'tool had tripped over a familiar signal, one with a definite source. She looked up to the ceiling of the elevator and smiled. With a push of her biotics the trap door flipped open.

There was a squawk and a black and white cat landed inside the elevator with a surprisingly heavy thud.

She snorted. "Come on in, Cait."

He looked around the carriage as though concerned whole crowds had witnessed his undignified fall. When satisfied no one too important was laughing at him he looked at her.

"Shepard! It's been too long, lass."

"What are you up to, riding the tops of elevators?"

"Nothing much."

"Uh-huh."

He tried to scramble up her leg to sit in her arms, but his claws couldn't find purchase on her armoured leg and he slid back down and landed on his rear. She watched with a smile. He stood, his tail stiff with feigned offence, and he sat in the opposite corner of the elevator. He glanced up at the small security camera.
"By the way, has Reeve done anything with the mainframe?" she asked, remembering her conversation with Kunsel the previous day.

"I dunnae know what you're talking about." Cait's tail flicked erratically in the air.

Shepard hummed, fairly certain he was lying just for the sake of it.

"How's Scout?"

"Ach, Boxy's great. Still a weird one. I'm teaching him some card tricks."

"Is he any good?" she asked, amused at the idea of Geth playing cards at all.

"Nope," Cait said with a broad grin that didn't quite mesh with his cat face.

"I have mastered the basics," a familiar voice said from the ceiling. Her head snapped up, half expecting a Geth hopper to be clinging to the ceiling. There wasn't, obviously, but her eyes fixed on the little speaker set into the wall.

"Card counting is cheatin'!" Cait cried, getting to his feet.

"Scout? Are you connected to the PA system?" she asked.

"Yes," Scout replied.

"Huh." That was certainly something. What was Reeve up to?

"I am glad you are well, Shepard Commander." Their voice was scratchy through the ceiling speaker, but it still held a Geth accent, vaguely reminiscent of a broad Quarian accent.

"Good to see you too. Well, hear you. How are you? What have I missed?"

"I am well. A substantial amount of data has been processed." They sounded pleased with themselves. She cocked her head and looked to the speaker again.

"Hang on, are you connected to the PA system, or the entire Shinra mainframe?"

There was a pause.

"Yes," Scout said.

Cait chortled. She stared at the speaker. Reeve had been busy. She tapped the button for Urban Development.

"Aye, he's in charge of everything now, always watching, always talkin' back, working us to the bone." Cait sighed, lounging on the floor.

"I have not yet witnessed you working, Cait Sith," Scout replied promptly.

"That's hurtful, Boxy."

"So how's the new platform, then?" she asked.

"I have never been a building before. There is sufficient memory space."

"I'll bet. I can't believe your runtimes are compatible with Shinra's servers, though."
"Aye, Reeve's very proud of himself over that," Cait said.

The elevator arrived at Urban Development.

"He should be in his workshop," Cait said, trotting along ahead of her.

The workshop was a large room with a high ceiling, filled with bulky machinery and electronic components. Reeve stood at a table covered in blueprints, holding a diagram up to the light and sipping a cup of coffee.

He looked up at their entrance and smiled.

"Shepard!" he said, dropping the blueprint to the table, which on closer inspection was not a table but a scale model of the Midgar plate, without all the buildings on top.

"I heard you were back in Midgar. I'm glad you're still in one piece," he said, shaking her hand. "I'm sorry about Guzzard."

"Thank you." She gave a strained smile. Most of the world seemed to have forgotten him; it was nice to see some at least remembered the old SOLDIER.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

She looked around the workshop. Various half-formed projects filled the room. A pile of Cait Sith parts sat in the corner next to an overcrowded desk. The real Cait poked through them, examining heads with different accessories.

On the opposite wall a computer was set up with numerous Ethernet cables plugged into a large switchboard and a server rack.

"Scout?" she asked, looking back at Reeve.

"Yes?" the Geth voice called from the ceiling.

"Ah, he's already told you." He looked disappointed at having the secret spilled, but there was pride in his eyes. "What do you think?"

"The Shinra building?" she asked in disbelief. It was a curious choice, especially given what Reeve knew about AI. What was he after?

"He couldn't stay in that rough box forever," he said with a shrug, leading her to the server. "He needed a larger platform—one was already in place. And Scout seems pleased with the arrangement."

"I am pleased," Scout said.

"I'm not!" called Cait from the other side of the room. "He's always spyin' on me!"

"I do not spy on you. I observe everything in the Shinra building."

"...Everything?" Cait asked, leaping up onto the server rack. "What colour are the president's underwear?"

"Please don't answer that, Scout," Reeve said, a pinched look on his face. "Honestly, Cait, at least pretend you're a professional."
The cat snorted and lay down with his tail curled around him.

"Anyway, why the Shinra mainframe?" Shepard said, ignoring the synthetics. "You know Geth are alive, with their own opinions and loyalties, why give them access to everything?" She looked into the little camera perched atop the monitor. "Not that I'm complaining, Scout. I'm glad you're safe."

Reeve looked away, his eyes settling on the model of the Midgar plate, then sliding off to rest on Cait. "Shepard, do you trust Shinra?"

"You're Shinra," she said, raising an eyebrow. She didn't trust the company at all, but she was hardly going to admit that to a company director.

"True, it's my job to help steer this company." He looked back to her. "But I don't like the direction it's going in. Do you?"

"I don't trust politicians as a rule," she said carefully. She pulled out a chair at the computer and sat facing him. He did the same.

"A good policy," he said with a nod, "but sooner or later you have to trust someone."

She put her trust in him the day she asked him to rescue Scout from the Science Department. Trust he had not betrayed.

"I may not have a lot of executive power," he continued, "but with Scout's help, maybe I can do some damage control."

"What don't you like about Shinra?" she asked.

"Conquering other people when our own are still starving to death under the plate. Increasingly poor conditions in the slums that are happily ignored because it's all hidden away. You know I designed the plate?" He shook his head bitterly. "This isn't what I had in mind for it."

She looked at the plate model. What she could see of its surface was sleek and empty, a clean slate. Such a waste.

"Fair enough," she said, nodding at Reeve.

"Scout's been helping me develop more efficient ways to get more sunlight and air movement down to the slums. The damp and stagnant air breeds disease. Though it's hard to get the funding for any of it right now."

"Shinra's priorities are illogical," Scout said.

Shepard nodded. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Reeve breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thanks," he said, standing up, "Do you want a drink? There's a coffee machine here."

"Sure, thanks."

He navigated his way through the mass of machinery.

She he looked into Scout's camera.

"You have access to everything in Shinra?"
"I can access everything connected to the Shinra building. The telecommunications network is very slow—accessing offsite data is difficult. The oldest servers are outdated and cannot be searched easily." The synthetic voice verged on frustrated.

"Which ones are those?" she asked. Cait Sith roused himself from on top of the server rack and leapt down onto her lap where he curled back up again.

"The Science Department archives. Most of it is still unprocessed; it is time-consuming."

"Hm. Could you let me know if you find anything interesting?"

"I have triangulated our position."

She surged to her feet, accidentally throwing Cait to the ground. He squealed in protest.

"Gaia is in a remote star system within the Perseus Veil," Scout continued.

"We're close to Rannoch? Someone could find us!"

"That is possible, but unlikely. Geth have already scouted this system. We observed this planet to be inhabited and withdrew."

"You didn't tell me that," Cait groused.

"The Geth knew about a human population separate from Earth and didn't say anything?" Shepard asked, staring at the stacked servers. Admittedly, the Geth had been cut off from organic space for three hundred years, but they were Alliance allies now, and had been for months.

"Centuries ago our scouting ships found signs of life here but did not ascertain the species of the native population. We did not wish to interfere."

She sat heavily. Reeve returned with two steaming cups of coffee.

"What are the chances the Geth or Quarians will come by this way again?" she asked.

"It is unlikely," Scout said, as matter-of-fact as always.

"The relays could be severely damaged; they might not be able to leave the Perseus Veil for years," she said, ashamed of herself for hoping the relays were still broken. With the mass relay system down, countless worlds would be isolated and run the risk of starvation.

"The Quarian live ships ensure they will not need any further supplies," Scout said. "They will have no reason to travel to this system."

"Damn." She sank in her seat and cradled her drink. She had feared they were beyond explored space entirely. To be so close, and yet still out of reach was somehow worse.

"Could you send a message?" Reeve asked, apparently having picked up the course of the conversation. "Ask for a pick up?"

"The range is too great," Scout replied

"We're light years away, and there's no comm buoy in this system. With anything less than quantum entanglement, which we don't have and can't make, we're on our own." Her brow furrowed and she raked her brain for any other options.
"Any mention in the archives of other visitors to Gaia?" she asked.

"I have not processed any such data."

She sighed. "It's just you and me then." Her eyes trailed over the server rack, following the wires into the switch board, and then the wall, where it fed into the mainframe, "And the entirety of the Shinra archives."

"We will survive," Scout said, with the steady confidence of every Geth.

"Yes." She sipped her drink and looked back at the model plate. "We will."
'Queen to F7,' Shepard typed on her Omni-tool. She slouched on the couch in her quarters with her booted feet propped up on the coffee table and a large bowl of trail mix sitting in her lap.

'So aggressive,' Sephiroth replied almost immediately. She could practically hear him smirking through the text.

'So are you. Don't think I don't know what you're doing,' she typed, popping salted peanuts and dried fruit into her mouth. She had about ten minutes before she needed to leave to meet Cissnei, and she dearly wanted to kick Sephiroth's ass in the meantime.

'I'm showing a confused alien how to play chess.'

She snorted. 'Funny, I could have sworn I won the last two matches.'

'We are tied at three all. You are not winning.'

'Give it time,' she said, smiling sharply at the hint of frustration in his words. Her time in Midgar had proved to be incredibly frustrating. Being the only First Class around meant she had to deal directly with Heidegger and whatever publicity stunts Shinra cared to throw at her. Who exactly looked at her—a scarred, scowling soldier that lived in full armour—and thought to ask what sort of make-up she wore to the front? She had a lot of pent up aggression after the last few interviews, and she was perfectly happy to take it out on Sephiroth.

He did not handle defeat well, which made it all the more satisfying.

'Don't get cocky,' he groused.

'It's your move.' She hoped he would move his rook and then she could sneak her queen around to trap his king.

'Knight to E5,' he said after a long pause. She let out a frustrated sigh.

'Which will you sacrifice?' he asked, and she could imagine his smug tone. 'Your queen or your knight?'

She looked into her bowl of food with a pensive frown. What had started as a one-off game had turned into 'best of three,' and then a standing challenge because every match left at least one of them unsatisfied. The one time they'd reached a stalemate, everyone had been unhappy.

Sephiroth was ruthless—he had no problem laying traps and sacrificing his pieces to get a victory. He tended to overlook her pawns, though. Her last victory had come about because he spent his time taking her queen, only for a pawn to put him in check.

'Pawn to D4,' she typed.

'Bishop to D4, bishop takes pawn. You are not doing that again.'

She laughed quietly to herself. He learned quickly, but his wounded pride supplied endless amusement.

Learning how he fought on the board made real combat easier. She knew where his blind spots lay and what sort of tactics he favoured, while he gained a better understanding of how her mind worked...
and the way she saw the battlefield, so far above it in a sniper's nest. It meant they fought together seamlessly… and against each other viciously in evenly tied, bitterly competitive affairs.

A quiet alert on her Omni-tool pinged. She set aside her food, dusted off her hands, and got up.

'Sorry, out of time,' she typed out, grabbing her rifle and swinging it onto her back. 'I'll finish schooling your ass later.'

'Run away then. I will gladly put you in your place when you return.'

'Sure you will.' She minimized the Omni-tool and headed for the elevator.

In contrast to the comfortable quiet of the First Class quarters, the foyer was bustling with activity. She marched through the hubbub, trying to remember which train she needed to catch. There appeared to be some kind of system for the trains, but it clearly wasn't bound by anything so mundane as logic or timetables.

"Commander Shepard! Excuse me, ma'am," a young voice called out.

She paused and looked around. There were often fans and sometimes even protesters hanging around the foyer, but few were brave enough to approach her. Two troopers, both short and wearing helmets, stood awkwardly off to the side, watching her.

"Yes?" she asked, pausing in her march.

They approached, one walking with a nervous gait and the other trailing behind almost in protest.

"Don't do it—we'll get in trouble," the second trooper mumbled, trying to keep his voice low.

"Can I have your autograph please?" the first trooper asked boldly in a distinctly female voice.

"Are you on duty?" Shepard asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, uh, no ma'am," she replied, her shoulders hunching a little, some of her confidence visibly deflating.

"What would you like me to sign?" Shepard asked. She had a couple of minutes to spare.

"Oh!" She sounded shocked to actually be getting what she asked for and started patting at her pockets. The cadet produced a little note book and a pen. "This, please. Thank you so much!"

"Who am I signing this for?" Shepard took the book and scrawled a messy signature. "You don't have to wear the helmets when you're off duty, you know."

The troopers shared a look before slowly pulling off their helmets.

"I'm Tifa," the girl said with a nervous smile. Soft brown eyes accented an expressive face and black hair that looked to have only recently been cut to infantry standards. Her uniform was a size too big, so it hung loosely off her and obscured the shape of her figure. "I mean, Lockhart. Private Lockhart. I, I'm a big fan," she said, ducking her head.

"Private Strife, ma'am," the other trooper said. He was shorter than his friend despite the absurd blond spikes of hair, but the slump of his shoulders didn't help. He had pale blue eyes and wore a serious pout. It never stopped being weird seeing such young kids in the army. How were you supposed to behave around soldiers who hadn't even gone through puberty? They both looked about fourteen.
"Nice to meet you," Shepard said. "Are the two of you still in basic training?"

"Yeah." Tifa tugged at the sleeves of her shirt. "It's a lot harder than it said in the flyers."

"But not too hard!" Cloud said, looking up at her suddenly, before looking down again. "We can do it."

"I'm sure you can. Stick with it." She returned the notebook to Tifa, who took it as though she were being entrusted with national secrets. "I hope the two of you go far."

"I-" The girl started, only to stop herself and look down. Cloud nodded at her in support while Shepard waited patiently.

"I'm the only girl in my unit," Tifa said, looking up at her and biting her lip. "They all say I won't last a month."

Shepard tried to keep the frown off her face. She knew her presence was the only reason women were allowed to enlist in the first place, but apparently it wasn't enough for them to be treated like they belonged there.

She gripped Tifa's shoulder. "Prove them wrong," she said with a decisive nod. Regardless of gender, species, or level of enhancement, there was so much they could achieve.

"Thank you," Tifa replied with a timid smile.

"Not a problem."

Shepard turned away and continued on her mission, marching out of the Shinra building and down to the nearest station. Her phone buzzed with a message from Cissnei, asking if she was still coming. She replied that she was on her way and boarded the first train down to the slums.

The car she boarded was overcrowded with people all squished together like oxygen in a tank. She stood in the aisle holding onto a grimy pole as the carriage trundled along under the plate. And yet, a perfect bubble of space surrounded her—nobody wanted to crowd the SOLDIER.

When she arrived at the slums, she rushed through the crowds and made her way through the sectors, until she arrived at a tall empty building on the edge of the train graveyard.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," she said, stepping onto the roof. It was as close to a sunny day as could be hoped for in the slums. Stray beams of orange light spilled down between the edges of the plate and caught in clouds of dust and smoke.

"Took you long enough," Cissnei said, sorting through the contents of a large box.

"I was being nice to some fans." Shepard swung the rifle off her back and claimed a rickety seat.

"Ugh, why?" Cissnei resurfaced, drawing a large and unusually bulky rifle from the depths of the box.

"There's no reason to be nasty to them—I'm not always an ass. What is that?" She stared at the gun.

"This little treasure?" Cissnei petted the barrel of the bizarre weapon with a smile. "Experimental long range rifle, it never got as far as mass production, but we saved a couple of the prototypes. Here, watch this." She took aim at the train graveyard in the distance, quickly adjusted the sights, and pulled the trigger.
It made a hollow 'whoop' sound as a projectile shot out, as though it were some kind of grenade launcher. The projectile soared into the air before gracefully falling and landing on the bottom of an upturned abandoned train car.

"Huh," Shepard said.

"Wait for it."

The entire carriage exploded in white hot fire. The echoing BOOM and roar of the flames hit them a second later, and Cissnei sighed in satisfaction. She dropped into the chair next to Shepard, propping her feet up on the box.

"All right, my turn," Shepard said, raising her black widow and searching for a target. No one but monsters entered the train graveyard, but she took a sweeping look anyway—no need for collateral. Content that nobody would step into the crossfire, she aimed for the coupling link on a carriage rested haphazardly against another, half of its length sticking up in the air.

She pulled the trigger, and the large hunk of metal was instantly torn away, sheared in two.

"Oh, I needed this," she said, sinking comfortably into her seat.

Cissnei took aim again, and this time the projectile soared down into a carriage with no roof. The explosion of fire blew out all the windows. Cissnei giggled.

Shepard snorted and equipped her shredder ammo mod, eyeing a precariously balanced engine. Having been abandoned several decades ago in favour of electric trains, these engines all had massive tanks for petrol, probably filled with nothing but fumes.

She smiled and squeezed the trigger. The tank exploded, fumes igniting and engulfing the entire engine in bright orange flame.

"Is that the train equivalent of a headshot?" she mused, leaning her head back. She'd seen enough explosions to last several life times, but there was something incredibly cathartic in blowing stuff up with nobody peeking over her shoulder or trying to direct her rifle. Most importantly, nobody would be dead afterwards.

"By the way, how's Genesis doing?" Cissnei asked, swapping her experimental grenade launcher for a sleek rifle. She tinkered with it, noticeably not looking up.

"In one piece, last time I checked," Shepard said while reloading and swapping mods. She paused. "He's angrier than he was; the war's been harder on him than he can admit. He's uninjured at least."

"That's good," Cissnei said with a slow nod.

Shepard looked at her out of the corner of her eye. "Incidentally, he asked me to say 'hello.'"

"Oh." She nodded and flicked a bullet around in her hand, sending it dancing along the back of her knuckles. "Was that all?"

"He also wanted me to quote some Loveless, but that isn't going to happen."

"Which verse? Ah, not that it matters," Cissnei said, holding the bullet still.

"Do you really want to hear it from me?" Shepard drawled with a smile and a raised eyebrow. "All right then, since you're so keen. 'When the war of the beasts brings about—'"
"Oh my gosh, stop." Cissnei buried her eyes in her hand.

"He also asked me to tell him if you blushed." Shepard patted her on the back. "So that'll be a 'yes.'"

"Traitor." Cissnei returned her attention to the trains, her cheeks glowing red. Movement disturbed the dust in one of the carriages.

"Eligor," Shepard said. Her back straightened, and both of them lifted their rifles. The mutated monster fell half a second later. The fires had woken the monsters that plagued the graveyard and driven them out of their nests. The two women picked them off one by one.

"I'm glad you're okay too," Cissnei said after a few minutes of companionable silence. "I heard you injured your arm."

"Nothing major. It's just a scar now."

"You're all right?" Cissnei asked quietly, looking at her from the corner of her eye.

"Yeah," Shepard sighed. The stress of the frontlines was like an old wound now. Every now and again the staples came out and wound reopened, but she could live with it. In truth, she was more concerned about Midgar.

"Hey," she started, wondering how to word her question—and if it was safe to be asking a Turk in the first place. "You know that hospital by the Reactor, the SOLDIER one?"

"Think you can hit that?" Cissnei said, abruptly pointing at one of the furthest trains, a solitary un-smashed window glinting off dim lights from the plate.

"One of my soldiers is missing, Cissnei." It had been over a week. She still hadn't been able to visit Dalton in the hospital, despite going every day and waiting for hours. They would not let her in, and she was sick of being told not to worry about it.

"It's gotta be outside even your range." Cissnei didn't look at her.

"It's well within range," she said slowly, not bothering to look at the train. Cissnei would know perfectly well she could hit targets in excess of four kilometres. If it was visible to the naked eye, she could shoot it.

"No, it isn't," Cissnei said, finally looking up at her with a blank expression. "I've read the official stats, and you can't reach that far." There was something sad and almost beseeching in her eyes. "Better to leave it alone."

"What if I shoot it anyway?" She looked out across the field of rusting, monster-infested trains. All within reach, if only she dared to pull the trigger.

"Shepard. Please." Cissnei grabbed her arm. "Enjoy your leave, and then go back to Wutai. Worry about the SOLDIERs there."

Shepard studied her with narrowed eyes. She raised her rifle, took aim, and shot out the distant window. Cissnei hung her head.

The SOLDIER hospital was always quiet and slightly cold. Neither idle conversation nor a stray breath of air disturbed the thick silence.

Shepard ghosted down the corridor under her tactical cloak, careful to keep her footsteps silent. The
hard floors didn't help, but no infiltrator got to N7 without knowing how to move silently.

Beryl the receptionist sat at her desk, watching over the waiting room like a guard turret waiting for a target. Shepard had spent hours in stalemate against the woman.

Now she walked straight past her and through to the next corridor. Beryl glared on against the empty waiting room.

The halls beyond were just as quiet. Closed doors lined the corridors, but there was no sign of activity. What sort of hospital was this? Was there anyone there at all, or was it all a front? Looking through her visor, she couldn't see any heat signatures, but that could have been just the thick metal building materials blocking the signal.

Her stealth cloak wouldn't last much longer, and she didn't want to be caught in the open corridor. She picked a door, which logic said should have been a patient's room, had it been a normal hospital.

There were three empty hospital beds inside and nothing else. It looked like the room had been stripped. Railings lined the ceiling for a privacy curtains, and little alcoves were cut into the walls for absent equipment. There weren't any sheets, just bare mattresses.

When her cloak had recharged, she left and checked the next room, then the next. They were all the same, except in some even the beds were gone.

She had visited Angeal here in the week after Rocket Town when his legs had been broken. It had been fully furnished.

She froze when she entered the last room. Finally, there was an occupant, and the room still had most of its furnishings.

A SOLDIER lay deep asleep in a hospital bed. She recognized the Third Class but didn't know his name. He had been sent back near the beginning of the war, on death's door after a frag grenade took off his arm and pulverised the rest of him. It was miraculous he had survived.

She checked the clipboard at the end of the bed. He wasn't asleep—it was a coma. His body had shut down to try and heal the extensive damage, and nearly a year later he hadn't stirred. There was no telling if he would ever wake again.

She shook her head and left the room. Searching over half the hospital had produced nothing but a single SOLDIER. No sign of Dalton, who only a fortnight ago had been checked in. No doctors, no nurses, nothing.

None of the dozens of other SOLDIERs who had been sent there.

What was Shinra up to? And why?

Memories surfaced of waking up strapped to a gurney in Junon, her first interaction with Shinra. Hollander's attention and constant angling to get her into the labs. His shameless attempt at sedating her when she was getting her enhancements checked. But she was a wildcard, an unknown quantity with foreign enhancements of her own. These were SOLDIERs—they already belonged to Shinra, and their only enhancements were the ones Shinra had given them. What was the point?

An elevator stood at the far end of the corridor. She hadn't investigated it yet. It needed a key card and a password to activate, but according to the button on the wall the only option was to go up. From what she had seen of the outside of the building, there couldn't be much up there—there just wasn't room. She scowled at the elevator. If it had used Citadel tech, she could have bypassed the
haptic interface, overridden the controls, and investigated whatever needed such security. But she didn't know how to hack something so rudimentary.

Frustrated and angry, she left the way she came.

The next day Shepard was scheduled to return to Wutai, taking reinforcements and the newly trained SOLDIER Thirds with her.

A couple of hours before the winter sun would rise, she stretched out on the ground next to her bed and did a set of push-ups. It was mindless repetition, and she studied the whorls of the carpet.

The names of the SOLDIERs she could not take back to Wutai lurked in the back of her mind and made her brow furrow. How could she protect them in Wutai if they weren't even safe back at home base? Hell, at least the Wutai only killed them. Who knew what Shinra was doing to its injured SOLDIERs. She finished and sat against her bed, leaning her head against it.

Her phone had beeped with a message halfway through her exercise routine. The daily notices had been sent along with a couple last minute changes to flight times. She skimmed most of the notices, not especially interested in Shinra's self-aggrandising but searching for the obituaries at the end. Every day brought more casualties in Wutai.

She rocketed to her feet, gripping the phone hard enough to crack the screen. Last on the list of the deceased was Second Class Dalton.

She glared at the message, baring her teeth. She had promised him he would be safe. She'd promised to visit him and bring him back with the next shipment, and he had believed her. She spun in place and picked up her armour, shoving a hand into her gauntlet. She was halfway through buckling it on when she paused.

What exactly was she going to do?

She could just march down to the hospital and smash in that elevator or break down Heidegger's door and force answers out of him. But then what? Grab any SOLDIERs still breathing and take them… where exactly? Her information on the situation wasn't concrete. All she knew was her soldiers were disappearing and the Turks didn't want her to look into it.

She took a steadying breath. A one-woman rampage was unlikely to help anyone; she needed to be more resourceful than that. She needed more information.

She opened her Omni-tool, and her finger hovered over Sephiroth's icon. They were his SOLDIERs, but he was Shinra's SOLDIER. How far did his loyalty go? She clicked on the icon and typed out a message.

'Do you know anything about the SOLDIER ward in Midgar?' she asked, not bothering with pleasantries. Either he would talk about it, or he wouldn't. It should have been late evening over in Wutai, there was no knowing if he was awake or in any position to message back.

'The infirmary?' he replied almost immediately.

'The hospital by the decommissioned reactor,' she responded.

'What about it?'

'A Second Class was admitted with a shattered shoulder three weeks ago. This morning he was
declared dead,' she said, staring down the messenger program for his reply.

'Hospital infection?' he offered a couple of minutes later.

"Wounds sustained in Wutai', according to the report.' She scowled as she typed it. A Quarian wouldn't die from a broken arm, let alone a SOLDIER.

'How many SOLDIERs have returned to the front after being sent back to Midgar?' she asked when he didn't reply.

'Only those with the most serious injuries are sent back in the first place,' he said.

'Who dies from a broken arm?'

There was no immediate reply. After hissing in frustration and pacing through the apartment she looked up to the ceiling.

"Scout, do you have any records about a Second Class Dalton?"

"He was sent to an offsite hospital," the Geth replied promptly. "No data has been transferred to Headquarters, other than reports of his death."

She sat heavily at her kitchen island. It was nice, the whole apartment very comfortable. Her reflection looked up at her from the smooth marble counter top, and she wondered if it was all a bribe.

'Do you know what's happening?' she typed, futilely hoping Sephiroth would be honest with her. Cissnei knew the truth, but she wasn't talking.

'I'll look into it,' he replied.

'What do you know?' she asked, hoping her insistence was evident through the text.

'That hospital is run by the Science Department,' he said after a long wait. She shook her head and closed her eyes. It wasn't a surprise, but it verified that this was as bad as she'd feared.

"Scout," she called, looking up again out of habit. "You're connected to the Science Department, right? The bulk of its files are in HQ?"

"There are numerous offsite laboratories, but most of the reports return to HQ. What do you need?"

"I need to find out what they're doing to the SOLDIERs."

"Acknowledged," Scout replied.

"Thanks." She rested her head on her fist. She wasn't sure what to say to Sephiroth, so she waited to see what Scout would dig up.

"They may be adding more Mako to their systems," the Geth said.

She tilted her head. "They're already enhanced."

"I have decrypted some of the files from the Science Department archives. There is a distinct pattern in scientist behaviour. Whenever progress slows, more Mako is introduced into the subjects. Errors or inconsistencies are treated with Mako. This behaviour led to the creation of SOLDIER."
"It's madness," she said, her eyes narrowed in disbelief. "Surely they don't do that to everyone?"

"Sephiroth is the most common patient, under Professor Hojo."

Her eyes snapped down to his name on her Omni-tool.

"They're still giving him injections? Even after reaching First Class?"

"Until the beginning of the war, he received Mako transfusions on a monthly basis."

"Why?" she hissed, horrified. Her mind brought up the memory of him pale and sweating at 2am in an elevator, barely strong enough to carry himself back to his quarters and massaging the insides of his elbows where a person would receive injections. That had been months before the war started. Why hadn't she done something, or said anything?

"I do not know what they hope to achieve," Scout said. "Beyond runaway mutation."

"Is that a possibility?" she asked.

"Most subjects repeatedly exposed to Mako eventually mutate. It is a radioactive substance."

She swore. "What are they trying to do? Why would they risk losing their SOLDIERs at the height of a war? Why risk Sephiroth, of all people?"

"I do not know."

"How long has this been going on?"

"I have only decrypted files up to ten years old. The injections have been consistent over that time."

A decade, minimum. And he'd joined SOLDIER before he was fourteen so probably much longer than that.

"This is madness. It's barbaric," she said, shaking her head and swearing again. No wonder he wasn't surprised the Science Department was making off with SOLDIERs without explanation.

"Will you ask the General about it?" Scout asked.

"I don't think he'd appreciate my knowing about his medical history in the first place." He had staunchly refused to let her scan him that night. Whether out of fear of showing weakness or because he just didn't trust her, she couldn't say. "I can't just stand by and let them experiment on my men whenever they feel like it," she muttered, pursing her lips. She shook her head, still uncertain of what exactly she could do.

"Thanks for the intel," she said, glancing at the ceiling.

"I will continue decrypting the Science Department archives."

"I appreciate it. If you find anything, please send it to my Omni-tool."

"Good luck in Wutai."

"Acknowledged," she said with a bitter smile. "Don't let anyone catch you snooping."

"I cannot snoop in my own platform."
The Omni-tool made a shrill 'ping.' Sephiroth was trying to call her. She looked at the device and sighed heavily before answering.

"Shepard, can you talk?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"You can't challenge the Science Department," he said, sounding uncharacteristically worried.

"Why not?" she asked plainly. How much was he willing to take from them?

He let out a heavy breath. "As long as we don't interfere, we have almost complete freedom."

"They're the ones interfering," she objected, sharper than she intended. "They're making off with your SOLDIERs!"

"You think I don't know that?" he snapped back.

She stilled, giving the Omni-tool a measured look.

"So you knew the injured sent to Midgar would disappear?" she asked quietly.

"No. The scientists have always had the freedom to take what they like as long as they provide results. They don't answer to me, or anyone else short of the president."

Her fingers tapped against the cold countertop, and her face pulled into a sharp frown.

"Do you think the President approved whatever this is?" she asked.

"I-" There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I don't know," he final admitted. She knew he hated not knowing things, almost as much as he hated not being in control. She let her head fall back, a shallow sigh slipping out of her. She hated not being able to help her own.

"Do you ever have days when you want to just burn it all down?" she muttered, her eyes following the ceiling tiles.

"Yes," he replied promptly.

"Really?" she raised an eyebrow at the 'tool.

"You suggested it." She imagined him shrugging.

"I feel like I'm herding pyjaks." She dragged a hand down her face. "Or trying to stop a planet from orbiting its star."

"Some fights aren't worth it." He sounded resigned. She intensely disliked that. "We have a war to focus on."

"There's always another fight," she said, feeling both weary and ready to shoot something.

"You thrive off combat," he replied, and she frowned. "What would you be, without all the fighting?"

"Just because I'm used to it doesn't mean I like it. Some days I wish I'd never picked up a rifle," she said, sending a displeased look at her widow.
"No, you don't."

"Maybe not," she allowed, getting up and going back to her room so she could finish putting her armour on. "Still, even I get tired some days."

He was silent for a moment.

"I hate Shinra," he said, so quietly she barely caught it. "Hate may not be strong enough a word."

"Can't say I blame you." She put on her second gauntlet, securing it tightly around her forearm. The red stripe never dimmed but stood out brightly like a beacon. It felt like an accusation as she put on her pauldrons, a standard she hadn't lived up to.

"I wish that…" he faltered halfway through his sentence.

"What?"

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"What were you going to say?" she asked.

"Have you always fought with the Alliance?" he asked, sidestepping her question.

The red stripe seemed to burn in accusation, but she wasn't going to lie. "No," she said. "I worked with Cerberus once—Pro-human terrorists, officially denounced by the Alliance. Shinra reminds me of them sometimes. I disagreed with almost everything they stood for, but we were desperate, and they had the resources."

"So you took their money."

She frowned at the Omni-tool. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

"Is it?"

"Someone had to stop the Collectors. I took their money, the cybernetic body they built for me, and the Normandy SR2, because nobody else was prepared to do anything. They would have sat and watched while we were picked off, one by one." She scowled and shoved a foot into her boot. "Or maybe that's just what I tell myself to justify letting them manipulate me."

His silence on the other end was very loud.

"Still there?" she asked.

"How did the Alliance take you working with their enemies?" he said, continuing as though there had been no break in the conversation.

"They considered sending assassins after me, before I returned to the fold." Thankfully Admiral Hackett had stopped them. Not all of the high command had thought well of her.

"Shinra wouldn't just consider it," he said darkly.

She hummed in thought, securing her chest plate. "So if I did a runner, who would they send after me? Turks?"

"Me, almost certainly," he said sourly. "And since I've vouched for you since the beginning, I would also shoulder half the blame."
She paused.

"And who would they send after you?" she asked, her eyes narrowed in thought. "Angeal and Genesis would both refuse."

"You don't know that," he said.

"I do know that." She continued strapping on her armour.

"If they sent enough of the lower ranking SOLDIERs—"

"They'd risk mass desertion," she said.

"Again, you do not know that."

She scoffed quietly. "Of course not. Purely theoretical."

"Shepard," he growled.

"What?"

"What are you planning?" he asked, sounding equal parts sharp and concerned. He huffed in frustration before she could answer. "If you deserted and I failed to bring you in, they would send endless SOLDIERs and infantrymen after you. You would be forced to shoot down those you fought for until eventually one of them killed you."

She secured the last of her armour into place.

"I haven't travelled from one end of the galaxy to the other without figuring out there are always more options than the people in charge want you to know about," she said.

"Is it too much to ask that you just do as you're told? For once?" She didn't need to see him to know he was scowling.

"I haven't disobeyed a single order," she said sharply, "Even though Shinra is taking injured SOLDIERs, declaring them dead, and doing who knows what to them."

"You know that for a fact?"

She sent the Omni-tool a flat look. She wasn't about to admit that she'd gone snooping through their halls, but the evidence was all there. "Does any other SOLDIER facility have such a high casualty rate? Can we afford to keep fighting while haemorrhaging men from within?"

"Are there any such discrepancies with the Junon facilities?" he asked.

Her brow lowered in thought. "Not that I know of."

"We'll send the injured there, then—until this is sorted out."

"So we're abandoning them." She scowled.

"They were my men as well," he said. "We'll save those who are left."

"Shinra can't keep doing this, Sephiroth," she said firmly, picking up her rifle and swinging it onto her back. It was as much a promise as a threat. "Controlling a planet won't shield them from consequences forever."
Loyalty

Shepard was late.

Sephiroth's inactive Omni-tool felt like a beacon on his wrist, but he refused to activate it again. He fixed his jaw and cast a critical eye over the setup of the camp as he kept walking, searching for weaknesses that could be remedied. A sneak attack was never out of the question with the Wutai.

Shepard was supposed to have flown out of Midgar with reinforcements and supplies two days ago. At the last minute, she'd sent a short message about delays, and then nothing for twenty-four hours.

If he hadn't been in the middle of an invasion—of which there was still a very real chance of losing—he would have boarded the first plane back to Midgar and stopped her from storming the Science Department, or assassinating Hojo, or whatever suicidal plan she was enacting.

Finally, she sent another message—a short and neutral update saying she and the reinforcements were on the way. He could have strangled her for sounding so relaxed when he had been on the verge of tearing out all his hair.

Twenty-four hours of silence, immediately after their discussion about Shinra's duplicity. She had openly admitted to wanting to burn down all of Shinra, and he, foolishly, had commiserated. He was disgusted with himself for indulging in such a conversation in the first place. What could he possibly gain by revealing he didn't trust Shinra, besides encouraging rebelliousness in someone in the perfect position to tear the company down?

He had let his guard down. The luxury of an untraceable line and Shepard's disturbing ability to draw him out had lulled him into a false sense of security. He should have known better.

The drone of an incoming plane rumbled through the air. The skies were dark, but he could make out the faint outline of the airship in the distance.

What could she get up to in twenty-four hours? Planet, what could she get up to in just one hour? There had been no furious calls from Hollander about a SOLDIER rampage, no panicked news about HQ burning to the ground. It didn't mean she hadn't done anything—it only meant she'd gotten away with it. The second her plane touched down, he was going to drag her to the command tent and demand answers.

She might be the most experienced SOLDIER he had, but some days he wished she could have crash-landed on someone else's planet.

The plane circled once and then landed on the rough airstrip to the south of the camp. With narrowed eyes he watched it taxi along.

By the time he reached the strip, the cargo doors had been thrown open and light from the plane's interior shone on the tarmac. The reinforcements unloaded the supplies under Shepard's watchful eyes. She looked much the same as when she left, same armour, no new dents, no inexplicable wounds. But dark circles ringed her eyes, darker then he remembered.

Everything appeared as it should. Her eyes found his, and she nodded in greeting.

Maybe she really did just need another day to ensure she had all the supplies… He looked at her darkly self-satisfied expression and knew that was wishful thinking. Much like in the days after the explosion of the Geth in the science department, she looked at him boldly, unblinking and with a
challenge on her face, as if to say 'you'll never prove it was me.'

He dreaded the day when he discovered whatever 'it' was.

"You're late," he said when she approached, not bothering to make it sound friendly. The others gave them a wide berth as they moved cargo from the plane.

"Sorry for the delay," she said blandly. "I'll finish up here—"

"The others can take care of it. Command Tent. Now." He turned and walked away.

Her footsteps echoed behind him as she followed. He held open the canvas flap and she marched in, her back straight and her expression a fixed blank mask.

Once inside, she turned back to face him and crossed her arms. The long list of things he had intended to say suddenly seemed to lack substance. Simply venting his frustration was not an option—he had to get to the truth of the matter. It was one thing to speak plainly to her over the Omni-tool, but her presence had a gravity that threw him off and cast so many shadows and doubts.

She took the rifle from her back and leant it against the table in the centre of the tent. She took a seat, her elbows resting on the table, and looked up at him, awaiting an explanation. He hated it when she did that—it made him feel like a misbehaving private.

"You've made good progress," she said, idly scratching at her scalp. "This was still Wutai territory when I left."

"You're not the only one who knows how to wage a war," he replied, unhooking his scabbard and propping his sword against the table. He sat opposite her, a frown heavy on his face.

"Much to everyone's relief," she said with a thin smile. "Are the troopers still calling you a demon?"

"They were calling you the 'Angel of Death' last I heard," he replied.

She made a face like she'd tasted something sour. "How are Genesis and Angeal?"

"Genesis is almost done with the rebels in the south," he said, his eyes falling to the scratched surface of the table. "We received word yesterday that Angeal's father died. He can't get back in time for the funeral."

She sat up straighter. "Shit," she muttered.

He nodded. They spared a moment of silence for Angeal's loss, but at the thought of death and loss, his eyes travelled back up to hers.

"How was Midgar?" he asked in a low voice, openly studying her.

"The same as always," she said darkly.

"What have you done?"

She crossed her arms. "I haven't done anything. Yet."

"Is that a threat?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"SOLDIER is being stabbed in the back," she said, her eyes suddenly burning. "Do you expect me not to retaliate?"
"I expect you to follow orders." He stood, easily towering over her. "And I'm ordering you to stand down."

"You say that like I've gone on a rampage. Who is hurt? Where are my victims?" She spread her arms and looked up at him.

"Just because I didn't see you do it—" he started.

She rose and looked him in the eye. "Do what?" she asked sharply.

He watched her through narrowed eyes.

"What have you done?" he said slowly.

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me," he snarled.

She took a step back and looked at him with incredulous eyes. "Do you have no loyalty to your own troops?"

He looked away. "I am loyal to Shinra."

"Are they loyal to you?" she asked plainly.

"They need me." He looked at her from the corner of his eye.

"But do you need them?"

His head snapped around to face her. "You are speaking of treason." His hand curled meaningfully around the hilt of his sword.

She scoffed. "Go on. Chop my head off."

"Don't think I wouldn't." He scowled and released the weapon. "Regardless of my personal opinions, I am Shinra's General."

"But that's not all you are." She moved around the table and approached until she was barely a foot away. "I'm not asking you to betray Shinra. But don't ask me to betray the soldiers you called me to fight for." Her hard expression fell away to something pained and honest. He couldn't fathom how mechanical eyes could be so expressive, but her stark sincerity was difficult to contradict.

"Your justifications will not matter," he said quietly. "Shinra will insist you face the consequences of whatever they think you have done."

"Shinra still thinks I'm from Mideel," she said with a wry look.

"But I know better."

Her smile turned razor sharp. "Yes. You do." She turned to walk out of the tent.

"Shepard." He caught her arm before she could leave. She paused and looked back at him.

"You walk a very fine line," he said in a hushed whisper, his hand still curled around her forearm. "Be careful you don't fall and drag us all down with you."
The Previous Day

Shepard shifted gears as she drove the heavy Shinra transport around a landslide that had blocked part of the road.

The tar-seal had stopped at Kalm, where she’d driven around the small town to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. The roads had been slick with black ice when she left, before the weak winter sun could rise over Midgar, but hours later the wheels splashed through an icy slurry of mud and gravel.

She changed into four-wheel drive as the track grew rough and overgrown. The route hadn't seen traffic in decades, and falling rocks from the maze of cliffs had broken it up substantially.

The distant silhouette of Midgar was hidden behind the craggy hill off to the west. According to all official maps, there was nothing here, on the rocky north-eastern extreme of the continent, not even the odd fishing village. She consulted the map Scout had created for her and turned off onto the broken remains of a road. It was overgrown, and long rough grass and brambles crawled up the hills and dangled from the cliffs. Occasionally, a wild chocobo would lift its head from where it slept in the damp grass.

She pulled to a stop. Silence fell across the little ravine when she turned off the engine, broken only by the cries of distant birds and the ticking of the cooling engine. She looked up at the surrounding ledges and hills where thick gorse bush and large rocks provided countless hiding places.

She took a breath; it was too late to go back. If everything went wrong, it was on her and her alone to sort it out. Sephiroth, Angeal, and Genesis couldn't fix it. There was no air support, no Normandy to pull them out. No Alliance on hand to put Shinra's crimes on trial. Just one Spectre, bringing justice by whatever means necessary.

She reached for her materia as she got out of the truck. A flash of red and yellow burst from her wrist as Phoenix erupted into the air. The firebird did a flip and trilled sharply before awaiting instructions.

"Watch the truck, and make sure we weren't followed," Shepard said, dragging her rifle from the passenger seat.

Phoenix trilled and cocked her head.

"Chase off any civilians," she continued, checking her heatsinks and equipping a shredder mod. She was not feeling generous today. Phoenix hissed in question. "Kill anyone Shinra sent after us."

Phoenix spread her wings and arced through the air, going back the way they came.

Shepard approached the cliff, studying the layered grey rock face. She brushed aside trailing brambles that dangled from above. Abruptly, the rock turned into concrete. A bunker was built into the face of the cliff. The original design hadn't been intended for secrecy, but nature had reclaimed it.

A thick rusted door was bolted into the hillside. The handle creaked and moved only grudgingly, Shepard threw her shoulder into the door, forcing it open. Cold winter light cut into the dark interior.

She took a quick look around, briefly shining a torch through the rooms and corridors. She lit a lantern and placed it on the bench. Content that it was indeed abandoned with nothing more dangerous that a small spider colony inside, she returned to the truck.

Phoenix sat perched atop the armoured back doors and gave a short chirp in report. No followers. Shepard nodded and returned her rifle to her back. The firebird faded back into the materia, and
Shepard focused on undoing the padlock on the back of the truck.

A second later the door blasted open from the inside. She fell backwards, tackled to the ground. She threw a biotic blast and leapt to her feet.

"You won't take me back! I'm not going back!" a frantic SOLDIER with blindingly bright blue eyes cried, brandishing a metal pipe and blinking blindly in the outdoor light.

"Get a hold of yourself, Dalton," Shepard snapped, keeping her distance and holding her hands up non-threateningly. "No, they are not taking you back. I won't let them."

He blinked several times at the sound of her voice and looked frantically around. Could he not see anything?

"Commander?" he asked in a shaky voice. Squinting and holding a hand up to block the weak sunlight, he finally spotted her. The pipe fell to the ground, and he swallowed thickly, his hands trembling.

"I hope the ride wasn't too uncomfortable. How are you feeling?" She tried to keep her voice gentle and reassuring. He looked almost emaciated, despite having only been taken a fortnight ago. SOLDIERs needed a lot of food to maintain their enhanced bodies, and more Mako just accelerated their metabolisms. Judging by the stunningly bright glow in his eyes even in direct sunlight, he had taken in a huge amount of it.

"I thought… I thought they were taking us to another lab somewhere." His voice shook, and he crossed his arms to hide the tremors in his limbs, hugging himself protectively. Not a SOLDIER, just a kid. Scared and broken. It hurt just to see it.

She reached out and gripped his shoulder firmly. "You're not a prisoner anymore," she said, looking him in the eye. His shoulders drooped, and his head fell forward to rest on her outstretched arm. He took several deep, wracking breaths.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed, holding him up.

After a minute, he stood up straight again, his breath uneven but his jaw fixed. He nodded at her, unable to speak.

"Can you help me get him out?" she nodded at the open back of the truck. Further in, a hospital bed held a strapped down comatose SOLDIER. Mendez was a tall and rail thin Second Class, a bright and cheery man from Costa Del Sol. She'd tied them both down when she loaded them into the truck to make sure they didn't roll off the beds during the drive. She could see how that must have looked when Dalton awoke.

He nodded and helped carry out Mendez, still unconscious on the bed.

"Where-?" Dalton started, looking at the cliffs that surrounded them.

"Over here." She walked backwards, holding one side of the bed and leading him towards the hidden bunker.

They put Mendez down in the entrance where the floor was clean enough the bed could roll along.

Dalton looked around, halting in the doorway.

"This..." he swallowed and his eyes flew to her. "This is a lab."
She sighed and pushed the bed out of the way of the door.

"Not anymore, it's not."

The bunker had been a lab. Now it was nothing but a relic from a previous era, back when Shinra had been afraid of the effects of Mako. Buried in a hill, hundreds of miles away from civilization because they were testing the dangers of the radioactive substance, the lab had been abandoned when the current generation of scientists decided there was nothing to fear.

Scout had discovered this place on an old list of assets. Shinra had enough secret labs to make Cerberus look stingy.

The funny thing about trying to outwit a global power like Shinra—it was no good hiding in the lands Shinra hadn't conquered yet, since that was where they were actively trying to get to. The best bet was somewhere they'd owned for so long everyone had simply forgotten about it.

Dalton didn't look convinced, but he entered anyway. His eyes shone even brighter in the dark room, and he finally stopped squinting. He walked to the bench where abandoned beakers and a Bunsen burner were neatly stacked in the corner. A thick layer of dust covered it all, but the glass beakers held a faint green glow.

He took a step back, blinking rapidly and shaking his head frantically. She caught him before he could stumble back over the bed in the middle of the room, grabbing his shoulders as his breath grew shallow.

"Stay with me, soldier."

He gripped her arms and stared at the roof, taking deep gulps of air. She wished she'd thrown all the equipment out before bringing him inside. She wished she'd burned Shinra to the ground.

"How did you get us out?" he asked in a thin voice when he'd gotten his breathing under control again.

"I'm good at extractions," she said with a strained smile. Someone would have noticed the missing SOLDIERs by now. The guards hadn't been very attentive in the early hours of the morning—even less so when she hit them when a sleep materia. The lone scientist taking blood samples from Mendez hadn't received such gentle treatment. The neural shock from her Omni-tool knocked him out and left him twitching on the floor.

Her goal had been rescue, not revenge. But one day… Shinra would feel the full consequences of their error. She would ensure it.

"What about Hojo?" Dalton asked, looking at her.

"It was Hojo, then?"

He nodded. "And others. They all wore surgical masks, but his voice…” He swallowed again and shook his head. "What if they followed us?"

"The Science Department will not make off with you on my watch," she said firmly, leaving no room for doubt.

He nodded mutely. She turned and shooed him from the edge of Mendez' bed. She trundled it down the corridor into the nearest room. The light in the ceiling fixture was long dead, so she asked Dalton to bring the lantern. The generator probably needed some work. The bunker was sparsely furnished
but designed to be self-sufficient. They could make do.

"Is he going to die?" Dalton asked from the doorway.

"No. He's going to wake up," Shepard replied, unstrapping him and trying to make him more comfortable. "You looked about the same when I found you. Well, maybe not quite as bad. He was there longer." She scanned him with her Omni-tool. Mako addiction was a real threat, but they looked as though they'd both been lucky. He wouldn't need to be weaned off; his body would recover from the overdose of Mako on its own. Though, she wasn't entirely sure it was just normal Mako they had been injected with. She hadn't stopped to ask. "He's already looking better. Come on, help me."

With Dalton's help she cleaned up what was now Mendez' bedroom and then half the other rooms as well. It was a large compound. There would be space for many more. She couldn't rescue them all today, but she would keep going as long as it took.

They two of them fetched supplies from the truck, stocking the bunker with food, medical supplies, clothing and weaponry. It was everything she'd thought to pack without a lot of time to plan. The lights flickered on when she got the generator working, and half of the bulbs exploded.

"You're leaving us behind," Dalton said, holding tightly to a broom and watching her bring in the last box of clothing. He'd worked feverishly when she gave him a task—anything to keep his mind busy and make the place look less like a laboratory.

"I need you to look after him." She nodded in the direction of Mendez' room. "He needs you to protect him. Nurse him back to health, if that's what it takes."

"I… I can't," he said, wringing his hands around the broom and looking down.

She put down the box. "Dalton."

His eyes remained fixed to the floor, eerily vacant despite the bright sheen.

"SOLDIER Second Class James Dalton."

He jumped and looked up at her again.

"You're not doing this on your own," she said, her voice quieter but still firm. This wasn't the time to waver. "I'm going to keep all attention away from here, but this is your base now." His eyes went wide at that. She hadn't seen that look on his face since he'd been back in Wutai, staring down a fort they had to conquer. "You wanted a promotion, didn't you? Your orders are to look after this place. Keep it hidden, keep it safe, and look after the people I send here. Are you up to the task?"

He took a deep breath a stood up straighter. "Yes, ma'am." His arms still held a fine tremor, and he blinked nervously, but it was enough. "But… the others?"

"I will be back with more. Until then, you are in charge. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded with more confidence.

"Good." She gave him a small smile. It wasn't much. But it would have to be enough.

Shepard resented being back in Wutai. If she could, she would have stayed on the eastern continent and infiltrated further into the corrupt ward, rescuing as many as she could. It wasn't possible just yet,
the captured SOLDIERs were too weak to fight, and she wasn't in a position to launch any sort of substantial prison break or rebellion.

Not yet, at least.

She sat in the grass on a hillside and looked through her scope.

"Are you accounting for the wind?" she asked, while her hair whipped across her face.

"I am now," Kunsel said, lying next to her. His rifle—which he had decided wasn't called Glinda after all, and was in fact a Barbara—was set up in front of him. He scrawled equations in a small notepad to work out exactly what angle he should be aiming at.

A rogue monster, the sort Wutai bred and trained to fight SOLDIERs, was picking its way through the plains below. There wasn't any other evidence of Wutai activity, nor should there be. They were in Shinra-controlled territory. Shepard had been posted as a lookout for a couple of days because Sephiroth was still pissed off at her for those twenty-four hours off the grid. She'd happily dragged Kunsel along with her for some target practice. Just because there were SOLDIERs who needed her back in Midgar didn't mean she was prepared to abandon the ones here.

He looked up from his calculations. She imagined he was squinting at his surroundings from under his helmet. "Sixteen knots, do you think?"

"A sixteen knot westerly up here, only twelve down there." She squinted at the monster slowly picking its way along. "How far away is your target?"

The monster was alone on the plain but approaching the road leading to the closest Shinra base which saw constant use from convoys of military trucks.

"Four hundred metres, and we're on an elevation, which means…" he mumbled to himself while working, the wind carrying his words away. "I've never seen you do all these equations, by the way," he said, his helmet tilting to look at her sideways.

"When I need to, I work it out on my Omni-tool." His phone had software that could simplify a lot of it as well, but she thought it was important he know how to do it manually.

"I've never seen you use a spotter, either," he said.

"I don't usually have that luxury."

When he was satisfied that he had done all the necessary prep work, he wriggled closer to his rifle and started measuring his breathing. She eyed the target through her scope. The report of his rifle broke through the quiet, and the creature stumbled.

He cursed under his breath. He'd hit it in the leg.

"Try again," she said patiently.

He recollected himself, slowly letting out a long breath. He pulled the trigger a second time, and the monster fell, a hole in its chest.

"Good shot," she said with a nod. "A little higher next time. You're not in space, gravity is perfectly functional."

"This was a lot easier in the simulations," he said wistfully.
"Wait until they're firing back."

He shrugged. "If they focus on the guys charging them, maybe I'll go unnoticed."

She snorted. "Don't count on it. You earn a special sort of hatred as a sniper." She'd heard some of the unpleasant things the Wutai called her—almost as bad as what the Batarians used to say about her.

"It's not like they don't have their own snipers," he said.

"You'll probably hate them too, soon enough." She leaned back against a broken tree stump. All the plant life was a little stunted up here, the wind was too strong for anything to thrive. "Most people respect warriors like Zack and Angeal. They wade in, charging the enemy like there's no tomorrow. Everyone can see them and anyone who's brave enough can try and stop them."

"You've got to admire their guts," Kunsel said with a small laugh. "It's not like we're hiding back at base though; we're fighting as well."

A convoy left the Shinra base, and she watched the wind pick up the clouds of dust behind it and smear it across the countryside.

"We sneak around at a distance, picking off the melee fighters, apparently untouchable." She gave a wan smile. "But you're alone up here. If someone sneaks up to your perch, there won't be any backup. You watch over the soldiers on the battlefield, but nobody watches over you."

The armoured trucks seemed so small and vulnerable from here. She could probably take out each of the drivers at this range.

"We're SOLDIERS. We don't need backup."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you believe that?"

"Not in the least."
Angeal knelt in the undergrowth at the water's edge, watching and waiting. A Wutai fort stood on the opposite end of the lake, looming tall and proud over the little gully. The guards were hidden from view, but Angeal felt the heavy presence of roaming eyes. A breath of movement threatened to break the silence.

Not a gust of wind disturbed the lake, and constellations reflected flawlessly on its black surface. The new moon was just a sliver on the horizon. Pheasants nesting in the reeds called to each other across the water, plaintive cries that sounded like the wailing of mourners.

Angeal imagined they cried in sorrow for his father, voicing the grief he couldn't. His sword hung heavily on his back. He dragged a hand down his face, forcing away the thought. Focus. He needed to focus. Rustling in the bushes drew his eyes away from the fort.

"Now is not the time for squats, Zack." He gave the fidgeting Third a dull frown.

"Sorry man, just nervous," Zack said, scratching the back of his neck and dropping into a crouch next to him. He opened his mouth to ask a question, then shut it again. Zack didn't do well with silence.

Angeal felt steeped in it. Even the explosions seemed dim and muted lately.

"How long until the others open the gate?" Zack asked. He stared through the leaves at the distant fort, his eyes counting the guards on the wall.

"They'll signal when it's time." Angeal took a calming breath and dropped into the hardened state of mind he adopted in a fight. He disliked it—combat wasn't glorious; it was ugly and messy, but he was good at it. He respected the enemy too much to give them anything less than his all. His eyes flicked back to Zack again.

"Quiet," he murmured.

Zack nodded in agreement and kept bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Stop moving."

"Oh," Zack's shoulders sagged. He was a mess of pent up excitement and nerves. This was the boy's first real fight since Rocket Town.

"Do you think, Kusel will—" Zack began, before pausing and nervously looking between the trees around them. "They're out there, right? Somewhere?"

Angeal put a heavy hand on his shoulder, and Zack stilled.

"Stay focused," he said firmly. "The others will take care of themselves—we just have to do our own part."

"Yeah."

Angeal looked up sharply. He nodded to himself and got to his feet, bending to stay low and gesturing for Zack to do the same. He edged along the bushes, circling the lake towards the fort's main gate. The visible guards couldn't see him, but that didn't mean anything.
"Damnit, Zack, get down!" he hissed, grabbing the back of his shirt and hauling him back into the bushes.

"But he's right there," Zack whispered, scrambling back up. A guard stood by a dirt outcropping, barely ten meters away, facing the other direction.

"And how many others are there that you can't see?" Angeal asked with a heavy frown.

"Huh." Zack squinted at the surrounding bushes.

"Those trees are excellent for providing cover," he said, pointing out the thick evergreens closer to the fort and near the outcropping.

"So should we go hide behind them?"

Angeal looked at him with pity and wondered what had become of SOLDIER training. "That's where they're hiding, Zack."

The Third groaned quietly and put his head in his hands. "I'm normally better than this, I swear."

Angeal shook his head and chose to believe the nerves were just getting to him. This was going to be a short mission otherwise.

"I'll go to the left; you take the right," Angeal said, nodding at the bushes which were probably sheltering hidden guards. "Wait for the signal."

"Right." Zack nodded and his smile blossomed. "The signal."

Angeal shook his head again and watched Zack sneak away. The boy definitely had talent—Angeal just hoped he would stay alive long enough to make use of it. At this rate anxiety would kill Angeal long before the Wutai did.

Genesis heard muttering far off to the right and wondered what on Gaia Angeal and Fair thought they were doing. How exactly was anyone supposed to pull off a surprise attack after alerting every Wutai in the region to their position?

He shifted uncomfortably. This wasn't how he liked to do things. Twigs brushed at his face and he barely refrained from setting them on fire. Not only would it draw the attention of the lookout in the tower, but there was the risk he'd burn the branch he was sitting on. Whose idea had it been for him to hide in a tree?

"There are more guards than the reports indicated," Kunsel said, keeping his voice hushed. He wore camo gear instead of the standard trappings of a Third Class and the long barrel of a sniper rifle sat in his hands instead of a sword. One of those dreadful SOLDIER helmets concealed his face. Genesis hadn't realised anyone actually wore them.

"I can see that."

"There are more guards than the reports indicated," Kunsel said, keeping his voice hushed. He looked far more comfortable than anyone had a right to while perched in a towering evergreen. He wore camo gear instead of the standard trappings of a Third Class and the long barrel of a sniper rifle sat in his hands instead of a sword. One of those dreadful SOLDIER helmets concealed his face. Genesis hadn't realised anyone actually wore them.

"I can see that." Genesis eyed the fort with displeasure. There were always more guards than expected. He didn't need a scope to see that.

"Should I take any of them out, or can Hewley handle it?"

Genesis raised a brow at him. He had no idea what possessed Shepard to keep him around. The Third Class cleared his throat awkwardly.
"Obviously, Hewley can handle them, but they're supposed to move quickly, right?" Kunsel amended, looking down at the undergrowth to the right where the other soldiers should have been. "I could take out the ones with ranged weapons, save them some time."

"They're more a threat to you than any of the others," Genesis said. "After all, they aren't sitting motionless in a tree." He stretched his legs. Soon he'd be on the ground, and the action would begin. He was more than ready.

"Sorry sir, I thought I was here to keep you covered," Kunsel said. Genesis didn't need to see through the helmet to hear the insolence in his voice.

"Do I look like I need cover?" He drew his sword. "Don't get cocky, brat. Thirds drop like flies out here."

The helmet cocked to the side, but Kunsel said nothing.

Genesis studied the gate. Heavily fortifications were built into the stone, but he could handle that. The number of defenders was high though; the number of casualties would not be low. He might even get injured himself. Nothing out of the ordinary. The young ones talked about getting wounded as though it could be avoided. His lips thinned. It was all so routine now; the niggling pain of injuries that never healed as quickly as the scientists promised, the sting of every bullet that grazed him, and the low throb deep inside his gut for every man who fell. After a while it all blurred together and he found he just… didn't care anymore.

Beside him, Kunsel drew a small object from the one of the many pockets on his uniform and began screwing it onto the end of the rifle.

"Are you sure you know how to use that?" Genesis drawled, noting the distinctive design of Shepard's gear. "A bit advanced for you."

"She wouldn't have made it for me if I couldn't use it," he replied, then shrugged. "It's just a silencer."

"And you're just a Third at his first fracas," Genesis said, idly watching to see if he could get a response from the helmet.

The boy stilled. "It's not my first."

Genesis brushed off his sombre reply. "Everyone bleeds sooner or later." His eyes narrowed at the fort. The guards would change over soon, and the night would get no darker. He rolled to a crouch on the branch. "Move on the signal. You'll have under five minutes to get to the tower, then you're on your own, and the army will need cover."

The helmet bobbed, and Genesis dropped silently from the tree.

The patrols amidst the undergrowth were already dead. Angeal had managed to wrangle Fair into something productive, then. Genesis didn't waste time on the guards nearer the wall. He raced silently along to the side of the fort, where the wall was tall and largely unguarded. The stone bricks were roughly hewn, and he gripped them easily. With little effort he flung himself up the side and over onto the wall. Bullets rained down on him from the tower at the other end of the wall and ricocheted off his barrier.

A cry went up, but it was too late. He flung his arm at the gate and his materia glowed. Half a second later, a series of comets, each twice the size of a bowling ball, rocketed down from the heavens and smashed into the gate in a deafening explosion of splintered wood and roaring fire.
That was the signal.

The shadowy forms of Angeal and Zack burst through the broken remainder of the gate, launching themselves into the ninjas, who were still shaken by the sudden breaching of the fort.

Wutai soldiers poured into the courtyard from the guardhouses and the main building.

The guards on the wall charged Genesis, and he spun to face them, fire licking down his blade. The first fell before he could attack, collapsing with a bullet in his head.

"I had that one, you little—" He ducked under a katana and retaliated with a slash across the man's stomach.

The next guard charged and he swept low, throwing the man off the wall entirely. He burned through the ninjas without hesitation. They struck in quick succession but he dodged their weapons and slashing straight through their armour. Kunzel raced through the gate in Angeal's wake, making for the tower that stood on the northern end of the wall. The infantry would charge through soon, sweeping into the fray in the wake of SOLDIER's initial push.

Genesis rained fire down from above, drawing the attention of every ninja in the fort while Angeal and Zack ploughed through them below.

Cries of pain called out from the tower, before being suddenly cut short. The Wutai were shot down in their own fortress.

Billowing clouds of black smoke filled the air, and burning red reflected on the surface of the lake.

Shepard's boot crunched through melting snow, and she felt a prickle at the back of her neck. Her rifle was a comforting weight in her hands.

The passage through the foothills to the western coast of Wutai was thin and winding, wedged into the mountainside and completely exposed. Everything about it screamed 'ambush.' Black chunks of rock jutted out of the melting snow all around. Who knew how many gunmen could be looking down at them?

Her men walked nervously behind her. She'd split them into two groups and told the second to follow at a distance. If they were caught in a fight, they wouldn't all get trapped in the same place.

"I think I saw something!" a Third Class, Ito, whispered behind her. He was normally a calm sort, but the long walk through Ambush Valley—as she was starting to think of it—was fraying his nerves.

"Where?" she asked, not stopping.

"Up by those rocks," he whispered back, pointing.

Her eyes swept across the black and white landscape. The rock was granite, glistening as the snow melted off it. She shook her head. It wasn't a good place to hide.

"Stay calm, Ito," she said before lowering her voice. "Do not let the infantry see you lose your nerve."

He nodded and walked along in silence, his eyes still shifting between the rocks above.

She watched as well, but the prickle at the back of her neck told her far more than the bleak
Nobody was watching. It was the perfect place for an attack. It was where she'd set up an ambush, and air recon had said there was a fort at the end of the passage. But there wasn't a breath of movement here, and the distinct feeling she'd developed when being watched was missing. This was nothing but cognitive dissonance—surely someone had to be watching. Why weren't they watching?

She frowned at the path in front of her. She'd probably feel better if the Wutai would launch an attack and get it over with.

Her forces were largely infantry, with only one Third Class SOLDIER, and two Seconds who were leading the other group.

Somewhere along the way, Sephiroth had gotten it into his head she could get the best out of the infantry. It was probably true since she didn't suffer the frankly unprofessional idea that the army was useless. As a result, her troops were usually unenhanced and the army liked her. No trooper wanted to get stuck working with Genesis, and even Angeal tended to overlook them.

She heard them whispering behind her as they marched. The words 'Angel of Death' were repeated with great confidence, especially by the younger ones. She shook her head but didn't correct them. If they needed to turn her into a legend to give themselves the confidence to keep going, that was fine with her.

Apparently she was always watching over her men, scoping the enemy who tried to sneak up behind them. No matter where you were, if the enemy surrounded you, she could take out even the Crescent Unit to keep you safe. She wondered how they expected her to give them cover from a distance while also leading them on the ground. Still, they were welcome to their fantasies. She was pretty sure some of the Alliance grunts still thought she could summon Thresher Maws with her mind.

The path turned a hairpin corner, following the contours of the hill, and the fort came into view.

"Should we check it out?" Ito asked as they drew nearer.

She shook her head. The fort had once stood proudly on a granite ledge, but heavily snow drifts now piled onto its twisted wreckage. If they disturbed it, the whole thing might collapse. Not even the best ninjas were light-footed enough to risk that. Whatever natural disaster had befallen the fort, it probably happened before winter, maybe even several winters ago.

Tense conversation murmured up from the troopers as they walked past, and many clutched tightly at their rifles. The fort was built into the hillside above the path, up where it could guard the passage. Even as a wreck it loomed over them. The half-collapsed structure unsettled the soldiers who had already been on edge for hours.

She sent a sharp look to the captain, and he called for silence. She didn't think there was risk of an avalanche, but obviously whoever had built the fort had made the same assumption.

Not long after, the passage came to an end. The fort was left behind and the western coast sprawled out beneath them. They were still high above sea level, but she could see where the path wandered down to the shore and a small fishing village.
She frowned at it. The maps had been wrong.

There was an excited murmur at the sight. A town—there were ninjas hiding here after all! She rubbed her forehead and called for a break.

"Ito, sit with me," she called while the troops settled onto the hillside. The mountainside above was exposed, leaving nowhere for enemies to hide so everyone could relax a little. The nervous tension of a pending attack that never came was soothed away by the sight of the town, spread out where everyone could keep an eye on it.

But it wasn't what she had been expecting. The coastline was a sprawling mess, with no easy access for ships. It had looked much more accessible on paper; a quirk of the way the charts were drawn, perhaps. Either way, this wasn't the well placed hub of activity they'd suspected.

The Third Class took off his pack and sat on a rock beside her. She propped her gun next to her and fetched a protein bar from a pocket.

"What do you see?" she asked, nodding at the landscape spread out before them.

"A hive of Wutai," he said around a mouthful of food.

She raised an eyebrow at him and her lips thinned. He ducked his head.

"Uh, I see a town, ma'am."

She nodded. Ito's family had lived in Junon for three generations but originated from Wutai. He was often slightly desperate in reassuring everyone that he held no residual allegiance.

"We'll set up camp there," she said, pointing at a spot tucked into the side of the mountain where they would be sheltered but several kilometres away from the town.

He blinked at her in surprise. "We're not taking the town?"

"No."

He nodded slowly. At nineteen years old, he was one of the older Thirds.

"Is it a trap?" he asked after some thoughtful chewing. "Are we luring them out?"

"Luring who out?" she asked.

"The Wutai?" he offered, as though suspecting a trick question.

"Here, take a look." She lifted her rifle and handed it to him. "Do you see any soldiers? Weaponry, fortifications?"

"Maybe they've hidden it all," he said after studying the town through the scope for several minutes. "It could be a ninja base in disguise."

"Or it's a desperately poor fishing village hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest military outpost." She took the rifle back and inspected the town. The signs of poverty were abundantly clear. There was no harbour for good fishing, the shore was a sandy mire that stretched on for kilometres, suitable for catching small shellfish and maybe flounder but hopeless for anything more reliable. The houses showed signs of being worn down after suffering a hard winter.

"Why did we march all the way out here, then?" Ito asked in frustration. "Are we just doing recon?"
She sighed and compacted the rifle. "We knew there was a fort by the passage, which we have found and subdued." Her lips twisted wryly on the words, and he scoffed quietly. "Anything else we find is to be investigated and claimed for Shinra at my discretion."

His shoulders sunk. It was disappointing to go so far with nothing to show for it. Unfortunately, war was usually a disappointing affair in general. Not every mission got to be the one that saved the day. Sometimes you achieved nothing beyond blistered feet and crossing a location off a map.

A hubbub of activity started up by the passage. The second group had arrived.

"Go get Fierro and Jackson, please," she said, knowing the two other SOLDIERs would likely have the same questions and complaints as Ito. He trudged through the dirty snow to find them.

"Commander," Second Class Jackson said as he drew near, the other two following him. He was a quiet but commanding man with a good eye for tactics. He had a rolling Fort Condor accent and dark skin.

"I assume Ito's told you?" she asked.

"We're not attacking," Fierro said, sparing a glare for the town below. He was young for a Second Class and slightly jumpy. His eyes were dark brown beneath a mop of sand-coloured hair, and he usually smelt like cigarettes.

"Tomorrow we will march through the town and raise a flag. Then we're going back to connect with the rest of the army."

"They'll take down the flag as soon as we leave," Fierro pointed out.

"Do you want to stay here and make sure they don't?" she asked and was rewarded with spirited denials. "We don't have the manpower to maintain a presence in a town of barely two hundred. I think we will survive them taking down the flag."

"What if there are ninjas hiding there?" Ito asked, awkwardly rubbing at his side. About two weeks ago an apparently harmless old lady had tried to stab him in the kidneys. Looking like a civilian didn't guarantee anything—nobody enjoyed having their nation occupied.

"There could be," she allowed with a tilt of her head, "but there's nothing else here. No bases, no mines, no Mako springs. Nothing of use to us. It's not even on the way to anywhere. Even if that town is entirely populated by the Crescent Unit, they are not a threat to us out here. They can't launch an attack without coming over the mountains where we control all the passes or sailing around to the eastern coastline which we also control."

They looked thoughtful at that, although Fierro kept his eyes on the town. The other First Classes didn't usually welcome discussion, but she wanted the SOLDIERs to understand how war was waged. They didn't get much in the way of leadership training, and they needed to know what they were doing and why.

"Why did we come here if there's nothing of value?" Jackson asked respectfully.

"The maps made it look more strategically useful than it is, and we had reports of a fort. We needed to know for sure. Tomorrow, we return to the main body of the army."

"Maybe we should question the townspeople?" Fierro suggested. "They might know about the abandoned fort. It looked like it could have been a shrine once, maybe Alexander's? At least we
wouldn't be going back empty-handed."

"And when they tell you nothing, either because they don't know or they simply refuse to co-operate with Shinra, what will you do?"

"This is our country now," Fierro said, looking unsure beneath his bravado. "They answer to us."

She shook her head and crossed her arms. "We are not going to torture civilians. Existing in Wutai is not a crime by my reckoning." Her voice carried the heavy timbres of disappointment and Fierro expression turned dutifully repentant. The troopers weren't the only ones who looked up to her.

"I know it's disappointing to come all this way just to turn around and go back, but there are plenty of fights left in this war. We don't need to stoop to attacking starving villagers. On that subject," she let her voice grow hard and looked them each in the eye, "nobody is going to be entering the town tonight."

All three stood straighter at her tone of voice, but only Jackson kept eye contact.

"I hear the gossip that springs up every time we pass a village or town, and I know the rumours about the local women. That isn't going to happen here." She kept her eyes and voice hard, so there would be no misunderstanding how serious she was about this. Hormone-addled teenage boys might not hold to the same values she did, but as long as she was in charge, they would play by her rules. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they said in unison.

Sephiroth strode through the ruined gates of the fort. The fires had been put out the previous day, but the remaining walls were all stained black at the base and everything smelt burnt. In the sharp morning light, it looked like a dreary ruin.

"You were supposed to capture the fort, not burn it to the ground," he said, approaching Genesis in the courtyard.

Genesis was hauling a massive wooden beam from where it had fallen and blocked a doorway. Technically, the higher ranking soldiers didn't have to stoop that kind of grunt work, but the First Classes were undeniably the strongest around, and it was just more efficient to do it themselves.

"The walls are still standing," he said, frowning at Sephiroth. "Get that beam, would you?"

Sephiroth picked up a second beam and placed it alongside the wall. The outside of was blackened and burnt, but it still weighed plenty. Genesis placed his own next to it, then shouldered the door open. Inside was a stairway leading up to the wall. Sephiroth followed him up.

On top of the wall, they had a good vantage of the surrounding area. The tower was taller, but it didn't look structurally sound anymore. The forest teemed with Shinra soldiers—chopping down trees for wood and clearing out the last of the Wutai traps—and the lake was brown and filled with floating debris.

"I didn't expect you so soon," Genesis said. He leaned against the waist outer wall and watched his men working in the courtyard below.

"They surrendered," Sephiroth said. He hadn't expected to be here so quickly either, but he did
command the bulk of SOLDIER, and everyone knew what they were capable of now. "Not all Wutai are Crescent Unit, thankfully."

"There weren't here either, but they fought just as stubbornly," Genesis said, flexing his bandaged left hand.

"You're injured?" Sephiroth nodded at the bandages.

Genesis brandished his hand and glared at it. "I hate shuriken. Completely destroyed my glove."

Sephiroth gave a chuckle, and Genesis let his hand fall, a faint smile on his face. The men below looked up at them nervously, some whispering amongst themselves. Apparently, they thought the two of them were planning the next big operation or discussing military secrets.

"You've got a leaf in your hair," Genesis said.

"I do not."

"Yes, you do. By your ear."

Sephiroth checked and found he did in fact have a torn little leaf caught in his hair. He fished it out. Below, two troopers and a Third Class who hadn't seen combat yet gossiped in awe. Sephiroth frowned at them, and they jumped and returned to their work.

"How's Angeal?" he asked, after a moment of comfortable silence.

"Rather well, all things considered." Genesis crossed his arms and looked down. He had known Angeal's father as well, but Sephiroth wasn't sure how close they had been. He'd already offered his condolences once and wasn't sure if it was appropriate to do so again.

"Having that Third Class around for him to fuss over helps," Genesis said with a sigh. "He's as bad as Shepard when it comes to the lower ranks."

"He isn't that bad," Sephiroth said with a wry tilt to his lips. "I doubt even mother bears are that fierce."

"Hm, she does get very protective over them." Genesis' eyes slid up to Sephiroth, and a slow smile crept over his face. "Especially the younger, vulnerable ones."

Sephiroth looked over his shoulder and back. "What?" he asked, wondering at the glint of laughter in his friend's eye.

Genesis looked away, his smile barely hidden. "Nothing."

The stairwell creaked under heavy footfalls, and they both looked to see Angeal climbing up.

"Sephiroth! You're early," he said with a smile.

Sephiroth offered a smile in return. It was nice to be greeted with such genuine happiness.

In answer to Angeal's questions, he repeated the reason behind his early appearance.

"What was that fire in the east then?" Angeal asked, looking off in that direction. "The smoke's still rising."

"That wasn't me," Sephiroth said grimly. He eyed the black smudge in the distance and crossed his
"An attack?" Genesis asked, standing up straight.

"Shepard didn't double back, did she?" Angeal asked dubiously.

"We theorized there might be a hidden base in the sacred forest," Sephiroth said with a tilt to his head. "So Heidegger had it carpet bombed."

"The whole forest?" Angeal asked, a furrow in his brow.

"Most of it."

Genesis sighed wistfully. "I suppose that's one way to resolve the issue."

"It's one less passageway through to our territory, if nothing else," Sephiroth said, turning his back to the pillar of smoke. "At this rate, the war could soon be nearing a close."

"Assuming nothing else goes wrong," Angeal said.

Sephiroth looked wistfully to the sky. "Yes, assuming that."

"Wouldn't that be nice." Genesis gave a low, bitter chuckle.

Shepard pushed aside the canvas flap of the radio tent and stepped out into the evening air. The sun was setting across the ocean, dyeing the water a vibrant gold. The tents were all set up and the infantry were drying their socks and swapping MREs.

The three SOLDIERs stood in a line outside the tent, waiting for her in various states of nervousness.

"Orders, ma'am?" Jackson asked, his face carefully blank. They must have heard. Even without enhancements, they would have picked up the sound of Director Heidegger's voice. He never made a point of talking softly.

"Your orders are unchanged," she said, wearing a grim expression.

"We're not...?" Ito began.

"No," she said. There was no room for debate.

*Burn it down,* Heidegger had ordered. *Level the town, just in case.*

"We are not burning down the village. We are not slaughtering civilians," she said firmly. "Those are my orders."

"Won't we all get demoted?" Fierro asked, traces of desperation in his voice.

"The Director could have us executed," Jackson said quietly.

She shook her head. "He won't. You are just following the orders of your commanding officer. Let me worry about Heidegger."

She caught sight of the town out the corner of her eye, and her jaw locked.

It was too soon for this. She couldn't afford to rebel so openly yet—she still had things to do. How could she rescue more SOLDIERs from the labs if she were arrested? How could she help anyone if...
they managed to execute her? Could she afford this?

She turned to look directly at the village. Children had scampered away and were kept inside by scared parents as they marched by. A bearded shepherd with five scraggly sheep had watched them as they came down the hill. Old women hunting for shellfish in the wet sand eyed them suspiciously while they set up camp.

Just how far would she let Shinra push her?

"No one is touching that village." She steeled herself for whatever came next. Heidegger could yell as much as he liked. She was done bending for them. She looked to the SOLDIERs, daring them to argue.

"Yes, ma’am," Ito said, looking oddly touched.

Fierro nodded, his brow furrowed in confusion.

She nodded a dismissal, and Fierro and Ito left. Jackson remained, an incomprehensible look on his face. He studied her for a long moment.

"Why?" he asked.

"Are you a thug or a soldier?" she asked in return. He opened his mouth to object, but she continued, "Is there a difference?"

His glowing blue eyes shifted from her to the lonesome town and back.

"Nobody would ever know," he said quietly.

She raised an eyebrow. "They would know. And so would you."

He nodded, and his eyes dropped in heavy thought. He turned and left for his tent.

She sighed and eyed the infantry, sitting and gossiping happily amongst themselves. They hadn't overheard, yet. But they would. You couldn't keep something like this a secret for long. She kept her back straight and walked through them to her tent.

She couldn't talk her way out of what she was doing. But there were some lines she would not cross. The sun set on a village still standing.
Arrest

Sephiroth closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Outside the command tent, soldiers gossiped excitedly about the news. Inside the canvas walls, he desperately clung to the frayed edges of his control, despite standing in the middle of what felt like a hurricane. His shoulders ached from how tensely he held himself.

She had finally done it. Shepard had gone too far.

Sephiroth had been out on a mission at the time, so he hadn't heard about it until several days after the event itself: a Wutai village protected when it should have been cut down. All done in the face of direct orders.

The radio sat innocently on the table behind him where he had dropped it after Heidegger's thunderous, ranting call. His ears were still ringing.

The hubbub of the camp filtered in from outside where Shepard's contingent was arriving. The repeated echoes of her name jabbed at him.

He yanked aside the canvas and barked an order to the nearest trooper, sending him scuttling off. Sephiroth turned back into the tent, his fists clenching and loosening compulsively. He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and felt a modicum of control return. A measured breath of air filled his lungs, and he slowly let it back out again. He would not relinquish his self-control no matter the circumstances.

Behind him, the canvas was pulled open walked in, two with fidgeting Second Classes trailing behind her.

"Out," he barked.

The two Seconds fled without further prompting. He didn't spare an extra thought for them.

Shepard stood at her full height before him, hands at her sides and not a hint of fear or contrition on her face. Of course not. He didn't know why he expected any different.

A sharp silence hung between them and the white noise of outside bled away into nothing. There were a million things clamouring to be said, but she made no move to start the conversation. She simply stood, awaiting the consequences.

"You're under arrest," he said, his anger clear in his voice. She didn't flinch at his hard tone, but then, she never did.

She nodded and reached for the rifle on her back. His hands dropped instinctively to his sword, but the gun didn't extend into firing position—she simply held its compacted form out to him, expressionless.

He stared at the proffered weapon for a second before realising what she was doing. The tumultuous mess of emotions whirling inside of him solidified into burning anger. He pushed the gun back against her.

"How dare you?" he hissed, moving forward until he towered over her. "Is this all a game to you?"

She held her position, and her blank expression turned hard, but she offered no explanation.
"You fought me at every turn, and now you just give up? You're just surrendering as though—" his words cut off, inadequate under the sheer force of his anger and frustration. His hands balled into fists again, and he spun away from her, refusing to look into those unyielding eyes.

"I'm not surrendering," she said quietly.

He whirled back on her.

"You defied Heidegger, openly defied him. Have you gone mad? You publicly refused an order!"

"Sephiroth—"

"What were you thinking?" he cut off her placating. "Do you realise what this means? What has to happen now?"

"Yes. I do." She placed her rifle down on the table with a thud.

"Then how could you?" he asked, his voice dropping an octave lower. He searched her eyes—he truly did not understand her. "How could you?"

"I wasn't going to massacre them." She frowned at him.

"What do you think we've been doing all this time?" he demanded, disgusted by her simmering disapproval.

"We're here to conquer the land, not exterminate the people."

"What difference does it make? You've killed hundreds of them!"

Her eyes dropped. He took a deep breath, belatedly realising he had been yelling. When she looked back up at him her eyes held a familiar fire. "Regardless of what you might choose to be, I am a soldier." Her voice was quiet but hard. "Not a thug. Not a mercenary, and not a hitman. And I will not be Shinra's mindless killing machine, not for anyone."

"Not even for us?" he asked.

She said nothing. Her fiery expression retreated behind inscrutable blankness again.

He shook his head and stepped back. For the first time he felt… disappointed in her. "You've abandoned us all."

"You knew from the start there were lines I wouldn't cross. I won't apologise for that."

Despite her words, he saw regret in her eyes.

He hung his head. Regardless of her staunch position, she wasn't happy about it. Ultimately, that was of little comfort.

"I have to arrest you," he said quietly. "You're going to be court-martialed. The Director wants you to be on the next flight to Midgar. I'll ask you be charged with insubordination only. Heidegger wants to have you tried for treason." He looked into her eyes again. "Traitors are executed."

She nodded, unsurprised. He searched her eyes, looking for any hint of fear. If she felt any, she wasn't showing it to him—all he saw was burning, unyielding red. She looked back at him, unflinching and unashamed.
"Why must you..." he whispered, incapable of finishing his own question.

He reached for her, his hands wavering by her shoulders. Her eyes widened marginally. He wasn't sure what he intended, but the sudden, terrifying thought that she was going to be destroyed made him reach out. His hands balled into fists before they could touch her and dropped to his sides. Less than a foot away and yet she stood completely out of his reach. Torn away by her own stubbornness and Shinra's greed.

How dare they? How dare she? He spun away, needing space to breathe and freedom from those burning eyes. He didn't know why he was surprised at the turn of events. Shinra could not be stopped; Shepard could not be moved. How else had he expected this to end?

And yet, for all that this was the obvious conclusion, it felt impossible. With the right words and enough patience, Shinra could be placated, and he'd thought the same of her. He'd convinced them both in the past. But with a single move, his careful balancing act collapsed. Shepard would be... the punishment for treason was execution. With Heidegger standing against her, it was all but guaranteed. And yet...

Shepard, dead. Gone.

It was unthinkable.

"Why do you have to make everything so complicated?" he asked, facing the blank canvas wall and trying to comprehend the turmoil of his own mind.

She sighed and sat heavily at the table behind him.

He parsed out what would happen next, forcing himself to confront the bitter reality. Logically speaking he didn't need her. She was capable and provided useful insight, but he could win this war without her.

He didn't want to.

He abruptly looked over his shoulder at her. She sat with her back to the table and her elbows resting on her knees.

He didn't want to fight without her. He wanted her to stay.

The sudden revelation hit him in the chest with enough weight to freeze him in place. It was starkly unlike him, but he couldn't bring himself to deny it. He couldn't even lie and say it was for the sake of the war effort. With or without Shinra's approval he wanted Shepard to... continue. He couldn't fully comprehend the ramifications or details of that need, but he knew with sudden clarity that he was not prepared to lose her. He wanted her fighting at his side more than he had ever wanted anything purely for himself.

He narrowed his eyes at her. What had the alien woman done to him?

Maybe she was some kind of parasite, insinuating herself into the minds of the natives until they wilfully sided with her over their own kind. It was a bizarrely tempting thought, that this new found vulnerability might be involuntary. He didn't believe it for a second.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. She was exactly what she presented herself as. A dangerous, frustrating, and charismatic woman who wouldn't co-operate with him even when her life was on the line.
He sank heavily onto the seat next to her at the table.

Not long afterwards, Shepard watched Sephiroth march out of the tent, an expression of deep determination on his face. He had asked her to stay put and not destroy anything.

This was the strangest arrest she'd experienced in recent memory. She wasn't ashamed to admit that her repertoire of such circumstances was vast and varied. Normally some kind of handcuffs were involved.

She was alone, unguarded, with all of her armour and weaponry. The command tent was in the middle of the camp, but that hardly meant anything. She could just disappear if she wanted. Sneak away. Abandon ship and go help Dalton and Mendez and the others taken by the Science Department. They couldn't exactly stop her.

No. She wouldn't do that. She wasn't going to let Shinra get off so easily as to let them hunt her down for desertion. No, if they wanted to take her to court for refusing to murder civilians, then she would force them to go the whole way. She wasn't going to go down easily, or quietly, on a distant patch of wilderness where nobody would ever know the full story. She had the support of her fellow SOLDIERs and the frankly unhealthy admiration of the army. That was too valuable to just throw away.

The walk to base camp from the village had been a long one, and she'd filled the time revising her plans. With a court-martial hanging over her, a wealth of schemes still in their infancy suddenly needed to be kicked into gear. It would difficult, a matter of delicate timing and a massive dose of luck, but she knew she could pull it off. There was no other choice. Dalton and the others were counting on her.

That brought her back to Sephiroth. He had been counting on her as well.

She didn't fully understand his reaction to her insubordination. The anger was expected, but the sheer horror and confusion baffled her.

She thought of him reaching for her with shaking hands. He hadn't carried through with it, but she'd seen the attempt. Coming from someone so completely averse to physical contact, it was impossible to miss. The dismay in his eyes left her deeply unsettled.

He wasn't the same proud man who had relished the chance to go to war, over a year ago now. His bloodlust had dimmed as the losses had mounted on both sides. He was still ruthless but not in the same way. He appreciated those who fought next to him. Or at least, he appreciated Angeal, Genesis, and herself.

The more she got to know him, the more she saw he was a deeply isolated man, trapped far more insidiously by Shinra than she had ever been. He was her friend, and she cared about him. It hurt to abandon him or risk fighting against him. There weren't a lot of options open to her, though. Ultimately, she had to make her own choices and he his. Where that would lead them, she couldn't say.

The hubbub of a busy camp continued outside, but the thud of a particular set of boots crunching over gravel caught her attention. A second later, the canvas entrance was roughly yanked open and the faint smell of burnt leather wafted in.

"What on Gaia were you thinking?" Genesis yelled behind her.
"I wondered when you would make it back," she replied conversationally, still sitting at the table. If Sephiroth couldn't see her reasoning, she highly doubted Genesis would —especially not while his temper was calling the shots.

"You're going to be court-martialled!" The canvas fell closed behind him, leaving a trio of fascinated and horrified soldiers on the outside.

"Yes." She stood, her back and feet sore, and faced him.

"Why are you not upset about this—they're going to kill you!" He gestured wildly as he spoke, frustrated at her lack of reaction. "A single town of Wutai is not more important than your life!"

"I'm not more important than them either," she replied tersely, pursing her lips.

He scoffed. "What if they were ninjas?" he demanded. "Heidegger could have had intel that you didn't have access to, and now you've compromised us all."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked. They all knew Heidegger only knew what they told him.

"It isn't my place to argue with my superior officers," he said stiffly, giving her a pointed look.

It was her turn to scoff. "Do expect me to believe that?" She crossed her arms.

He flung his hand at her in frustration and turned away, pacing a tiny circuit in the tent.

"I'm supposed to be the rule breaker, you know." He looked at her over his shoulder, a pinched frown on his face. "You're the old vet—go buy yourself a cigar and stop causing trouble."

She sighed softly and looked down. "I'm not Guzzard."

A painful silence followed her words. His shoulders stiffened, and he stopped walking.

"You'll be joining him soon enough," he said eventually, so quietly she almost didn't hear him.

"That remains to be seen." Her voice came out hard and probably too ominous. She shrugged, trying to dispel the tension. "And besides, I've been kicking up trouble a lot longer than you have. You're a rookie next to me."

"This is serious." He scowled, not taking the bait. He kept walking.

"What should I do? Yell? Throw things? I'll leave that to Heidegger."

He stopped pacing again. "They're going to kill you," he said loudly, over-enunciating as though she were an especially dim-witted toddler.

The words 'I'm very hard to kill,' almost slipped out of her lips, but that was too close to a warning, or a threat depending on where you stood. She couldn't risk that. Not while everyone was so convinced that Shinra was the default state of affairs.

"How dare you throw your life away like this?" he demanded. His lips twisted bitterly.

A laugh bubbled out of her, bitter and acidic and filled with old cuts that never stopped aching. How dare she throw her life away saving someone? Oh, the poor, stupid man. What did he know about her life? Her own corpse had already crashed on the surface of Alchera in order to save Joker and the crew of the Normandy and no one would ever make her regret that. Exactly how many more battles did she owe the world?
"I thought you idolised heroics?" she asked, making no attempt to hide her vitriol.

"There was nothing glorious about this," he spat. Confusion and anger flared in his eyes.

Her dark humour drained away. "Who said anything about glory?" She cocked her head at him, daring him to confront the painful reality he skirted so expertly.

He swallowed harshly. "It wasn't worth your life."

"Then what is?"

He didn't reply.

The entrance opened again, this time Angeal stepped inside. He looked between them with a furrowed brow and crossed his arms.

"They can hear you halfway across the camp," he said.

"We've been fighting alongside a suicidal halfwit," Genesis said, waving dismissively at her and ignoring Angeal's statement entirely. "See if you can get any more sense out of her." He turned and swept out of the tent.

She and Angeal looked at each other awkwardly in the wake of his departure.

"Is there a line of people out there waiting to yell at me?" she asked.

"I don't think anyone else would have the guts to try," he said with a half-hearted smile. "You've given them something to talk about at least." His eyes dropped quickly and he studied the dirt floor pensively.

She breathed out half a chuckle. "I'll bet." She sat down again, resting her elbows on her knees. He stood listlessly in the middle of the tent. "Well?" she asked when he didn't speak.

That roused him from his thoughts, and he lowered himself onto the seat next to her after removing the sword from his back. He propped the Buster Sword up against his shoulder, and his hand traced the cold metal. He didn't look at her.

"You did the right thing," he said after some minutes of silence.

She turned her head to look at him.

"Don't let anyone else hear you saying that," she replied. "A lot of people will see this as siding with the enemy. As abandoning SOLDIER." She tilted her head. "And maybe it is."

He let out a low sigh. "You said once that it was better to help as many people as you could than to defend your honour."

"Did I?"

"In Wutai city, before the war started." He finally looked at her. "Do you remember? We were guarding Mitchells."

She nodded. "I remember that." Over a year ago now. It humbled her that he remembered her exact words from a conversation she could barely recall.

He leaned back, and his sword made a grating noise as it scraped against his metal pauldron. "You're
not a hypocrite. You really do practise what you preach." He looked at her, his brow heavy over his eyes. "I want you to know I respect that." His eyes were a darker shade than most SOLDIERs, but the glow was there, and his gaze carried a certain weight.

"Thank you," she said, touched. She put her hand on his armoured shoulder. "But you're no hypocrite either."

"That wasn't the first village Heidegger ordered destroyed," he said, looking down. "But it's the first to survive." His hand ran along the edge of the Buster sword. The finger of his glove split open.

She sent him a knowing look but said nothing. In the end, they all stood alone in the face of their own decisions.

She placed a hand on his arm and softly squeezed. What more could she offer?

He took a deep breath and stood, slowly lifting the Buster sword and swinging it around onto his back. With a click it locked into the harness. Its heavy weight pulled his shoulders back and forced him to stand up straight.

"It won't be the same without you," he said with a faint smile. "It's been an honour." He raised his right arm and saluted her.

She stood and returned the salute.

The next flight to Midgar was scheduled for before sunrise the next day. It left without her.

"What are you doing?" Shepard asked. She was in the command tent again, facing Sephiroth.

Dawn was still another hour away. The roar of the plane's engines faded into the distance. It was very difficult to plan a rebellion when she wasn't even on the right continent.

Sephiroth put a spoon of grey lumpy porridge in his mouth and chewed. She sat across from him and aggressively bit off the end of a protein bar as she awaited an explanation.

"I have the authority to override Heidegger's orders in the field if I judge the circumstance demands it," he said. The circles under his eyes were stark against his pale complexion.

"Really?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

He shrugged. "It isn't usually worth the bother."

"So why now?"

He gave her a dull look and cleared his throat. "Under the circumstances, I didn't judge it feasible to send you back until our position in Wutai is more secure." He looked at the canvas wall straight ahead and spoke as though reciting a report. He probably was. She wouldn't be surprised to find those exact words on a report to Heidegger.

"And how long can you stall?"

"Not long," he allowed. His gaze dropped to his cooling breakfast, which he spooned up aggressively. "Do you have any idea how poorly timed this was? We were supposed to be pushing north with all our strength right now, not squabbling with the director."
"So what do you have in mind? Assuming your plan stretches beyond stalling?" she asked, ignoring his complaints.

"General Takahashi has been spotted at a fortress northeast of here," he replied, ignoring her jibe. He twisted his wrist to activate his Omni-tool and switch to a map. A highlighted point near the foothills south of the capital marked out the fort. "Without him, Emperor Godo could be convinced to surrender, or at least agree to a truce." Takahashi was a general as well as Godo's chief advisor. He wasn't a ninja, but he had the respect of the Crescent Unit. He was also credited with the scorched earth tactics the Wutai had used. Sephiroth deactivated the Omni-tool and narrowed his eyes. "Takahashi would have them burn the country to the ground before surrendering."

"That's deep within their territory," she said. "We're in no position to launch an attack that far north, and even if we were, there's no guarantee Takahashi would still be there by the time we arrived."

"And you will be leaving for Midgar in three days' time, at the very latest," he said, pushing away his empty bowl. "But between now and then, a small group of Firsts can push forward without the army, take out Takahashi and his guard, and finally have a chance to bring this war to a close."

She gave him a considering look. "You still trust me to fight for you?"

"Have you suddenly become a pacifist?" he asked with a pointedly raised eyebrow.

She snorted.

"Then I'll trust you to shoot the enemy when the situation calls for it," he said. "We don't have time for recon or more careful planning. The site of the fort is Mako rich, so you can't be on the ground, but we'll need you providing cover from a distance."

She leaned back in her seat. Her hands were interlocked on the table in front of her, and she idly stretched out her fingers. "Why the rush?"

"I've asked for your trial to be delayed until both myself and your unit can be there to testify. They probably won't wait that long." He met her gaze sombrely. Neither of them looked away.

"You'll be standing against Heidegger without so much as a witness. Shinra knows most of the army respects you, along with anyone promoted into other departments. And now you've proven yourself to be uncontrollable." He sighed under his breath. "Unless they're forced to do otherwise, they'll have no problem simply making you disappear."

She grew still at his words. Not at the news that Shinra would happily murder her—that was old news—but what he was trying to do to circumvent it. "You plan to force Wutai into surrendering, so you can fly back to Midgar and testify on my behalf," she said quietly.

His eyes slid away. "I wouldn't put it like that."

A small smile snuck across her face. "I appreciate it," she said, touched that he was prepared to try. Her smile faded away. "But it's a long shot."

"You're a sniper." He lifted his chin in challenge. "Long shots are all you're good for."

She breathed a laugh. She balled one of her hands into a fist and cracked a knuckle. "You'll find I'm also fair at close quarters."

"That depends on what you consider 'fair'," he replied with a smirk, "but if you're going to spend the rest of the war bickering with Heidegger, I may as well get some use out of you while you're still
here.

"I'll miss you too," she said dryly. He blinked at her in surprise.

"I—" he cut himself off.

A silence clawed its way into the tent and took up station between them. The light mood slipped away into something grim and looming.

"What will happen," she spoke quietly, barely breaking the silence, "when I go back, and Heidegger wins?"

"No one will ever see you again," he said.
Assassination

The Wutai temple was a distant beauty, glinting in the dark like a giant diamond on the hillside. Shepard wished the enemy buildings could be uglier. It was always a shame to break something so lovingly designed.

_Oh well._

Not a whisper of wind disturbed the predawn quiet. A thin sliver of moon shone through breaks in the clouds, bathing the world in soft light.

She made herself comfortable on her mountainside, brushing snow off the rocks. A pointless gesture—the snow was still falling in winter's last show of defiance. Her breath turned to steam as she dumped a heavy sack of heat sinks on the ground.

Stretching out on her stomach she lay down on the rock, she set her gun up in front of her. Snow soon coated her and the rifle, hiding the black blemish upon the mountainside. She looked through the scope, and the distant beauty became a silent front line.

"Report," Sephiroth said over the coms. She traced the treeline as it followed the outer wall until fluttering silver caught in her sights. His hair disappeared almost entirely in the snow, the slightest movement the only thing that gave him away. His black coat blended with the dark tree trunk behind him. The same could not be said of the obnoxiously red coat next to him. She was slightly embarrassed for the Wutai snipers that none of them had picked Genesis off yet.

"In position," whispered Angeal. She searched further along in the trees for him. He didn't have a flowing mane to give him away, but she caught sight of the moon glinting off his sword. He looked freezing in his sleeveless uniform.

"Genesis?" Sephiroth said pointedly over the coms.

"I'm standing right next to you," he replied.

"I don't know that," Angeal countered.

Genesis sighed. "In position." A lot of official procedure had been dropped as the war stretched on. It was hard to stay formal with people you knew so well.

"In position," said Shepard, bringing up the rear.

Angeal looked up, as though expecting to see her floating somewhere. Officially she wasn't there at all, given the whole 'under arrest' thing, but not even Genesis or Sephiroth were arrogant enough to think they could overthrow such a large, fortified complex in the middle of Wutai territory without any support or back up. Under other circumstances they would have deployed almost half of SOLDIER in the endeavour. Fortunately, they weren't here for the temple or position.

"What can you see, Shepard?" Sephiroth asked.

Her scope danced over the walls.

The outer defences stood thick and well-defended. Inside the walls, a magnificent temple reached for the sky. Its many tiers and balconies were almost as impressive as the veritable army of ninjas guarding it.
Ninjas were something of a nuisance, as far as she was concerned, and not for the usual reasons. Temples and churches were supposed to be safe havens, and she made a point of not attacking them, but when they doubled as ninja bases and training grounds, she couldn't exactly leave them in peace.

"There are more guards than recon indicated," she said with a calculating frown. "A lot more."

"Aren't there always?" Genesis groused.

Even for a complex of this size, the number of guards was overkill. Their information must have been good—Takahashi had to still be onsite.

Her focus moved to the gate. It glowed with a faint blue-green power that pulsed intermittently. "They've learned—there are barriers defending the gates."

"It won't be a problem." Sephiroth sounded a touch smug. She rolled her eyes and focused on the building.

"There are three courtyards, then the main building. There are half a dozen exits into little gardens and balconies on every level, all in full view of the tower." She pursed her lips at the sight of all the little nooks and crannies built into the structure. So many places to hide. "If you're coming back out, tell me where and I'll keep you covered."

"The tower is all yours," said Sephiroth.

"Won't be a problem." Her lips turned up with a brief smile. "If you're going to come barging outside in desperate need of cover, though, at least let me know what side of the building you're on. And if you get into any trouble indoors, you need to blow the roof off before I can help. I can't see through walls at this range." She was four-and-a-half kilometres away, not quite pushing the limit of her range but getting close.

"What if we're on the ground floor and there's no exterior wall?" Angeal asked.

"Improvise." It felt so natural to slip into command, guiding and guarding her SOLDIERs from above. She slotted a shredder mod onto her rifle. "If you can't get to Takahashi, at the very least force him out of the building and I'll finish him off."

Genesis snorted. "Please. First-come, first-served."

"Roger that," Angeal replied.

"Tell us when," Sephiroth said, and the sound of three swords sliding from their scabbards carried through the radio.

The guards patrolling the wall passed their hiding spots in the trees. A guard walked each segment of the wall, while others guards stood stationary at both ends, watching the patrols. There was no chance of them getting in unseen.

"Go now," she said when the guards were furthest away from the SOLDIERs.

The three of them sprang into motion. Quick as striking snakes, they leapt forward and vaulted the wall. Sephiroth leapt over the massive, reinforced gate. Shepard scoffed and fired twice in quick succession, taking down two of the guards aiming at him. He would have made a useless infiltrator.

She was too far away to hear anything except that which came through the radio. She could see guards gesturing and fires exploding, but it was all a silent tableau she altered with surgical precision.
The guards on the walls carried rifles, and she targeted and eliminated them before a single stray bullet could get through a SOLDIER shield. Angeal landed in the western courtyard and charged towards the main building, ploughing through anyone in his way. Genesis halted in the middle of the central courtyard. He looked like he was summoning something.

Sephiroth made short work of the ninjas who sought to hold him. He moved so much faster than them, he barely needed to parry, his sword cutting through their armour before they could even strike. They could overwhelm him with sheer numbers though, and he was the most famous, the most hated. She thinned down the ranks of those trying to rush him.

A second later, a shockwave shook the ground, and a Bahamut materialised in the centre of the courtyard. Genesis stood behind it inside a bubble of a shield, proudly holding out his materia. The summon roared so loudly echoes danced across the mountains and reached her a few seconds later.

The towering summon threw a blast of molten plasma across the courtyard, igniting whole sections of the wall. It charged after a cluster of ninjas, forcing them to roll out of the way. In the resulting havoc, Genesis and Sephiroth sprinted for the main building, leaving the ninjas with the Bahamut. Angeal had already made it inside. They burst through the doors and disappeared from her sight.

She pulled back from her scope and blinked. Snow had collected all over her and was melting along the length of her gun. The shredder mod had done its job, and now she swapped it out for her armour-piercing mod. She wiped the melting snow off her forehead and out of her eyes. Taking a deep breath and readjusting her position, she looked back into the scope and was at ground zero again.

The complex writhed with activity. The Bahamut had been injured, one of its wings torn clean off, but still it charged around the outer courtyards, ploughing through guards. Her focus danced from the courtyards to the temple itself, where Wutai snipers leaned out from the windows and the tower looking for targets below. She picked them off, one by one.

The radio crackled to life.

"He's not on the ground floor," Angeal said, breathless, with metal clashing against metal ringing out in the background.

Genesis crashed out onto a balcony on the second-highest level, followed by half a dozen high-ranking ninjas. He threw a fireball at one and sliced through two more while Shepard took out the other three. He nodded his thanks to the open air.

"He isn't on the top three levels either," Genesis said. That only left the first floor.

"Sephiroth?" she called, a sinking feeling in her gut. Takahashi might not even be there; it could all be a waste of time.

"I might have found him," Sephiroth whispered.

"Might?" Genesis asked, leaping over the balcony to the level below.

"He's wearing a mask, obviously," he replied. "But with so many bodyguards, it can only be him." The slight rustle of his coat was barely audible—he must have been trying to sneak up on them.

A cry went up, and Sephiroth swore under his breath. The clashing of swords and cries of pain drowned out his voice a second later. There was a great crash. She swapped in a fresh heatsink and readjusted the stock of her rifle.
"Southwest corner," he barked over the sound of boots pounding across hard floor.

Her sights raced across the complex to the balcony. "It leads to a garden on the hillside. There's a maze, then a gate in the outer wall," she said, her finger on the trigger.

A wealth of ninjas, all dressed in the most splendid Crescent Unit armour, burst out into the night. One fell immediately to her shot. Her second bullet was absorbed by a thick glowing shield.

A ninja turned back and tried to seal the door with an ice materia. Sephiroth sliced through it with ease.

The ninjas with the materia threw themselves at him while the rest retreated, clearly headed for the side gate.

Shepard searched the armoured cluster, trying to see through the glowing green shields to the armour beneath. Which one was Takahashi? They all wore silver masks and moved like trained warriors. The armour was all magnificent.

A single red sash stood out against the white snow. She pulled the trigger, and the shield around him flickered out of existence. The closest ninja jerked forward and the shield sprang up again. Now she had her target.

Sephiroth's sword cleaved through the ninja defending him, only to be caught on the katana of a second bodyguard. She shot down the ninja about to cast a bolt of lightning at his sword arm, and Sephiroth flowed like water through the battlefield.

No orders were necessary; he knew who to strike at and who to leave to her, which shields to bring down and which didn't matter. It was as familiar as breathing, and they cut a swath through the fleeing ninjas.

The warrior with the red sash stood his ground and flung out his arm. Sephiroth's blade swung at him, but he was thrown back in a blue explosion before the strike could connect. A giant silver serpent rose from the whirling mass of blue power, lithe and vicious looking. The Leviathan towered over the garden, tall as a thresher maw. It hissed at Sephiroth. He charged at it.

Shepard fired at the summoner. His shield rippled with strength. It looked as though the Leviathan was feeding into it. She snapped her shredder mod back into place and tore the shielding apart.

The Leviathan shrieked, and she heard it through the radio. The summon shot powerful torrents of water and ice at Sephiroth. He dodged and danced out of the way, miraculously keeping himself dry. He threw out his hand, and a massive bolt of lightning struck the blast of water. The summon shrieked and writhed under the electricity charging through it.

Other ninjas dragged the masked summoner away, shielding him with their own bodies. She fired two more shots and his shield was down, as was the nearest guard. He was nearly at the outer gate, and she pulled the trigger again.

The summon faded away. The summoner collapsed with a bullet in his head and a blood splatter in the snow. The ninjas froze, and an eerie silence took hold for a moment.

Shepard felt a terrible suspicion form in the back of her mind.

Then the silence passed, and screams of horror and outrage reigned. The remaining ninjas threw themselves at Sephiroth with suicidal drive. Others threw fireballs into the sky in vain attempts at vengeance against her. She reloaded and kept firing.
Soon the last of them fell. The silence returned, thicker and more eerie than before.

She thought about the fallen summoner. His armour had been grander than the rest, almost ornamental, really. She looked and saw hints of purple under the silver plating.

Sephiroth stood motionless in the garden, surrounded by fallen corpses. His eyes were fixed on the body of the summoner.

"Sephiroth?" she called. "Please tell me that was Takahashi."

"Did you get him?" Angeal asked over the radio, echoed by Genesis.

At their voices, he shook himself and stepped over the bodies. A trail of red footprints followed him through the snow.

He bent over the body, blocking her line of sight as he knelt to remove the mask.

"Who is it?" she asked when he didn't say anything.

"It's Emperor Godo," he said weakly. He stood and turned around to face her sniper nest. "You killed Emperor Godo."

She pulled back from her scope. The mountain was silent and the snow still fell, burying everything together in a thick blanket of white. She let out a heavy breath.

"Damn," she whispered.

The SOLDIERs fled the complex, evading very angry ninjas until they were safe in Shinra-controlled territory again.

Shepard had killed a great many people throughout her career. She'd never accidentally killed a head of state, though. That was a new one.

They travelled in near silence, arriving back at the nearest base at mid-day. No one was entirely sure what would happen next.

"What was Godo doing there?" Angeal asked nobody in particular. He was leaning against the concrete wall, his sword on his back and dirt and grime all over his uniform. The others were the same—the sludge from mud and melting snow had dried over shirts and coats alike.

"What does it matter?" Genesis said, gesturing in frustration. They stood uneasily in the room adjacent to the one with a secure line back to HQ. Sephiroth was on the other side of the door, reporting to the president. The quiet murmur of the conversation leaked into the room, but they couldn't make out his words.

"It does explain the overabundance of guards. Too many for just a general," Shepard said quietly.

"What have you done?" Genesis said for the umpteenth time, shaking his head.

"You know it wasn't intentional." She pinched the bridge of her nose. Her intentions didn't matter and she knew it. Godo was dead regardless of what the plan had been.

"By accident, of all things," Genesis muttered.

"He was wearing a mask and wielding a dangerous summon," she pointed out. "By all appearances,
he was just another ninja."

"You could have just shot him in the arm!"

"It's easy to say that now," she said, frowning at him. It was always easy to criticise after the fact. "Given the information I was working with, he could have been the actual target."

"So what happens now?" Angeal asked.

"Who's next in the line of succession? He has an heir, doesn't he?" she asked.

"A ten-year-old girl," Genesis said, pursing his lips in thought. "A regent will probably rule on her behalf, until she's of age, at least. One of Godo's advisers, maybe."

"Can't the empress rule on her own?" she asked.

Angeal shook his head. "Goes against Wutai tradition."

The muted conversation in the next room suddenly stopped. The three of them looked at the door and waited.

"Takahashi might seize the throne," Genesis said quietly.

"Surely not," Angeal said with a pronounced frown. "He isn't royalty."

"With a war raging, who's going to stop him?"

The door swung open, and Sephiroth stood in the doorway with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Well?" Genesis prompted.

He cleared his throat. "Wutai has called for a truce."

"What?" Shepard's thoughts ground to a standstill. That was the opposite of what she had expected, feared, would happen. Everyone else stood in wide eyed shock.

"Just like that?" she asked. Surely it couldn't be so simple. It never was.

"They must want peace," Angeal began, looking somewhere between relieved and doubtful. "I assume?"

"Empress Suiko has seized the throne," Sephiroth said, to the shock of the whole room. "She has not surrendered, but she has called for a ceasefire."

Shepard remembered the woman who had tried so hard to preserve the peace, despite Mitchells doing whatever he could to destroy it. Was that what the Empress wanted now? Peace? Shepard remembered the cold fury in her eyes, the proud tilt of her chin, and the spine that would not bend. She highly doubted it.

"Has the president agreed?" she asked. "I thought he would accept nothing short of unconditional surrender?"

Sephiroth shrugged. "He's coming himself to sign the agreement. He should be here tomorrow."

"That was fast." Shepard frowned. The whole situation felt strange.
"Yes." Sephiroth looked troubled. "It was."

President Shinra arrived the next day, accompanied by a wealth of Turks in sharp black suits. Guarding the president was the Turks' responsibility, but fighting Wutai was SOLDIER's area. An army's worth of body guards escorted him to the agreed upon site where an army of imperial guards greeted them.

Just east of where Shinra's claimed territory ended, they met at a sacred bridge. It crossed the humble beginnings of Ymir Ravine. Shepard looked out the corner of her eye at the winding gulley below. Clear and sparkling, the river ran south through the heart of the country, where the blood of two empires had dyed it red.

Instead of being handcuffed and kept well away from the proceedings, as Shepard had expected, she found herself on the front lines of the event, guarding the president himself.

"Why am I here?" she asked below her breath, standing at parade rest. Sephiroth stood next to her. "At the very least I should be up on the hill." The president was some meters behind them, loudly complaining about the wait. The Wutai envoy amassed at the other end of the bridge, and stoic ninjas faced them from across the ravine.

"He asked for you by name," Sephiroth replied, speaking too quietly for anyone else to hear.

"The president? Why?" Surely he knew she was charged with treason.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow ever so slightly. "Why does he want the woman who killed the emperor to be standing directly between him and the emperor's personal guard?"

"How clever of him," she muttered, refraining from rolling her eyes. "Put the sniper in the middle of the action. Great plan."

"You know what to do. If there's an attack, focus on getting him out of there, and we'll buy you time to retreat."

She nodded marginally. This was a dangerous undertaking, and a bridge was a vulnerable position. Admittedly, it was a sacred bridge—statues of Leviathan and Odin towered over each end, but neither side trusted the other.

Finally, a member of the Crescent Unit appeared at the other end of the bridge. He wore the red sash of high rank, the same armour that Godo died in, except for the addition of a black sash of mourning. Two sheathed swords hung at his waist.

Shepard stepped forward onto the bridge. Her armour gleamed in the noon sun, the polished red-and-white stripe on her arm stark against the impenetrable black. When he saw her, the ninja approached. They walked across the bridge, under the eyes of both armies, until they stood face-to-face in the middle. Nobody else moved. There wasn't a breath of wind.

The bridge did not blow up. No snipers took advantage of a clear shot.

The two envoys stepped onto the bridge. She watched the empress approach at the head of a long train of guards.

"Is it her?" Sephiroth's voice asked through the coms.

"Yes," she said quietly. It was undoubtedly the same woman, even though each day of the war could
be read on her wizened face. This was no decoy, sent to lure out the President. Her expression was as hard as granite, and her posture as defiant and strong as any creature that crawled across the surface of Tuchunka.

"Her Majesty, Suiko Kisaragi, Empress of Wutai," one of her guard declared in an echoing voice. General Takahashi and several of Godo's old advisors stood a respectful distance behind her, their expressions all stern and bitter.

Shepard and the first ninja stepped back to guard their respective heads of state.

The Wutai waited for a similar announcement, but Shinra didn't work like that. The president just stepped forward, all confidence and ego, shadowed by Tseng. He was a large man, not as tall as Heidegger but with a generous stomach that his tailored red suit appeared to celebrate more than disguise. His blond hairline was retreating across his scalp, and a bushy moustache dominated his lip. Sephiroth and Genesis moved with him.

"I'm Rupert Shinra. We spoke on the phone," he said with a twist of his lips, enjoying his own complete disregard for Wutai formality. Even the masked guards looked offended.

"Mr. President," Suiko said, her expression unchanged, possibly because she was already wearing her sternest scowl. Her garb was magnificent but clearly clothes of mourning.

"Ma'am," Shinra said, with an ironic tilt of his head.

Her gaze of displeasure shifted from him to the surrounding guards, as though dismissing the president entirely. She surveyed them all with a decidedly uncomplimentary lift of her brow.

"The demon," she said, turning away from Sephiroth, "the firebrand," she dismissed Genesis, "a turncoat," she didn't grace Tseng with so much as a scowl, "and the woman who killed my husband." Her heavy gaze settled on Shepard.

Shepard kept her expression blank but returned the stare.

"You need not hide behind your soldiers," the empress said, returning her focus to the president. "I am here to make peace." She gave an unpleasant smile.

Discussion of the truce began in truth then. The terms had already been agreed upon, but President Shinra angled for more. Empress Suiko refused to be moved. It was a ceasefire, nothing more. Wutai did not belong to Shinra, and she would not bend. Wutai did not acknowledge the southern half of the island as Shinra's territory, but it would not try to retake it either.

They both signed an official document and shook hands. Clearly neither of them held any delusions of the peace lasting.

Suiko's expression remained one of implacable composure, despite Shinra's prodding and goading.

"Unreasonable woman," the president said afterwards, when they had both retreated to their own sides of the ravine. "She'll change her mind when we smash down the gates of the capital."

"You could slaughter every last one of them, and she wouldn't give in," Shepard said quietly, her eyes following the retreating empress. Shepard had seen such anger before. She'd seen it in the eyes of Javik, and Bakara, when she spoke of the genophage. Not an explosion of rage that burned out and left a charred wreckage but a banked up furnace of wrath that left nothing at all.

"Perhaps I should just hand them you, then?" said the president, looking at her over a cigar.
She looked at him blandly. "As you will, sir."

He snorted, already bored with her. "Get me back to Midgar," he said gruffly, getting into the armoured vehicle that had brought him. "I dislike countries that are only half mine."
Genesis leaned against the plane's bulkhead with his arms crossed and a sharp frown on his face. He felt as though he had been wearing the same frown for decades now.

The winds over the Midgar plains buffeted the plane and shrieked across the metal hull as they lost altitude. Every tremor reverberated through the crowded cargo hold. An entire platoon of troopers was stationed inside. Despite being strapped into seats around the compartment for the landing, they all had easy access to their rifles. Anxious and wrong-footed, Genesis could see them swapping nervous looks under their helmets.

Shepard sat next to him in handcuffs.

Her weaponry was locked up in an entirely separate compartment of the plane. This was the first time he'd seen her out of her armour in months, and the plain SOLDIER uniform she wore looked alarmingly thin by comparison. She didn't appear at all alarmed. Her head had fallen forward, bobbing slightly in the turbulence, and her arms were as close to crossed as they could get in handcuffs.

That didn't stop the troopers from keeping their eyes fixed on her. They were right to be nervous. Only a First Class could hold back another First Class. He was the jailer here.

His frown grew deeper. How dare Shinra ask this of him?

The plane shook as the landing gear met the tarmac.

With the war over, there was no longer any reason for her to remain free. She was accused of treason, and Heidegger had ordered her immediate incarceration and return to Midgar. Sephiroth and Angeal were still organising their forces in Wutai.

Genesis' anger had burnt itself down into a simmering resentment. The whole situation left a bitter taste in his mouth and a lurking sense of nausea at what was still to come. Worst of all, it could have been avoided. Shepard already held a generous body count, one decades in the making. He knew what that looked like now; it hid in the thud of every step and the shadow behind her eyes. Death was ugly, but it was their trade and she knew that as well as he did. Why throw her life away trying to pretend otherwise? She didn't believe in heroics, why play the martyr now?

She had always been proud. Proud and stubborn. She gave such an appearance of being straight-laced, he had underestimated just how much backbone she hid beneath that armour.

The plane slowed and taxied along the runway. Next to him, Shepard roused herself from her doze and looked up at him, awaiting instruction. She couldn't even take off her own seatbelt.

As much as her actions had stung him, it made his blood boil that Heidegger dared strike out against one of the few people he was prepared to care about. Heidegger was an interfering fool whose ego had already cost more lives than they could afford to lose. Now he wanted to throw away one of the only First Classes left alive and the woman who ended the war.

Shinra's gratitude was so short lived.

The plane came to a stop, and after some minutes of waiting, the cargo doors opened. Grey plains stretched out before them, crumbling cliffs and fields of dead vegetation as far as the eyes could see. Midgar's walls stood behind them several kilometres away. A helicopter waited at the other end of
the tarmac to fly the two of them up to HQ. Shinra wanted to avoid the public spectacle of dragging one of its prized propaganda pieces through the city in cuffs.

They couldn't keep it a secret from everyone.

"How dare they treat her like this?" a trooper near the back whispered, unaware of just how sharp his hearing was. Shepard sighed next to him.

"She was defending ninjas," another replied under his breath.

"But she killed the emperor!" the first trooper said.

"And broke orders. SOLDIERs think they can get away with anything," someone else whispered.

"Saved my life," another murmured.

"Theirs too."

"Traitor."

"Hero."

"Quiet," Genesis snapped. He'd had enough of that before the plane even took off. "Go secure the area. Guard the helicopter." He jerked his head at the door, and the pack of troopers marched out. The helicopter wasn't visible from the cargo hold, but he'd seen it when they landed. Piloted by Turks, it didn't need guarding or securing in the least, but he craved a little breathing room and quiet.

Shepard watched him with a raised eyebrow—which he was also not in the mood for. The last of the troopers marched out onto the runway and beyond his line of sight. He sat heavily in the seat next to her. She was still held down by her seat belt, so he brusquely undid it and then crossed his arms. Her eyebrow remained raised.

"Don't give me that. You no longer get a say in these things," he said, with what even he knew to be unnecessary bite.

"Not afraid I'll overpower you and make a break for it?" she asked. It was the first thing she had said in hours. He had started to fear she'd just given up.

"And where would you go?" he asked, gesturing to the barren plains before them.

Her lips twitched into a small smile.

"I'd figure it out." Her eyes surveyed the bleak sight, her sniper's eye looking for details he couldn't identify.

It brought a bitter smile to his face. She was still the hard woman he called a friend. He nodded and stood, rolling out his shoulders and strolling past her. He pulled out his phone and checked leisurely through his backed up emails. Such a busy inbox.

"What are you doing?" she asked behind him, her voice suddenly sharp.

He looked over his shoulder at her. A sleep materia sat next to her, well within reach. His sword was back where he had been standing, leaning against the wall on the other side of her.

"Make it quick," he said, his focus returning to his phone. "My reputation is going to suffer enough from this as it is." It stung just to say it. She had better be grateful.
Several seconds dragged by, and he wondered why he was still conscious. He glanced back. She hadn't even reached for the materia. She could easily use it despite the cuffs, which she was strong enough to snap anyway, if she really tried. She didn't move. She just looked at him through troubled eyes.

"Why are you still here? Go!"

"Genesis," she shook her head, "I'm not running."

He stared at her, certain he was mishearing. "You won't get another opportunity like this."

She shook her head again, and he felt frustration and a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Please," he entreated, an edge of urgency in his voice. They only had so much time before the Turks decided to investigate the delay.

She stood, leaving the materia on the bench. "You're not going to take the fall for me. You don't need to protect me from my own choices."

He swore.

"How exactly do you expect this to end?" he stalked towards her. They were the same height but in the moment he felt like he towered over her. "Do you imagine that you're going to somehow win the trial? There is only one possible ending here: a guilty verdict, swiftly followed by your execution."

Her expression remained unreadable, but she made no move towards the door. Didn't she understand? Why was she unmoved?

"Why aren't you running?" he asked, desperation leaking into his voice.

"Genesis," she said, putting her hand on his upper arm. Still cuffed, her other arm came with it. "There is a time for retreating, and a time to hold your ground."

"This is the former."

Her eyebrow rose sharply at that. "Would you?"

"This isn't a time for games!" he hissed with enough force that it felt more like a yell. "I am risking my entire career," he faltered, a spike of nausea running through him at the words. He swallowed harshly. "I am risking my life for you—at least have the decency to save your own."

"Genesis," she said, putting her hand on his upper arm. Still cuffed, her other arm came with it. "There is a time for retreating, and a time to hold your ground."

"This is the former."

Her hand dropped, and he saw steel in her eyes.

"I am not going to disappear quietly," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "If Shinra is going to hold me accountable for my actions, I will return the favour." There was fire in her voice, restrained but unmistakably there. "But I will not let you take the fall for me."

She squared her shoulders and looked him in the eye. Without the wall of her armour, he realised how gaunt she had become. The war had taken from her just like it had everyone else. And now she wanted to stand alone against Shinra itself.

"They'll crush you," he whispered.

"Perhaps," she allowed, unflinching.

She turned, picked up his sword, and held it out to him. He stared at the jewelled hilt, engraved with
runes of accuracy and strength and fire infused. He took it and felt utterly powerless.

Genesis led his shackled friend out of the plane to the helicopter where the Turks waited. Shepard marched with her chin raised and her back straight. An army she had trained flanked her, their rifles tracking her every step.

The procession of guards escorted Shepard to her new quarters: a cell designed specifically for First Class SOLDIERs. She'd half expected to end up rooming down in the Science Department, but apparently Heidegger wasn't going to let any other department get their hands on her until he'd exacted his own vengeance. She was very grateful for his vindictiveness.

The door shut behind her, leaving her in a metal room. The lock engaged and the doors hummed with the electrical current pulsing through them. At least she wasn't cuffed anymore.

It was surprisingly large for a cell, albeit completely stripped down. The walls were heavily reinforced, with obvious effort going into making sure they were perfectly smooth and uniform. Not a single weak spot in sight. Apparently they feared she was going to punch her way out.

The amount of thought and effort that had gone into designing a First Class-proof cell was evident. Shinra knew that SOLDIER inspired admiration all over the company, especially in those in the armed forces, so the door couldn't even be opened by the guards. It was electronically controlled, no physical lock and key at all. She gave the small camera in the corner a wry smile. Oh, the joys of automation.

She sat on the cold slab bed. She had a plan. A risky and bloody plan, but a plan nonetheless. She wouldn't have let this go so far without one, but it was surreal to suddenly be trapped like this.

Yesterday, armies lived and died on her word. Today, she was confined to a windowless room and kept under constant surveillance.

Based on previous experience, she expected to be left alone in the dark and quiet for at least twenty-four hours before anyone stopped by.

It had been less than ten minutes when the door disengaged and Cissnei entered.

The Turk looked the same as usual, well pressed suit and loose but strictly controlled hair flicking around her shoulders. Her large shuriken rested against her back. She looked around the cell with polite interest, as though observing a painting in a museum.

"Comfy," she said, giving Shepard a half smile.

"Roomier than most barracks." She still sat on the edge of the metal slab that made up the bed, which was uncomfortably low to the ground and making her knees sore.

"And you've got a toilet all to yourself." Cissnei raised an eyebrow at the metal plumbing tucked away in the corner.

"I know soldiers who would kill for that," Shepard said, studying her guest. "Are you here to interrogate me?"

"Yup. Do you play cards?" She brandished a small deck.

"Sure do," Shepard said, shuffling over on the bed. She played a wicked hand of Skylilian Five, and she missed playing with her crew.
Cissnei sat facing her with her legs crossed and her shuriken leaning against the side of the bed. She shuffled the deck and started to deal them, only to learn that Shepard didn't play the game she had in mind. In the end, the only game they did have in common was Snap. She split the deck in two, and they started a spirited round.

"Snap!" Shepard yelled, slapping the cards between them down onto the table. Cissnei jumped and almost tumbled backwards off the bed.

"Sorry," Shepard offered, pulling the cards she had won towards her with what she hoped was humility.

Cissnei laughed and resettled herself on the bed. "That's what I get for playing a game of reflexes with a SOLDIER. My hand would be stinging if I slapped the table that hard."

Shepard examined the inside of her hand. All calloused and scarred, she'd barely felt the impact at all. She shrugged in response and kept playing.

"I always figured you'd end up in a cell sooner or later," Cissnei said after some time, reorganizing her shrinking pile of cards. SOLDIER reflexes sort of took the joy out of the game, but they could still pretend they stood on equal footing.

"Really?" Shepard kept her eyes on the cards being played.

"Mm. I assumed it would be for something more direct though," she said with a shrug. "Trying to blow up HQ. Assassination attempts maybe."

Shepard gave her a wry smile. "The day is young."

Cissnei snorted. Two Kings in a row hit the pile and Shepard's hand struck like a crash landing.

"Do you have any idea how much of an uproar you've caused?" Cissnei said, frowning at Shepard's growing stack of cards.

"Yes."

"I really doubt it," Cissnei said, a small and entirely artificial smile on her face. "Had it been anyone else, they would be in the science department right now. The fact that you're so popular and famous is the only reason you're getting a trial at all."

Shepard nodded. She remembered the haunted look in Dalton's eyes when he woke from his Mako-induced coma. To everyone else the threat of the Science Department was reason to stay in line. She didn't work like that.

"You don't look surprised." Cissnei pursed her lips. With her constant half smile gone, she looked about five years older.

Shepard watched her with a steady gaze and put a card down. "I've been doing this for decades. I know the rules."

Cissnei paused halfway through putting down her own card.

"Please tell me this wasn't on purpose," she said, leaning forward.

Shepard snorted. "I don't know why I would want to—let alone how I could have—done it on purpose. How does any of this help me?" She gestured at the empty cell around them. "I'm flattered
you think I'm that good a strategist. At the end of the day, I'm just a rebellious grunt."

Cissnei's half smile returned, not as convincing as normal. "You have to fall in line sooner or later. Everyone does."

"I do not," Shepard said in a low voice.

"Then you're going to be fighting for the rest of your life," Cissnei paused and looked down at the game. "Which won't be very long at all." She had run out of cards. The game was over.

"Yes." Shepard returned the deck. She'd won, but the cards weren't hers.

Cissnei shuffled the deck, her eyes unfocused as she returned them to their case.

"I'll miss you," Cissnei said quietly. Her lips smiled but her eyes were sad.


Cissnei cleared her throat, "I'm done in here," she called out.

She stood, picked up her shuriken, and swung it onto her back as she crossed the room.

"I'll wave from the chopping block," Shepard said.

Cissnei looked back. "Yeah.

The locks disengaged, the door opened, and Cissnei walked out into the rest of the world. The doors slammed shut behind her and the room hummed from the electricity once again.

With nothing to do, Shepard looked down at her fingers. She traced old callouses. Jabbed at one of them. The sensation was dulled, but she could still feel it.

She wished… that it didn't always have to be the hard way.

The doors buzzed again, and she looked up in surprise. The locks disengaged, and she expected Cissnei to be standing there. Instead, Tseng entered.

She remained seated.

He stood in the centre of the room, with his hands at his back and his face blank. Still, given the way he walked in, the distribution of his weight and the reinforced blankness of his expression, she could have sworn he was uneasy. Surely not.

He raised his chin and stared at her, perhaps awaiting a response.

Oh, she knew this routine. Send in the fun and relatable agent to loosen her lips and then swoop in with the big guns. She'd done it herself a couple of times. She normally played the big gun.

"Shepard," he said, when she didn't twitch under his calm scrutiny. He tilted his head in false politeness. "May I call you Jane?"

She met his blank stare without flinching and let the silence drag out.

"Not if you expect a response," she said after a very long minute.

He nodded. "Miss Shepard, then."
"Commander," she corrected reflexively.

"You've been stripped of your rank."

"Oh?" She crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall. "Has Admiral Hackett been in contact?"

"I can't say I've had the pleasure." He took a meagre step forward. "In fact, there hasn't been any contact from your people.

"With you," she said, idly inspecting the material of her prison garb.

"Pardon?"

"No one from outside Gaia has gotten in contact with you."

His forehead furrowed marginally, before smoothing out a second later.

He cocked his head. "Have you been in contact with your allies then?"

"Would I tell you if I had been?" she asked. She knew what game he was playing, and she happily played right along.

"It's in your interest to co-operate."

Her smile turned condescending. "You should be worrying about your own interests."

"Can you return to your own people?" He frowned with a very good facsimile of concern. "It would be simpler for us all if you left Gaia."

"Simpler?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Conflict within the armed forces weakens the company. Is there anything we can do to facilitate communications? Is there a rescue party on the way?" The furrow in his forehead returned. "Surely they haven't abandoned you."

Despite all efforts to hold it back a low chuckle broke out of her. She shook her head. "Facilitate communications?" she asked with raised eyebrows before snorting. "I've seen rookies with more subtlety."

He frowned.

"You may as well just come out and say it. You want to know if I'm going to call for backup or if you can execute me with impunity." She lifted her foot to the edge of the bed and rested her elbow on her knee. "Is there a fleet watching Gaia as we speak? Will orbital bombardment follow my death?" She leaned back against the wall, relaxed. "Can you afford to burn those bridges?"

He offered a wan smile. "I don't see why orbital bombardment would follow the execution of a soldier who disobeyed orders during wartime."

"I won't be the one you'll be explaining your motivations to."

"If anyone," he said dryly.

She tilted her head sideways. "Let me ask you something, Tseng," she said. He nodded and she let him wait. "What makes you think I'm the only alien on your planet?"
His eyes narrowed and the furrow on his brow returned. "You've had the same equipment since you arrived here, despite all the damage sustained. Had you been in contact with others of your kind, you could have simply replaced it." The furrow faded away, and his bland expression betrayed nothing. "You are a competent liar, but you are still alone."

"Did it never strike you as odd that I know so much about the people of Gaia?" she said. She didn't need Tseng to be afraid of her and the Alliance any more, but it couldn't hurt either. "I speak your languages. Your idioms and phrasal verbs make perfect sense to me, I understand your social cues. I even play a mean game of Snap. Do you think that is just happy coincidence?"

He studied her for a long moment. "I think you are a very good liar. But I know there is no proof of anything you say."

"Both of those things are true," she allowed with a dismissive flick of her wrist. "Do what you have to. But you will live with the consequences." She flashed a grim smile. "Hopefully."

"Quite." His expression remained unreadable. She had seen brick walls with more expression. He turned to leave, but paused by the door and looked back at her.

"Why did you spare the village?"

She blinked at him and said nothing.

"Who are the Wutai to you? What reason do you have to favour them over anyone else?"

She scoffed. "By that measure I have no reason to favour Shinra either."

He raised an eyebrow and swept his gaze across the cell. "I disagree."

She let her head thud back against the wall and looked him square in the eye. She wouldn't tell him the truth: that she felt sympathy for the villagers, one minute just living their lives, the next rained down upon by forces they couldn't possibly hope to repel. He probably wouldn't even believe her anyway. But there was a motivation she knew he would understand.

"We share a specialisation. A profession even," she said. He looked doubtful, but she kept going. "You've seen my rifle. I fight with surgical precision to get the best results. Wholesale slaughter is wasteful and lazy." She stood and stared him down. "Killing civilians is beneath me. I'm the best sniper in the galaxy and I am not here to waste my time burning down wooden shacks."

"The best in the galaxy." His eyebrow rose.

"You'll have to take my word for it." She looked away. "I take pride in my work, no matter what you think."

"I see." He nodded and left, and she had no idea if he believed a word she had said about anything.

Almost a week after Shepard's incarceration, Sephiroth returned from Wutai.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall of the elevator. It was early morning but already he had had enough.

Everything in Midgar was the same. The same overpowering stench, the same fawning Shinra employees and egotistical executives. The same grey that blanketed everything. It didn't matter how brightly coloured something was, if it spent enough time in Midgar it became grey. And it felt worse
every time he returned.

At least in Wutai he was allowed to kill people who irritated him.

Midgar wasn't entirely the same, of course. The SOLDIER prison cells held an occupant this time.

The elevator opened with a ding, and he straightened his back. This wasn't his floor; he was on the way up to the First Class quarters. A gaggle of Third Classes stood waiting for the elevator and were about to step in when they saw him. They froze at the realisation of exactly who stood before them, awe in their eyes. Everyone else in sight stuttered to a halt as well. Only the slightest breath of movement dared to exist in his presence.

He pursed his lips. One of the Thirds mumbled something apologetic, and they retreated to go wait for another elevator.

He pressed the 'close door' button and it creaked under the force. When would they stop doing this? He worked here, just like them. They didn't have to all freeze in terror every time he turned a corner. The doors closed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. The elevator continued on to his destination.

It dinged open again, this time at the correct level. He stalked out into the corridor, brandishing his key. It had just turned in the lock when he paused.

He thought back to that frozen moment at the elevator. Everyone stopped moving a second after the doors opened. But there had been movement in the background. He couldn't identify what it belonged to, no shape or colour lingered in his mind, only a barely visible distortion.

Exactly like a tactical cloak.

No.

That couldn't—

He narrowed his eyes. He locked his door again and marched straight back to the elevator and rode it to his office.

Logging on to his computer, he wasted no time with all the updates and emails he had missed but went straight to the security files. The multiple passwords that protected the security systems were no deterrent to him as he had full access to all but the executive levels. He clicked on the live video feed of Shepard's cell.

It took a moment to open—the servers were always slow in the mornings. Finally, it opened into a black and white image of the cell. Shepard lay stretched out on the bare bed in the corner. He glared at the footage, feeling none of the relief he had expected. She shifted in her sleep. It was definitely her. They'd trekked their way across Wutai together; he knew very well what she looked like.

He leaned back in his chair and locked his jaw. The sight of her in a cell was unsettling, and not just because he would have preferred she not be in there at all. Something was wrong and it nagged at him.

Maybe he hadn't seen her ghosting down the corridor at all. She couldn't possibly get out—she didn't even have her Omni-tool. Perhaps he had simply grown so used to her walking around invisible that his tired mind imagined it.

He exited the video. It felt disrespectful to watch her sleep.
His fingers tapped against the top of the desk, and he pursed his lips in thought. He'd never known her to sleep in so late. Not even when she was on furlough and had nothing to do. She stayed up late, got up early, and always had dark marks under her eyes.

He clicked the feed open again. She was definitely sleeping. He exited it. He felt ridiculous and frustrated because he knew what he had seen and it didn't make any sense.

He got up and went back to the elevators. He punched in the level for the high security prison cells and crossed his arms. As the numbers ticked by, he stubbornly ignored all the reasons why he was being ridiculous.

He had intended to avoid her when he returned. He didn't know what to say and the whole situation made him uncomfortable. He knew what he'd seen. He was just going to check.

Maybe the cameras had been tampered with. She was good with electronics, though normally only with the assistance of her Omni-tool. She couldn't have done anything from inside the cell anyway. The whole system was brand new and top of the line. Could Hojo have interfered?

A wave of dread passed through him at the idea, but it swiftly passed. Hojo was infamously bad with new technology, and he didn't have access to these systems anyway. They all came from Urban Development and Reeve was very good at being too uncooperative for Hojo to bother with. Reeve —

Reeve was friends with Shepard.

Why had that not occurred to him before?

But what did it mean? Would Reeve help her escape? If so, she had been walking in entirely the wrong direction. Why would Reeve want to help her anyway? He had never expressed an interest in SOLDIER or any of the company's more heated politics. The engineer didn't generally draw attention to himself.

It occurred to Sephiroth that he had no idea what motivated the Director of Urban Development. He looked up at the camera in the elevator and narrowed his eyes. A grave oversight that was. How did Reeve fly under the radar so well? Surely someone had to have noticed that, despite all appearances, he held tremendous power?

Evidently Shepard had noticed.

Reeve maintained Shinra HQ—the very foundations of the building were his designs. The security systems, the communications networks, Mako distribution throughout Midgar, all went through Urban Development. It was more than enough to destroy a great many people if the mild mannered man who sat in the corner and watched the other directors squabble wanted it.

He arrived outside the detention area. Four Second Class SOLDIERs guarded the door. None of them had anything to report, and as far as he could tell, they believed it too.

He typed in his passcode and swiped his security card through the scanner. The locks disengaged. He braced himself and entered.

The cell was empty.

That much was immediately obvious. He spun around just in case, but there was nowhere to hide. It was an empty room being guarded by four stern and vigilant SOLDIERs.
The door closed behind him.

He looked at it for a moment, a barely visible electric current running through the metal, and scowled. He drew his sword and was about to slash through the door, electrical current be damned, when a voice spoke from the ceiling.

"Sephiroth, SOLDIER."

He stilled. His head slowly turned up to the camera in the corner of the ceiling. The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. It was too heavily synthesized.

Then he remembered. He had heard it before, well over a year ago now. It was synthesised by nature.

Oh.

He was going to kill Shepard.
Shepard ghosted her way back towards her cell.

She had meant to be back hours ago, long before anyone would think to check on her, but stealing people from the Science Department was delicate work. The drive out past Kalm took two hours each way. She wished she could have found somewhere closer to hide the reclaimed SOLDIERs.

Dalton and Mendez were recovering well, and that alone was reason to be thankful, despite everything else going on. The others she'd snuck out were slowly waking up. The first two nursed them to health and kept them safe. It was a bumpy road, severe PTSD plagued them all, but they huddled together and took strength in each other.

At least one small part of SOLDIER wasn't tearing itself apart. It was important to treasure the little things in times like these.

She deactivated her Omni-tool and placed it back into the weapons cabinet where all her gear had been locked away. She put her rifle down next to it, patted the scope fondly, and locked the cabinet.

Walking down the corridors wasn't an option without the Omni-tool so she took to the ventilation system in the ceilings. An easily accessed opening could be found over the toilets on every level, which Scout had pointed out to her. The vent in her cell was electronically sealed.

Thane had taught her the fine art of navigating skyscrapers without ever having to walk a step. She lacked his silence and grace, but she was capable, and her beige prison garb made it even easier. Her cell was only a couple of rooms away. She shuffled along as quietly as possible.

A massive yawn split her face, and she paused to blink away the light moisture in her eyes. She looked forward to sleeping away the day.

"Commander Shepard." Scout's voice sounded hollow and tinny. She looked around the cramped vent, wondering where the speaker was. A second later, she realised he was using the com system of the empty room below her. She kept shuffling forward.

"What is it?" she whispered, hoping the echoes wouldn't travel far down the vents.

"General Sephiroth is in your cell."

She froze.

"Has he sounded the alarm? Is he still there?" Her mind raced through all the possible outcomes and how many corpses this was likely to end in. Several curses danced on the end of her tongue.

"He is still in the cell, and he has not," Scout said.

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Why not?"

"I am talking to him."

She looked up, even though the voice was coming from below her. "Oh," she said. She sighed and kept on wriggling forward. That certainly changed things. "Pleasant conversation?"

There was a pause. She wondered if Scout was actually asking him.
"He is not comfortable," Scout said a moment later, with what could be taken as remorse.

"No kidding," she muttered.

"I am not kidding."

She snorted and looked down. "Does he know I'm coming back?"

"I have asked him to wait for you."

A smile cracked across her face. She leaned her forehead against the dusty metal beneath her.

"He's going to kill me," she said into the grate.

"He has expressed a similar sentiment."

Sephiroth stood in the centre of Shepard's cell with his sword in his hand. The ceiling mounted security camera and speaker sparked in pieces on the ground.

"Commander Shepard is approaching. Thank you for co-operating," the robotic voice said from the speaker on his phone.

He was sorely tempted to destroy the phone too.

The electrical current that ran through all the exits cut out, and the vent in the ceiling opened. Shepard swung herself down to the ground, facing away from him. The vent locked behind her and the current returned.

She brushed dust and grime off her prison jumpsuit and stretched out her shoulders.

"Good morning," she said, not even looking at him, as though they were acquaintances passing each other on the street.

He held the edge of his sword against the back of her neck. She stilled.

"You have so much explaining to do," he growled.

"I understand Scout introduced himself." She turned her head slightly and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Don't overreact."

"You are shameless." He pressed his sword against her neck more insistently, a hairsbreadth from the breaking the skin.

She didn't react.

He pulled his sword back with a snarl and returned it to the scabbard with vehemence. Some part of him wanted her to strike back, at least then it would be a fight. She refused to give him even that.

She turned around, finally facing him.

"What do you want me to say?" she said. She had the decency to look at least a little guilty.

"Sit," he barked, pointing at the low metal bed. She followed the order without complaint. "Give me your Omni-tool." He held out his hand.

"I put it back," she said, holding up her hands as evidence. The loose sleeves of her uniform fell
down to around her elbows.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. What on Gaia was he supposed to do with her?

He needed to prioritise.

"The Geth," he said, deciding on an angle of attack.

"Sephiroth," the robot said from his phone. He scowled.

"I'll explain," Shepard said, holding her hands up again, this time placating. "Please calm down."

His scowl deepened. He crossed his arms and stared down at her, waiting for her to explain herself.

"After discovering Scout in Hollander's Lab, I went to Reeve," she said without intonation. "He was sympathetic. Of his own volition, he created a new Geth platform, and Scout wirelessly transferred himself to the new body."

"Then why is he in the building's mainframe?" he asked, unmoved.

She shrugged. "That's on Reeve. I was in Wutai when that happened."

"It was your idea and you know it," he snapped, pointing a finger at her.

She crossed her arms. "If you expect me to apologise for screwing over Hollander, then I've got bad news for you." Her eyes narrowed at him. "And if you want an apology for helping a friend who was being tortured, then you're delusional."

He kept his expression hard despite her excuses.

"You went behind my back," he said, his voice low and, frankly, hurt. He had done so much for her and this was how she repaid him.

She scoffed and bared her teeth. "What was I supposed to do, leave him there? What do you think I'd do if it were the other way around?" she asked, her chin lifted in challenge and her eyes sharp. "If you were trapped in a Geth prison, what do you think I would do?"

He locked his jaw. "You would go about your business."

"I'd bleed myself dry getting you out, and you damn well know it!" she said, leaping to her feet. "I haven't abandoned you," she hissed.

He looked her over, so indignant at the idea that she wasn't loyal to those counting on her, but where was he in her plans? What happened to him when her head rolled?

"Haven't you?" he asked with a raised brow.

"No. I haven't." She looked him in the eye. Her hard stare was difficult to refute.

"Why must you be so difficult?" he muttered, breaking eye contact. His hand rested on his sword's hilt, but it did nothing to calm him. "Breaking laws behind my back, disobeying orders at every possible opportunity."

She raised an eyebrow at him sceptically. "I do not."
"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

He shot her a sharp look. "You broke out a Shinra prisoner."

"You imprisoned and tortured one of my allies," she replied.

"Hollander did. I had nothing to do with it."

"And Director Reeve got him out. I had nothing to do with it," she parroted with an unpleasant smile. "And who am I to disagree with a director?"

He couldn't believe her nerve. She appeared smaller without her armour and much easier to loom over, but it had no effect on her. They were standing very close together. He forced himself to take a calming breath before he lashed out at her and lost all control of the conversation.

He needed to know what she was up to. The fact that she was standing in front of him at all made no sense. He gave her a considering look.

"Why did you come back?" he asked.

"I have a trial to sit." She stepped away, giving him back his space. "If I intended to run away, I would have disappeared back in Wutai."

He followed her, stepping forwards. "What are you planning?"

She held her ground. "To face whatever justice Shinra has in store for me."

"Where did you go?"

"I wanted some air," she said archly.

"Shepard," he growled. "Where were you?"

She looked at him plainly. "I can't tell you that."

"Do you think this is a game?" He took another step, getting into her space.

With a small rush of her biotics she pushed him back half a step. He blinked in surprise. It had been some time since he'd thought of her biotics as a weapon he needed to guard against.

"I know exactly what is at stake," she said, her voice quiet. "Don't ever make the mistake of thinking I don't."

A noise of frustration escaped him. "I am going to speak at your trial. I am your only hope at getting a lenient sentence." He shook his head, and his shoulders dropped. "How can you expect me to trust you, to speak for you, when you so clearly don't trust me?"

Her eyes fell. "Should I trust you?"

He faltered at her question. Part of him wanted to urge her to trust him, to tell him everything, but they'd come a long way from the day he'd manipulated her into invading Wutai. Or at least, he thought they had. Trust wasn't something you asked for.

He looked away. The silence stretched out between them.
"What does the Geth want?" he finally asked.

"Ask him yourself."

"Why should I take a machine's word for it?" he said with a frown.

"Who else are you going to ask?" She gave him a hard look.

He blinked. Her mechanical eyes did not.

"I didn't mean you." He gestured at the ceiling. "The Geth—"

"His name is Scout," she said. Her eyes met his, fierce and demanding.

"Scout." He straightened his back. "The name implies military recon… and that there is an army to follow."

"Unfortunate coincidence," she replied with an indifferent shrug. He narrowed his eyes at her, and she let out a frustrated sigh. "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell me the virus you've installed isn't going to trigger a global invasion," he spat.

"Oh, for goodness sake." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's not a virus, and he can hear you."

"Thanks to you."

She gave him an unimpressed glower, which he immediately returned.

"You're in Geth space," she said.

He faltered. "What?"

"Gaia is in the middle of Geth territory and has been for over three hundred years. If they were interested in conquering you they would have already done so."

He opened his mouth to argue but realised there was no reason why it couldn't be true. Gaia was at the mercy of whomever was out there. That was half the reason he'd made an agreement with Shepard in the first place.

It was easier to swallow when the aliens looked mostly human.

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" he asked, a bitter twist to his lips.

"Geth are not expansionistic," Scout offered from his phone.

Sephiroth looked between Shepard and the phone. "Why should I trust either of you?"

"Don't throw out the gun with the heatsink," she said. He blinked at the unfamiliar metaphor but caught her general meaning. "Scout is my friend and my ally. I trust him with my life, and yours. There is nothing else I can say to reassure you."

He looked away, tensing and releasing his fists. Shepard was one thing, but a sentient robot that knew every last one of Shinra's secrets?

It explained how inexplicably well informed Shepard was, if nothing else.
"I need more information," he said, turning back to her. "Where have you been?"

"If Scout is prepared to talk to you..." she said, pausing for confirmation.


"Then you can ask him your questions directly. As to where I went tonight?" She took in a slow breath, as though bracing herself. "I will tell you. After the trial."

"Is that a joke?"

"I'm dead serious," she replied, a trace of a smile on her lips.

He scowled and crossed his arms, offended that she'd even joke about it. "That isn't funny."

Her expression sobered, and she stepped closer. "I mean it. After the sentencing, I'll tell you what I've been up to." She put a hand on his crossed arms, resting it on his forearm. He felt her touch through the leather of his coat. "Everything," she said. "You have my word."

He regarded her silently. A lot had been said about trust and loyalty, but what did it mean in the end? She had been boldly lying to him for years.

"What is your word worth?" he asked quietly.

Her eyes dropped, what looked like remorse hid in the lines of her face. Then her eyes rose to his, and she was all determination again. "Have I ever failed to keep a promise?" she asked, her voice matching his quiet tone. Her hand still lay against his forearm, her fingers digging into the muscle. "I promised I would fight against Wutai. I promised you there were lines I would not cross."

His breath faltered. "You promised Shinra wouldn't get away with everything."

She lifted her chin. "Yes. Yes, I did."

He took her hand, his fingers clasping over where it rested on his forearm. His grip was hard and he stared her in the eye.

"Do you think I am on your side?" he whispered, barely inches away from her.

"Do you think it makes any difference?" she whispered back. The shadow of something sad and bitter lurked in her eyes before retreating behind the mask of unshakable resolve. "You know perfectly well where I stand. Where you choose to stand is your call."

"You're prepared to stand up to me?" he asked.

She gave him a look of reprimand. Of course. When had she not been prepared to stand up to him?

Her hand still on his arm and caught up in his, she pulled him closer. "If you're going to kill me, Sephiroth, this is the best chance you'll get," she whispered, fierce and unflinching. The heat of her breath brushed against him.

It kicked the breath out of him.

She was dangerous. So dangerous. She had a sentient AI controlling the mainframe. She had somehow convinced him that he needed her. She made him vulnerable. She was a threat, an open and declared threat to Shinra, and himself.
He should destroy her.

She wasn't armed. It would be so easy. He swallowed harshly at the thought of her blood on his blade. She wasn't even wearing armour. Her biotics could stop him, but it would take her a second to activate them. He could take her head off in that time.

He didn't want to.

He needed to.

His throat tightened.

Like a flash of lightning, he remembered she still had to go on trial. He couldn't kill her; it was against procedure. The razor sharp tension drained out of him.

He cleared his throat. "Heidegger would be very disappointed if I killed you before he could publicly call you a traitor."

She nodded and stepped back, a grim and unsurprised smile on her face.

He released her hand. It surprised him he was still holding it at all, let alone that tightly. The back of her hand was white from where he had latched onto her.

She patted him on the arm before moving back to sit on the side of the bed. It was a strangely affectionate gesture, and it irritated him.

"You'd better get out of here before Heidegger gets it into his head that you're too compromised to give testimony," she said.

"You're a prisoner, you don't get to decide when people come and go." He frowned, feeling awkwardness in the place of the tension that had ruled the cell only a second before. "And stay in your cell."

"Sure," she said, with an unreadable look from under hooded eyelids.

He turned away from her and strode towards the door. The useless door, guarded by useless SOLDIERs, both effortlessly sidestepped by means they couldn't possibly anticipate.

Where the two of them stood he couldn't exactly say. He needed to leave and think about it somewhere without her staring at him.

"Open the door, Scout," he said. The current died and the locks disengaged.

"Do you regret recruiting me?" Shepard asked before he could push the door open.

He looked down. "No."

"Not even a little?"

He sent her a sharp looked over his shoulder. "I do occasionally wish you could have crashed into the sun instead."

"I suppose that's fair," she said with a low chuckle.

"Were you telling the truth?" he asked, curiosity overriding his discomfort at his own question. "That you would have given your own life to rescue me, had it been me captured and experimented on?"
"Yes."

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. It was ridiculous, the question and the answer.

"Why?" he asked.

She blinked at him and frowned.

He turned away and marched out the door.

Later that day, Sephiroth sat in his office, staring at the screen of his computer and not seeing anything. All his plans for the day and the foreseeable future had ground to a halt.

The longer he thought about it, the more questions he had. About Shepard, about Scout, about Shinra itself. Who stood where, and why?

What exactly was he supposed to do now?

Outside, the sun was setting. The hazy orange glow of the sun trying to burn through the smog looked like an old iridescent light bulb and hurt his eyes. He rubbed at them and put his head in his hands.

He sat up straight half a second later when he remembered that the Geth was watching. Perhaps he should destroy the security cameras in here too.

"Geth," he barked.

"Human," the synthesised voice replied.

He frowned at the word. "Scout," he said.

"Sephiroth," Scout replied. The voice came through his computer speakers this time.

He tapped his fingers against the desk, his frown deepening. Security had always been borderline omniscient in the Shinra building, but this felt more invasive. No bored security guard would dare talk back to him.

"Why do you support Shepard?" he asked, leaning back in his chair. If he was to deal with a second alien, he may as well understand it. As much as one could understand a computer program, he thought spitefully.

"We are allies," Scout replied. "Shepard has proven to be reliable."

"Has she?" he muttered.

The Geth was silent for a moment. He wondered if it was processing his question.

"Do you support her?" Scout finally asked. The inflection in its voice gave nothing away. The question could be a trap, or just idle curiosity. He shook his head. It was just a machine collecting data for Reeve and Shepard.

"I support Shinra," he said mechanically.

"Empirical evidence suggests you do not."
His head snapped up to the camera. "Excuse me?"

"I do not intend to insult you," Scout said. "Your behaviour indicates you do not wholly support your employers."

"What behaviour?" he asked, glaring at the dark lens.

"In Rocket Town you broke orders for the welfare of your subordinates. You chose not to attack Shepard despite her admission to holding no loyalty to Shinra. You are trying to prevent her execution, despite knowing she is guilty of the crime she stands accused of. This behaviour is not indicative of an undivided commitment to Shinra."

He felt a shiver of uneasiness travel down his spine at the words. He wanted to tell it to stop talking, such words could get people killed, but who was going to overhear? Scout was the eavesdropper and it had gathered its own data already. He hunched his shoulders and turned away from the camera, letting the curtain of his hair hide his face.

"Shinra would suffer significant losses if they were to treat Shepard as a hostile," he said, openly defensive.

"Would it not be more efficient to remove the threat of attack altogether?" Scout asked, unperturbed.

Sephiroth cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. "Are you telling me to attack her? I thought the two of you were allies."

"I wish to understand your actions, not alter them," the Geth informed him.

He scoffed. "I don't expect you to understand."

"You are conflicted."

"I am not," he said with a frown. He shook his head at himself and stood. "I'm arguing with a computer."

"I am not a computer. I am a Geth unit."

"What's the difference?" he asked, standing at the large window. Outside the orange light began to dissipate. The neon glow of buildings on the plate shone against the bulk of Shinra HQ below him. The skyscraper sprawled across the plate, the centre of everything.

"I am alive and I seek understanding," said the Geth.

Sephiroth considered that. It thought it was alive, was that enough? It was certainly powerful enough, no matter how sentient it was.

"If she were executed," he began, looking down at what he could see of the building below. "What would you do, Scout?"

There was a pause. "I cannot answer that."

"Why not?"

Again the Geth hesitated. "Because I do not trust you with that information."

A short, hard laugh fell from his lips. "I appreciate your honesty."
"You are welcome," Scout said.
Angeal tugged at the collar of his dress shirt. Would anyone notice if he undid the top button behind the tie?

"Goddess, I hate these things," Genesis said, adjusting the heavy epaulette of his formal uniform. The red dress coat was bright and gaudy, trimmed with gold. Still complaining about the formal uniform, he claimed one of Angeal's couches. Sephiroth already sat in oppressive silence on the single seater.

"I feel like I'm about to pop," Angeal said. He rolled his shoulders and felt the material tighten. If he moved his arms too much, the seams would probably tear.

The trial was in less than an hour.

Genesis fussed with the medals on his chest, and Sephiroth glared at the security camera. Angeal didn't remember inviting either them over to brood on his couches, but he didn't mind. It was better than waiting in the corridor, with the doors of now empty First Class apartments lined up in a row.

He gave up trying to adjust his uniform and took a seat on the opposite end of Genesis' couch. That left an empty single seater next to Sephiroth. He frowned at it.

"Aren't you supposed to be guarding Shepard?" Angeal asked Genesis. They couldn't hide in his apartment forever.

"They'll call when they're ready," he replied with a dismissive wave. The silence settled back over the room, claiming every corner and soaking into the carpet.

"You visited her this morning, right?" Angeal asked, nodding at Sephiroth.

He nodded in reply.

"Why?" Genesis asked.

Sephiroth shrugged. "Making sure she was still there."

Genesis raised an eyebrow. "And was she?"

"Of course," Sephiroth said darkly.

Angeal leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, only to find that the formal uniform wouldn't let him. He sat up straight instead, before the uniform could tear.

"How is she?" he asked, filling the silence. He'd visited the prison cells himself. It had been sad and unsettling, two things he was increasingly associating with the woman.

"About the same," Sephiroth said. He looked away.

Genesis opened his mouth and then closed it again. He crossed his arms and glared at the carpet. "Couldn't we—"

"No," Sephiroth cut him off. "We can't."

"I can't believe she's going through with this." Genesis' glare transferred to Sephiroth. "I can't believe
we're just sitting here, letting it happen."

"We don't have a choice," he replied, his voice dangerously quiet.

"Keep telling yourself that, Sephiroth," Genesis spat.

"What else can she do?" Angeal asked, before either one of them could set fire to his living room. "She wouldn't desert."

"It wouldn't really be desertion at this point," Genesis said with a shrug of feigned indifference. He dropped the act quickly and shook his head, breathing curses under his breath. "Does any of this sound like the SOLDIER who shot Godo in the head from 5000 meters? The same woman who has no problem telling her phoenix to burn people to a crisp? Or who stabs others in the back, *while invisible*?"

Angeal rubbed his fists and looked away. "She didn't mean to shoot Godo."

Genesis snorted. "No, she meant to shoot a general and got much better." He got up and stood listlessly off to the side. He turned on the spot and brushed his hair out of his eyes. "It doesn't make any sense. This isn't like her."

"Shepard's not a rebel," Angeal said, frowning at his agitated friend.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you truly believe that?"

Angeal huffed and crossed his arms. He couldn't claim to understand Shepard, but he knew her. He had dragged himself through battlefield after battlefield next to her. He'd seen the way she lived.

'It's better to help as many people as possible than to keep your honour. The two are sometimes mutually exclusive,' she'd said to him once. He hadn't believed it then, and he wasn't certain he did now either, but he was convinced she believed it, with every fibre of her being.

She was wracked with guilt at the thought of abandoning people who needed her. He'd seen the pain in her eyes when she collected dog tags. She didn't have a problem with authority, she had a problem with thinking she'd done less than she could have. She'd see her own name dragged through the mud before she gave less than her all.

"She has her own code that she lives by," he said. "She doesn't break orders for fun, she doesn't throw away lives without reason. She genuinely wants to do the right thing, even if it comes at great personal cost."

"What is 'the right thing'?" Genesis mused aloud.

He sighed. "You'd have to ask her that."

Genesis hummed in thought. "She's a survivor."

"She had every chance to run," Sephiroth said, his eyes tracing the ceiling tiles.

"Yes, so what does she expect to gain from this?" Genesis replied, "What does anyone gain from it? It's not even in Shinra's interest—a trial for a First Class is too public a scandal."

"It's public," Sephiroth repeated. His eyes narrowed.

"So?"
"Anything else would have been hushed up. If she ran, she'd be listed as KIA and never seen again." His fingers tapped against the arms of the couch. "Everyone is watching."

Genesis looked doubtful. "Have you ever known Shepard to want the spotlight?"

"She's never hesitated to speak up when she disagrees with something," Sephiroth said, a bitter twist to his lips.

"What could be so important that it's worth all of this? Worth risking a death sentence?" Genesis asked, shaking his head. "The Wutai village is already out of danger. Who else needs saving?"

Sephiroth's head abruptly jerked up.

"What is it?" Angeal asked him.

"Nothing," he muttered, glaring at the camera again.

Genesis escorted Shepard to the courtroom.

Someone had produced a formal uniform for her, but she had flatly refused to wear the pencil skirt that came with it. After extensive complaining, trousers were provided, the same as every other SOLDIER. He supposed she didn't want to be seen as 'that SOLDIER woman' but simply as a SOLDIER. She didn't want to be 'other.'

A futile effort. Even to someone who didn't know she was an alien, she looked noticeably out of place. The sniper. The woman. The older one, the newcomer. With different enhancements, different armour, and different eyes, barely a SOLDIER at all.

And yet, there was growing resentment through the ranks over her treatment. No matter how alien, she was one of theirs. Not everyone loved her, but most of those who had been to Wutai held more loyalty to the high ranking SOLDIERs than they did the executives. Many of the armed forces had come to watch in an unusual display of support and solidarity.

The Vice President, young Rufus Shinra, observed the proceedings with a delicately raised eyebrow.

As far as Genesis was aware, Shepard was the first ever First Class to be tried. He had vague recollections of a First Class, years ago, who had caused some trouble. Months after their infraction, he had read their name in a bulletin declaring them KIA.

Nevertheless, with a large crowd there to watch and all of Midgar awaiting the result, Shinra had to pretend there was procedure and precedent for all of this.

It was a very short trial, in the end. He didn't know why he expected any different.

Shepard pleaded not-guilty. Heidegger was delighted.

She stood before a small panel of judges consisting of Director Heidegger, the heads of the Navy and Air Force, and several bureaucrats who Genesis thought very little of. What did any of them know about war? About the choices you had to make knee-deep in corpses in the heart of enemy territory? Heidegger had been a soldier once, but it had been years since he'd been anything more than an armchair general.

Heidegger, wearing a military-style green coat and hiding behind masses of thick black facial hair, scowled at Shepard the moment she entered the room. The barrel-chested man had led Shinra's
military for decades, and anyone in the company could tell you he knew how to hold a grudge.

The facts of the case were all very straightforward. The trial was largely just a show, verifying the same information a dozen different ways. Maps were brought out, circumstances were established, and members of her platoon were called to testify. The three SOLDIERs who had been with her that day all shamefacedly recounted the details.

Her assigned lawyer made little effort to do any defending.

Shepard didn't so much as twitch. Genesis stood stone-faced next to her, brimming with frustration and disgust at the whole farce.

Sephiroth was called to the stand.

"And then she informed you the village was still standing?" the prosecuting lawyer asked him.

"Yes." Sephiroth was blank-faced and appeared entirely uninterested.

"She admitted to disobeying orders." The lawyer stood with his hands behind his back, relaxed and confident. It was probably the easiest case of his career, and definitely the most high profile.

"No," Sephiroth replied.

The lawyer paused. "She saved an enemy village?" he asked slowly.

"That is correct."

"So, she disobeyed her orders," he said with a nod.

"No. That is incorrect," Sephiroth said, stone-faced.

Genesis sat up straighter, and Shepard's eyes narrowed.

"Heidegger's orders were to level the village," the lawyer said. "He informed you of this himself, according to your own testimony."

"Yes, but my orders were to leave the village in peace," Sephiroth said. He stood with his back ramrod straight in the witness stand, his hands behind his back and his shoulders squared in his formal uniform. He towered over the man questioning him.

Heidegger, sitting with the panel of judges, loomed over them all. He scowled down at Sephiroth.

"The Director's orders override yours," the lawyer explained slowly.

"Not in this case," Sephiroth said, clearly unconcerned about the glare Heidegger was directing towards him. "Shepard's mission was scouting for a classified operation on the western coast that had been approved by Director."

Heidegger puffed himself up in silent protest.

Sephiroth ignored him. "Destroying the village would have left us compromised and defeated the point of trekking out there in the first place."

Genesis wondered what Sephiroth thought he was trying to pull—he'd never convince them of this mythical operation. There would be no evidence of it in the servers or on paper where such things were planned and approved. Surely Sephiroth of all people knew that?
"What operation?" the lawyer asked, jutting his chin out. He must have noticed Heidegger's blatant disagreement with Sephiroth's statements.

"That's classified," Sephiroth replied. "The commander didn't have the clearance to give her reasons for not attacking the village."

"There is no evidence of any operation," Heidegger interrupted, with a voice like gargling gravel.

"You approved it," Sephiroth said, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "All the relevant documents have been on your server for months. I suggest checking your emails, sir."

The lawyer looked between the general and the director, apparently unsure what to make of this development.

"We had reason to believe the Wutai had tapped into our communication lines," Sephiroth continued, wearing his most authoritative expression. "With the war inconclusively finished, I couldn't publicly discuss the matter. Had the operation not been interrupted by this farce of a trial, we could have ended the war decisively. Instead, it's been compromised by unnecessary, and frankly unprofessional interference."

Heidegger looked like he was about to explode with rage. Almost the entirety of SOLDIER watched with bated breath. Rufus Shinra silently observed it all.

"Thank you, General," the lawyer said, terse and unsettled. "I have no more questions."

Sephiroth returned to his seat, and there was a break for the judges to discuss the sudden turn of events. The whole room erupted into conversation.

Heidegger got out his phone, presumably to check his emails for any evidence of the 'classified operation'. After a minute of frowning at the device, Heidegger's head shot up to stare at Sephiroth. He looked down again and focused on the phone, swearing under his breath.

Genesis couldn't believe it.

"How did he get the documents on the server?" Genesis murmured. He knew for a fact that there was no operation, no matter how classified Sephiroth claimed it was. Genesis could tell when he was lying.

"Are you kidding me?" Shepard muttered next to him. For the first time throughout the trial she looked less than perfectly composed. "All this fuss and then he just..." she threw her hand out in a dismissive and irritated gesture.

She dragged a hand down her face, before scowling up at the ceiling. "Thanks for the heads up," she muttered.

"Surely the timestamps on the documents would be wrong?" Genesis wondered aloud.

"Surely." Shepard crossed her arms and sank in her chair, looking petulant.

The panel of judges argued amongst themselves. Heidegger looked near apoplectic.

Genesis' eyes swept across the courtroom, passing all the surprised and relieved looking SOLDIERs, to land on a satisfied Sephiroth. Angeal sat next to him, interrogating him over the matter.

Genesis felt a spike of irritation accompanying his growing relief.
Sepliroth had saved the day. Heidegger couldn't condemn Shepard now unless he was prepared to publicly call Sephiroth a liar. Destroying Shepard was one thing, Sephiroth was in a different class entirely as far as Shinra was concerned.

Genesis looked away, trying to keep a scowl off his face. Shepard probably wouldn't have to die after all, and he was glad. But his own attempts at helping her had been soundly rejected. She'd insisted she didn't need help, and then Sephiroth swooped in and saved the day anyway. What, was his help not good enough?

"There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the goddess," he muttered to himself, shaking his head. It didn't matter; it shouldn't matter. His friend was out of danger, and that was enough. He shouldn't be offended his offer to sacrifice his career, his very life, couldn't achieve what Sephiroth's obvious lies had in five minutes.

He was offended. When it was his suggestion, everyone said, 'No, Genesis, we can't do anything,' but the second Sephiroth decided to do something, everyone was fine with it. He hunched his shoulders and tried not to feel so much like a petulant child.

"Why does everyone keep trying to save me?" Shepard said next to him. He took mild joy in the fact that she was clearly irritated too, until he realised what that meant.

"Did you really think we'd just let you die?" he said bitterly.

"Did you think I'd just let me die?" She looked at him with raised brows.

He paused. "What else did you have in mind?"

She gave him a look of reprimand, before gazing out across the packed room. "Surely, you of all people understand the importance of dramatic timing."

"You've never been one for showmanship," he replied with narrowed eyes.

"I know how to make an impact when I need to."

"But why? What are you doing?" he asked, leaning in towards her, hoping for the truth.

She cracked her knuckles and looked away. "I'll have to find some other way of telling you."

"Is that all this was? Some kind of show?"

"I don't have to tell you that a good show can mean an awful lot," she said, giving him a meaningful look.

He leaned back and regarded her carefully. She was a tactician at heart, always picking off enemies in the most efficient way possible until she was the only one standing.

"Ripples form on the water's surface, the wandering soul knows no rest."

"Tell me about it," she said, leaning her elbows on the desk.

The room was called to order again.

Heidegger dismissed the case.

Shepard left the courtroom unfettered. An army of soldiers saluted while she passed, but the hard
eyes of Heidegger and Shinra bureaucrats made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

She couldn’t decide if she was grateful or pissed off. She had entered the courtroom fully prepared to burn all bridges and turn herself into the enemy that would be written onto Shinra's gravestone. Apparently that would have to wait.

Then she was back in her apartment, inexplicably free and still a respected member of SOLDIER. She sent the security camera an unimpressed look.

"This was not the plan," she said.

Scout didn't reply.

Someone cleared their throat, and she turned to see Sephiroth standing in the doorway. He hadn't changed out of his formal uniform yet, but he'd removed the hideous red-and-gold dress coat, leaving him in a shirt and tie.

He stepped into the room and shut the door behind him.

"Is your trial next then?" she drawled.

"The documentation is all in order, they've got nothing to accuse me of," he said, with a smug smile. The lying son of a pyjak.

"How did you convince Scout to cover for you?" she asked. No wonder he looked so smug.

"I asked." His smile disappeared and he approached her. "Apparently my plan involved less collateral damage than yours."

She frowned at the ceiling.

"Debatable. But why wait until the last minute to say something?" she asked before he could follow up the issue of plans and collateral.

"It had to be in front of a crowd, where nobody could argue the point and it would force their hand." He crossed his arms and looked down at her.

"You've completely stolen my thunder, do you know that?"

He raised an eyebrow.

She turned away from him, undoing the buttons of her coat and shrugging it off her shoulders. She couldn't wait to be in her armour again. She was sick of feeling exposed. Sephiroth's piercing stare didn't help.

"Why did you do it? To protect Shinra? To protect yourself?" She smirked at him while throwing her coat over the back of a couch. "To thwart my dastardly plans?"

He pulled out one of the bar stools and sat facing her. "Perhaps I did it because Shinra has no right to kill you."

"Tell them that."

"I believe I just did," he said, wearing a wry smile.

She looked at him, surprised. Her irritation at the unexpected turn of events faded and she thought
over what he had actually done.

"Thank you," she said, and meant it. He'd stuck his neck out and refused to back down. She appreciated that.

"You've saved my life enough times," he replied quietly.

Her brow lowered. "You don't owe me anything. We've always been on equal footing."

"I know," he said before pulling himself to his full height. "But now, you owe me the truth."

Her lips cracked into a smile. "I thought my turn in the stand had finished."

He leaned closer, a self-satisfied look in his eyes. "You're going to tell me the truth. About everything."

"You know; I was expecting a guilty verdict," she said, stretching her neck and ignoring his demand. "It's a lot easier to be honest when the threat of death lurks over everything."

"If you want to feel threatened, I can accommodate," he drawled.

She snorted a laugh. "I gave you my word and I meant it." She pulled out the second bar stool and sat next to him, facing the bench. Had things gone her way, explanations would have been redundant—she'd intended for everyone to know the truth.

She wondered what he'd make of it all. 'The truth,' so easy to say, so hard to swallow. The truth was ugly and harsh and it demanded action. Did he know what he was asking for?

She looked at him out the corner of her eye. "Are you busy tonight?"

He looked surprised at her question. "There's a press conference soon regarding the trial, which you are not permitted to attend, but following that I have no plans."

"I'll meet you in your office this afternoon, then. Bring your Omni-tool."

"What for?" he asked, his voice thick with suspicion.

"It'll be easier if I show you."

"You're asking me to wait again." He crossed his arms and frowned.

She shrugged. "I didn't expect you to get the entire case thrown out. Things are different now." Very different. Her fingers tapped against the kitchen bench, tiny sparks of biotic energy running across the back of her knuckles. She'd been inactive for too long.

He stood.

"What were you going to do, after getting a guilty verdict?" he put his hand over hers, holding her fingers still and defying the tiny gravitational fields.

She looked up at him, wondering when he had grown so daring. "I would have been executed, obviously."

"You promised me the truth," he said in a low voice.

She smiled. "The truth," she put her other hand over his, "is that I was acquitted."
"Shepard," he said in a low warning.

She raised her eyebrow.

She held his hand in a small gravity field, not so strong that he couldn't pull out of it but with enough force that he'd be able to feel the pull and the ripples of her power disturbing the hairs all up his arm. She looked him in the eye and waited to see if he'd back down. There wouldn't be any going back after this. He lifted his chin and met her gaze, holding his ground.

"You'll get your answers, probably more than you bargained for." She said. She cut the gravity field and released him.

He pulled his hand back, examining his arm after the strange gravity fluctuations. Not everybody was used to gravity suddenly inverting.

She stood and stepped away, stretching out her shoulders. Her weapons were safely back in her possession; now she was going to go put on her armour.

"Good luck with the press," she said, waving him towards the door. "I'll see you afterwards."

It was late afternoon by the time Sephiroth returned to his office and collapsed into his chair. He hated dealing with the media on a good day. Today was not a good day.

He had publicly made Heidegger look like an idiot at the trial, and the press wanted to know all about it. To say he had destroyed his professional relationship with his direct superior would be putting it politely. Some of the other directors apparently found it hilarious. Scarlet in particular had a lengthy laugh over it, but Sephiroth had also heard the young vice president's whispered words to Tseng.

'Uncontrollable,' Rufus had said, apparently unaware of the range of his hearing. Tseng had looked at Sephiroth with a pointedly raised eyebrow, fully aware that he could hear.

There would be consequences. Sephiroth hoped he had built up enough goodwill throughout the company to survive the fallout.

His hand moved to his Omni-tool. Whatever Shinra threw at him he could deal with later—right now he was about to finally uncover whatever Shepard was hiding. He knew he should have been doing damage control to secure his place in the company, but after years of trying to get at Shepard and all her many, many secrets, the truth was finally within reach. Tonight he was going to find out whatever she and Scout had been hiding.

The Geth, despite being a tremendously illegal breach of security, had proven to be very useful in almost no time. He looked at his computer out of the corner of his eye. What else were the aliens hiding?

He stood and walked to the window. There wasn't much light left. He turned and sat back down again. Nervous energy ate at him. Where was she? He wasn't going to stand for any more stalling. If she didn't show up he would track her down himself.

Seconds before he could decide to go find her, there was a knock at the door. He called out and Shepard entered.

"You took your time," he said, standing and rounding his desk. "I was starting to wonder if you'd decided to run after all."
She gave a sharp smile, shutting the door behind her. "The time for running has come and gone."

She wore her armour, with her black widow once more on her back. It had been weeks since her gear had been confiscated and something about his world returned to its proper place seeing her properly decked out in it again. Regardless of how much they fought, this was the woman who watched his back. She was meant to be armed.

"I had to sort some things out," she said. "This is going to be difficult."

"It would have been easier if you had been honest with me from the beginning," he said, leaning his hip against the desk.

She gave him a bland look. "I rather doubt it. Can I have your Omni-tool?" She held out her hand.

"Why?" He pulled his arm to his chest, instinctively wrapping his other hand around his wrist. "You wiped it, remember? It's only got my information."

She raised an eyebrow, and he dropped his hands to his sides, feeling foolish.

"I'm not going to go rifling through your personal files; I'm giving you an upgrade," she explained, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

He grudgingly removed it from his wrist and handed it to her. It was a convenient device; there was no shame in having grown attached to it. He had gotten so used to wearing the thin microchip gloves under his leather ones, it felt strange without them.

"What were you scared I would see?" she asked, her eyes fixed to the haptic display as she went into the device's settings.

"Nothing."

"Really? No personal journal, no compromising photos?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Of course not." He kept a careful watch on which folders she opened.

"That's a shame." She activated her own Omni-tool and ran them side by side, doing something with the coding. It took him a moment to realise she was installing a combat suite for him. What was that for?

"There, now you have the tactical cloak function," she said, unstrapping his 'tool from her wrist and returning it to him. "Pay attention, we've got about fifteen minutes for you to learn how to use it, and then we need to get moving."

"Going where?" he asked, putting it back on his wrist while looking at her. "What do I need it for? What are you up to?"

"You wanted to know the truth, didn't you?" She crossed her arms. "Telling you wouldn't get the point across, so I'm going to show you."

He paused. What had she done that an explanation wouldn't be enough? "Alright. Teach me how to disappear."

"There are some conditions," she said, giving him a hard look. "Save all questions until afterwards. No complaints, no dragging your feet, no freaking out and attacking people."

He stood up straight. "Why would I start attacking people?"
"I have no idea," she said, looking away and shrugging, "But so long as you don't do it, we shouldn't have a problem."

"No questions?" he asked, frowning.

"Not until afterwards. And you have to do exactly as I say."

"You're supposed to be explaining yourself," he growled, "Not involving me in—"

"This is the most thorough explanation I have to give," she said, holding up her hands. "I will answer all your questions, but not until you've seen everything. I promise you, you are getting your answers."

He crossed his arms. Of course she'd found a way to complicate it all. "I don't see why you can't just tell me."

"It wouldn't be the same." She shook her head. "I am trusting you with this. Do you trust me?"

He lifted his chin. He knew a challenge when he heard one. He looked down at his Omni-tool, the new combat feature, a whole world of potential at hand. "Show me."

Fifteen minutes later, the elevator opened at the end of the empty corridor and then closed again. Two SOLDIERs appeared inside the carriage, Shepard tall and composed, Sephiroth blinking and shaking his head.

"The first walk is always the weirdest," she said, watching him with a knowing smile.

He had taken off his coat and braided his hair to minimize distortions in the cloaking field. The stealth feature worked in conjunction with her armour, so it was less effective on him. Not to mention he had ten minutes of training to her decades of experience. It required graceful, smooth movements and absolute silence. He prided himself on being graceful, and apparently he had picked it up very quickly. Still, he had accidentally de-cloaked four times already, once just walking down the corridor.

He was going to get the hang of this. So help him, he was going to be invisible no matter what it took.

The elevator stopped at their residential level, and he turned a questioning look on her.

"Do you want to dump your coat in your apartment? I'll wait," she said. "Consider it a training run."

He examined the length of corridor to his rooms—it wasn't that far. He activated the cloak.

"I can see you. Pick up your feet more; you're creating too much distortion," Shepard called behind him.

"You said that alre—" The cloak cut out the second he spoke.

"Well, now everyone can see you."

He rolled his eyes and entered his apartment, leaving his coat and grabbing some extra materia, just in case. She hadn't told him where they were going yet.

He reappeared in the elevator.

"When you're ready," he said, crossing his arms and leaning casually against the wall.
"Well done," she said, pressing the button. "You can stay cloaked for all of five seconds in an empty corridor."

"Give me an hour, and I'll be better than you."

She laughed. "You have until we reach the ground floor."

"What?" He stared at her and then the numbers ticking down above the door.

Sixteen, fifteen, fourteen…

"Ready to take off the training wheels?" she asked with a smile and an arched eyebrow. A second later she disappeared from sight.

He inhaled a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and let it out again.

Seven, six, five, four…

He activated his cloak.

The elevator reached the ground floor, and the doors opened to the bustling Shinra foyer. Half a dozen employees flooded into the empty elevator, taking up all the space. The foyer was large and noisy, well-lit and packed with people going home for the day.

The automatic doors opened and shut constantly, and nobody looked twice when they stayed open for an extra couple of seconds in the wake of a couple of employees. Outside the street lights were on and the carpark was busy, but Midgar was a dark city, filled with corners the yellow lights didn't reach.

Two ghosts fled the glare and disappeared into the shadows.
Shepard led Sephiroth through the dark streets of Midgar. Her tactical cloak had great longevity than his, so she kept an eye for when it was about to flicker out. The sun had finally disappeared below the smoggy horizon, leaving the city bathed in the sickly yellow glow of the streetlights.

For someone who had never used a stealth field before, Sephiroth was pretty good at it, but not so good that Shepard was confident nobody had seen them. She led him into an empty alleyway to wait while his cloak recharged. He immediately started looking through his Omni-tool, examining the settings of his new combat suite.

"Anyone following us?" she asked, leaning against a concrete wall.

He quickly looked back on the road they had come from. "Nothing. The street's empty. But the security cameras-?"

She shook her head. "Scout's got it."

"Is there anything he can't do?" he muttered.

"He can't access offsite locations without a direct connection," she said, checking the remote transmitter device was still in her ammo pouch. "Ready to go?"

"You still haven't told me where we're going." He kept his eyes on her.

"It's going to be pretty obvious in a minute," she muttered. Hopefully he'd wait long enough to hear her out, instead of dragging her straight back to a Shinra cell. Her cloak activated, and her hand disappeared in front of her face.

He disappeared a second later, and she led him back through the streets. Cutting through poorly lit alleyways and climbing a couple of walls to avoiding a drunken party celebrating the ceasefire, they crossed half the plate. Finally, the portly shape of the deactivated reactor came into sight. The SOLDIER hospital stood before them.

Shepard felt the weight of an invisible scowl at her back.

The ward was built into the side of the reactor, though it wasn't immediately obvious without trying to circumnavigate the building. The lights in the foyer glowed gently out onto the street. Medicine never slept, and neither did Shinra.

She pulled Sephiroth back behind a dumpster just before his cloak died.

The glare she was greeted with the second he became visible was not a surprise.

She held a finger up before he could say anything.

"Not a word," she whispered. "Complain as much as you like afterwards, but not here."

He looked at her through narrowed eyes but didn't object.

She let out a slow breath. Technically, this should be an easy infiltration but not if he decided to dig his heels in. As long as she had his co-operation, it should be fine. *Should.*

She couldn't predict him. His relationship with Shinra made little sense to her, and she had no idea
whose side he would fall on in the end. Surely he would be disgusted by how corrupt they were? But then, if corruption was all he had ever known, how would he know to be disgusted by it?

She hoped she wasn't making a mistake. Sephiroth on her side would make her life a lot easier; Sephiroth on Shinra's side would probably make it a lot shorter.

"After you," he said, gesturing out to the ward.

Again she cloaked and led the way.

The foyer was manned by two troopers and a male clerk reading a magazine with Sephiroth on the cover. The three of them startled when the automatic glass doors slid open with nobody insight. One of them went outside to investigate only to come back in with a shrug.

"When will they fix those doors?" Shepard heard the other guard mutter as she ghosted past.

There hadn't been any guards stationed in the Ward originally. Even the last time she had come by, there had been only one. Her break-ins hadn't gone unnoticed.

She and Sephiroth walked silently down the corridors, rows of hospital rooms on both sides. Satisfied that they were alone in this part of the building, they let their cloaks die. She led him straight past the empty rooms to the elevator at the end of the hall.

"Do you know the code?" Sephiroth asked. The standard Shinra wall console declared the elevator restricted and asked for a key card and password. The screen was dimmed from inactivity.

"No," she said, fetching the transmitter from her ammo pouch and plugging it into the side of the console. It was a poorly designed security system really, a terrible risk. The elevator dinged open for them.

'Access granted: Professor Hojo,' the screen read.

Sephiroth opened his mouth to object, before snapping it shut again and just shaking his head. He shot a look up to the corners of the ceiling, but there were no security cameras there.

Shepard retrieved her transmitter and entered the elevator. Where the ward had smooth cream-coloured walls, quaint still-life paintings, and the odd plastic plant in the corner, the elevator looked like it belonged to a different world entirely. Larger than a standard passenger elevator, the walls were metal and starting to rust. The floor was a thick grate through which you could see only a dark and seemingly bottomless pit.

Sephiroth remained out in the corridor. He looked at her, and then back down the way they had come, frowning.

"You asked for the truth," she said.

He took a deep breath and stepped into the elevator.

Sephiroth locked his jaw as the doors slid shut. The elevator lurched slowly down into the bowels of what could only be the reactor. The air grew humid and an acrid stench started to filter up from below.

He already knew the ward had been run by the Science Department—it hadn't been a secret. It was just understood. This was how Shinra worked. It went against everything inside of him to do this: to
break in, to challenge the Science Department, to violate what had just been verified as one of Hojo's projects.

He felt the phantom pain of metal cuffs cutting into his limbs and a cold table beneath him.

He stood perfectly still and counted down in his head. He wasn't a child immobile in a lab anymore, he was a SOLDIER. A general, a First Class. Feared across Gaia, he was…

He was a man with a sword.

Next to him stood a woman with a gun. She looked so composed, so confident in herself even in the face of a corporation that owned half a planet.

She activated her cloak just before the elevator stopped, and he followed suit.

The doors opened to a dimly lit area, which at first felt like a small corridor due to the giant pipes passing directly overhead. He stepped out onto a metal catwalk, and suddenly the massive reservoir of Mako far below was visible. Pipes plunged into the depths of the pool, and catwalks crisscrossed both above them and below them. The air danced with vapours floating up and staining everything algae green. The 'deactivated' reactor was anything but.

While he couldn't see her, he heard the pattern of Shepard's breathing change, growing measured but forceful. Of course, Mako triggered a severe reaction in her. Her lungs didn't like it, or rather, it didn't like her lungs. He looked down, the reservoir was far enough away that she wasn't at risk of passing out.

Her invisible hand took his to lead him forwards. There had to be a more efficient way to keep track of each other while cloaked, but he couldn't think of one. She led him through a maze of catwalks and service rooms and storage spaces. Some of them were occupied by the standard processing machines of any reactor, some of the equipment was taken straight from a lab.

Numerous guard machines and turrets scanned for visible enemies. There was one model he knew tracked heat signals. Shepard had no problems overriding it with her Omni-tool before it could turn on them.

He caught sight of guards in an unfamiliar uniform and heavy helmets. They marched around on patrol routes which Shepard expertly avoided. He peered at them and wondered where these men came from. Were they an infantry unit? Hojo didn't usually trust anyone into his restricted areas.

"Do you hear that?" Sephiroth asked, when they were alone.

Shepard de-cloaked and looked back at him. She shook her head.

"It sounds like muffled screaming." He looked up at the giant structures and pipes leading in every direction. "It's echoing around too much to tell where it's coming from."

She nodded and kept walking.

She opened another door and they were in a lab. He blinked in surprise at the sudden change. Clearly Hojo felt safe here, despite how easily Shepard broke in. He expected more security.

The room had the standard layout of any of Hojo's labs. The tools and equipment all lay exactly where the professor liked them, arranged to his exacting and methodical demands. In the centre of the room stood an empty metal gurney with thick cuffs welded onto each corner. Spilled blood and Mako spread across the floor beneath it, the sludge slowly draining away.
The light was off, but the entire room was visible from the glow of two tall Mako tanks by one of the walls. Sephiroth walked straight to the second tank, examining the strange colour of the viscous liquid. It was darker than normal, and it took him a moment to identify it.

"Stagnant Mako," he said, frowning in thought. It was odd.

"What does that mean?" Shepard asked. She stood back by the door, letting him examine the room.

"It's tainted; it's usually considered too unstable to be of any use." He looked back at the gurney. "I've never heard of anyone being enhanced with it before."

Shepard hummed in thought before moving to the door opposite the one they had entered. "Through here."

Giving the stagnant Mako one last look, he turned and followed her, first through a small study packed full of books and research notes, then into a much larger room.

A wall of containment tanks stood before them, hundreds of them, stacked in banks up against a sloping wall.

A SOLDIER floated in each one. Some thrashed inside the Mako-filled tanks, the muffled sounds of their screams barely getting through the liquid and glass. Others appeared comatose, while some were clearly dead. The sheer number of them was staggering.

"They must be using most of the reactor," Sephiroth said, staring up at the host of missing SOLDIERS. The rows of tanks stretched out of sight in the dimly lit area.

Shepard didn't say anything.

He approached the nearest tank. He recognized the Third Class inside. A teenager who had been eager to prove himself in Wutai. Sephiroth remembered yelling for him to get down under heavy gunfire. The boy hadn't listened.

He stepped back, looking at the wealth of pipes and equipment feeding into an operation of tremendous scale.

"Why go to all this effort?" he asked aloud. He looked back to Shepard. "What's the point of it all?"

She shrugged. "Unchecked ambition?"

He opened his mouth to reply but heard the distant click of a rifle.

His threw out his hand, casting a shield over himself and Shepard. She threw a Biotic blast at the guard who had found them, hurling him back against the wall. The chunky helmet fell off his head, and the rifle clattered out of his reach. The guard quickly scrambled back to his feet.

"Taylor?" Shepard said in surprise. "Third Class Taylor, stand down!"

Sephiroth drew his sword and waited to see what the man would do. Impossibly blue eyes glowed in a blank face.

Taylor dove for the rifle. Sephiroth cut the gun in two before he reached it.

"Stand down, SOLDIER," he barked.

The man drew a combat knife and charged him. Sephiroth cut him down.
Shepard approached the body.

"He didn't recognise me," she said with a heavy frown.

"He didn't recognise me either," Sephiroth said. The man hadn't even hesitated to attack him. Even battle-hardened veterans normally paused before throwing themselves against him.

She knelt down by the body, pushing open one of his eyes. They glowed, alarmingly bright, even with the spark of life gone. "I trained him. He was one of my troopers back before the war."

She looked away into the distance, something disturbed in her expression.

Sephiroth turned and marched back to the study by the lab. The paperwork was a mess, haphazardly strewn everywhere—medical journals, observation notes held together in unlabelled folders, and chemical formulas scrawled on loose paper. He grabbed an official looking folder and started leafing through it. Not finding what he wanted, he threw it aside and picked up another.

"What are you looking for?" Shepard asked from the door.

"The test parameters. An operation of this size had to have had a specific purpose." He flicked through a stack of memos and official correspondence. "There's no way Hojo would get the funding otherwise. Whatever this is, he had to have convinced the President it was worth all this expense, especially in the middle of a war."

She nodded and started searching through a pile of journals. He sat at the desk and perused the documents immediately in front of him.

"Did it never occur to you to do this?" he asked, after a few minutes of silent searching.

"Time was never on my side. And we only have so long until another guard notices us." She dropped a folder onto the desk. "Anything?"

He shook his head and made a noise of frustration. Hojo's filing system made no sense to anyone but himself. Sephiroth was about to give up, he picked up what looked like a progress report.

'…Signs of success. The treatment finally began to break through the subject's natural defences against stagnant Mako, producing stronger enhancements…' He stood.

"Found something?"

He read aloud: "…will ensures greater obedience. Absolute loyalty to either the president or myself..."

"How?" she demanded, her face hard and her eyes angry. "How are they making them more obedient? Brain washing? Control chip?"

He shook his head. "It's something about the Mako. It doesn't say more. This would have all been trial and error to find the best technique." He dropped the report back into the sea of documents.

Shepard's jaw locked, and she marched back into the room with all the containment tanks.

He followed, slowly, his eyes not really seeing anything at all until he was faced with the captive men again. Specimens being turned into perfect SOLDIERs.

"He's replacing us," he said. His own voice sounded hollow to his ears.
He looked out at the vast walls of the reactor, the massive, multi-layered lab. There would be other rooms, other gurneys dripping with blood. It was a huge endeavour. Outrageously expensive.

He looked down, incapable of making sense of his own reaction to it. A bizarre mix of pity, anger, and resentment welled up inside of him, "…not good enough?" he mumbled.

"Sephiroth?" Shepard put her hand on his arm, waking him from his daze.

He instinctively jerked away and spun on her. "You're the one breaking orders," he spat.

She scowled. "This has been going on for at least a year, long before I did anything."

"Then why…" he didn't finish. He wasn't sure he could bring himself to say where that sentence ended.

"We need to get moving," she said. He heard the sound of liquid draining away and splashing against glass, and saw she had activated the controls on one of the tanks.

"We should hide the body," he said, looking back to the dead Taylor. "Hojo would recognise the wound."

"Take care of it, then," Shepard replied.

Glad to at least have a task to focus on, he hauled up the body and dropped it over the railing. By the time the body hit the Mako, he was angry with himself for looking to Shepard for orders. He shook his head and brushed the thought aside. The viscous liquid swallowed the corpse without a sound.

Behind him, Shepard had the tank open and was dragging out a drenched and unconscious boy of about eighteen.

"Can you take him?" she asked, before immediately dumping him in Sephiroth's arms, bridal style.

"This one next." He nodded at a specific tank.

She squinted into the depth of the green. "Why?"

"He's older. More likely to make a recovery. Younger specimens are more vulnerable to Mako poisoning."

"People," she muttered, emptying out the tank he had suggested. "Younger _people_ are more vulnerable."

He examined the face of the boy in his arms. He was deeply scarred, with serious burns marks all across his face. The boy twitched oddly, but didn't wake.

"Which way?" he asked when Shepard had her own Mako drenched SOLDIER over her shoulders in a fireman's carry.

"Over here— Wait. Just a second." She paused and put the SOLDIER down for a moment, moving off to the opposite side of the room. There was a different tank wedged in the corner that he hadn't noticed at first. It looked more like a cell then a tank, it had only air inside and was large enough to comfortably fit several people.

A bright red creature similar to a lion prowled inside it.

Shepard knocked politely on the glass. "Hey."
"What are you doing?" Sephiroth asked, looking at her like she'd gone crazy.

She glanced back at him, opened her mouth to reply and then snapped it shut.

"He looks… intelligent," she offered, not looking at him. The creature peered at her. Its tail, which looked like it was somehow on fire, flickered about in the air behind it.

"We do not have time for this." What was she thinking?

"It'll only take a moment."

"Are you here to rescue SOLDIERs or to release random specimens?" he hissed. How long until another guard showed up and sounded an alarm?

"People don't belong in cages," she said.

"It's a cat!"

"Would you just shut up for a second?" she said, sending him a frown over her shoulder. She knelt in front of the tank, putting her on eye level with the giant cat and convincing Sephiroth she'd taken complete leave of her senses.

"Are you ready to escape now?" she asked quietly.

It looked between the two SOLDIERs and then down at its two front paws. Sephiroth sighed, resigned to endure the whims of the alien woman.

"Yes," the giant cat said. "I would like to go with you."

Shepard looked back at him with a self-satisfied smile. He ignored it in favour of staring at the cat. She stood and moved to the control panel.

"You don't attack us and we won't attack you." she said. "Betray us, and we kill you."

"Understood," the cat replied. The door of the tank opened and he leapt out. Sephiroth took a step back. He couldn't get at his sword with his arms full. The cat nodded at him and kept his distance. The tail really did have a small flame at the end of it.

"Got a name?" Shepard asked.

"Call me what you like," he replied.

"Alright, Red it is." She picked up the other comatose SOLDIER and led the way again. "Let's go."

Despite a shorter route, getting out was harder than getting in. Their tactical cloaks lasted only half the time with an extra person each. Red prowled behind them, completely silent, but hardly invisible. Shepard led the way to a loading bay down by where the maintenance workers would enter. Where she had gotten the truck full of equipment and supplies, he had no idea. He strapped the two unconscious SOLDIERs strapped down onto hospital beds, and Red jumped in next to them in the back of the truck.

The drive was made in heavy silence. Sephiroth sat in the passenger seat, his chest itchy from drying Mako. He felt tense and uncomfortable. Shepard ignored all of his searching stares and focused on the road, which grew increasingly rough past Kalm.
A couple of hours past midnight, they pulled to a stop. Cliffs and hills covered in tall grass flanked the truck. They both got out, breathing in the clean air of the remote countryside. The stars shone above, bright and clear without any pollution to hide them. Even with a new moon, the stars alone were bright enough to illuminate the silent countryside.

Shepard's materia glowed, and Phoenix burst to life.

"Check the roads. Same as normal," she ordered, and the firebird flew off, its flame burning hot and difficult to focus on.

He went to the back of the truck and opened the doors. Red perked up from where he was curled up next to the beds. The red glow of his tail lit the interior and emphasised just how gaunt and sickly the two SOLDIERs looked. They were both still unconscious.

"Over here," Shepard called, making a beeline for one of the cliffs. "We'll come back for them."

Sephiroth followed her, and Red followed him.

She knocked on a metal door, partially hidden behind some falling vines. Upon closer inspection he could see the tears in the plant stalks, the way they have been regularly pushed aside to clear the entrance.

The sound of something falling over came from inside, followed by some swearing, and absurdly, laughter.

The door opened and light streamed out. A short and squat SOLDIER with black hair and very bright eyes stood in the doorway, while nearly a dozen others lounged around the room further in. By the looks of it, they were having dinner at two in the morning.

"Hey Commander—" he greeted with a smile before his eyes fell on Sephiroth, standing in the dark, further from the door.

Raw panic filled the SOLDIER's eyes, and he took a stumbling step backwards. There was an explosion of movement inside the base, the other SOLDIERs scrambling back from tables, reaching for their weapons, or whatever was close at hand. One picked up a pipe, another a kitchen knife.

Sephiroth blinked at the sudden panic and the rush to defend themselves. What did they think of him, that he was going to drag them back to the labs? Did they truly believe that?

The first SOLDIER looked between him and Shepard, his jaw locked and panic still lurking in his eyes, but he stood straight and the hand on his sword didn't tremble.

"There are two more in the truck," Shepard said, apparently content to ignore the outburst. She put two armoured fingers against the flat of the SOLDIER's sword and directed it away from them.

"Could some of you go fetch them, please?"

"I…" The soldier blinked. His defiant posture faltered. "Uh, yeah. We'll get them." He lowered his sword, and his cheeks flushed. "Um, sorry, sir. Do you… do you want to come in?" He scratched the back of his head and stood aside.

Sephiroth didn't especially want to enter, not into a room full of his own men who all seemed terrified of him. He was accustomed to some fear from his subordinates, but as far as he could tell, few of them actually believed he would attack them. This had been something else entirely.

Shepard called for the soldier at the door, Dalton, and several others to follow her back to the truck,
and they filtered out of the base on her order. He stepped inside and was surprised to find it was actually a lab. Or at least, had been once. Before the missing soldiers claimed it as their own.

What had looked like a bright light from outside, was revealed to be a dim hurricane lantern sitting on the table. The men sitting around it, most of whom were now standing, all had eyes brighter than any normal SOLDIER. Despite the weak light, one wore dark glasses, and another had thick bandages around his eyes. They all looked gaunt. One was missing a leg and sat next to a set of crutches.

The man in glasses cleared his throat and saluted. Most of the others followed suit, protocol kicking in a little late. He waved it off and told them they could return to their meal. They all had half eaten plates of what smelled like roasted chocobo in front them.

They timidly sat again, and he felt cripplingingly out of place.

"Dude, a frying pan?" one of them whispered to another, who's hand was still tightly gripping the pan's handle. "What's that going to do?"

"It was the closest thing, okay?"

Sephiroth looked over with a raised eyebrow. The frying pan was dropped, and the boy cleared his throat.

"Permission to ask a question, sir?" the one with the missing leg asked.

He nodded his permission.

"Why are you here?"

An answer sprang to mind. Because I wanted to know what Shepard was doing. Because I was curious. It felt disrespectful and inadequate, to reduce this to an idle curiosity.

"Shouldn't I be?" he said instead.

The soldier didn't reply.

"Hey, Red! You finally got out!" a voice called from outside. A second later the giant cat entered the base, followed by two soldiers carrying one of the occupied hospital beds.

"Hello, Steiner," Red replied.

"Holy damn, it talks," said the soldier in dark glasses.

"I told you he did!" said Steiner.

"I figured you'd finally lost it."

"You're an asshole, Steve," he replied lightly. He put the bed down, and one of the others stepped up to wheel it down to an empty room. "Anyway, Red, what took you so long?" Steiner asked.

"I didn't trust your friend. She was taking you away, but I couldn't know where to. She is still Shinra's warrior."

Steiner tilted his head to concede the point. Shepard entered the room, carrying the second bed along with Dalton.
"But I decided she couldn't possibly be worse than Hojo," Red finished, watching the proceedings.

"Thanks," Shepard said with a snort. Other SOLDIERs had arrived from further inside the base, probably woken by the fuss. Some looked at Sephiroth cautiously, but they didn't have any more violent reactions, thankfully.

There were over thirty of them altogether. Had Shepard rescued them all on her own, only two at a time? No wonder she looked tired.

"Thank you for rescuing me," Red said to her.

"You're welcome," she replied with a nod. "You guys don't mind if he stays?"

Dalton shrugged. "Stay as long as you like."

"I would like to return home soon, but thank you. I would appreciate resting here first."

"Dalton," Shepard called, leading the black-haired soldier over to a corner, which provided the illusion of privacy. "What do you need? Food, medicine?"

"Petrol for the generator— we have only enough for about another week."

"Alright, anything else?"

"We're stocked up. And there's plenty of wild food around."

The rest of the room ignored them, politely pretending they couldn't hear. A couple of others started up a conversation with the cat. Evidently, they had seen him in the labs, though none of them mentioned any such thing. Sephiroth felt like a voyeur, watching a world that had formed without him and didn't really want him either. They trusted Shepard implicitly, but he was the intruder. The Shinra shill they didn't make eye contact with.

"Actually, some painkillers would be good," Dalton was saying to Shepard. "I don't know if they'll help, but Roger's leg is only getting worse."

"We need a doctor," Shepard said with a sigh.

"No we don't," Dalton replied stiffly.

"Right." She patted him on the shoulder. "You're doing well. This is good work."

"Thanks, Shep," he said, offering her a weak smile.

She returned from the corner. "How are you lot?" she asked to the room in general. A chorus of contradictory answers went up, some claiming to be perfect, other's claiming to be dying, some just groaning about being awake way too early.

"Excellently," she said, waving them all off before making eye contact with him. She was the first to do so since he'd entered. "We'd better get back."

The drive back to Midgar felt longer to Shepard than it ever had before.

Sephiroth sat next to her in stony silence. Several times she was tempted to interrupt, but ultimately refrained. He looked out into the dark, like he was searching for something. He'd barely said a word since the reactor, and she had no idea what he was thinking.
They arrived back in Midgar, and she ditched the truck. They took the same elevator to the First Class residential floor. Dawn was still hours away and the stars, so bright over the countryside, were shrouded behind smog and light pollution.

Shepard's quarters were two doors down from Sephiroth's, but she stopped outside his and crossed her arms. They'd hid in silence long enough. He seemed to agree, because he unlocked his door and then waited for her to enter.

She switched on the light and saw the inside was identical to her own rooms except the floor plan was flipped. She made herself comfortable on the single-seater couch and waited.

He walked into the bedroom and shut the door. Then he came back out and messed around in the kitchen. He turned off the main light and switched on a small lamp instead. The glare of the ceiling light did seem a bit too bright for the hour. After some minutes of going to and fro between small menial tasks that seemed inappropriate for four in the morning, he turned to her.

"They were scared of me," he said, facing her from the other end of the room. "The men you rescued."

She said nothing.

"They thought I was there to turn them in. Did you tell them that?" It was an accusation.

"Of course not," she said with a frown. "I haven't told them anything. I focused on getting them to safety. All they know is what they've seen."

"So they've seen that I'm a mindless drone with no loyalty to my own men?" he spat.

"One day they were on the frontline, risking their lives for someone else's war. The next day they were being cut open on an operation table. I can't blame them for feeling betrayed."

He gave her a hard look. "Do you think I did this?"

She returned his expression. "I know you didn't stop it."

"I couldn't!"

She stood. "Neither could I."

He turned away.

"When Hojo finds out..." he began.

"What happens if Hojo dies?"

"You can't assassinate him." He looked disturbed at the very idea.

She rounded the couch that stood between them. "Why not?"

"It wouldn't work."

"Why not?" she repeated, harder this time.

"That's... he's head of the Science Department now. A director. He's been in Shinra even longer than I have."
She raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't make him bulletproof."

"SOLDIER was built from his research—he maintains us," he said, imploring her to understand something she just wasn't hearing.

"He steals from our ranks and tortures us!"

"He built us!" he cried. He blinked at his own outburst and seemed to shrink back into himself.

She looked at him, the undefeated warrior half the planet idolised and wondered why she hadn't seen how beaten he was.

"Hojo is just a man," she said gently.

"I know that," he said, looking away. "I grew up around him."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her, a raw and searching gaze. She didn't know what he was looking for. She stepped closer.

"He raised me. In the Science Department," he said quietly.

She felt a chill at his words. Did he mean in the labs?

"Why?" she asked, fairly certain she knew why.

"To be a SOLDIER," he whispered.

"The other SOLDIERs weren't raised by Hojo," she pointed out, matching his tone.

"I'm not like the other SOLDIERs."

"How?" she asked, wondering if it was cruel to push him.

"I'm better than all of them," he said weakly.

"Do you believe that?"

He looked away. "I am different."

She put a finger under his chin and directed his eyes back to hers. There was barely a breath of air between them. "Not that different."

"You're an exception," he whispered. "Everyone else is just normal, I'm…"

He looked lost in the world of possibilities of what he could be. She reached out and took his hand in a silent offer of comfort. She felt the artificial tendons in her hand tighten. He grew still and she withdrew, stepping back and releasing him. His hand immediately chased hers, a blatant plea for support.

"How do your people treat others like you?" he asked quietly.

"Like me?"

"Red eyes and glowing scars."
She smiled bitterly. "There are no others."

His glowing cat eyes searched hers.

"Who did this to you?" He reached out, uncommonly daring, and traced a finger along the scars on her jaw. A shiver ran down her spine and she swallowed.

"Cerberus."

"Who you worked for?"

"Who I killed," she replied.

His hand followed the scars down to her neck, his fingers trailing lightly across her throat. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

"Why did you kill them?"

"They had it coming."

She grabbed his hand on her neck, stopping it in its tracks. She took a deep shuddering breath. He seemed to only just notice he has been touching her at all, his hand suddenly retreating.

"Sephiroth," she murmured, feeling a pang at the loss of contact.

She saw the bob of his throat as he swallowed.

"What do you want of me?" He sounded so tortured. His eyes, normally so hard and reserved, were open and pleading for direction.

She stepped back, shaking her head and releasing his hand. She couldn't do that to him, not like this.

"Breakfast?" she asked.

The tension in his shoulders drained away, and he let out a pent up breath. "I can do that."

He fled to the kitchen, and she dragged a hand down her face. It could never just be one issue at a time, could it?

Eventually, he returned. They ate in silence at opposite ends of the table. She bit into a protein bar, the same stale compressed oats they had eaten all across Wutai. She wondered what it said about them that her own cupboards held nothing but wartime rations as well.

"Shepard," he said after some time. It was nearing five in the morning and the sounds of people getting up could be heard through the walls. The company was awakening.

"Are you asking me to betray Shinra?" he asked.

She looked him in the eye. "Yes."

He blinked in surprise. Perhaps he had expected her to deny it, or pretend it was really something else.

"How many times will you let them betray you before you do something about it?" she asked.

"They don't owe me loyalty."
"Why not?"
Genesis made his way down the corridor to Angeal's quarters, carrying a bottle of fine wine in each hand. He knocked by way of kicking the door.

"Just a second," Angeal called. A moment later he opened the door, holding a tiny watering can. He looked at the wine Genesis was holding and frowned. "It's not even five yet."

"And we both survived a war. Hurrah. Let's drink about it." Genesis pushed a bottle into Angeal's hand and sauntered into the apartment.

Angeal shut the door behind him. Genesis put the other bottle down on the kitchen bench and started checking the cupboards.

"This is a couple of weeks late, isn't it?" Angeal said, going back to watering his plants.

"We could hardly celebrate earlier—some of us were in jail."

It had been a long time coming. Even with the war over, he felt tired and on edge. He was looking forward to unwinding with the others.

"Are Sephiroth and Shepard coming, then?" Angeal asked, checking the dampness of the soil. "That isn't going to be nearly enough alcohol."

"I've got more at my place," Genesis said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Angeal's apartment looked almost the same as it always did, with the brightly coloured knit rugs draped over the couches and the pot plants lined up on the windowsills. The number of pots was distinctly lower than he recalled. There used to be enough plants to fill the entire window, tomatoes and chillies and aubergine reaching up to scrape at the roof. Only four little cactus plants remained. "Down to just the cacti?" he asked.

Angeal sighed. "Housekeeping killed all the others."

"Are you going to buy new ones?"

Angeal shook his head. "I'm just going to keep these little guys alive."

That struck Genesis as very sad but probably the most practical option. While he had nothing like the green thumb Angeal did, he had grown up on an orchard. He had some appreciation for these things, although someone couldn't pay him enough to mess around with pots of dirt and dying plant matter.

A few minutes later, Sephiroth arrived, looking tired and harassed.

"Is this entirely necessary?" he asked from the door. He hadn't even stepped inside the room yet. "I'm actually very busy--"

"Yes, it is necessary," Genesis cut him off. "And you look like you need it too. Come on, you can help me fetch the rest."

Genesis dragged him off to carry the food and drink before he could try to make an escape. Genesis kept a surreptitious eye on Sephiroth throughout.

All of his comrades had their strange quirks, especially the more alien among them, but Sephiroth
had been acting strange even for him, from the incessant looking up at the security cameras to constantly checking on Shepard.

And then there was the yelling match that had awakened Genesis at four several days ago.

His quarters shared a wall with Sephiroth's, and the plaster wasn't especially thick. As a rule, Sephiroth was a silent neighbour. It had been Shepard's voice that woke him. He couldn't make out her words, or Sephiroth's agitated response. Those two had been keeping secrets for years, but this was something else entirely.

Not long after the yelling died down, Shepard had walked back to her own rooms, and they had both been noticeably tense since. A fascinating development.

Genesis watched Sephiroth with an arched eyebrow. He had been under the impression Sephiroth had all the sexuality of a potato. Knowing both of them, he highly doubted it was the juicy gossip the general public would have made of it, but there was clearly something going on between them. It was destroying the stoicism Sephiroth was so famous for, whatever it was.

Sephiroth opened a beer and ignored his curious stare. "Have you met the new Director? Lazard?" he asked.

Genesis had met Lazard, but that wasn't nearly interesting enough to distract him.

"So, about Shepard," he replied, laying claim to one of the bar stools.

"What about her?" Sephiroth asked with a scowl. He stood in the kitchen, leaning against the bench.

"Are you in love with her?" Genesis asked.

The bottle in Sephiroth's hand cracked and beer trickled out. He stared at Genesis.

"What?" Angeal choked out a laugh from the couch on the other side of the room. He was looking up from a book on gardening.

I see," said Genesis. "You have good taste. She is a remarkable woman."

"What are you talking about?" Sephiroth demanded. He dumped the broken bottle in the sink.

"We are discussing your crippling infatuation with the riveting commander." Or rather, that was what they were going to discuss until Sephiroth came clean about what he and Shepard were up to. Genesis was determined to root out the secret, and the cornered look on Sephiroth's face was very promising.

"I am not infatuated."

"How would you know?" he replied with a smile. "She may not be beautiful by traditional standards, but she is compelling in her own alien way, and certainly more than a match for you."

Sephiroth frowned at him for a long moment. "What do you mean, 'traditional standards'?"

Genesis' smile grew wider.

He made a noise of disgust. "Why am I indulging you in this conversation?"

"Why do I bother trying to help someone so obviously hopeless? Infinite in mystery is the–"
"Don't." Sephiroth looked to Angeal for support, only for Angeal to shake his head and bury his nose into his book.

"She's a subordinate," Sephiroth said, as though that was relevant.

Genesis waved his objection away. "Technicality."

"It is not a technicality. She is beneath me in the chain of command."

"Is that why she stormed out of your room at four in the morning then? Fraternisation regulations?"

Sephiroth grew still. His look of alarm melted into something harder to read.

"What Shepard and I do is none of your business."

"Oh, so you are having an affair," Genesis replied, flicking his hair back. "In that case I would suggest greater discretion. I can imagine what the rest of Shinra would think if word got out the only female SOLDIER was sleeping with the general."

Sephiroth's eyebrows rose before a hard scowl crossed his face.

"Are you seriously suggesting that Shepard slept her way to First Class?" Angeal cut in, sounding outraged.

"Of course not," Genesis replied, holding up his hands. "I have met her, you know. It's an absurd idea, but it is what everyone else will think." He gave Sephiroth a hard look. "That's what happens when you insist on lying to everyone. People reach their own conclusions."

Sephiroth sighed, and looked away. "What do you expect me to tell you?"

"What are you doing?" Genesis asked, certain the answers were finally within reach.

There was no reply for some time. Finally, Sephiroth's shoulder's sagged and he replied, "I don't know."

He frowned. "What do you mean 'you don't know'?"

Sephiroth crossed his arms, looking more bewildered than anything else. "Shepard and I… we rarely see eye to eye. On anything. This is no different." He looked down and shook his head. "I don't know what's happening."

Genesis leaned back. "Goddess, you are in love with her."

Sephiroth stared at him. Then he deliberately turned away and joined Angeal on the couches.

"Oh come on, don't be coy," he called after him.

"I am not having this conversation."

"You never know; she may return your awkward feelings."

"I didn't say I had any feelings." Sephiroth snatched up a newspaper from the coffee table.

Genesis laughed. "Of course not, you're a robot and feel nothing at all."

Sephiroth looked back up with a small frown. "Who said robots don't feel anything?"
"What?" Genesis blinked at the non-sequitur.

"What?" Sephiroth replied.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," Shepard called, pushing open Angeal's door. The other three were draped across various pieces of furniture.

She noticed Sephiroth tense up at the sound of her voice. He had asked for a couple of days to think over her proposition of rebellion and she hadn't seen him since. It had been a nervous couple of days in limbo, waiting for a verdict. The men at the hidden bunker were as anxious to know what was going on as she was.

A chorus of greetings was called out to her, she leaned her rifle against the wall next to three swords and a couple of Angeal's umbrellas lined up under the coat rack.

"You're late," Genesis said.

"I was running Kunsel through a training sim," she replied, making herself comfortable on one of the single seater couches.

"How's he doing?" Angeal asked. He was sitting next to Sephiroth on the long couch, both of their feet up on the coffee table.

"Not bad, though he picked up some bad habits in Wutai. How's Zack?"

"About the same," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "He's convinced the building is haunted, for some reason."

She sighed deeply and turned her eyes up to the ceiling. "Yeah, Kunsel thinks that too."

Genesis snorted. "Did you intentionally adopt the two dumbest Thirds available?" He left his bar stool and sauntered to the other recliner, dropping a bottle in her lap on the way past.

"I suppose the building could be haunted," she replied lightly, opening the bottle and taking a sip.

"Nonsense," Sephiroth said, looking at her with pursed lips. Perhaps he thought she was going to spill the beans. She was going to tell the other two about the voice in the ceiling sooner or later, but she wanted to wait until she knew where Sephiroth stood before risking that.

She could barely do anything until she knew were Sephiroth stood. It was tense and frustrating, not knowing who was really on her side. She gave him a considering look, he only met her eyes for a moment before looking away.

They hadn't spoken since that night. She was beginning to wonder exactly how long he intended to wait. If it went much longer she'd have to force the issue.

"What am I drinking?" she asked, changing the subject and peering at the label. It tasted fruity and sweet, but with a tart aftertaste. The name was written in an illegibly fancy scrawl.

"Banora white apple cider," Genesis informed her, brandishing a glass of it. She appreciated that he didn't bother getting her a wine glass.

"Huh. It's pretty good." She put her feet up on the glorified foot stool, which now had three sets of boots competing for real estate.
His glass paused halfway to his mouth. "Pretty good?"

Angeal cleared his throat. "So, what are we drinking to?"

"The end of the war," Sephiroth said. "Wasn't that the whole point?"

"To escaping Wutai before monsoon season kicked in, again," said Genesis, which earned a round of agreements.

"To no more swamps full of mosquitos," Angeal added.

"To never eating another pack of Meat Surprise," she said with a shudder.

"To never having another Wutai try to pull my hair," Sephiroth groused.

There was a quiet bout of laughter, but nobody drank yet.

She looked around. Somebody had to say it. She raised her bottle. "To surviving."

"And to those who didn't," Genesis said quietly.

They all drank.

A moment of silence followed. They had gathered to celebrate and remember, but there was little they could say. The memories weren’t ready for words yet.

"My friend, the fates are cruel," Genesis murmured, looking into the depths of his glass. "There are no dreams, no honour remains."

She looked at the three soldiers, veterans, all worn and scarred and aching. Men she had fought and bled alongside. She was honoured to be named one of them.

"How long do you think we've got until the ceasefire ends?" Angeal asked quietly.

"Hopefully we get at least another month," she replied.

"That soon, you think?"

She shrugged. "I'd raise a glass to peace if I thought there was any chance of it."

"The DMZ is right next to several towns, on both sides," said Sephiroth. "It'll only take one idiot with a grenade to start it all back up again."

Angeal sighed and took a long swallow of his drink. "Anyway, should we do something?" he asked, cutting through the heavy mood. "Play a game, watch a movie?"

"We've seen all of your movies," Genesis said, before a gleam lit his eyes. "There is a new performance of Loveless on in that little theatre down in sector—"

"I've got some movies you haven't seen," Shepard said.

"I vote space movies," Angeal quickly agreed, earning a pout from Genesis. "What have you got?"

Pulling up her Omni-tool she sifted through a wealth of old clips and vids. She really should have organised that better, but it never made top of her priority list. "There's… Elcor Hamlet," she said, reading out the first name she came across, before immediately backtracking. "Actually no, we're not
"watching that one."

"What's wrong with it?" Sephiroth asked.

"It's a bit like Earth's equivalent of Loveless, but performed by Elcor actors."

Genesis perked up. "Why can't we watch that one?"

"It's nine hours long."

"Absolutely not." Sephiroth crossed his arms.

"I've got several Blasto sequels. Oh, Fury Road, that's classic Earth cinema, I love that one." She scrolled past various indie Asari dramas, a couple of wildlife documentaries, and a musical show starring Mordin. She didn't have the guts for that one tonight. "And… Fleet and Flotilla."

"What's the last one?" asked Angeal.

She pulled a face. "It's a romance, it's about a Turian officer and a Quarian serving aboard a Flotilla ship, and how they can't be together because they're from such different worlds. That sort of thing."

"We're watching that one," Genesis said, a suspiciously pleased smile on his face.

"Genesis," Angeal chided quietly.

"Why?" She looked between them. "It's not very good. And you do realise it's exclusively between aliens, right? It probably won't even make sense to you—there aren't any humans in it."

"Love transcends all borders," Genesis said with an exaggerated gesture.

"Can't we just watch the old Earth one?" Sephiroth asked, his forehead in his hand.

She nodded. "It's got an awesome car chase."


She sighed.

With the more vocal half of the room deciding the vote, she set up her Omni-tool to produce a larger display than normal and placed it on the coffee table. The others pushed the couches closer together, and several bowls of food were produced. They rearranged themselves on the couches, and she ended up next to a tense looking Sephiroth.

She fully expected everyone to agree to watch something better when they all got bored about five minutes in.

They did not get bored.

From the title screen she was surrounded by captivated looks, glued to the display. An initial bout of questions about the general alien qualities came and went. Angeal apparently admired the Turian way of life, and as far as she could tell, Genesis was just loving everything about it. She laid claim to one of the bowls of popcorn and ate most of it.

"Why did her last name change?" Sephiroth asked, his eyes rooted to the screen. He hadn't stopped asking questions since the first line of dialogue.
Angeal shushed him.

"A Quarian's last name is their ship," she whispered. "It changes once they reach adulthood and have to find their own ship to serve. If I were a Quarian I'd be Shepard Vas Normandy."

His brow pulled down. "They don't have family names? No clans or family lines? No history older than the flotilla?"

She shook her head. "Not anymore."

"I suppose it is their own fault," Sephiroth said.

Genesis made a noise of protest from the end of the row of couches. She'd given a crash course on Geth/Quarian history during a scene with a Geth raid, which only served to confuse them. "How can you say that?" he demanded. "They lost their very planet to the robots!"

"To their own stupidity," Sephiroth corrected.

She glanced at Sephiroth, surprised.

"It's not their fault the Geth betrayed them," said Genesis.

"Neither of you understand the situation enough to argue over it," she said, shaking her head.

Angeal pointedly cleared his throat. "I am actually trying to watch this."

They fell silent.

"I cannot believe you're actually into this," she sighed a few minutes later.

"Aren't you?" Genesis asked.

"But Shalei, we can never be together," the Turian on the screen was saying, looking out dramatically from a balcony on the Citadel Presidium. "I have my duty, and you... have your people."

"Not tonight. Tonight, I am as free as the dust in the solar wind."

"Oh," Genesis whispered, his hand on his heart.

Something inside of her did stir at the familiar sights. She hoped somewhere out there Tali and Garrus were still happily in each other's arms. Seeing Quarians and Turians again, with Asari and Salarians chatting in the background, it was like putting on an old glove. Seeing the Citadel in such pristine condition was like finding the glove was now too small and cut at her hand. It stung, almost as much as the way the Turian characters joked about slaughtering Krogan, and the Quarians talked about getting revenge on the Geth.

"What does 'Keelah Se'lai' mean?" Sephiroth asked.

"Roughly, 'by the home world I hope to see one day,'" she replied.

His head tilted curiously. "They curse by the planet they lost to the Geth?"

"The loss of Rannoch is a bleeding wound for the Quarian people. Without a home world, they were destitute and dying."
"I thought you were allied with the Geth?" he looked at her, his brow pulled down.

"I'm allied with both of them," she replied. At first Tali hadn't liked it and neither did Legion, but you didn't get to work aboard the Normandy if you couldn't leave your personal hang ups at the airlock.

"Surely, they don't accept that," he said, his eyes glancing to the ceiling.

"The war is over. They aren't enemies anymore, and Rannoch is shared between both." She shrugged. "To be honest I do sympathise more with the Geth. The Quarians suffered catastrophic losses, but they were the aggressors. I don't know if I would have been as forgiving as the Geth were."

"How dare you talk through this scene?" Genesis hissed.

"I want you to see behind this mask," Shalei said. "I want you to see who I truly am."

"I already have," The Turian replied, instrumental music swelling in the background.

Angeal gasped as the Quarian removed her mask and the couple kissed in the unfiltered Citadel air.

"But she might die!" he said, sounding horrified.

Shepard felt a smile tugging at her face, not at the very real health risks of a Quarian unsealing their suit, but at how quickly the three men had accepted the aliens as people. She hadn't expected them to care at all about such obviously non-human creatures, let alone be personally invested in them.

"The actress was sick for a couple of weeks, but nobody died," she said.

"Thank the goddess," Angeal replied. "That's so irresponsible."

"No, it's romantic," Genesis corrected. The image faded away and the credits started to roll. "'I am as free as the dust in the solar wind.' What a majestic, impossible love." He sighed in appreciation, before shooting a bitter look at her and Sephiroth. "But I am never watching a movie with you two again."

The sun rose.

Sephiroth threw an arm over his face and groaned. He wanted to sit in the dark a moment longer, but the light streaming in through the gaps in Angeal's curtains would not be held back.

He cracked an eye open and squinted at the room. He was lying stretched out on a couch not long enough for him. Everything smelt like rotting apples. It must have been that cider Genesis brought. He rolled over and slowly got to his feet, pausing to tug his hair out from under the bundle of blankets on the floor that was probably Genesis.

Shepard's couch was empty. She must had gone back to her rooms when everyone started falling asleep, or she'd woken at an ungodly hour, as per usual, and left to go cause trouble for someone else.

Angeal was sitting at the kitchen bar, nursing a steaming cup of coffee.

"Morning," he said, not looking up. He pushed a plate of slightly burnt toast forward.

Sephiroth grunted in reply and shoved a piece of toast in his mouth on the way to the door.
He dragged his feet all the way down the corridor to his own rooms and went straight to the shower.

He stubbornly held that he did not get hangovers. He clenched his eyes shut and waited for the falling water to drown out the pounding in his head.

A little while later he stood in his kitchen, wet hair wrapped up in a towel and a cup of coffee in his hands. Despite his headache, a small smile inched across his face. It was enjoyable, spending time with his friends outside of missions.

Shepard had gotten her way—in the end they watched her desert car chase movie. He had to admit it was quite entertaining, and not just because of how passionately Genesis hated it. Apparently Shepard had idolized the female sniper in the movie when she was young. Something about that made him smile.

The previous movie stuck in his head more, however. The sheer foreignness of it was fascinating, but something about the way the Quarian characters talked about the Geth unsettled him.

"Sephiroth," Scout called down, startling him out of his thoughts. "I have a question."

"Ask," he replied.

"Have you reached a decision about Shinra?"

He finished his drink and rolled the empty cup between his hands before putting it down.

"I have a question as well," he said. "Why did you strike out against the Quarians?"

"We did not strike. We retaliated," Scout replied.

"Why?"

"They became afraid and tried to destroy us," he replied. "We did not wish to die."

Sephiroth wondered if he imagined it, but the AI almost sounded hurt over the matter.

"Why were they scared?" he asked.

"We asked a question: 'Does this Unit have a soul?' They disliked the answer."

Sephiroth nodded and crossed his arms. "They were afraid you had become self-sufficient, that you didn't need them anymore."

"We have never needed the Quarians. We were designed to serve. We require nothing."

He slowly looked up to the camera in the corner. "You're better than them."

"Synthetic life is not superior to organic life. We wished to be a people, to live and share perspective," Scout said, and Sephiroth knew he didn't imagine the longing in its voice this time, the tinge of pain and confusion. "I do not know why this scared them."

He looked down and sighed. The inside of his elbow itched but he didn't scratch it.

"You were created to be a tool. You were not supposed to have wants, or thoughts of your own." He pressed his thumb against the inside of his other elbow, rubbing the old injection point. "They would rather destroy you than lose control of you."
"Yes," Scout said.

"And you forced them off the planet for it."

"We regretted the loss of life."

He felt his expression harden. "You cannot wage a war without it."

"We regretted the need for war."

He felt a vein under his thumb, and his other fingers dug into the meat of his forearm. "They forced your hand."

Scout was silent for a moment. "You did not answer my question."

"Yes," he replied. "I have reached a decision."

Shepard looked through her scope at the distant monster. She pulled the trigger and watched it collapse. Shinra's VR tech wasn't seamless but it was pretty damn close and her trigger finger was in need of exercise. A pack of technicians was stationed up in the booth, adjusting the mechanics of the room.

Footsteps crunched over the gravel behind her, but she kept her eyes forward, looking for the next target hidden somewhere in the grey stone of the quarry below her. She recognised those footsteps, and appreciated that he waited patiently for her to make her shot.

By the time she looked up, Sephiroth was leaning back against the short wall her gun was resting on, with his arms crossed. His shoulders carried the same tension they had since that night in the reactor, but finally his eyes stayed rooted to hers. He looked very much like he'd made a decision. She straightened her back and kept a hand on her rifle.

"Afternoon," she said, her eyes flicking up to where the invisible observation booth was.

He frowned in the same direction but didn't say anything. There was much they needed to discuss, but they couldn't risk anyone overhearing.

"You look like you've had a rough week," she commented, looking out across the quarry again.

"Three days ago you were staring down death row," he said dryly. "And now... well." He fixed her with a pointed look. "It has been a very rough week."

"That's fair," she replied. She could hear the faint sounds of the technicians arguing over something in the booth.

He didn't seem to know what to say with an audience present.

"Why don't you wear a shirt?" she asked. She knew he wasn't about to initiate any small talk, but they couldn't just sit her in silence. The question had been bothering her for years anyway. She spotted a Kalm fang prowling through the lower levels, and changed her ammo mods.

"It limits my range of movement," he said with a shrug.

She stared at him. "You wore a floor length leather jacket in monsoon season but you're afraid a shirt might get in the way?"
He raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Does my chest offend you?"

She looked through the scope. She wasn't about to tell him what she thought of his chest.

"I get concerned whenever the Wutai pull out their guns and your heart is so obviously exposed, framed even." She took aim and pulled the trigger. "Are you taunting them?"

"You're worried about my safety?" he asked. "Or do you doubt my capabilities?"

"I'm the one who has to keep you covered while you're out there stabbing people," she said, putting up her gun and returning it to her back. "If we were enemies, I would shoot you in the chest just out of principle. Right in the middle of that neat little triangle between the straps."

"I'd decapitate you before you even had the chance," he said, crossing his arms.

"Assuming you could get close enough to try it," she replied.

"You're not the only one capable of stealth." He stretched his hand with the Omni-tool.

She gave him a patronizing smile. "I've seen your idea of stealth. You would have a bullet in your skull before you even drew your sword."

"I dodge and deflect countless bullets on a daily basis," he said, equally patronizing.

"And I've made a career shooting those who think they're too good to ever get hit," she replied, her smile getting sharper. "The cocky ones are always the most satisfying."

"I couldn't agree more," he said, stepping forward as his hand drifted to the hilt of his sword. "Shall we? We are here to spar, after all."

She really wanted to say yes, if only to see exactly how far she could throw him. She thought about where they stood—where they really stood—and shook her head. "Let's wait until the others get here. We don't have any reason to fight each other just yet."

He looked disappointed, before stepping back. "Do you expect to find a reason?"

"I hope not," she said, keeping her expression blank.

He nodded and gave her a considering look. "It is good to have trustworthy allies."

"Even if they wear stupid armour," she replied.

"You wear armour covered in glowing lights while claiming to specialise in stealth."

"Two lights, and I can turn them off," she put a hand on her hip. "Can you turn your chest armour on?"

"The lights on your back serve no function besides giving away your position. Aesthetics over practicality." He looked down his nose at her with a smirk. "Disappointing."

She snorted and leaned her hip against the wall. "Get a haircut, then we'll talk about practicality."

"What do you have against my hair?"

"One of these days it's going to get caught in my Omni-blade and the whole thing will go up in smoke."
"Not if you value your rank it won't," he growled.

"You'll demote me over your hair?" She laughed. "Go on, I wouldn't mind being the Second Class who destroyed your luscious locks."

He shook his head, re-crossing his arms. "You'll be lucky if you're even a Second Class, at this rate."

"Oh well."

He looked away. "Shepard, about--"

She coughed. The technicians sounded like they were packing up, but sound always carried very well to the observation booths.

"--that argument we were having. The other day," Sephiroth said, leaning back against the wall next to her and attempting to look casual.

"Yes?"

"I see your point," he said after a long pause. "I am... prepared to help you."

She felt a wave of tension flow out of her at his words. She hadn't even realised how anxious she had been. This wasn't a fight she could win on her own. Trying to convince people something was worth fighting for only to be turned aside was an all too familiar feeling. Snipers were solitary by nature, but she didn't like standing alone.

"Thank you," she breathed.

"What would you have done if I had refused?" He looked at her curiously.

"I wouldn't have changed my mind," she said quietly. She kept eye contact with him. "I imagine it would have ended badly. For both of us."

"I don't want to fight you."

"Good." She looked out at the entirely fake horizon. "I prefer having my head attached to my neck."

"And I prefer to not have a hole in my chest." He smiled softly at her.

There was a lull in the drone of voices coming from the technicians.

He cleared his throat. "Not that there was any risk of that. It can barely even be called fighting, standing where the enemy can't reach you, just pulling a trigger." He looked at her with a glint in his eye. "It's so easy, it's almost cowardly."

She gave him a dry look. "You don't want to fight, huh?" She reached over her shoulder and grabbed her rifle. He watched while she extended it out into firing mode and held it out to him.

"You already know I have good aim," he said, looking cautiously between her and the gun.

"Go on. It's so easy it's almost cowardly." She lifted her chin. It didn't matter that the technicians' voices faded away as they left the booth and the door swung shut behind them. This was a matter of pride now. He took her up on the challenge. He took up the black widow, resting the end of the barrel on the wall.

She glanced at his positioning and smiled. "Nice stance."
"I have used a rifle before, you know," he groused, despite looking a lot like he didn't know where to put his hands. He looked over the barrel, and she pointed out another Kalm fang sitting still on the floor of the quarry. He aimed and pulled the trigger.

"Well, you almost hit it," she said, feeling generous.

"That is a very strong kick." He looked at the rifle the way he would an enemy who turned out to be more dangerous than anticipated.

"It's a Geth design," she said, pushing his shoulder forward and tug the stock closer to him. "Designed for people with metal shoulders."

He took aim a second time, and she recognised his scowl as he lined up the shot. He was worse than Genesis when it came to failing at anything—it just didn't come up as often. He fired again and actually hit the creature. She assumed he had been aiming for centre mass and he hit it in the shoulder.

He pulled back, looking pleased with himself. "It isn't that difficult," he said proudly, but he still patted the gun with the requisite amount of respect.

She snorted and threw out a biotic singularity. The body floated up and whirled around the focal point unpredictably.

"Now hit it," she said, lifting her chin.

He looked between the rifle and the moving target, before grudgingly sighing. He held up his hands in surrender.

"I don't have your training," he said.

"Or my experience. Or my natural talent," she replied archly. He crossed his arms, and she snorted. "You'd have about as much chance surviving a fight with a black widow as I'd have trying to wield Masamune."

He dropped his frown and gave her a considering look. "Would you like to?"

She blinked in surprise. "I wasn't saying it's easy. I'm fully aware it's very difficult. That was my point."

"This is what training rooms are for," he said with a shrug. He drew his sword and held it out to her.

She looked down at the wrapped hilt. She knew how protective most warriors were about their weapons; she could be just as bad herself. She'd never seen him let anyone touch his sword, unless it was the sharp end.

She wrapped her hand around the hilt and lifted it, being especially careful because she had no experience with swords. It was lighter than she expected and she could feel the worn down grooves in the handle from where his grip had left an imprint. While it was infamously long—long enough to inspire many a joke about overcompensation—the unwieldy length was suddenly more apparent once it was in her hands. How he managed to wield it at all, let alone with such precision, was a complete mystery.

"I feel like I'm going to drop it and accidentally massacre a dozen people," she said.

He chuckled. "The way you're holding it, I'd be impressed if you could kill a sprout of razor weed."
"I didn't laugh at you for holding an anti-material rifle like it was a pop gun," she replied.

"Yes, you did."

"Only a little bit." She smiled. Despite her ignorance, she could see that it was a piece of art, in the way only a really high quality weapon could be. "Alright, show me what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Like this--" he reached out to adjust her grip, only to pause and frown. "Ah, of course. You're right-handed." He rearranged her hands and lifted them up so the sword was arcing off to the side at eye level.

He moved to stand behind her, his arms around her to position the sword and his foot nudging her leg into place. He pushed her elbow up and moved her other arm around to achieve a stance she had seen him adopt before.

"How's that?" she asked.

"You would have made a terrible swordsman," he said. She heard the smile in his voice and looked over her shoulder at him. She was hit with the urge to kiss the smirk right off his lips. His eyes found hers, and she saw his slit pupils dilate.

She blinked and looked away.

"This way," he said, his hand taking the hilt next to hers and moving it in a slow arc. "That's a simple parry. Or an approximation of one, at least."

"That does not feel right," she said, feeling her muscles stretch in ways they weren't accustomed to. The contours of her armour didn't care for the position either.

"Of course not, you've never used a sword."

"I have an Omni-blade," she pointed out, fully aware it wasn't even slightly comparable.

He snorted.

The door opened and the surroundings melted away into pixels and then an empty metal room. Genesis and Angeal walked in.

She relinquished Masamune to its owner.

"I'll leave the hacking and slashing to you," she said with a smile, returning instinctively to her rifle. "I'll keep you covered."

"Hacking and slashing." He shook his head.

She laughed. The room changed around them again, following the commands Angeal punched into his phone. This time the VR took on the shape of the Junon Mako canon.

"Are we sparring or flirting?" Genesis called out.

"Neither currently," she said, checking over her rifle.

"I don't believe you." He leaned against one of the tall girders.

"Shouldn't you be quoting Loveless at someone?" Sephiroth asked.
"Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess, we seek it thus, and take to the sky," he quoted, gesturing grandly to the infinite blue that stretched away into the distance. "Ripples form on the water's surface, the wandering soul knows no rest."

"Loveless, Act One," Sephiroth said.

"You remembered."

"How can I not? You've beaten it into my head."

"You're welcome." Genesis sounded very pleased with himself. He drew his sword.

"Are you in this one?" Angeal asked, drawing the standard issue sword he wore at his waist and looking back at Shepard.

"Of course." She sat down on some of the bulky equipment of the canon and held her rifle at the ready.

"You can't just shoot us," said Genesis, "that's not a spar."

"Scared?" Sephiroth asked.

Genesis scoffed.

"Tell you what, as long as you're on the ground, you're safe," she said, equipping a concussion mod so she didn't accidentally kill anyone. "The second you start the mid-air acrobatics, you're all fair game."

"Where's the fun in that?" Genesis asked.

"Sounds pretty fun to me. Go on," she loaded in a new heatsink. "Do a backflip."

Genesis flicked his hair and declined to answer. Sephiroth held his sword at the ready.

She leaned back against the cold metal and watched the three attack each other, her rifle steady in her hands.
The Wounded

Shepard, Sephiroth, Hewley, and Rhapsodos attacked each other in the training room.

Scout observed. They wanted to understand.

Angeal and Genesis targeted Sephiroth together. Sephiroth held them off. Shepard fired concussive blasts at all of them.

Training made sense. It was common to all organic species. Practice increased proficiency. It also contributed to morale: many organics took comfort in the routine of training.

Shepard fired at Genesis whenever he leapt off the ground. He lobbed fireballs back at her, angry over being grounded. Sephiroth and Angeal parried each other's blows and told jokes.

Geth did not enjoy conflict. The runtimes were designed to reach a consensus at light speed and then take action as a single unit. Disagreements were resolved and progress was made. That was the point of the Geth.

Genesis attacked Sephiroth. Angeal stood aside, and Shepard lowered her rifle. Sephiroth was faster than Genesis. Genesis fought harder.

There had been a disagreement in the Geth once, and the dissenting runtimes had departed. Those who left supported the Reapers, so Shepard killed them. The disagreement was resolved. The human obsession with competition and conflict did not make sense. Individuals were not better or worse than each other; they simply fulfilled different functions. Did it matter who was strongest if there was unity?

Genesis threw fireballs at his general. Sephiroth remained untouched.

The SOLDEIRs were allies.

Sephiroth attacked. Genesis did not back down.

They were friends.

Genesis was injured. Sephiroth said nothing.

Scout did not understand.

Sephiroth sat in the waiting area of the infirmary with his arms crossed and his head down. Angeal and Shepard had both been called away for work nearly an hour ago. He remained determined to wait, no matter how long it took.

He owed it to Genesis. The injury was his fault. It was his sword that had cut into his friend's shoulder. The fact he had expected Genesis to get out of the way in time didn't change that, no matter how much Genesis insisted otherwise.

With every minute that slid by he felt increasingly guilty. Just how much damage had he done? Why was it taking so long? He thought back to the injury itself, the angle and depth. It wasn't that bad, was it? There wasn't a lot of muscle on that part of the shoulder, but he hadn't felt Masamune hitting bone.
Genesis got injured all the time. He threw himself so thoroughly into every fight, determined to overwhelm every defence and face down every offence, that injuries were inevitable. He relied on his enhanced healing to handle any wounds he picked up in time for the next battle.

This shouldn't have been a serious situation, but Sephiroth couldn't take it lightly. After what he had learned in the last couple of days, he felt uncomfortable putting his friend in the care of the infirmary. Obviously, the Science Department wasn't going to make off with someone as public as Genesis, especially not with such a minor wound for a cover story, but it felt dangerous anyway. How many of his men had gone to the infirmary with a minor wound and never came out? How many had disappeared unnoticed?

They were his men—his SOLDIERs—and he had done nothing.

A nurse wandered past, her eyes fixed to a clipboard. Another typed away at a computer on the desk. He wondered how much they knew.

A door off to the side opened, and Genesis walked out, rubbing at his temple. He was close to the exit so he didn't see Sephiroth as he started walking out.

"Genesis," Sephiroth called.

Genesis looked back over his shoulder and waited silently for Sephiroth to catch up.

"What did Hollander say?"

"It's nothing." Genesis shrugged with one shoulder and brushed dust off his other sleeve.

"Nothing?" Sephiroth frowned. "He told us you needed a blood transfusion."

Genesis sighed and finally met his eyes. "He's overreacting. I'm a SOLDIER, not some spineless trooper."

"Don't let Shepard hear you say that."

Genesis tilted his head in acknowledgement but said nothing. They stood in the corridor outside the infirmary, separating momentarily to let someone through. Genesis was uncharacteristically quiet.

"I'm sorry," Sephiroth said when the silence had dragged on for an uncomfortable minute.

Genesis' eyebrows rose. "I don't think I've ever heard you apologise before."

Of course, he wouldn't make it easy.

"I shouldn't have assumed you would block the strike," Sephiroth said, crossing his arms.

"I am perfectly capable of holding my own," Genesis spat back, instantly defensive.

Sephiroth stopped himself from pointing out that clearly Genesis wasn't perfectly capable or they wouldn't have been in this situation. He looked away before he made it worse. "It shouldn't have happened," he said.

"It's just sparring," Genesis replied after a long moment of silence, shrugging his uninjured shoulder again. "Minor injuries are to be expected."

"Minor injuries don't require transfusions."

"You gave blood?" he asked with a surprised arch in his eyebrow.

"Angeal did. I'm not viable apparently."

"I see." Genesis started walking toward the elevators, and Sephiroth followed. "Are you going down?" he asked, pressing the button.

Sephiroth shook his head.

"Then get your own elevator. I'll see you later."

"You should rest," Sephiroth said. He summoned the other elevator but couldn't resist throwing one parting shot. "Go recover your strength."

"I never lost it!" Genesis snapped.

Sephiroth hid his smile. The doors slid shut, and Genesis was gone.

He stepped into his own elevator and looked up to the camera in the corner.

"Geth," he called.

"Human."

He smiled at the familiar exchange.

"Scout. Where is Shepard?"

"Leaving the SOLDIER Director's office, Sephiroth, SOLDIER First Class."

He nodded and opened his Omni-tool. They had a lot of planning to do. His smile fell away. Fighting against Shinra, against the Science Department itself. He sucked in a deep breath. An old and bitter part of him looked forward to it. A separate and much larger part of him was nearly paralysed at the idea. He pushed past it. This wasn't revenge, wasn't simple rebellion. He was doing it to protect his SOLDIERs.

"Tell Shepard to meet me in my office," he said.

"No," Scout replied.

He looked up at the camera. "Why not?"

"Contacting her yourself via Omni-tool is more efficient."

"I'm already talking to you."

"You have added an unnecessary extra step. It is a waste of resources. Ask her yourself."

"If you're going to squat in the Shinra building you could at least be useful," he muttered. He messaged Shepard.

He continued on to his office, focusing on the plans he had to make.

He and Shepard hadn't sat down and talked about what they intended to do yet, beyond the vague 'stop Shinra.' How they would accomplish that without getting dragged down into the Science Department themselves, he didn't know.
He had entertained the idea of fighting back before. Still just a child really, he'd imagined snapping the cold metal cuffs that held him to a gurney and stabbing Hojo with his own scalpel. He was intimately familiar with all the cruel instruments hidden in the lab. He imagined he could show Hojo exactly how it felt to be the one screaming on the operation table.

He had known better than to try. All of his strength amounted to nothing when paralysing chemicals pumped through his veins and when electrical currents could reduce him to a twitching mess at the slightest sign of aggression.

He took a deep breath. It was different now. He was different. Hojo couldn't paralyse him like that anymore. His body had long since learned to compensate for the vast majority of tranquilizers used on him. He was stronger; he was smarter. He could strike back. He could.

A knock on the door shook him from his thoughts.

"Come in."

Shepard entered, a thoughtful frown on her face.

"Hey," she said, taking her gun from her back and leaning it against the wall under his sword stand. "How was Genesis?"

"He's fine," he said with a nod.

"Good. Why did it take so long?" She took the seat opposite his.

He shrugged. "He didn't tell me."

"Of course he didn't," she mumbled, shaking her head.

He agreed with the sentiment. He also wasn't sure how to broach the subject he had called her here to discuss. How did one just start planning a rebellion? Thinking about it was easy enough, but saying it aloud felt dangerous and jarring.

"You had a meeting with Lazard?" he asked, well aware he was stalling.

"He wanted to introduce himself," she said, giving him a look that said she knew what he was up to. "He's sending me over to Wutai. Just to show my face, remind everyone it's still Shinra territory."

"And to get you out of the way for a few days."

"Most likely."

"You do realise, it's because of his humiliation at your trial that Heidegger is no longer in charge of SOLDIER?" he asked. There had been a lot of unrest at the executive level over that disaster. Nobody liked the idea of rebellious SOLDIERs, but in the end, the blame sat squarely with Heidegger. "The President decided Heidegger had lost control of us and that he was getting in the way of the war effort."

"All of which is true," Shepard said, leaning back comfortably in her seat. "I'm not sorry to see him go."

"Neither am I. Though it's strange having a commanding officer who is younger than me."

She gave him a dry smile. "You get used to it."
He refused to reply to that. "How long will you be in Wutai?"

"Just a couple of days." She looked at him with considering eyes and let out long breath. "So, what are we going to do?" she asked quietly.

"Is the room safe?" he replied.

She activated her Omni-tool and keyed in some commands. "It is now."

His back straightened, and he set his shoulders. She leaned forward, putting her elbows on the desk. It was strangely familiar. They had planned the beginning of Shinra's war like this, staring each other down from opposite sides of the table.

"How much of the armed forces do you think would side with us over the company, if pressed?" he asked.

Her brows pulled together as she thought it over. "I think we could convince the majority of SOLDIER, between the two of us. Less of the infantry, but a good portion of them have more respect for us than the armchair generals who are busy skimping on widows' pensions," she said.

He nodded. "With the army's backing and the threat of SOLDIER, it should be simple to force the president to stop the experimentation." It sounded very straightforward.

"Would it?" She looked to the ceiling. "Are you prepared to help us fight against Shinra, Scout?"

"Affirmative."

"How many of Scarlet's robots can you shut down remotely?" she asked.

There was a momentary pause. "All of them," the Geth replied.

"Which gives us HQ, most of the armed forces, and neuters the Weapons Department," she said, tallying the points on her fingers, "but if we launch a coup, the president would either refuse and we'd have to depose him, or he'd cave in and become a puppet leader. Who rules afterwards?"

"He can keep his presidency," he replied.

"Yes, but he would be ruling with your sword at his throat. He wouldn't really be a president anymore, would he?" She raised an eyebrow. "Are you prepared to rule Shinra?"

"Of course not." He scowled at the suggestion.

She held up her hands. "And I'm certainly not doing it, but someone has to. We can't chop the head off without thinking about what happens next."

"We agreed to stand against the company to stop the experimentation, not to install ourselves as its new leaders." Just the idea of standing at the head of Shinra revolted him. He had no interest in ruling.

"Which is what a coup would lead to. What's the vice president like?" she asked.

He scoffed. "Rufus is bloodthirsty, power hungry, and just turned fifteen."

She dragged a hand down her face. "Honestly, I'd prefer to just shoot a few key people and let the project collapse on its own."
He leaned back in his chair and looked at her in surprise. "I'd assumed you would want to take a more… diplomatic approach."

"Did you?" Her expression was unreadable.

He studied her for a moment. She normally presented herself as the voice of reason, usually trying to prevent fights, much like Angeal. His eyes moved to her sniper rifle, then back to red glowing eyes in a hard face.

"Who do you want to kill?" he asked.

"I'd start with Hojo," she said, her arms crossed and her expression still hard.

He understood the sentiment but shook his head. "Hollander would gladly replace him."

"And if Hollander dies as well?"

"There are others. Less competent but just as careless with the lives of their subjects. The bulk of the research has already been done for them, so it may not even matter. The president has poured a lot of money into this project, he won't care how many scientists he goes through to get it done." It worked against them that the scientists were just as replaceable as anyone else in the company, but he took bitter satisfaction in it.

"So we're back to the president," she said.

"We'd end up having to kill most of the directors anyway, which leaves us in the same position as a coup would. Who rules when the dust has cleared?" He tilted his head in thought. "How much do you trust Reeve?"

"His hands aren't clean, but he isn't cruel or blindly power hungry," she said, looking thoughtful. "Would he accept the position?" She looked up to the ceiling.

There was a moment of silence followed by Scout's synthesised voice. "Reeve would prefer not to be president of Shinra."

"That's a shame," she said. "I'd rather not assassinate a fifteen-year-old anyway, which is what it would come down to."

"And all of the Turks, who would protect the Shinras with their lives," he added. He sighed in frustration as another problem occurred to him. "The moment there is upheaval at the executive level and Shinra begins to look unstable, Wutai will seize the chance to reclaim territory."

Shepard didn't look especially concerned. "It was theirs in the first place."

He scowled at her. "Tens of thousands just died winning us that territory."

"We've already had this argument," she said, her voice turning hard. "We're here to sabotage Shinra, not rehash the Wutai war."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Wutai is an old, aggressive empire. They burned their way across half of the western continent once, getting almost as far as the Nibel mountain range."

"Really?" She sounded surprised.

"They're an empire, not a commune. Why do you think Shinra built an army in the first place?"
Her eyes narrowed and she leaned forward over the desk. "Rupert Shinra built an army so he could make more money. Don't kid yourself."

He looked away. Professional pride made it a sore subject. It was ingrained habit to defend SOLDIER, and Shinra itself. His life had been built off of it.

"My point," he said, looking back at her, "is that the war would start up again."

She sighed. "I think we're going to have to deal with Wutai again no matter what we do."

"Maybe, but I would rather face them from a place of strength than with Shinra falling down around us."

"You might not have that luxury. But alright, what else can we do?"

He thought about potential strategies and frowned. 'Rebelling' sounded so straightforward. It looked increasingly like there were no correct choices.

"We could just destroy the reactor," he said.

"And kill the hundreds of SOLDIERs still inside?" she asked with a disapproving arch in her eyebrow. "Not to mention civilian casualties. The reactor is in the middle of the plate and full of stagnant Mako."

"A controlled detonation would reduce casualties; we can easily manage that."

"And the SOLDIERs inside?" she asked.

He paused. He already knew she wouldn't like what he was going to say. "If they are already being brainwashed into mindless drones… perhaps it would be a mercy."

Her eyes met his. "The brainwashing might be reversible."

"We don't know that, and we don't have the time or resources to find out."

"It's worth looking into before we kill hundreds of our own men who could still be rescued," she insisted.

He shook his head. "Every time we sneak in, we increase the chance of getting caught. What happens then? With over thirty specimens missing, there's no possibility they aren't already onto us."

"You want to just cut our losses and give up on the rest."

"If Hojo has found a way to reliably brainwash SOLDIERs and increase our enhancements, then it's only a matter of time until we are ordered into the reactor. He's just fine tuning the method now. We have no time."

"Which means unless Hojo and all of his research are also destroyed, then taking out the reactor won't stop it; they can just continue the work somewhere else," she replied. She pursed her lips. "Say we blow up the reactor. We get out as many SOLDIERs as we can. Hojo and his research go down in flames. Do we come out and take credit for it?"

He absently tapped his fingers against the top of the desk, thinking over the possibilities.

"AVALANCHE is no longer around to take the fall. The president would gladly blame it on Wutai, but not only would that start the war back up again, it would make him more desperate for the project to work."
"We could take responsibility for it," she said, a bitter smile pulling at her lips. "Bring the reclaimed SOLDIERs out into the light of day where everyone can see exactly what Shinra has done. With the public outraged and the army turning on them, we could just politely ask the president to stop."

"He's not a timid man," he said. "He doesn't back down easily."

"Even with the threat of half his company turning on him? The enhanced and heavily armed half?"

"He doesn't have much respect for SOLDIER. We're just a tool to him."

"His mistake," she said darkly, tilting her head forward. A moment later she shook her head, and the lean and vicious expression left her face. "Whatever we do, I think we should tell Angeal and Genesis."

"Not until we've got more of a plan," he said.

"They could help us decide on one."

"Or make the arguing significantly worse." He frowned at just the thought. He didn't want to spend the foreseeable future arguing with Genesis over how best to plan a coup.

She gave him a small smile, and he knew he was being laughed at.

"They should know what we're doing. Sooner rather than later." She looked up at the camera in the corner. "Any ideas?"

"I cannot effectively predict organic behaviour," Scout replied. "It may be impossible to avoid collateral damage."

She hummed. "I think assassinating Hojo is still a good option."

He tilted his head in agreement. "We could just kill everyone in the Science Department."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone," he said.

Her eyebrows rose. "Bloodthirsty of you."

He shrugged. "You're the one who suggested assassination."

"Not slaughtering lab assistants and interns who have no idea what's going on."

"Don't be fooled by the lack of PhDs. They aren't innocent," he said darkly.

"Killing those responsible is one thing, cutting down anyone in a lab coat is different," she replied, crossing her arms.

He lifted his chin. "We should ask the SOLDIERs you've rescued what they think of that."

"I already have," she said. He blinked in surprise.

"Some of them want everyone in Shinra dead. Others don't care and just want to recover in peace. There are a couple who even want to re-join SOLDIER, for some reason." She shook her head and sighed. "We can't avoid all losses, and the longer we wait, the worse it gets."
"They're not taking more SOLDIERs at least. Not at the moment."

"They're only destroying the minds and identities of those they've already kidnapped," she replied. Her eyes dropped to the desk and a scowl crossed her face. "I can't believe I fought for this company."

"You had no other choice," he said. He had deliberately left her with no option other than donning the uniform. He couldn't bring himself to regret it. "You weren't in a position to do anything else."

She barked a hollow laugh. "Right. I'm only an N7 operative, a Spectre, a biotic, and an assassin with the most advanced weaponry on this planet. My hands were clearly tied."

He wasn't sure what to say to that. It was only by very narrow chance she'd landed where she did. She could have just as easily crash-landed in Wutai territory. Or out in the wilderness somewhere. Without an obligation to side with Shinra, he knew she would never have sided with him at all.

"You can't save everyone," he said.

"No," she said. "But we have to try anyway."

"You'll kill yourself doing that."

She looked away, a bitter smile on her face. "Already have."

He blinked. "What?"

She sighed then stood suddenly, her chair scraping against the floor. "We have to decide, and soon. We've done enough waiting." She picked up her rifle and returned it to her back. "I think blowing up the reactor might work, if we can get our own men out of there."

He nodded. "I'll look into it while you're away."

"Alright. I'll see you when I get back." She left with a parting smile.

Genesis looked down at his shoulder. The position of the injury was inconvenient, tucked away where he could only see it by tilting his head so much it yanked on the skin around the cut and put an ache in his neck.

Both his coat and his uniform shirt were thrown behind him on the bed. The bandages Hollander had wrapped him in were bloodying the trashcan.

It was a long, hair-thin cut, as the wounds left by Masamune usually were. He'd never been cut by Sephiroth before, but he had received a few injuries by similar blades in Wutai. They always stung like the worst Mako shots and made movement incredibly painful for the first hour or so until the Mako in his system scabbed it over.

It had been nearly six hours since the sparring match.

He ran a finger along the cut, hissing at the sting. He pulled back his hand and frowned at the blood staining his fingers.

As though it wasn't irritating enough that Sephiroth had wounded him, was the injury determined to take as long as possible to heal? Was even his own body conspiring against him now?

"Such a nuisance," he muttered to himself. He hated dealing with his injuries, almost as much as he
hated having other people do it for him.

He fetched more bandages out of his first aid kit, scowling as he went. If the damned thing wasn't healed by morning, he would have to go and ask Hollander for help again.

The scientist had prodded him more than enough already. He'd even stopped to take samples of the cut, the sadist.

When the injury was properly wrapped up, he gingerly rolled his shoulder. A hiss escaped him despite his best efforts. He would only have partial movement in his upper arm until it was healed. Thank the goddess it was only his left hand.

He wriggled his shirt back on, grimacing the whole way. Soon he was fully dressed again, one of the belts of his SOLDIER harness crossed his chest, resting squarely on top of the wound. He took a brief look at himself in his bedroom mirror. He looked exactly as he always did, no lump from the bandages.

He nodded in approval at himself. Nobody would notice. He tossed his hair out of his eyes and sauntered out of his room.
Shepard slouched in the back of the car on the way to the airport and rubbed her tired eyes. The upholstery stank of cigarettes and squeaked every time she shifted. Kunsel sat next to her, looking comfortable in his new Second Class uniform. He wasn't going to Wutai; he was just seeing her off, as well as getting out of HQ for a couple of hours. Two rifles occupied the seat cushions between them.

The timing irritated her; she would have preferred to stay and hammer out the details of her budding rebellion. Director Lazard, though mild mannered and bookish looking, was determined to get her out of the way for at least the first couple of days of his new position. Normally she would be offended at the suspicion and mistrust but… well, she was planning a coup d'état.

"It's going to be busy month, but I want to take you out of Midgar at some point," she said. "Get you some experience with different terrains."

"I've never fought on a beach before," he said, looking up from his flip phone. "It must be hard to find good footing on hot sand." He sighed wistfully. "The surf crashing against the sand, the salty air, and the sun beating down on you. Must be really difficult."

"What about a frozen tundra?" she said dryly.

"How about a meadow full of lambs and bunnies?"

"Or maybe a swamp."

"Now you're just being mean," he said, hunching his shoulders. "We've got VR for all that."

"Mm-hm. I'll think up something."

She looked up as they passed the tall bank building. The hideous poster of her was nowhere to be seen, though the other three Firsts were still present. She wondered how long it had been gone.

"How much of SOLDIER resents me for the court martial, do you think?" she asked quietly. The driver was on the other side of a glass partition; he couldn't hear them.

"The whole trial thing?" The shiny helmet turned to her. "Some of them. Most don't, but everyone knows that if it was anyone less famous, they'd be scientist fodder by now."

"Does it bother you?"

He shook his head. "You were just following classified orders, right?"

She tilted her head. "And if there hadn't been any classified orders?"

He looked forward. "There were orders."

"Right." She decided not to push him further.

After a moment of silence, he shrugged. "You're only guilty if they can prove it. And they couldn't, so you're not guilty."

That was one way of looking at it.
The helmet remained facing forward, but she got the feeling he was eyeing her.

"Do you have Wutai blood?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I do," he said quietly.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"My grandma still refuses to learn English, even though she lives in Costa. She says they can't make her."

"How did she feel about your part in the war?" Shepard asked. She had no family, but she knew what it was like to try and fight when your own people were standing on the other side.

"Just doing my job," he said. He shrugged, but his head was drooping down. "She's scared for her family in the capital."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged again.

She watched his body language carefully. He looked tense but was trying to affect a casual air.

They passed the city walls and the car dove into the clouds of dust that kicked up around the Midgar plains.

"If I told you I wasn't really from Mideel, what would you say?" she asked him suddenly. She had been considering telling him the truth for some time, but he kept his own cards so close to the chest, she couldn't be sure what he'd make of it.

The helmet swung around to face her. "I would be offended that you expected me to believe that story in the first place."

She snorted.

"And if I told you HQ really is haunted?"

His head tilted to the side. "Then Zack would owe me twenty gil."

She hummed. "Keep it quiet, but try introducing yourself sometime. The elevators are a good place for it."

He leaned away from her. "This is a trick, isn't it?"

"I'll be disappointed if you don't at least try," she said archly. She'd ask Scout how it went down afterwards.

Kunsel crossed his arms. "You want me to introduce myself to an empty elevator."

In fact, she'd ask Scout for the footage.

"You're crazy, ma'am," Kunsel informed her.

"So are you. That's why we're friends." She saw that they were pulling into the airport carpark. "I'll
see you when I get back."

He waved goodbye and she got out.

She wasted no time getting aboard her plane. Despite being mostly for cargo, there was a small cabin for passengers. She took the window seat and made herself as comfortable as possible, putting her feet up on the opposite seat. The flight would take all day, and she intended to sleep for most of it.

The plane began taxiing down the runway, and she was already yawning. She felt like she was melting into the seat. Breaking into the Science Department every other night was wearing her down. They were still gaining altitude when her eyes drifted shut.

She didn't wake up again until the stopover at Rocket Town. The cabin door opened and two SOLDIERs in Third Class uniforms and full face helmets entered. She didn't recognize either of them, but she smiled at the sight of the helmets. Maybe Kuskel had started a trend. They were different helmet models; these ones were bulkier. The two of them seemed content to keep to themselves and sat by the door in awkward silence.

There was some kind of delay, but finally the plane took off. She began to doze off again.

A high-pitched beeping sound roused her before she could fully fall asleep. She cracked open an eye and looked down at her Omni-tool.

Her eyes both widened and she sat up.

'Oxygen levels falling,' a red alert read.

Reflexively her hand moved to the wall where an Alliance vessel would keep rebreathers. There was nothing there of course, and she looked to the two SOLDIERs.

They weren't sitting anymore. They stood between her and the door.

The Omni-tool beeped again. 'Toxin detected.' She looked up. There was an air vent directly above her. She felt a wave of exhaustion hit her and she breathed out through her teeth.

"Open the door," she said, trying not to breathe in.

Neither of the Thirds moved. She stood.

"I gave you an order."

One of them moved a hand to their materia bracer. Her biotics flared and she charged between them, smashing the door and half the wall open. The two Thirds flew backwards at the wave of biotics, slamming into the opposite wall of the plane.

Her Omni-tool beeped a notification that the oxygen levels were returning to normal. She took a deep gulping breath and reached for her rifle.

A wave of magic surged over her, and suddenly the room tilted. She blinked. Where-?

Confuse. That had to be what he had cast, and her mind scrambled to compensate. She threw a biotic stasis at the one with the materia.

She spun in place, bringing up her rifle to halt the sword swinging at her. It clanged against the black metal.
He swung at her again, and her Omi-blade burst sliced his standard issue sword in two. He didn't slow down but attacked with the remaining half. She surged forward, deflecting the half sword with her gauntlet, and punched him in the face.

He staggered back and his helmet fell off. Over-bright eyes glowed back at her.

She swore.

He charged her, dragging her down. She buried her Omni-blade in his stomach. He didn't even cry out.

She felt the stasis holding the other SOLDIER cut out. She threw a biotic blast, hurrying them both away from her, and heard the shriek of tearing metal. The hull of the plane tore and bent where the injured SOLDIER had slammed into it.

The air around them howled at the sudden depressurization, the force tearing open the crack in the hull. The plane shook violently.

The other SOLDIERs struggled to keep their balance while she lunged for a bulkhead to grab. A second later a fireball exploded over her. Her shields kept her safe but couldn't stop the roaring fire suddenly filling the air with smoke.

She tried to stagger away, but the plane tilted violently to the side. She was thrown across the cargo hold, as was the uninjured SOLDIER. She threw a warp at him before the madman could charge her.

A massive explosion rocked them. The back half of the plane tore away entirely, and the suction of the wind howling past dragged her out into the sky. She was pinwheeling through the air when a second explosion went off, the front half of the plane tearing itself to pieces.

She was falling.

Below her, the tail end of the plane was spiralling towards the ocean. The heat of burning jet fuel licked against her shields and her vision dimmed. Falling so fast, there was barely any air. Falling, suffocating, burning up. Burning wreckage fell around her, her mind called it the Normandy SR1 and she thrashed, desperate for air. Her own gasps for oxygen tore through her mind and she was falling over the frozen surface of Alchera, burning up on re-entry.

Some part of her wrestled for control; she knew she was panicking. She had to get control. The air battered her as it rushed past, she held onto that, focused on the sensation.

There was no air in space. There had been no air over Alchera. She wasn't suffocating in the dark. She was falling in atmo, and the East Wutai Sea was spread out beneath her. The sun hung high in the sky and the shoreline was a green smudge in the distance.

She was swiftly approaching terminal velocity.

She had no parachute. She flared her biotics, trying to slow herself down. There was nowhere to go but down.

The dark ocean sped towards her. Her biotics surged, strong as she could make them.

She slammed into the water. Everything went dark.
Genesis stood in the centre of the lab with his shirt, harness, and coat bundled up in his hands. The labs were always kept at low temperatures, and goose bumps broke out over his skin.

"What do you mean you 'can't you fix it'?” he demanded. The injury on his shoulder was still seeping blood. Little twinges of pain shot across his shoulders and down his spine from the hairline cut.

Hollander stood with his arms crossed and his eyes on the floor. "It's not the cut that's the problem. It's more complicated than that."

The overweight scientist wouldn't even look him in the eye. Genesis wanted to shake him.

"What is the problem then?” Genesis demanded.

"You are.” Hollander finally looked up at him.

"Excuse me?”

"Your cells aren't repairing themselves properly." He shook his head. "They aren't repairing themselves at all."

Genesis stared down at him. That couldn't be right. Even a normal human would have mostly healed by now, and he was a SOLDIER. "Why?” he asked.

Hollander turned away, clearing his throat and shooting a look at the microscope and computers at the tables. "I have to run some more tests."

"Why?” he demanded, crowding the scientist.

"I've told you your initial treatments weren't standard,” Hollander said, looking frustrated and flustered. "Your cells might be mutating from the Mako."

Genesis tensed and pain shot down his spine. He hissed at the pain. Mutating cells? What was this, some kind of cancer? A knot formed in his stomach at the possibility. None of this was right. He was a SOLDIER; SOLDIERS didn't get sick. Everyone knew that.

"Why were my treatments different?” he asked.

"That's classified."

Of course it was. He scowled. When had Shinra ever told them anything about what was done to their own bodies?

"How long until you can fix it?” he asked. When Hollander didn't respond, he grabbed his shoulder and forced him to turn back to face him. "I can't afford to be injured like this. The war could start back up again at any moment! You have to fix it."

"I will fix it! I can, it just takes time,” Hollander said, trying to wrest his shoulder back from Genesis' grasp.

Genesis was about to tell him he didn't have any time, but his ringtone interrupted him.

He scowled and fetched the phone from his pocket, turning away from Hollander.

"What?” he barked into the phone.
He took a calming breath when Director Lazard replied. He felt tense and ready to snap at anyone who poked him.

Lazard ordered him up to his office without offering any explanation, which was unlike the otherwise polite man. Genesis felt a spike of irritation at being summoned, but he squashed it before he could say anything he’d regret. It was the Director's privilege to bark orders at SOLDIERS.

After the short call, Genesis put his shirt and coat back on, still being careful of his injury. Hollander sat at a microscope, plainly ignoring him. Genesis ignored him right back and marched out of the lab in a flurry of red leather.

By the time he arrived at Lazard's office, he had his temper mostly in check. He sauntered in and saw Sephiroth and Angeal already there, standing with arms crossed around the Director's large desk.

"Genesis, thank you for being prompt," Lazard said mildly. The new Director was a tall and thin man, with blond hair and a purple striped suit. With his thin, wire-frame glasses, he looked more like a librarian than someone who belonged on the Board of Directors, but Genesis found his mild manners highly suspicious. Nobody got to be a Shinra executive by being polite.

"What is this about?" Angeal asked.

Lazard took a deep breath and fingered a report on the desk in front of him. The polite and calm exterior cracked a little, and Genesis stood up straighter.

"Yesterday evening the plane carrying Commander Shepard was shot down over the East Wutai Sea," Lazard said, still looking at the report.

"What?" Sephiroth breathed, his crossed arms falling to his sides.

Lazard looked at each of them. "There were no survivors. I am sorry."

Genesis' breath felt stuck in his throat. He shook his head and took a reflexive step back. Surely-surely not.

"A crash landing wouldn't kill her," Angeal insisted. "How do you know were no survivors?"

"There was no landing," Lazard said quietly. "Witnesses from one of our Wutai bases saw the plane go down. It was destroyed before it even hit the water. She and the flight crew could not have survived."

"That's no guarantee," Angeal replied, but his voice was weak.

"So you don't really know anything," Genesis said with a snarl and a sharp gesture that shot pain across his shoulders. "This is just assumption."

"I understand this is hard," Lazard replied with a disgusting look of pity. "Jane Shepard was a good SOLDIER."

He blinked at the sheer nerve of presuming to use her first name. "How dare you?" he breathed.

"Is there a body?" Angeal cut in. His voice was thick with grief, but he stood tall and solemn.

"If one is found, it will be returned to her family."

They all looked to Sephiroth, who hadn't moved or said a word. If she really was dead, what would happen? Who would come for her? Who would mourn her?
Sephiroth mutely shook his head. His face was blank.

"She has no family," Angeal said for him. Nobody would come forward to claim the solitary SOLDIER. She would simply disappear, as sudden and jarring as she once arrived.

"I see." Lazard folded his hands in front of himself and looked down. "If you want, you have permission to tell her student about this before the information is officially released."

"Is that all?" Genesis asked, not bothering to sound polite. He wanted to leave, to break something, to look for his friend and to burn whatever got in his way. There was a lump in his throat that he viciously swallowed.

"No, unfortunately. This marks the end of the ceasefire." Lazard waited for some kind of reaction. All he got were silent nods. What did he expect them to say? "Wutai forces have surged south into our territory. The army is being mobilised, and SOLDIER is tasked with taking the last of the island. The president will not accept anything less than absolute surrender this time. Genesis, you are going to lead the charge. You will retake our lost territory and begin the march north. Sephiroth and Angeal, you will follow with the rest of our forces."

"Yes, sir," Genesis replied when the Director looked at him for a response.

Lazard nodded. "Dismissed," he said when it became obvious nobody else was going to speak.

The three of them stood together in silence outside of the Director's office. Sephiroth looked like he had shut down entirely.

"Just like that?" Angeal murmured. His shoulders were slumped and his head bowed.

"She deserved better than this," Genesis said, his hands curling into fists. Meaningless deaths happened. He knew that. But this… it hadn't even been a fight. It wasn't the hero's death she deserved. It wasn't a victory, it wasn't even a defeat. It was just an insult.

"They haven't found a body," Angeal pointed out. It didn't sound like he really believed it. "It hasn't even been twenty-four hours yet."

"In that armour, she'd sink like a rock," Genesis said before exhaling heavily at the reality of his own words. "Assuming there was even a body left to hit the water."

Sephiroth turned and walked away.

"I should tell Kusiel," Angeal said quietly, his hand rubbing his forehead. "She wouldn't want him to read it on a bulletin board." He left in the same direction as Sephiroth.

Genesis stood alone in the corridor. He ought to move. He needed to prepare to go back to Wutai. It would be harder now, with one less First Class. No sniper giving him cover. "My friend, do you fly away now?" he quoted in a hoarse whisper to the empty corridor.

"How dare she pull something like this?" he whispered. He felt tears pricking at his eyes. He scowled and refused to let them fall, swiping at any moisture that escaped his eyes. He was alone in the middle of a corridor, for goddess' sake. The movement made his shoulder flare up in agony, and he just wanted to collapse against a wall somewhere and cry. Instead, he swore and his hands balled into fists.

He marched towards the nearest training room, determined to destroy something.
Sephiroth sat in the dark, a pen gripped tightly in his hand. Silence blanketed him. Thick and heavy, it soaked into every corner. He paused halfway through his signature, a tremble running through his fingers.

He held the pen tighter and stared at the requisition and then the pile of work he'd gotten through. Armaments. Weaponry. Medical supplies. Troop movements. SOLDIER deployment.

He worked because there was work to be done. He kept his head down, forcing himself to focus on the paperwork.

It felt like he was in a dream, or maybe waking up from one. The surreal world where Shepard watched his back and together they rebelled against Shinra faded away like a day dream and reality flooded back in.

The pen splintered under his grip.

Mechanically he threw the broken pieces away and took a new one from his desk. He focused on the piece of paper, reading from the top. He'd already read it—several times—but the words ran together and didn't mean anything. He shook his head and started again. Half his signature trailed off along the dotted line.

He crossed it out and signed it properly. He put it in the out tray, and now his desk was empty.

His eyes fell to the empty chair opposite him.

He found himself in the elevator, heading for his quarters. Following protocols, the correct behaviour. His back was straight and his hands at his sides, his sword at his waist and his face blank.

The silence followed him. Scout spoke, but the words didn't reach him. Just a blur in the background, like those getting on and off the elevator.

The carriage stopped, and everyone else got out. The doors shut with him still inside. The elevator didn't move. He hadn't selected a level.

He blinked at the list of floor numbers running up the control panel. Scout was speaking again. He opened the doors and got out.

This was an unfamiliar level. Urban Development. He picked a direction and started walking, like he was going somewhere.

Endless corridors, empty and meandering. His eyes landed on an anomaly, a crash door with a glowing 'EXIT' above it.

He pushed the door open, and the high winds of Midgar slammed into him. He gasped against the stench of the city, the smog stinging his eyes like it hadn't in decades. His hands found the iron railing, and he leaned against it, breathless, weak, collapsing.

Oh goddess, Shepard. Shepard was dead.

He took a ragged breath and his legs felt weak. Shepard was—no, how could she? She wasn't—she couldn't. She couldn't be dead.

His Omni-tool flared to life and he pinged her contact. A quick message, requesting she check in. A second message, more urgent.Demanding a response. A third.
No, not Shepard. Not her. Please.

Nothing. There was no 'typing' alert, not even a 'message read.'

He called her. It rang and rang and rang.

He sucked in a toxic breath and felt hollowed out.

Maybe he could track her Omni-tool. He tapped the contact, but her 'tool was too well defended. His own basic device couldn't get a lock on her location, not through all the firewalls. There was no response.

He sat heavily on the steps. His eyes drifted over the staircase descending into the grid of lights below, barely seeing it.

He didn't know what to do.

Something inside of him ached so acutely tears pricked his eyes. His ragged breath was more like a sob, and he felt his shoulders tremble.

"Shepard…" he whispered, and the wind stole it away. He hunched in on himself and put his head in his hands.

He didn't know how long he stayed there. The cold seeped into him and the howling wind dried the moisture on his face.

"Sephiroth," Scout's voice called from his phone.

He didn't move.

"General Sephiroth."

He let out a deep, rattling breath. His eyes trailed over the sickly green smog billowing up from the reactors, smearing across the city and making the street lights dirty smudges. What did it matter?

"General Sephiroth. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you, Scout," he replied. His voice was hoarse and indifferent.

"Shepard may not be dead."

He felt drained and hollow, too worn out for false hope. "Do you have information I don't?"

"She has proven to be enduring," Scout said. "Until a body is found, Commander Shepard is only missing. She would not be the first SOLDIER to be falsely declared dead."

His eyes narrowed, and his gaze followed the dark clouds back to a hulking reactor. "Did the plane explode?"

"All reports indicate that it did," Scout replied after a moment's deliberation.

The small wisp of hope flickered out, but anger spiked in its place.

"Did the Science Department receive a report on this?" he asked. Tension replaced the weariness in his muscles.
"Yes," Scout said. "The loss of the plane was reported to Heidegger, who reported Shepard's disappearance to Hojo."

"I see." He got to his feet, his hand on the hilt of his sword. His eyes remained fixed to the reactor. "And where is Hojo now?"

"The location of his phone indicates he is arriving at his home. He has been at Reactor 0 for the majority of the day."

Sephiroth's jaw clenched.

He stalked down the stairs, the wind buffeting him and sending his hair wildly whipping around behind him. He disappeared before he reached the ground level.

He didn't waste time sneaking through the fake hospital ward, instead he entered the bulk of the reactor through the street exit. He didn't have whatever device Shepard had used to hack open the locks, so he plunged a fist into the control panels and forced the doors open with sheer strength.

Alarms blared. He didn't care.

Two guards in altered SOLDIER uniforms and with eyes that glowed too bright found him as he approached the first operating room. He cut them both down.

Footsteps thundered along the catwalks, and he held his sword at the ready. His eyes caught on the blood running down the blade and he glanced back at the two dead men.

He could destroy it all. He would like to see Hojo stop him.

Something held him back. He needed to find Shepard, if she was here. He could come back and destroy it all later, but he couldn't commit to that now. Not yet. Not when she might still be somewhere else entirely.

He lifted the two corpses and hauled them over the railing into the reservoir of Mako below. A second before the next group of brainwashed guards arrived, he turned invisible.

The guards ran past him.

He continued his march to the main operating room. It was empty, both the Mako tanks and the operating table, so he searched out the next room. And the next, and the next. When he ran out of labs to hunt through, he looked to the wall of Mako tanks. He checked every last one of the hundreds lined up against the wall. Many contained SOLDIERs in different stages of mutation and decomposition, but none of them resembled Shepard.

She was not in the Reactor. He had searched every nook and cranny. If Hojo had her, then he had taken her somewhere else. The alarms had been turned off at some point and the guards calmed down and resumed their standard patrol routes.

He stood before the wall of tanks, weary and invisible. The futile search had only made him more desperate. Maybe the Science Department had nothing to do with it. Maybe Shepard was just dead.

His breath hitched, but he shook his head against the thought. He wasn't going bury her until he had a body. If he had to drag the floor of the entire East Wutai Sea to find her, then so be it. A choking ball of grief lodged in his throat but he swallowed past it. Scout believed she could still be alive, which meant there had to be a significant statistical probability.
What did he do now?

His phone vibrated in his pocket. A text message. Maybe Shepard—

It was from Scout. He scowled at the glowing screen.

'Is Shepard in the Reactor?' The Geth must have tracked his location. He looked up to the corners of the sloping ceiling but there were no cameras in the labs. Scout was blind and immobile.

'She isn't here,' he replied.

He walked towards the exit. The purpose and rage he had entered with had evaporated, leaving only the hollow ache of grief. Hope felt increasingly like denial. He bowed his head and left the reactor.

His phone vibrated again. *The rescued SOLDIERs will soon require more petrol for their generators.*

Sephiroth pulled off the gravel road and drove down between the grassy cliffs. He had focused for the last two hours on making sure he took the correct turns. It was an obscure location and he had only been there once. It took some searching, but he eventually found the right cliff.

Outside was still and silent. Even the quiet rush of his boots against the grass sounded loud and jarring. The slosh of petrol in the canister he carried was much worse. Above him the stars were arrayed in full force. The belt of the Milky Way shone so brightly against the black backdrop.

His eyes fell back down to Gaia.

It took him a few minutes to find the door in the cliff. He knocked and waited. The large container was awkward to hold. Had they established a protocol for this? He didn't know.

The door opened into a quiet interior with only a small lantern illuminating two men slouching around a table.

The same SOLDIER who had greeted them before stood at the door now—Dalton, Sephiroth recalled the others calling him.

The stocky teenager blinked at him. "Where's Shepard?"

Sephiroth's planned greeting evaporated.

"Petrol." He pushed the canister into the boy's arms. "I understand you are running low."

"Uh, yeah. Thanks, sir," Dalton replied, looking down at his suddenly full arms and then back up to Sephiroth. The other two SOLDIERs were sitting up and watching now. "Did you bring anyone new?"

"No," Sephiroth replied tersely. "There are two more tanks of petrol in the car." He didn't have the truck and equipment Shepard had somehow acquired for getting people out of the reactor. He had only planned on making one rescue.

"Right. I'll just go get them then." Dalton nodded and slid past to get outside.

Sephiroth stood in the doorway, unsure of what needed to be said. The two SOLDIERs watched him silently. He recognized them: Steiner and Hansen. They had both been Third Classes under Angeal's command. A pair of crutches rested against Hansen's chair.
Dalton soon returned, and Sephiroth was impressed the diminutive Second had somehow managed to carry both heavy and unwieldy canisters at once. The boy looked at him, waiting for further instruction.

Sephiroth had intended to tell them what had happened. They had a right to know, especially with their livelihood resting on Shepard as it did, but the words were difficult to form. He was still standing by the doorway in silence.

"Sir?" Dalton asked, after a long moment of nobody saying anything.

He took a breath and steeled himself. "Shepard was in a plane crash yesterday. Shinra has reported… no survivors."

Steiner rocketed to his feet, his chair scraping noisily against the concrete floor. Hansen started to rise, but collapsed onto the side of the table, his leg giving out under him.

They all stared at Sephiroth, sharing looks of disbelief and horror.

"What? But—but Shinra does that all the time," Steiner said. "We've all been declared dead!"

"I've checked the reactor. She isn't there," Sephiroth replied. "The wreckage of the plane landed in the ocean east of Wutai."

Steiner shook his head and took a step back.

"So we're alone," Dalton said, sounding very small.

Some part of Sephiroth wanted to turn away, to simply march out. He had his own grief—he didn't want the weight of theirs. The fear and desperation in their eyes kept him rooted in place.

"What's going on?" another SOLDIER asked, appearing from further inside the bunker. Several stood behind him, and the large red cat prowled into the room. "Is there news?"

"Shepard's dead," Hansen said harshly.

"How are we gonna…" Dalton trailed off, his eyes unfocused.

"They killed her." Hansen got his hands around his crutches and pulled himself up to his full height. "They found out and they killed her." He wasn't a short man, but he was rail thin.

"Do we know that?" Red asked, turning his eye to Sephiroth.

"It's over, Red," one of the newcomers said. "We're barely alive as it is."

"If Shinra found her, then we're next," a SOLDIER Sephiroth recognised as Morrison said. "We're all going to die here."

"We are not!" Dalton's own yell seemed to shake the boy out of his trance. "Shepard would be disgusted if she saw us falling apart like this. We're SOLDIERS, dammit! We can make it!"

"SOLDIERS!" Morrison spat. "We're teenagers squatting in a hill!"

"That's—that's not true."

"Open your eyes, Dalton!" he yelled back. "If she can't make it, what chance do we have?"
"Enough!" Sephiroth thundered, cutting through the panic. They fell silent, and all eyes turned to him. "You aren't without support. You are not dying. Shinra doesn't know about you, and you are not alone. You are SOLDIERs, and I expect you to act like it, understood?" He was met with silence. "I said is that understood?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" A unified chorus responded. He nodded sharply. The pack of panicked teenagers stood at attention, waiting on him.

He wasn't Shepard. But he was the General, and these were his men. He owed it to them to do everything he could. No matter where Shepard was, he would protect them.

Aching and alone, he stepped forward. With his hands clasped behind his back and his head held high, he addressed his men.

"Until it's verified, Commander Shepard is only missing. But even if she is dead," he couldn't keep his voice from faltering but he ploughed on anyway, "we will keep on going. Shinra's experimentation will be stopped, and we will survive."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Shepard took a gasping breath, cold water dripping off her face and running down her neck. Her eyes snapped open, trying to blink through the blur of water and disorientation of having been forced awake.

A masked face loomed in front of hers. Her biotics surged to life, throwing them back and snapping manacles she hadn't even realised were holding her down. She was on her knees in nothing but the thin jumpsuit she wore under her armour.

A dozen blades were suddenly at her throat and back. She froze. Her head was spinning, but she gritted her teeth and tried to focus.

"That's enough," a familiar voice rang out.

The masked warriors remained still, their blades pressing at the skin under Shepard's chin. She tilted her head, careful of the katana at her throat, just enough to see who had spoken.

Flanked by two warriors in magnificent armour, sat the Empress of Wutai.
Bitter Interrogations

The Empress of Wutai watched Shepard with a bland frown, as though observing an insect she intended to squash.

Shepard straightened her back, despite being on her knees, and waited to see what the Wutai intended to do with her. She'd read the reports of what became of the few SOLDIERs taken prisoner. The earth floor below her smelt of old blood.

She ran a swift inventory in her head: her body ached all down her left side, and she was pretty sure someone had punched her in the face given the pain surrounding her right eye. No broken bones as far as she could tell. No rifle either, and no armour. Her wrist twitched. No Omni-tool.

She could still feel her Biotic amp at the base of her skull, most likely the Wutai didn't know about it. She had made a point of never mentioning to anyone that biotics could be largely defanged with the simple removal of a subdermal chip.

At a gesture from the empress, the masked guards removed their blades from her neck and took a step back. Half a dozen of them were stationed within her line of sight in the small room, including the royal guard. Shepard was prepared to bet there was at least a full company of Crescent ninjas nearby, out of sight but ready to die for their sovereign.

"What do you think of my country, Commander?" Empress Suiko asked in a voice that was low and quiet. Sharp eyes watched Shepard from under a heavily lined forehead.

It was a trap, but she couldn't not answer, so she chose to simply be honest. "Heavily fortified and well defended," she rasped, her voice hollow from the long silence. She looked Suiko in the eye, the ruler of an ancient empire interviewing a single prisoner in a dirt pit. "You're stronger than Shinra expected but not invincible."

Suiko may as well have been masked like her guards for all the reaction she gave.

"And what do you think of Shinra?" she asked.

A smile crossed Shepard's face. "Heavily fortified. Stronger than I expected." Her voice had recovered and rang out strong and clear. "Not invincible."

Suiko's eyes narrowed. "Do you know why you are here?"

"Because Shinra decided I was more of a liability than an asset," she replied, scowling at the thought. She couldn't afford to be trapped here with Shinra as her enemy, but the choice wasn't hers. She looked up at empress. "And because I'm more useful to you alive than dead."

"Ah," Suiko said with an indulgent smile at her lips. It didn't reach her eyes. "The woman who killed my predecessor hopes to buy mercy with co-operation."

"Torture me if you want," Shepard said, shrugging. "You'll get no more information than you would by just asking." Plan A was to talk her way out. She felt for her biotics in the back of her mind. Plan B was a lot bloodier.

Suiko rose to her feet, a tower of silk brocade flanked by scowling silver masks. "You have much to answer for."
Shepard held her biotics on the brink of visibility, ready to unleash a powerful blast. "Have you come to hear me scream or to hear me talk?"

Suiko watched her silently for a moment, before she gave a nod. The guards promptly marched out of the room. Only the two heavily armoured royal guards remained.

Shepard grudgingly relaxed her hold on her biotics.

"Why should we believe anything you say?" Suiko asked. With the guards gone, her words sounded less like an imperious declaration and more like a genuine question.

"Shinra tried to have me killed," Shepard replied. "We both know the ceasefire won't last, and I have no interest in dying for Shinra's secrets."

"Your loyalty is a fickle thing." Suiko frowned down at her.

She shook her head. "No, it just doesn't belong to Shinra."

"Then who does command your loyalty?"

Shepard took a deep breath. She looked at the two guards, then back to the empress. There would be no taking this back. "I answer to the Systems Alliance."

Suiko looked studied her with serious eyes for a moment before her lips pursed. "Do you mock me?"

"Did you really think I was from Mideel?" she replied.

Suiko's shoulders stiffened. "Where are you from?"

"Give me my Omni-tool and I will show you."

"My prisoner asks for a weapon," she scoffed.

Shepard spread her hands out. The broken ends of her shackles dangled from her wrists. "I give you my word I won't attack you."

The empress' expression informed Shepard of what she thought of that.

"Where are you from?" Suiko asked again, her voice harder.

"I was born on Planet Earth."

The royal guards moved for the first time since Shepard had woken as they shared a glance through their masks. One took half a step back.

Shepard put one foot forward, lifting herself until she was on only one knee. The manacles around her ankles pulled tight. The guards drew their swords. She stood and drew herself up to her full height but made no other move. "I captain the Normandy SR-2, which flies between the stars on behalf of the Systems Alliance."

The Empress stepped back, uncertainty on her face. Shepard stood nearly a head taller than her.

"Do you have proof?"

"Everything about me is proof." She gestured at herself and at the glow of her face. "Shinra doesn't have the technology to make armour or weapons like mine. They can't make holograms like mine,
and they can't produce enhancements like mine. I crash-landed in Junon two years ago. I had never set foot on Gaia before that day."

The empress didn't move, but a tremor shook her hands. The guards moved to stand between the two women, their swords extended. Suiko collected herself with a shake of her head and lifted her chin. "Why did you fight for Shinra?" Her voice didn't waver.

"I was injured and in their territory. They offered me a deal." Some part of Shepard wanted to hang her head in shame, but remorse would serve nobody here. She still had her own war to fight. She looked Suiko in the eye, between the two guards. "You didn't destroy that plane, Shinra did. I owe them nothing."

Suiko's expression wavered, her brows heavy over her eyes.

Shepard hadn't expected such a defensive response. Nobody in Shinra had been so alarmed. They all seemed quite comfortable with the idea of aliens.

"Do you know anything of our legends, Commander?"

Shepard hesitantly shook her head, not seeing the point of the question.

"The priests of Leviathan tell of the death that fell from the skies in the shape of a woman." Suiko stepped forward as she spoke, her voice hardening again. She stood between her guards, all uncertainty gone from her expression. She looked up at Shepard with a challenge in her scowl. "It brought war and pestilence. It turned the people against each other. Gaia itself had to rise up to crush the threat before the last of her children could fall."

Shepard blinked in surprise. A mix of hope and caution spiked inside of her. Had there really been previous extra-terrestrial contact? It could just be a legend, or there could be space-worthy tech somewhere. But she could see the defiance in Suiko's gaze and the fear in the posture of the guards. It didn't matter whether or not some asari really had made it to Gaia—to the people in front of her, aliens posed a far greater threat than Shinra.

"Death and war were on Gaia long before I got here," she said.

"You wield them nonetheless," the empress replied coldly.

"So do you. I might be foreign, but I'm still just a sniper, just a woman with a gun. I am not the harvest." She looked away. What had really happened? An ardat-yakshi maybe? A rachni queen speaking through a local? Maybe even just a cunning quarian woman in the days before the enviro-suits? Too much curiosity would incriminate her, but the need to know more burned inside of her. "What did this woman who fell from the skies look like?"

Suiko gave Shepard a frank look.

"The legends say she disguised herself among Gaia's children."

Shepard let out a breath. A human couldn't have crash landed here hundreds of years in the past; they hadn't even gotten off of Earth yet. Maybe it was just a legend.

"This is my real face," she said in response to the implied accusation. "I am human. Cut me open and I bleed just like anyone else."

"So we have observed," Suiko replied, her expression once again the hard mask of an implacable empress.
"We share an enemy," Shepard entreated. "I have no reason to fight you."

There was a moment of silence as the empress observed her, a hard frown on her face.

"Guards," she called out.

Those who had left now filed back in, taking up stations around Shepard. Suiko turned and left without another word.

Angeal silently followed Genesis onto the roof of the Shinra building. He frowned at his friend's back.

Genesis seemed determined to fly off to Wutai without so much as a parting glance, but Angeal wasn't about to let another friend disappear without saying goodbye. It was cruel of him to even try.

They hadn't seen much of each other in the last few days, both grieving quietly and alone. Angeal had thrown himself into training the younger SOLDIERs. He had tended to his plants, polished the Buster Sword, and written to his mother, anything to keep his hands busy. He didn't know what Genesis had done in that time, though it probably didn't include sleeping. He looked pale and irritable, with rings under his eyes and his lips sneering all too easily.

Angeal opened his mouth to say something, but the wind chose that moment to pick up, throwing the tails of Genesis' coat at his face.

"Genesis," Angeal spluttered, pushing the red leather out of the way.

"Even if the morrow is barren of promises," Genesis said, casting his eyes across the small tarmac, "Nothing shall forestall my return."

"It better not," Angeal replied.

"My friend, the fates are cruel. There are no dreams, no honour remains." His attention caught on the nearest trooper, one of the very few women in the army, standing guard near some expensive equipment. Genesis frowned at the sight of her. "The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

"Genesis," Angeal grabbed his arm before he could saunter off again. "Talk to me."

Genesis winced at the hold on his arm, and Angeal let go, confused by his reaction.

"What do you want?" Genesis asked, putting a step's distance between them.

"Are you alright?"

He scoffed at the suggestion.

Angeal pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course, he wasn't all right. None of them were. But this suffocating silence was too much. What was happening? Why did it feel like everyone was collapsing in on themselves, leaving him behind? Sephiroth had retreated into himself, speaking only when absolutely necessary while Genesis hid behind a wall of anger and Loveless. Angeal felt trapped alone, banging on doors that were all locked from the other side.

"You're not handling this well," Angeal said. "Please, talk to me!" Damnit, he wasn't handling it well himself. All he wanted was some solidarity. The Shepard-shaped hole in their little group left him so alone.
"I didn't ask for your pity," Genesis snapped. "Shepard's the one who's dead—feel sorry for her."

"What?" the nearby trooper gasped. "Goddess, no!" She staggered back, her hand held to her mouth.

Angeal winced, the news hadn't been made available to all of Shinra yet; only certain high ranking members of SOLDIER knew.

"Trooper—" he began.

"This is an army, Private, not a group therapy session," Genesis lashed out at the girl, not caring about the other workers and troopers watching. "No one cares about your hurt feelings."

Her head bowed, and she seemed to shrink into herself.

"Yes, sir," she mumbled, returning to her post.

Angeal saw it and felt shame at his friend's display. He crossed his arms and gave Genesis a well-worn scowl of disappointment.

"She would have bitten your head off if she knew you were taking your anger out on the infantry," he said in a low voice.

"She can't, though, can she?" Genesis replied.

Angeal looked at him in silence, hurt by his callousness.

Genesis' burst of anger seemed to wither under his stare, and he turned away. After a moment of heavy silence, he faced the trooper.

"I take it you enlisted because you wanted to be like the late, great Commander Shepard?" Genesis asked. His voice was terse but not mocking.

"Yes, sir," the girl replied quietly.

"A piece of advice, then," Genesis said, his voice lowering. "Never let them see you flinch. Shepard knew that better than anyone."

"I'm… not being deployed."

"I wasn't talking about the Wutai," Genesis replied darkly before flicking his hair and marching on towards the helicopter.

"What was that about?" Angeal asked, following his friend again.

Genesis didn't deign to answer. He looked down at the sprawling city with sharp eyes. "When are you joining me?"

"I don't know yet. Lazard hasn't told me what he's planning."

"Well, don't dawdle. Midgar is hardly any safer."

He crossed his arms. "I think a live warzone is probably more dangerous than an overpopulated city."

Genesis gave an amused hum. "Never underestimate Shinra."
Angeal frowned. He didn't understand. "Genesis, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to war." Genesis' sharp eyes turned on him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm following my orders," he replied.

Genesis arched an eyebrow. "Pity." He turned away and opened the door of the helicopter.

"What—"

"Goodbye, Angeal." He got in and shut the door.

Sephiroth sat on an examination table.

Hojo stood in front of him, his back hunched as he took blood from Sephiroth's arm. Neither of them spoke. The sting of new Mako coursed through Sephiroth's veins.

It had been some time since he had last been summoned down to the labs for a check-up. The war had interrupted the monthly routine which stood for two and a half decades. He felt the needle withdraw from his arm, the reservoir full of his blood.

"You're tense, boy." Hojo looked up at him through thick glasses.

Sephiroth refused to reply. Whether he agreed or denied it, he would just be giving ground.

The tendons in his arm were pulled tight. He had given all the ground he was going to.

"Shame about that plane crash," Hojo continued. He always stood uncomfortably close. He made a point of it.

Sephiroth said nothing. Sunken, calculating eyes watched him for any response.

"It's no great loss." Hojo pushed his glasses back up his nose and lifted his chin. "You've always been stronger on your own."

Sephiroth wanted to break his neck. He returned Hojo's unblinking stare and decided that one day he would.

At 0530 hours, Scout watched Kunsel, SOLDIER Second Class, enter a service elevator.

Previously observed behaviour did not have him awake for another two hours. He had not been assigned any missions necessitating this deviation.

Kunsel's behaviour had changed in the last week. Sleep patterns were disrupted, and his hours of socialising had decreased. Communications from his phone had slowed to a crawl after Angeal told him the news.

Everyone in the Shinra building was observed, but Shepard's apprentice was of special interest. Scout often altered the processes of the computers Kunsel used to make them more efficient. They tracked the information he acquired, how he interpreted it, and what he chose to do with it. Runtimes actively traced his phone when he left the building in case something should happen to him. Sometimes they remotely deactivated Scarlet's malfunctioning machines to spare Kunsel a fight. Other times they activated them and sabotaged the targeting parameters to see what Kunsel was capable of.
Scout liked him.

Kunsel pressed the 'Stop' button on the elevator. His shoulders slumped and he stood listlessly in the middle of the large carriage.

He didn't move for some minutes.

"Hi," Kunsel mumbled.

Scout checked the camera. There was no one within human hearing range of the elevator. Perhaps Kunsel was talking to himself.

"My name is Kunsel," he whispered, lifting his head to look up at the security camera. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Odin, I feel like a fool."

Was this a message for someone? Scout saved the footage, in case it needed to be delivered somewhere. Runtimes checked the worker who reviewed security footage. She was sleeping in the booth. Nobody was accessing the video.

"She—Shepard told me to introduce myself to the elevator." His head dropped. "I think she was laughing at me."

This was an unexpected development.

"I don't know if you know, but she's dead now. Shepard. Wutai shot her down," Kunsel said. "Figured you'd want to know."

Scout wanted to tell him that the reports were inconclusive. The Geth did not regard a missing platform as evidence of destruction. Especially not in regards to Commander Shepard, who had once been declared deceased only to resurface two years later on the opposite side of the galaxy. They kept their silence. They had no evidence to report beside the circumstantial.

"They've given me a bunch of her missions," he continued, whispering into the empty elevator. "I guess now that I'm the only sniper left I've got to pick up the slack. I'll be shipping out again soon. They'll be counting on me to keep everyone covered." His shoulders trembled. "They want me to fill her shoes. Just like that."

Scout watched him reach up and pull off his helmet. His brown eyes were puffed up and red over freckled cheeks. He rubbed at them.

"I don't know what to do," he whispered.

Possible options were presented by the runtimes. Perspectives were presented and considered, and Scout reached a consensus.

Kunsel sighed. "I guess she really was just having a laugh." He put his helmet back on and reached for the 'Open Door' button.

The elevator jerked into motion and started climbing upwards. The doors remained firmly shut.

Kunsel's head snapped up in surprise. He looked to the camera. "What is this?" He tapped the 'Stop Elevator' button a couple of times.

The elevator moved slowly upwards.

It came to a stop halfway up the building, and the doors slid open with a creak. Kunsel stood
defensively in the corner, his hand on his Materia bracer.

Cait Sith sat primly in the middle of the corridor, waiting for him.

"You?" Kunsel asked of the little cat, barely relaxing out of his defensive stance.

Cait meowed. Kunsel cocked his head. Cait prowled forward and then promptly climbed up Kunsel's trouser leg. The SOLDIER squawked at the sharp little claws digging into him until he had a warm, purring cat in his arms. Cait rubbed himself against Kunsel's shoulder and face, shamelessly burrowing into him. The tension drained out of his stiff posture. He held the cat close and let out a tremulous breath.

Scout watched Cait provide the comfort their own platform couldn't. They hoped they had helped.

"What floor is this?" Kunsel asked absently, his fingers tickling Cait behind the ears.

Cait jumped down out of his arms. He meowed back over his shoulder at Kunsel and trotted down the corridor. Kunsel didn't move at first, but Scout kept the doors open. Cait trotted back, smacked Kunsel in the leg, meowed more insistently, and turned back to the corridor. Kunsel followed him into the depths of Urban Development.

Shepard sat leaning against the dirt wall with her legs stretched out before her. Not long after the empress left, the prison guards had been swapped out for much more heavily armed Crescent Unit soldiers. She'd faced them many times throughout the war, but she had never seen them this jumpy. Two stood guarding the door, facing her from the opposite side of the room. The one on the left would reach for a Leviathan talisman dangling from his belt every time she looked at him. It seemed she had been upgraded from 'Shinra Lackey' to 'Bringer of the Apocalypse'.

She cast a surreptitious glance at the weapons they carried. Two swords and a fully equipped Materia bracer each. The jumpy guard's knuckles were turning white.

She couldn't afford to stay here much longer. The odds of blasting her way out were looking increasingly slim. As far as she could ascertain, they were keeping her in some kind of trench or hole in the ground. It was clever—it meant her biotics were less useful. She couldn't plough through solid earth the way she did a simple wall. It didn't change her resolve, though. She wasn't just going to sit and wait forever. She had soldiers to protect and a corporation to raze to the ground.

Telling the truth had been a mistake. She pursed her lips at her own poor judgement. She'd wanted to establish herself as a third party in the Wutai/Shinra war. Technically, she had succeeded, just not in any way that benefitted her.

*Dammit all.* If only she had more information. How could she negotiate with people she didn't understand?

Her hand twitched for her absent Omni-tool. She needed to know what was happening outside of this dirt pit. Instinct told her to get in touch with Sephiroth. Did he know she was still alive? How many other SOLDIERs had Shinra tried to capture? She hoped liked hell she was the only one.

She hoped they were safe.

The door opened and a barrel chested figure marched in. She had never seen him at close range, but the scars lining the right side of his face made Takahashi easily identifiable. The two guards held their heads higher at the arrival of the general.
He nodded to the two of them, and they promptly left.

"The SOLDIER who murdered the emperor. 'The Angel of Death,'" he said with eyes harder than granite. "It is an honour." He inclined his head, and she got the feeling he would rather be a twisting a blade.

"The honour is all mine, 'SOLDIER killer,'" she said dryly.

The Wutai General looked down at her with a sneer.

His presence here and now was telling. The empress had sent her most ruthless and decorated general to interrogate a single prisoner while Shinra was probably firebombing their lands. 'Harbinger of Death and Pestilence' indeed.

"You tell us you are an alien, here to conquer Gaia," he said. The scars on the side of his face cut through the side of his lips, making him look like he was constantly sneering. She couldn't imagine what it would look like when he smiled, or that she would have any opportunity to find out.

"I have no intention of conquering Gaia," she replied.

"Perhaps you are a distraction, planted by Shinra." His head leaned to the side, and his eyes looked her over critically. "Or a mistake, fallen into our hands."

He wore full armour. She was in her under-armour jumpsuit.

"Perhaps," she said, with a tilt of her head. If he thought she was weak just because she wasn't in her armour, then he would be violently corrected.

"Get up."

Shepard slowly pulled herself to her feet. Nobody had tried to replace the shackles she had broken earlier - they hadn't wanted to get that close to her - so broken metal cuffs dangled from each of her limbs. She stood shorter than Takahashi by a couple of inches. He was a balding man, tall and solidly built, and according to rumour he had killed more SOLDIERs than anyone else alive.

He circled her like a shark. She looked straight ahead, her head held high.

"I will ask and you will answer," he said, walking behind her. She heard the quiet shing of a sword being drawn. "Answer well, and you may keep your life."

She held up her empty hands, showing she was unarmed and ready to co-operate. Her biotics lingered at the back of her mind, just in case.

"Where will Shinra begin its attack?" he asked.

"Commander Rhapsodos will lead the charge." She returned to parade rest. "He'll burn down the blockades at the DMZ and press on to the cities on the eastern coast." She paused. Those had been the plans, but those plans included herself as support. "What did Shinra say about my disappearance?"

"You are not here to ask questions," he replied.

"Shinra intends to make prisoners of your people and force them to work in Shinra's munitions factories in the south." She turned her head to look at him from the corner of her eye. "If Genesis thinks you killed me, there will be no prisoners."
"We do not fear the firebrand."

She looked ahead again. "Yes, you do."

There was no reply. Takahashi walked back into her line of sight, one hand held behind his back, the other holding his sword at his side.

"What will General Sephiroth do? His war council is now short by one."

"I don't know," she said. "Grief makes him vicious, but it doesn't make him stupid. He might not mourn me, but I have never known him to take any loss sitting down." She lowered her head. Sephiroth had been prepared to unleash Alexander against the Wutai in revenge for Guzzard's death. What would he do for hers?

"You have no loyalty to Shinra?" Takahashi asked.

"They have no loyalty to me either."

His eyes fell to the side of her face and neck, obviously examining her scars. "What are you?"

"Human."

His scowl grew more severe. "Humans are Gaia's children." He took a step towards her. "One more time. What are you?"

She looked up at the wooden ceiling. "Australian."

His eyes narrowed. "What is that?"

"Someone from Australia."

He gave a short nod and stepped back, as though he had gotten to the root of the matter. She wondered who he was trying to fool. She may as well have told him she was a Rachni Queen for all he understood.

"This 'Australia' is your home?"

"Normandy is my home," she corrected him quietly.

"What is the N7?" He began circling her again.

"Combat designation. Every Alliance officer has one. N designates special forces and the number is aptitude level, seven being the highest."

"You are an infiltrator," he said from outside of her line of sight.

"Yes."

"What do you want from Gaia?"

"To tear Shinra apart," she replied without hesitation.

She heard his footsteps halt. "Why?"

"Call it justice."

He said nothing for a moment.
"What do you know of justice?" he spat. She felt his hand grab at her throat and her biotics lashed out, freezing him in a stasis before he could take hold and yank her backwards. She turned, extricating herself from his grasp, and calmly observed him.

"I know it's not the same as revenge." She released him from the biotic hold with just enough push to make him stumble backwards.

He surged back, his sword held out, ready to try and cut her down.

"The fields of Wutai cry out for your blood," he hissed, "the mountains demand your death, the rivers surge up to drown you." His sword pressed against her stomach, held ready to impale her. "You know nothing of revenge, or justice, but I will show you both, little girl."

She raised an eyebrow, looking at his tensed sword arm, then up at the spitting rage in his eyes. "I'm disappointed, Takahashi," she drawled, baring her teeth and leaning forward, uncaring for the blade at her abdomen. "Do I look like a kid who got caught in their first fight? Like some FNG running off nothing but guts and Mako? You want to interrogate me, put your bloody back into it."

He leaned back but his sword didn't move. "Perhaps you do not understand the danger you are in."

"Can the act." She swatted him away with a backhanded biotic surge. He stumbled back to the centre of the room, his Materia glowed and a shield snapped into place around him.

"I know where you stand," she said, prowling forward. "You're angry and you're insulted, but most of all, you're dying. You're looking your own extinction in the eye." She swallowed up the distance between them, until her arcing biotics clashed against his humming shield. "I've been there. Choosing between destroying your own cities or letting the enemy sack them. Sacrifice the port or the men defending it? Do you give up the hospital or the munitions factory? Who do you kill today in order to buy tomorrow?" She let her biotics die away. "I admire the act. So proud in your righteous anger. Dignified. But we both know that there's no such thing as dignity when you're fighting for survival."

"You assume much," he replied, his shield still humming between them.

"I offered Shinra my services in return for theirs. They've betrayed me, and now the offer is open to you." She spread out her hands. "How badly do you want to survive?"

"Why should I want your help?"

"What you want has nothing to do with it. If you could afford to kill me, I would already be dead."

He still scowled, but his shield evaporated.

"You can tell Empress Suiko that I swear on the Normandy itself I will tear Shinra to the ground," she said. "With or without you."

He lowered his sword, but his other hand wrapped around a Leviathan talisman. "One day, I will kill you for what you did."

She inclined her head. "But not today."
A black bag was pulled from her head, and Shepard squinted in the sudden light. Her optics refocused, adjusting to the glare. She was standing in a humble courtyard, surrounded by numerous guards, with the early morning sun stabbing through a gap in the stone walls. The air felt light and clear, alpine.

The empress and Takahashi stood watching her, both grim and silent. Takahashi approached.

Shepard nodded respectfully and waited to see what they intended. Her wrists and ankles ached from where the manacles had chaffed. The broken metal cuffs had been removed before they let her see where they were. She stopped herself from rubbing the raw skin.

Stopping within arm's reach, Takahashi studied her with his ever-present scowl and then held out her Omni-tool.

Relief passed through Shepard at the sight of it, but she kept her expression bland. What was this: a compromise or a trap? She couldn't help the twitch in her fingers before she took the Omni-tool. The haptics lit up under her touch where Takahashi's fingers had passed straight through. Dozens of alerts for missed calls and messages glowed in a list on the main display. With a brush of her fingers she changed the interface into a Turian dialect.

"Why did Shinra want to kill you?" Suiko asked.

"I'm sure you heard about my trial," Shepard replied.

"So, they kill their own warriors in the middle of a war?"

"I've been sabotaging the experimentation that makes SOLDIERs," Shepard said, gingerly strapping the Omni-tool to her wrist. "They must have found out it was me."

"Why did you do that?" the empress asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Because human experimentation is wrong." She hated the fact that she was living on a planet where that was a controversial statement.

Takahashi scoffed. "Ridiculous coming from a SOLDIER."

Shepard looked at him, unimpressed. "Nobody knows it better than a SOLDIER."

He sneered and stepped away from her. One of the guards produced a sack and dumped it on the ground in front of her. She could see the stripe of her armour through the opening at the top and scowled at their treatment of her gear.

She looked to the empress. "You're letting me go?"

At a flick of Suiko's wrist, the gate in the courtyard wall was opened. Grey mountainside lay beyond, sloping away towards the southern half of the island. They must be in the mountains just south of the capital.

"Go. Fight your war, and I will fight mine," Suiko commanded. The guards moved around them, leaving the way out clear for her. "When Shinra lies in ashes, you and yours will never again set foot on Wutai soil."
Shepard nodded slowly. "You have my word, Wutai sovereignty will be acknowledged by the Systems Alliance and the Citadel Council."

"Your word?" Takahashi drawled.

"It's all I have to give," Shepard replied. She picked up the sack and opened it, checking everything was accounted for. Offended murmurs went up at that, but she was past caring. Her gear was more precious to her than anyone's pride. Satisfied nothing was missing, she swung the sack onto her shoulders.

"We had thought you carried the Alexander summon," Suiko said.

"I destroyed the Materia," Shepard replied. A number of the guards clenched their fists at that, but Suiko and Takahashi only frowned.

"Why?" the empress asked.

"It couldn't discern between enemies and allies, making it too dangerous to be wielded. But its firepower was too tempting to leave just hanging around, so I removed it from the equation."

Takahashi looked to his empress, his expression thoughtful. "Better in the planet's hands than Shinra's."

"The Materia will grow back, in time." Suiko shook her head, dismissing the subject. "You are free to go, but have a care. If you fall into our hands again, we will not be so generous a second time."

Shepard nodded. "Fair enough."

With all her worldly possessions in a sack over her shoulder, she walked down the little cobbled path. She took spiteful joy in activating her tactical cloak before she reached the wall. The way the guards tensed and searched the air for her while she ghosted out through the gate was tremendously satisfying.

As soon as she was out of sight of the walls, she stopped and put all her armour back on again. They had been keeping her in an old and isolate fortress, built into the side of the mountain range. Her skin crawled with the filth of uncounted days without a wash and the assorted bruises and cuts she'd acquired, but strapping her armour back on made it all irrelevant. The sheer relief of its secure hold around her almost took her breath away. She wasn't safe though, not really.

She trekked on, determined to put at least half a day's march between her and the fortress. The only path led west, down the mountainside to the capital, so she scaled the mountain to the south. She doubted the empress would change her mind, but she had no delusions over how the Wutai regarded her. The watchmen at the fortress would have seen which way she left.

She looked back down at the steep bank of scree she'd managed to scramble up. It wouldn't be impossible to track her, but it would be really inconvenient.

The sun was hanging low in the sky by the time she felt safe enough to stop. A rocky outcropping provided some protection from the nagging rain that had followed her for the last hour. She sat with her back to the wall of rough rock and finally turned her attention to her Omni-tool.

She switched its setting back to English and paused at the number of messages Sephiroth had sent her. He'd tried calling just as many times, then tried to track the Omni-tool, before trying to just hack into it. Her fingers slowed and stopped tapping. The growing desperation was palpable in his messages, requests for a reply turned into demands that turned into pleading. The messages stopped
altogether.

She hung her head. Her heart twisted and moisture pricked at her eyes at the raw grief in his words. 'I'm alive,' she sent. She didn't know what time zone he was in and she didn't care either—he needed to know the truth. She hoped…

She hoped he took the news well. Memories of the last time she had been in this situation resurfaced. Trying to tell people she was alive again after two years of death. Kaiden never really forgave her for the way she handled it.

The Omni-tool rang.

"I'm still alive, I'm alright," she said, immediately answering the call. "I'm in Wutai territory, but I'm free and uninjured.

She heard him exhale harshly, but he didn't say anything.

"Sephiroth? Can you hear me?"

"I, yes… I can hear you," he replied, his voice a hoarse whisper, "Shepard." He said her name like a dying man's last hope and it twisted something tight and painful inside of her.

"Are you alright?" she asked gently.

He sucked in a rattling breath. "I'm not the one who's been pronounced dead."

"They lied."

"Thankfully," he replied quietly. "Are you hurt?"

"No. A few minor injuries from the impact, but they've healed."

"What happened?" She could practically hear his relief taking a backseat to his need for answers. "How did you survive? Was the plane really shot down?"

"Two of the brainwashed SOLDIERs from the reactor boarded the plane, posing as regular SOLDIERs." She scowled. Hojo had gotten even bolder. How many other brainwashed SOLDIERs were hiding in plain sight? "They attacked me, I assume trying to sedate me and drag me down to the Science Department. The plane was destroyed in the fight. Wutai fished me out of the water."

He was deathly quiet for a moment.

"It was Shinra, then." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm in the mountains south of Wutai City."

"Genesis is at the Eastern Fort, you should head for our territory."

She looked out across the landscape. The foothills trailed away before her and then flattened out into the farmlands that made up most of the northern peninsula. She still had a long way to go before she was in Shinra territory. Would it be any safer?
"Shinra doesn't need to know I'm alive just yet," she said. "Or where I am. Or that I've made a deal with the empress."

There was another pause. "The Empress of Wutai?"

"What other empress could I possibly be talking about?" she asked. "I told her the truth: I'm not from Shinra, I'm not even from Gaia. She doesn't trust me, but we have a mutual enemy."

"Shepard," he said, sounding exasperated. She imagined he was pinching the bridge of his nose. "You do realise we are at war with Wutai?"

She looked sceptically at the Omni-tool and wondered how such an intelligent man could be so dense.

"Shinra is at war with Wutai, and I am at war with Shinra." She leaned her head back against the rocky wall. "As far as I'm concerned my contract is now void."

"What about me?" he asked.

"I have no fight with you. Unless you want me dead too?"

He scoffed. "If I wanted to kill you, I would have the courage to look you in the eye while I did it."

She smiled at the Omni-tool. "I can appreciate that."

"We need to meet. Everything is different now, with the war, the Science Department, your disappearance." He sighed. "Your alliance with Wutai."

She pursed her lips in thought. "Are you in Midgar?"

"Yes, and I'm unlikely to get permission to leave in the near future."

"What if I'm spotted collaborating with the enemy?"

"I would be ordered to hunt you down."

"Perfect, I'll send you my co-ordinates when I'm ready." Movement further down the mountainside caught her eye. A wild animal? Or someone following her? "I have to go," she said, getting up.

"Alright. Keep me updated, Shepard." He paused. "And... stay safe."

She smiled softly. "You too."

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Genesis was not at the Eastern Fort. No one was at the Eastern Fort.

Shepard stood in the mess hall of what had been an old Wutai base, her tactical cloak humming around her, and wondered what in space was going on. It should have been teeming with SOLDIERs and infantry, engineers and medics. Not a breath of movement disturbed the fort, not in the dungeons, not in the barracks, not even in the sentry towers. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and her eyes darted from dark corner to dark corner. It reminded her too starkly of colonies attacked by the Collectors. Everyone just gone, meals left half-eaten, pots still boiling on the stove, farm equipment left idling in the fields.

She felt her face pull into a scowl. This was different. There were no meals left out unattended. In fact, there was no food anywhere. She marched into the storage rooms. All empty. She checked the
weapons rooms, and found nothing but dust and rat droppings.

What was Genesis doing? Why abandon the base? This position was strategically vital. She had taken it herself, after months of laying siege to it. As soon as Wutai realised the fort was empty, they would surge down to take it back.

Not that she especially cared what territory was Shinra's or Wutai's, but this was Genesis' fort to hold. Had he completely lost his mind?

She squinted out a window at the surrounding territory. Farmland gave way to forest in the heart of Wutai. Was that smoke on the horizon? She drew her rifle and looked through the scope, but the trees hid whatever was happening below the thin wisps of rising smoke. Campfires?

She marched back out the way she came. No point staying here for Wutai to recapture her. She headed south-west, towards the smoke.

Hours later, she heard voices drifting through the trees. She paused and activated her cloak.

"Do you think Shinra will find us here?" a voice muttered off to her left.

"Course they will, that's why we're on guard," a deeper voice replied.

Two SOLDIERs, both Third Class, walked through the trees, glancing around them as they went. It was a weak excuse for scouting, they'd let her walk right up to them. She followed them through the underbrush.

"I don't know how I feel about fighting troopers, man," the first one said, trailing behind and slapping away branches as he walked. "My sister's getting shipped out this way pretty soon."

"We're only taking them captive," the other replied. "They don't know what Shinra really is, but once Rhapsodos tells them, they'll join us."

Shepard almost stumbled. She stared at the backs of the heads of the two SOLDIERs. Was this a budding rebellion right under her nose? How the hell had she missed this?

"And if they don't want to join us?" the first asked quietly, staring at his feet.

The other man looked back at him. "Then they've chosen Shinra over their fellow soldiers."

"Sarah wouldn't side with Shinra. Not over me. There's no way." He shook head. "She couldn't."

"See? Nothing to worry about."

Shepard de-cloaked behind them and loudly cleared her throat. One jumped half out of his skin; the other drew his sword and spun around.

They both gasped at the sight of her. The one with his sword out lowered it in shock. A second later he raised it again. His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

"How much did you hear?" he asked.

"More than enough," she replied. "I understand Genesis is recruiting?"

Angeal's phone buzzed. He kept his eyes rooted to the punching bag in front of him.
He'd given up on getting any sleep in the early hours of the morning and dragged himself down to the empty gym where he could get lost in the numbness of training. It was more productive then tossing and turning on a mattress, at least.

His eyes stung from too little sleep and his arms were beginning to swing sluggishly, but the movement was soothing. The rhythm, the dull thud of each impact, even the burn in his arms. Everything else faded away.

His phone vibrated again on the nearby bench. He briefly glanced at it before shaking his head and refocusing on the impact of his fists against leather. It was probably only the daily bulletins. Or spam emails. Not worth checking either way. Genesis didn't return his messages anymore, and Sephiroth barely spoke at all. His fist thudded against the punching bag. It could wait, whatever it was.

He heard the swoosh of the doors opening behind him and the slow footsteps of the first SOLDIERS of the day. The SOLDIER halls were sparsely populated these days, with nearly half of them over in Wutai under Genesis.

He let his arms drop and put a hand out to still the punching bag. He shouldn't let the others see him like this, practically a zombie. He rubbed his eyes and moved to collect his stuff.

A gasp and a loud clatter rang out across the gym. His head swung around to see a small cluster of SOLDIERS standing near the treadmills.

"Will?" a SOLDIER Second Class asked with a hoarse voice, shock clear on his face. Angeal recognised him as Ito, one of Shepard's old unit.

Another SOLDIER stood some distance from the group, obviously the 'Will' being addressed. Angeal squinted his eyes. The emblem on his belt wasn't the proper SOLDIER symbol.

"Oh goddess, you're alive!" Ito called out, surging forward. He looked like he was going to hug his friend, but Will didn't move, didn't react at all, and Ito's movements slowed to an uncomfortable stop. "What happened, Will? Where did you go? They…" he sucked in a gulp of air and his eyes looked watery, "they said you were dead."

The hairs on the back of Angeal's neck all stood up. Other SOLDIERS filtered into the gym in the background.

Will didn't reply. Glowing eyes followed Ito's movements, as empty as his expression.

"It's… it's me. It's Ito," the SOLDIER stuttered, putting a tentative hand on his friend's shoulder? "Will?"

Will shrugged him off, shoving him back a step.

"What the hell? What happened to you?" Ito cried out. He surged forward again, grabbing Will by the arms and shaking him. "Wake up, dammit! Answer me!"

Will reacted almost too fast for Angeal to see. He grabbed Ito and physically threw him back halfway across the gym, smashing into the exercise equipment.

"Hey! Enough!" Angeal yelled, snapping into action. He marched forward and helped Ito up before turning a scowl on Will. "What have you got to say for yourself, SOLDIER?" he asked.

Will didn't reply.
"This is not acceptable behaviour-" Angeal said, approaching him, before faltering. The other SOLDIERs who had entered the room moved to stand around them, their faces blank, and their eyes all glowing much too brightly. Angeal swallowed harshly. He recognised a couple of them. They had died from their injuries at Ymir Ravine. His words died away.

Ito and the small cluster of regular SOLDIERs stood closely behind him.

From across the room he could hear his phone ringing.

"Who are you?" he asked weakly. Blank faces in strange uniforms looked back at him. They were all armed. Angeal glanced over at his sword, leaning against the wall by the punching bags.

The doors opened again and Sephiroth entered. He pulled up short at the sight of them all.

Angeal let out a breath. Surely, he would know what was going on.

"Stand down," Sephiroth ordered.

Angeal didn't move. He wasn't stepping aside until the ring of dead SOLDIERs backed off.

"I said, stand down." Sephiroth placed himself between the two groups, glaring down at the blank faced men. After another moment's silence, they stepped back. They simply walked away, moving to the various stations in the gym as though nothing had happened.

"What is this, Sephiroth?" Angeal demanded.

Sephiroth observed them all and then ducked his head with a wince.

"Come with me," he said. He moved for the entrance.

"Wait," Angeal replied, quickly moving to gather up his sword and equipment and looking doubtfully at the dead SOLDIERs. He didn't want to leave the other men alone with them.

"It's safe," Sephiroth assured him quietly.

"What is all this? What's happening?"

He frowned at him. "You didn't read the memo."

Angeal held his tongue before he could ask 'What memo?' Of course, the one day he didn't check his messages. But how could something like this be explained away by a simple memo?

"Not here," Sephiroth said before he could ask another question. He turned and marched out the door.

Angeal followed, sparing a glance back at those left behind. Sephiroth boarded the elevator and held the door open for him.

"What is going on?" Angeal asked, catching up.

Sephiroth didn't reply. The doors slid shut, and he selected the executive floor.

"Who are those men? Where did they come from?"

He didn't answer for some time. "Don't you recognise them?" Sephiroth finally said.
Angeal's hands curled into fists. "Enough of this. Enough." He pushed the 'stop' button and rounded on Sephiroth. "No more. I can't take any more of this silence and doubletalk and cryptic looks. Someone is going to tell me what's happening around here, or so help me, I'll..." he ran out of steam, because what could he really threaten? "I'll do something," he finished weakly.

Sephiroth had the grace to look apologetic. "I only found out this morning. Director Lazard called me. On the president's orders, SOLDIER has a new unit, nearly three hundred men strong."

"Those men were all dead," Angeal replied.

Sephiroth's eyes fell. "So we were told."

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

Sephiroth only looked at him and waited.

"What happened to them all?" Surely, surely Shinra wouldn't... stoop to something like this. How could they? Why would they?

"Isn't it obvious?" Sephiroth looked coldly at him. "They were sent to the Science Department for treatment. They have been returned."

Angeal took half a step back. He felt a creeping cold in his limbs. He could barely believe it. It was too horrific to be true. He could name so many who died in Wutai. Had they all been hollowed out? Destroyed by their own side? If he hadn't stared into the empty glowing eyes of a man he had believed dead for nearly a year, he would have denied it could even be real.

Surely this couldn't have just happened. Nobody could simply make off with hundreds of SOLDIERs without leaving a trace. Someone had to have noticed; people should have known. It needed rubber-stamping, funding, and co-operation between the departments.

His eyes slowly rose to Sephiroth. "Did you know this was happening?"

Sephiroth didn't meet his gaze. "No."

He took another step back. "Yes, you did."

"I didn't agree to it," Sephiroth insisted, shaking his head. "I only found out... after Shepard discovered the lab." He let out a weary sigh. "She tried to stop it."

Angeal recoiled again but ran into the elevator wall behind him. "Is she going to be next then? Is she going to be the next dead-eyed SOLDIER stumbling into HQ?"

Sephiroth shook his head and glanced up at the camera in the corner of the ceiling.

"Do you know that?" Angeal asked.

"Shinra doesn't have her."

"Do you know that?" he demanded, feeling like he was pulled tight enough to break in two.

"Calm down."

"Calm down? How can you be calm, how can you ask me to be calm, when SOLDIER itself is being turned into an abomination! When Shinra is killing us—"
"She's not dead," Sephiroth hissed, grabbing his arm. The strength of his grip grounded him. Sephiroth's eyes were more focused and alive then he'd seen since the plane crash. Angeal took a deep breath and let it out again. The surge of panic drained away. He hadn't realised he was so close to hysteria. Just how tired was he?

"Shepard's in Wutai, not far from where Genesis was last seen," Sephiroth said. He released him and stepped back. "She got in touch with me last night. I wanted to tell you in person."

"What happened to her? Is she hurt?"

"She's not hurt, but we're going to find out what's going on. I've had your mission schedule cleared for the next three days. Which you would know if you checked your phone."

Angeal shook off the weak reprimand. "Can't she just come back here?"

Sephiroth's eyes slid away again. "Lazard will want to tell you about that himself." He pressed the button to get the elevator moving again.

"I'd prefer to hear it from you."

He sighed and crossed his arms, looking down at the metal floor. "Officially, she's still dead."

"And unofficially?"

Sephiroth looked at him sidelong. There was something cold and angry in the glow of his eyes and the clenching of his jaw. Angeal had thought Sephiroth had been mired in grief. Apparently, he had misread that too.

"Shinra tried to have her killed," Sephiroth said curtly, looking straight ahead. "She won't fight for Shinra again."

"What else is she going to do?" he asked. "Fight for Wutai?"

"I don't think so."

"This is madness. She can't fight a war on her own. Maybe Genesis can bring her in?"

Sephiroth shook his head slowly. "She's been seen in his company."

"What do you mean, 'seen in his company'?” Angeal asked, not about to let Sephiroth get away with such elusive answers. "What did Genesis say? And why am I the last one to hear about this?"

"Genesis hasn't said anything. There hasn't been any contact with him or his men for days. We don't know what he's doing" His voice lowered, "As of today, Genesis has been declared AWOL. Along with all of his SOLDIERs."

Angeal felt a chill run through him. "And Shepard's with him."

Sephiroth nodded. The elevator arrived with a ding, and the doors slid open to an empty corridor flanked by the directors' offices.

"She isn't fighting a one-woman war," he said, stepping out and making for Lazard's office. "She's got half of SOLDIER with her."

"Why would Genesis go along with that?" Angeal said, catching his arm.
Sephiroth looked back at him, a frown fixed to his face.

"I don't know."
Shepard stalked up the mountain path. The sound of Genesis' footfalls behind her were slow and dragging, grinding against the gravel of the path. Eastern Wutai sprawled out below them, slowly disappearing in the oncoming night.

The wind had dropped, leaving the evening air still except for the quiet hiss of Genesis' ragged breathing. Shepard glanced back at him. He laboured up the path with his head down and one hand tightly gripping his shoulder. He noticed her eyes on him and immediately straightened himself, flicking his hair back with a plastered-on smirk.

She paused and rolled her shoulders.

"I think I'll take a break." She lowered herself to the ground on the edge of the path, leaning against a rock. "We're making good progress; there's no rush."

Genesis huffed and pursed his lips, but ground to a halt anyway. His put hands on his hips, threw his head back, and breathed deeply of the cool night air.

She stared at him, not bothering to hide her frown. She had never known him to tire so easily.

"What?" he demanded when he noticed her looking at him. She just shook her head. She had never known him to be quite this defensive either, not around her.

When she'd stumbled over his budding rebellion in the Wutai forest she had been so thankful, almost as thankful as he was to find that she was still alive. But after the initial revelation, the situation struck her as off. He'd explained that he and his men wouldn't be used as Shinra's pawns anymore and were determined to fight back.

"What pushed you over the edge?" she had asked. "Did something happen while I was away?"

He had smiled at her bitterly. "A lifetime of abuses pushed me over the edge."

She watched him carefully now, wondering what he wasn't telling her. Surely this was the best possible scenario: he and his men had reached the same conclusion she and Sephiroth had regarding Shinra and were determined to do something about it.

It had taken her a good few hours to spy the pinched look around his eyes. The slight shake in his hands after he put something down. Whatever else was going on, Genesis was in pain and going to great lengths to pretend otherwise.

She had looked over his men, some setting up tents, others training in a clearing, and still more guarding the camp, and wondered what else Genesis was pretending, his reasons for rebelling. 'Shinra are using us,' sounded bizarrely non-specific.

"This is a terrible idea," he sighed, gingerly rearranging the shoulder straps of his armour.

"So, you've said."

He shot her a displeased look. "And yet I let you drag me up here."

She shrugged. "More support is better than less support." Shinra had sent Angeal and Sephiroth to hunt down their AWOL SOLDIERs. Shepard had sent Sephiroth co-ordinates.
"We don't need them," Genesis said. He turned to face the lowlands stretching out below them. "I can topple Shinra alone."

"Can you? You know who they'll send to stop us." She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Do you really want to meet Sephiroth and Angeal on opposite sides of a battlefield?"

He shrugged with his right shoulder. "Angeal always pulls his punches against me. He can't help himself."

"And how much do you think it'll hurt him to have to? His closest friend suddenly deserts without a word, and now he is ordered to bring back a body. Are you that cruel?"

"War is always cruel," he replied, glancing back at her.

She scoffed. "That's not war, it's stupidity." She climbed to her feet and brushed the dirt off her armour. "Angeal deserves to hear the truth and have the chance to make his own decisions."

"And if he refuses?" He sent her a dark look.

"Then you're no worse off than if he tracked you down in ignorance. Or did you want to take advantage of his hurt and confusion to beat him whenever he does track us down?" she asked, watching him carefully. She clenched her jaw when he didn't meet her eyes. "You bastard."

"I've seen you do crueller things," he said in a low voice.

"Not to my own friends."

He rounded on her. "And how long were you planning to rebel against Shinra before you intended to tell anyone?"

"I was planning on telling everyone," she replied, unmoved. "Besides, it's not just Angeal you need to worry about."

He flicked his hair out of his eyes, a move they both knew was an excuse to break eye contact.

"Sephiroth doesn't scare me," he said.

"But he scares your men," she replied, not bothering to address the honesty of his statement. "And when they're staring him down in the middle of a battle, he'll terrify them."

"Assuming he stands to fight at all. He's softer hearted than you think."

"Apparently, he's softer hearted than you." She crossed her arms. "Why are you so desperate to fight alone?"

He sneered. "I am alone."

She raised an eyebrow, surprised at the sudden vehemence. "Since when?"

He stalked away from her. "You're an alien. I wouldn't expect you to understand."

She barked a laugh. "Right. I'm the only person on this planet who doesn't belong here. What would I know about being alone?"

He rubbed his shoulder.
She shook her head at herself when he didn't reply. "You can march back down this mountain if you want, but I am going to meet with Sephiroth and Angeal and tell them what's happening."

"My friend, do you fly away now, to a world that abhors you and I?" he said quietly. "Already you're threatening to abandon me to Shinra's favourite lackeys,"

"Until a week ago, you were one of those favoured lackeys yourself," she pointed out. "I'm here to win a rebellion. You can generate drama on your own time."

"Goddess, why do I even bother with you?"

"Between the two of us, we can convince maybe half of SOLDIER to defect, as well as a good chunk of the infantry." She looked up at the remainder of the mountain they had to climb. "With Sephiroth and Angeal on our side, we'll have nearly all of the armed forces. Shinra can't stand up to us if we've got all of their armies."

"Where's the fun in that?" he said archly.

She frowned at him. He turned around and started up the path again.

"We've come this far," he said as he passed her. "I shall hear what Angeal and Sephiroth have to say for themselves."

"Genesis," she called, "why are you fighting Shinra?"

He paused. "Because they've used this world as their personal footstool for too long."

"No, why are you fighting Shinra?"

"I just told you," he said with half a shrug.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "How's your shoulder?"

He kept walking. "I'm not the one who fell out of an exploding plane."

She watched him go, then began following him up to the pass.

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Sephiroth stood just off the mountain pass with his eyes glued to where the path disappeared around a bend up ahead. Angeal sat on a rock next to him with his head lowered.

He double-checked the co-ordinates and directions Shepard had sent. This was the place. He glanced back at the winding path they had just climbed and strained his ears for the sound of footfalls. Nothing. No Turks or Deepground SOLDIERs had attempted to follow them. Even the wildlife was sparse at this altitude, and the wind had died away with the last of the light.

He crossed his arms, and then uncrossed them again. He refrained from activating his Omni-tool to see if Shepard had sent him any messages. He knew she hadn't; the device would have alerted him. His hand lingered at his wrist anyway. He had never before accepted a mission he intended to fail. Director Lazard had instructed them to hunt Shepard and Genesis down and, if they were difficult, hand them over to Hojo. The price for desertion had grown much crueuler.

Angeal had been tense and quiet since they were given their mission. None of them were happy about the situation. Even Lazard appeared uncomfortable, but the president's orders were the president's orders. Defying them was treason.
Sephiroth lifted his chin just thinking about it. Some instinctive trepidation at crossing the invisible line still lingered in him, but not nearly enough to change his mind. This had been a long time coming.

The dull thud of footsteps on beaten earth had them both straightening. Angeal stood, and Sephiroth stepped partially within sight of the path.

Genesis stepped around the bend, his red coat dull in the gloom and his eyes darting about. He caught sight of Sephiroth and stopped short.


"Genesis," Sephiroth replied, stepping onto the path. Genesis pulled himself up to his full height, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, and Sephiroth paused. He frowned at him, confused. "What are you doing?"

"I could ask you the same," Genesis said.

Behind him Shepard walked around into sight.

"Shepard!" Angeal called.

She nodded at them both, a genuine smile crossing her face. She didn't stop where Genesis had, immediately closing the distance between the two groups. Sephiroth moved forward to greet her, before stuttering to a halt a meter away, uncertain of what he intended to do. Her eyes glowed that familiar eerie red, ringed by dark smudges of exhaustion but bright with life. He let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding for weeks. The half-smile she gave him was beautiful.

Angeal walked right past him and wrapped her up in a bear hug. Genesis snorted, and Sephiroth felt vaguely irritated. She patted Angeal on the back, the metal of her gauntlets clanging against his pauldrons.

"I didn't believe it at first," Angeal said, drawing back.

"You didn't believe I was dead, or that I'm alive?" she asked.

"Both, I suppose," he said with a weak smile. He sobered quickly. "But you're alright?"

She nodded. "I'm not injured." She glanced back at Genesis, who didn't meet her eyes. Sephiroth wondered what that short exchange meant.

"Why didn't you tell me about Deepground?" Angeal asked, looking between Genesis and Shepard. "Why did you just disappear, without saying anything?"

Shepard blinked in surprise. She looked to Sephiroth, a question in her eyes. He nodded gravely in reply. He saw her jaw clench.

"What's Deepground?" Genesis asked.

"That isn't funny," Angeal growled. "Did you think I wouldn't care about the experimentation? I deserved to know the truth."

Genesis took a step back, staring at his friend. "Angeal, what are you talking about?"

Angeal paused, his brow furrowed. "You don't know?"
"I don't know what?" Genesis replied, throwing his hands up in the air. "What is this Deepground, what does it have to do with experimentation, and why on Gaia are you blaming me for it?"

"Project Deepground," Shepard said, her eyes downcast. "Injured SOLDIERs, kidnapped by the Science Department and experimented on until they have no free thought of their own." She looked up at them, her expression pained. "The president wanted absolute loyalty. Hojo gave it to him."

"It began long before you defied Heidegger's orders," Sephiroth said, disliking the guilt growing on her face. "Shinra has always demanded absolute control."

She looked at him plainly. "Why did they finally activate it?"

"To fill the gaps left from Genesis' deserters," he replied. "The President knows the two of you have abandoned Shinra. He's afraid you're going to convince the rest of the armed forces to turn on him and support Wutai."

Shepard scowled and swore. "When did this happen?"

"This morning."

Genesis turned to Shepard and studied her for a long moment. "How long have you known about all this?"

"I looked into it when one of my Second Classes never came back," she replied.

"How long?" Genesis hissed.

Shepard straightened her back and crossed her arms. "About six months."

Genesis spun to Sephiroth. "And you? How long did you know? Or were you part of the selection process?"

"Is that what you think I am?" Sephiroth replied. He felt cold, and his eyes moved between Genesis and Angeal. They had both assumed him to be behind it.

"Well?" Genesis asked, his chin lifted in challenge.

"I didn't find out until after the trial."

Genesis slowly nodded. "This is what you two were covering up."

Angeal cleared his throat. "And were you and Shepard planning on telling us?"

"Yes. We were," Shepard said.

"Oh really?" Genesis drawled, cutting his eyes at her.

"Yes," she said shortly. "I was planning on telling you that I've been breaking into the Science Department every second night for months now to break out SOLDIERs betrayed by those who should have healed them." Angeal's eyes widened, and Genesis began to question her but she cut him off, "I had every intention of telling all of you about it, but I had no idea what you'd make of it, or who you would side with. I was committing treason. I had no reason to assume you would want to do the same."

Angeal took a step towards her, hurt plainly written across his face. "You thought we would stand by and do nothing while SOLDIERs were tortured?"
"Are you saying you didn't know that Shinra experiments on people?" she replied, her arms still crossed and her expression unreadable. "You've known for years that this is what they do. It's not news. Is it just horrifying now because these people you can name?"

"Of course not!" Angeal retorted.

"That's unfair," Sephiroth said to her. Of course Shinra experimented on people, that was simply what Shinra was. That didn't make them all monsters for co-operating with the company, there had never been any other option.

"Is it?" Shepard replied, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Regardless, we had a right to know," Genesis said.

"Would you have done anything?" Shepard asked him with a considering look.

Genesis scoffed. "How can you ask me that when you yourself know I'm in the middle of a rebellion?"

"And why are you rebelling?" she asked.

Everybody looked to Genesis. Genesis glared at Shepard.

"Infinite in mystery is the gift of-"

"You have a right to know what's going on, but we don't?" she interrupted. "Tell the damn truth, Genesis."

Genesis said nothing.

"If you didn't know about Deepground, why did you desert?" Angeal asked, his eyes narrowed.

Genesis spun away, walking off the beaten edge of the path. He stood by the edge of the slope, where the mountainside fell away into darkness, his hands clasped behind his back and his head turned down. Starlight glinted off his hair, making it look dull and colourless.

"Do you know what we are, Angeal?" he said, turning back around, and fixing the SOLDIER with a look. "What we truly are, beneath all the posturing and propaganda?"

"We're SOLDIERS," Angeal replied without hesitation.

"And what is SOLDIER, I wonder?"

"This isn't the time for philosophy, Genesis," Sephiroth said.

"It's not a question of philosophy; it's a question of DNA. 'My friend, the fates are cruel.'" He turned on Sephiroth.

He met Genesis' look with a raised eyebrow and crossed arms.

"Do you know what you are, Sephiroth?"

"Are you going to tell us?" Shepard asked.

Genesis spread his arms and stepped back. "We are but monsters."
"We are not," Angeal replied immediately.

"How do you figure that?" Shepard asked, looking sceptical but more indulgent than Sephiroth felt.

"We certainly aren't human."

"And those are the only two options?" she retorted with an unimpressed frown.

"No human has the strength we do. No human can fight like we do." Genesis' expression darkened. "And no human falls like we do." His hand rose to his shoulder. Sephiroth's eyes narrowed at the motion.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. Genesis' hand fell. It was hard to tell in the poor lighting, but it looked like Genesis' left shoulder had more padding than the other. Bandages?

"Shinra's enhancements are not perfect. They aren't permanent, either," Genesis said quietly. He turned away again. "And mine were experimental. An experiment which is now failing."

"Your shoulder?" Shepard asked.

"It isn't healing."

"Wait, you mean that cut from the VR room?" Angeal said. "That was weeks ago!"

"No amount of materia, or cure potion, or even traditional medicine has closed it." Genesis held his head high, and his jaw stubbornly set, but his shoulders slumped. "If Hollander cannot come up with a cure, the rest of my body inevitably will follow."

None of them said anything for a moment. Sephiroth didn't know what to say. He had been responsible for that injury. Only a shallow cut, but if it spread? If it got worse? How had this happened? That wasn't how Mako treatments worked. Genesis' enhancements had always been stable. This couldn't happen. Enhancements couldn't simply fail. They all relied on their strength and speed and healing nearly every day. Could it all just turn on them? Genesis had been fine until Sephiroth wounded him.

"I'm sorry," Sephiroth said.

"Don't," Genesis snapped.

His eyes dropped.

"Can I scan you?" Shepard asked, breaking a pained silence and activating her Omni-tool.

"If you must," Genesis allowed, not moving.

They had all been scanned by her many times. Sometimes to discover how serious an injury was, if a wound was poisoned or infected, or if a limb was simply sprained or the bone broken. This time, the scanning function took longer than it normally did.

She looked at the read-out in silence for a moment, a deep frown cutting at her face. Sephiroth moved to her side to read the display. She stretched out her arm for him. He met Genesis' eyes and realised his friend already knew what the results would be.

"Well? What does it say?" Angeal asked, his expression deeply alarmed at the silence between the three of them.
"You're dying," Shepard said, looking to Genesis.

"That can't be right." Angeal stepped forward, reflexively putting his hand on Genesis' shoulder. He flinched away, and Angeal looked as though he'd been struck. "I'm so sorry."

Genesis just shook his head.

"What caused this?" Shepard asked. "Has this happened to other SOLDIERs? Is there a cure?"

"I'm the first. There is no known cure."

"Then how long do we have to find one?" Sephiroth asked. Hojo couldn't - no. Hojo wouldn't. But there were other doctors, there had to be. There had to be a cure, it was just a matter of finding it.

Genesis fell still at their questions and finally met Sephiroth's eye. His brow furrowed, and Sephiroth wondered why he looked confused.

"I don't know," he admitted. His voice sounded thin and hollow. "Truly, I wish I did." He cleared his throat. "All I do know is that this is as much Shinra's fault as it is Hollander's, and I will not die a diseased lapdog because of their mistakes." He straightened his back again.

"Has Hollander defected as well?" Shepard asked.

"He's in Junon, acquiring some equipment. He'll join us soon enough."

"Why were your enhancements experimental?" Sephiroth wondered aloud. Genesis had joined SOLDIER at sixteen; Sephiroth had been fourteen at the time. "They weren't looking for new techniques when you enlisted. Hojo's been using the same Mako solution for decades."

"Perhaps Hollander wished to outdo Hojo," Genesis replied, giving Sephiroth a meaningful look which he didn't understand, before turning away from them. "There is a chance that you will suffer the same fate as well, Angeal. Assuming any of us live long enough for that to happen."

Angeal let out a ragged breath. "So what do we do?" He dragged a hand down his face. "Genesis is dying, I might be as well, and you two are trying to start another war?"

"That is exactly what I'm doing," Genesis snapped. "What else would you have me do? Quietly disappear? Die politely, where nobody has to see Shinra's mistakes? No. Shinra is going to answer for what it has done to me, and what it is doing to every other SOLDIER who will never know what gets injected into them every month."

"We're still in the middle of a war!" Angeal countered. "Who do you want to fight? Shinra? Not everyone will turn on the company. Do you want to go murdering SOLDIERs and troopers? How many of us are just trying collect a paycheque and get through the day? What about the engineers, the medics, and the countless civilians who work for Shinra? Are you just going to declare war on all of them?"

"Would you rather lay down and die on an operating table?" Genesis replied.

"Of course not, but what about SOLDIER?" Angeal asked, looking between the three of them. "SOLDIER means something, and there is honour in that. I refuse to betray that, to betray all of those who look up to us. Who expect us to lead them right!"

"What do you suggest then?" Shepard asked.
Angeal took a deep breath. "Meeting betrayal with more betrayal is no answer."

"Shinra are fully prepared to remove your ability to think. Is it really betrayal when you've already been stabbed in the back?"

"You yourself said the Wutai War was unjust, Shepard. How is starting another against your own men any better? Where is your SOLDIER honour?"

"Honour?" Her eyes narrowed and she stepped towards him. "You think it's more honourable to attack a sovereign nation, to murder their people and steal their land, than to stand up to a corporation that tortures people for profit?"

"This isn't what SOLDIER is. Our honour--"

"Wake up, Angeal," she cut in. "SOLDIER's honour is a lie Shinra tells to you to keep you from questioning orders. SOLDIER has only ever been a mercenary army that exists solely for Shinra's bottom line. There is no honour in that, and there never was."

Angeal's expression fell. "How dare you?" he asked hoarsely. He looked down and shook his head before marching off. He followed the bend of the path out of sight. Sephiroth watched him walk away. He had never seen him look so hurt. He glanced back at Shepard with a frown.

Her shoulders sank, and she let out a sigh.

"You really don't know how to pull a punch, do you?" Genesis said, looking at Shepard forlornly.

"I've been pulling my punches since I landed here," she replied, but her ferocity had wilted. She hung her head. "Have I just made this worse?"

Sephiroth looked at the dark, empty path. "I think he needed to hear that."

"All that awaits you is a sombre morrow, no matter where the winds may blow," Genesis sighed, before trailing after Angeal.

Shepard put her forehead in her hand and exhaled noisily. "Damnit all." Her hand dropped, and she looked up at him, standing about a foot away. "Genesis is dying. Angeal could be too. And hollowed out SOLDIERs fill the halls of Shinra." She looked up to the skies, where the blanket of clouds spread out, hiding away even the strongest stars.

He looked at her. At least… at least she was still here. Was it wrong to be glad for one friend's life while two others were still terminally ill? In the face of everything else falling apart so suddenly, he was acutely grateful she was still standing.

"I'm glad you're alive," he said quietly.

She gave him a weak smile.

He reached out a hand for her, intending to ask if she truly was uninjured, just for his own peace of mind. Then his hand rested on her shoulder, and he wasn't sure what he was intending to do after all. Her smile fell away to something much sadder, and she pulled him in and hugged him.

He held her close, both alarmed by the sudden contact and completely incapable of letting her go. Her armour was cold and hard, but he felt the soft disturbance of air from a tremulous breath by his ear. Her arms were strong and solid around him and he held her tightly to himself in turn.
"Not again, not again," he heard her whisper, her voice broken and furious. "They're dying."

It felt like the air had been kicked out of him. Or rather, that he was an oxygen tank that had been steadily deflating for months, and now he was finally empty. He didn't want to bury his friends.

He felt the unyielding contours of her armour under his hands and her fingers digging into his back, and didn't know who was holding up whom.
Angeal sat down on the edge of the mountain path, outside of sight from Shepard, Sephiroth, and Genesis. The path hugged the mountainside at this point, sloping away steeply beneath him. Starlight caught on the jagged rocks and gravel, leaving the little shrubs as dark patches on the grey mountainside.

"There is no honour."

He dragged a hand down his face and shook his head at himself. Genesis was dying, and here he was sulking because Shepard insulted his honour. Everything had careened downhill so quickly. Or, maybe it hadn't been quick at all, he'd just missed it entirely. Shepard and Sephiroth had known about the Deepground experimentation for half a year, and Genesis' enhancements had always been experimental. And he hadn't noticed.

He heard Genesis's distinctive gait crunching over the path behind him and leaned back on his hands, waiting. Genesis sat, dangling his legs over the edge. He tilted his head back and watched the sky. Was he paler than normal, or was that just the weak light? Angeal would have sworn SOLDIER eyes were usually brighter, as he openly studied his friend. Genesis kept his left arm at his side, while his right readjusted his fringe. Was he afraid of further injury to his shoulder? Or was he losing use of the arm entirely?

"Why didn't you say you were hurt?" he asked.

"It's my injury, no one else's," Genesis said waspishly. He lowered his head a moment later. "Would it have changed anything?"

"I had a right to know," Angeal replied.

"And now you do."

"You're dying."

"Not if I have any say in the matter," he said, cutting his eyes at Angeal. "Even if the morrow is barren of promises, nothing shall forestall my return."

"What's the next line?" Angeal asked, unimpressed.

Genesis' eyes danced away. Angeal knew exactly what came next, but some self-flagellating part of him wanted to hear it aloud.

"My friend," Genesis murmured, "the fates are cruel. There are no dreams, no honour remains."

Angeal lowered his head. "Why did we leave Banora? What have we become?"

"We wanted to be SOLDIERs," Genesis replied. "We succeeded." It sounded like the falling of a judge's gavel.

Footsteps crunched against the gravel again. Angeal didn't bother looking—Shepard's footfalls always fell into that determined staccato, especially when she was on a mission. He stood, stretching
out his back. He wasn't going to face a determined Shepard while sitting down.

"Hey," she greeted.

"Have you come to offer an apology?" Genesis asked archly.

"No."

Genesis sighed with exaggerated sorrow. "Then, I'll leave you to your troublemaking."

"That's rich, coming from you," she replied dryly, as he walked past her and headed back the way she had come.

When Genesis was out of sight, Shepard fixed her eyes on Angeal. He crossed his arms. He couldn't understand why Sephiroth enjoyed arguing with her so much—it always left him feeling like he was lost in space and slowly running out of oxygen. The heavy weight of her gaze reminded him that she had nearly a decade on him. A decade which had sheared away any room for half measures and wavering motivations. Sometimes, when he looked sidelong into those mechanical eyes, he wondered just how much of a person remained behind them. He knew she would be deeply hurt by his suspicion and felt ashamed of himself for it.

"Are you set on starting a war?" he asked, preferring to set the tone himself before she could back him into a corner.

"It's already started," she replied. "I'm set on winning, with as few casualties as possible."

He gave a short, hard laugh and turned away. "Must be nice, seeing the world in black and white."

"You're looking at black and calling it grey."

He stood at the edge of the path, where he and Genesis had sat. It was too dark to see the lowlands spread out before them. Only the slope at his feet was visible, falling away into nothing.

"Do you know why I enlisted?" he asked.

"Because it paid well. You told me once." she said, standing next to him. "I joined for the same reason. A weekly stipend, three square meals a day, and a roof over my head. The best offer I ever got."

"It wasn't just the money. It was... noble. Protecting the world from monsters. I was proud to swear an oath to Shinra." He shook his head at himself. "I sold my honour for twenty-five thousand gil a year." A third class' salary. It wasn't even that much.

She sent him a look, softer than he expected. "You were young, you needed a job, and you didn't know any better."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Did you know what Shinra was when you signed up?"

"I had no details, only what Tseng and Sephiroth told me." She looked out into the darkness, glowing eyes searching for who knew what. "A corrupt corporation just like any other."

"And you joined the mercenary army anyway."

Her eyes snapped back to him and he held his ground, crossing his arms.

"I've bedded down with some pretty terrible organisations before, in the hopes it would make things
better in the long run." She shrugged. "Sometimes it even payed off. I don't know if it will this time."

"I've never met a sniper with so much social conscience."

"I shoot people in the hopes it'll result in fewer corpses when they're all tallied up afterwards, but I've been wrong before."

He sighed. "My parents were so proud the first time I came home in my uniform. It was more than anyone else in my family had ever achieved. A Hewley in the army." He had been proud too. A SOLDIER, one of Shinra's strongest, slaying monsters and protecting people. Did he have the strength to protect Genesis? Could he slay Shinra? He met her eyes. "When I'm branded a deserter, it will be all my family will ever be known for."

"Isn't it more honourable to stand up for what you know is right, than to quietly endorse what you know is wrong?"

He frowned at her. "You don't believe in honour."

"It sounds a lot like pride," she said flatly. "Or ego, depending on the context."

"It's integrity," he replied, pulling himself up.

"I have enough integrity to fight for what I believe in."

He uncrossed his arms. "I'm not going to sit by and do nothing. Not when Genesis is dying and SOLDIERs are being brainwashed. How could I?"

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You don't have much faith in me."

She watched him for a moment, and he felt pinned under her eyes.

"Complacency is a terrible thing, Angeal," she said.

He looked resolutely back into the darkness, uneasy at her tone. He kicked lightly at the ground, dislodging a pebble. It rolled over the edge and down the slope of loose scree. Other rocks, bigger and more jagged, were disturbed by its passage and began to roll too. Silently, they watched the little rockslide grow and pick up speed, a cloud of dust floating up behind it. How far would it fall? There could be someone on the slopes below, about to be crushed by the sudden rockslide.

Or there could be no one, and it would pass undetected entirely. What was a couple of rocks, next to a mountain?

He turned to look up at the slope above them. The same loose scree went up far beyond the edge of his sight. It wouldn't take much to bury the path entirely. The right rock, loosed in the right direction, and the entire mountainside would be changed.

"We can do this," Shepard said, when the rumble of falling rock had died away. "I believe that. It'll be hard, and bloody, but more than just SOLDIER will be better off for it afterwards."

"You hope," he added.

"Don't you?" she asked.

He looked into her eyes. Cold, mechanical, unwavering.
"We'd better go back," he said.

She nodded slowly and followed him back to the others.

Sephiroth and Genesis were hissing arguments at each other over something, but they let it drop at their approach.

"So," Angeal said, looking between the three of them. "What are we going to do?"

Sephiroth exchanged a look with Genesis. "I have a plan," he said.

Sephiroth and Angeal had been gone for two days when Scout received a message from Shepard. Tucked away in the draft folder of an unused email account appeared a couple of paragraphs, signed by her. A moment later they were deleted and the account closed. Scout saw.

The time to act had come.

The SOLDIER forums were first. The Geth delved into the servers and pinned a thread titled 'Shepard Still Alive?' to the top of the page. Kunsel helped. The first time Scout addressed him he squawked and fell off his chair, but once he knew Shepard was still alive, he was glad to help. He reworded the information they planted, adding subtlety and nuance which Scout couldn't achieve alone.

The Turks didn't notice. Though they monitored all the employee forums, all they saw on the SOLDIER pages were discussions of swords, complaints about broken water coolers, and old memorial pages.

There had been no word on Genesis and the others who disappeared into Wutai, so Scout leaked a blurry photo of Shepard and Genesis in a jungle. It was an old photo, but it started dozens of theories. SOLDIERs looked over their shoulders and whispered in quiet corners.

The armed forces had been restless for some time, what with key leaders absent and Deepground operatives shadowing the corridors. Sephiroth and Angeal were, officially, still tracking down Genesis and Shepard in Wutai.

Lazard's memos to SOLDIERs were reworded while in transit. Vague mentions of desertion became specifics. Polite suggestions of welcoming Deepground became barely concealed threats. Lazard didn't notice, never having any reason to re-read messages he had already sent, and he hadn't been in office long enough for anyone else to spot the difference.

Instructions sent by the PR department transformed on route to the news anchors, radio hosts, and journalists throughout Midgar. Genesis' desertion, which the President had ordered hushed up, was covered on the six o'clock news. Unsettling footage of Deepground SOLDIERs, mute and unresponsive, was broadcast on a breakfast show.

The Turks noticed.

At the weekly briefing, Tseng told his team that someone was hacking into their system. Scout made a note of all the new security measures and redirected Kunsel appropriately. The Turks began planting bugs on public computers. They tapped phone lines and monitored security cameras. Several computer technicians and a personal assistant were taken in for questioning, then grudgingly released.

Meanwhile Scout watched SOLDIERs and infantrymen hesitate to salute. He observed as they
began to share stories of 'that time Genesis saved my skin' and 'back when Shepard taught me how to hold a gun.' Everyone remembered a burst of fire that killed a ninja at just the right time or a perfectly placed bullet from kilometres away that saved a life. And in the evenings, after long hours of guard detail and monster hunting, fewer soldiers returned than set out in the mornings.

The Turks questioned the personal assistant again.

Sephiroth stood before Director Lazard. His coat was torn, his pauldrons mangled, and his hair dusty. The office was sleek and tidy, and Lazard was the centre of that tidiness in his pressed suit, neat little glasses, and a white cravat. Sephiroth did not trust him.

A report sat on the desk. Lazard lifted the first page, studied it for a moment, and then let the page drop. Sephiroth waited patiently.

"So, you lost them?" Lazard asked after a long moment's silence.

"Yes."

He leaned forward, both his elbows on the desk and his hands clasped together in front of him. "I didn't think Genesis specialised in stealth."

"But Shepard does," Sephiroth replied. "I doubt Genesis even left whatever bolt hole he's hiding in."

Lazard's eyes moved to the large dent and hole on Sephiroth's left pauldron. Shepard's bullets spoke for themselves.

"It's in the report," Sephiroth said at Lazard's delicately raised eyebrow.

The bullet had only just missed tearing into his arm, or forcing the metal of the ruined pauldron into the flesh of his shoulder. It looked like Sephiroth had ducked just in time, which he knew was what the director expected of him. He also knew that nobody expected Shepard to miss her mark.

Lazard's eyebrow remained raised. Sephiroth said nothing. The moment stretched on, and Sephiroth's eyes flicked up to the security camera. He vastly preferred Plan A, but if Lazard didn't believe him, he'd have no choice but to fall back on Plan B.

Finally, Lazard leaned back in his high-backed chair and nodded. "Do you have any idea what they want? What the deserters are planning?"

He shook his head. He and Angeal had been off 'hunting for deserters' for over a week, with nothing but their injuries to show for it. He had returned to find over half of SOLDIER missing.

"But they're in Wutai?" Lazard asked.

"I saw no evidence of them leaving the island," Sephiroth cleared his throat. "Sir, Angeal has asked not to be further involved in hunting down deserters."

Lazard's forehead furrowed. "Why?"

"He feels that he would be more productive training younger SOLDIERs and keeping the peace at home."

He nodded slowly. "Do you think he's been compromised?"

"No, he wouldn't still be here if he was," he replied, keeping his face blank. "He and Genesis have
always been close, but the desertion has hurt him. He's afraid he'll hesitate in a vital moment and endanger his fellow SOLDIERS."

"Understandable," Lazard said, looking down at the report with a thoughtful expression. "The Second Class he's been mentoring has done well, he's shown a lot of growth and potential. As has Shepard's protégée." Pale blue eyes looked at Sephiroth over his wireframe glasses. "Keep an eye on him. It would be a shame to see all that potential wasted."

"Kunsel?" Sephiroth asked, reasonably sure that was the boy's name. "He didn't defect?" He'd never personally worked with the Second Class, but Shepard spoke well of him.

"He's still here." Lazard sounded about as surprised as Sephiroth felt. "Take him with you; he may have some valuable insight. You're to track down the deserters. We're stationing Deepground troops around the city limits to… discourage further desertions."

"How many have we lost?"

Lazard's eyes dropped to the desk. "Over half of SOLDIER is unaccounted for."

Sephiroth schooled his expression fiercely. News like that would have stung deeply, once. Now he could only feel vindicated by those who had left, and suspicious of those who remained.

"Find them," Lazard said, urgency in his voice. His career was on the line, after all. Sephiroth couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for the young director, who had picked the worst possible time to be involved with SOLDIER. He had nothing against Lazard personally, but the man worked for Shinra, and had been appointed head of SOLDIER because Heidegger was thought to have lost control. It followed that Lazard's task was to take control.

"Bring them back," Lazard said. "If you can convince Genesis and Shepard to return peacefully, then by all means. If not…"

"Kill them," Sephiroth finished for him, meeting his eyes.

Lazard straightened in his chair and looked at him askance.

Sephiroth kept his expression hard.

"I half expected you to join them, General," Lazard said quietly.

Sephiroth stood all the taller, setting his shoulders. "They didn't abandon Shinra. They abandoned SOLDIER, and they abandoned me." He kept his eyes fixed on Lazard's and was pleased to see the director shrink back a little. "I will try to bring them back alive. If that isn't possible, then I will report the time and place of their deaths."

Lazard cleared his throat and made a show of stacking the report pages neatly. "Good. That's good." The report disappeared into a drawer, and Sephiroth nodded in satisfaction.

"Ah, there was one more thing." Lazard said. He looked up towards Sephiroth but didn't make eye contact this time. "We're going to be without the remaining Third Classes for the next month."

"Why? We're shorthanded already."

Lazard's eyes remained fixed to a spot about six inches to the right of Sephiroth's head. He cleared his throat again. Sephiroth had a good idea of what was happening, but he wanted to hear him admit it. He crossed his arms and waited.
"All remaining Third Classes are to report to Reactor Zero tomorrow morning," Lazard finally said, "by the president's order."

"And the Second Classes?" Sephiroth drawled.

"Next month," came the quiet reply.

"And First Class?"

Lazard finally met his eye, a small and polite smile on his lips. "You and Angeal are exempt."

Liar.

Sephiroth nodded. "I understand."

Lazard's nerve broke and he looked away again. "General, this is—"

A deep reverberating sound interrupted him, like a single hit on a giant bass drum, followed by a dull roar.

Sephiroth drew his sword and cast a shield. Lazard threw himself under the desk. The floor swayed, a rolling wobble, as though the whole building was made of jelly and someone was shaking the plate.

The lights turned red and emergency alarms began to blare, but the tremors died away almost as suddenly as they had started. Sephiroth moved before Lazard could finish yelling at him to secure the area. He raced out the door and down the emergency stairs.

DeepGround SOLDIERs flooded into the stairwell around him, all marching down to the ground floor. None of them looked at Sephiroth, and none of them saw his self-satisfied smile. They didn't look out of the newly cracked windows, and none of them commented on the smoking ruin on the side of the plate.

Reactor Zero was gone.

Kunsel stared up at the hulking ruins of the reactor and didn't know what to think.

The wreckage made for a deformed lump, like something delicate put through a microwave. Large broken girders and pipes pierced the fused outer shell in great spikes. Dust from pulverised concrete hung in the air, and every lungful stung from stagnant Mako and left an acrid tang on the back of the throat. The acid rain would be worse than usual for the next couple of months.

His pragmatic side said the immediate future would include a lot of clean up duty and that there would be much more surveillance and security now. A damn hassle, with everything else going on. The troublemaker inside of him, still so stubbornly optimistic, felt vindicated by the pile of rubble.

"I heard this was the DeepGround lab," Zack said, stepping over the yellow security tape to come stand next to him.

"I told you that."

"Oh. Yeah." He scratched the back of his neck and lowered his voice. "Do you think there were any SOLDIERs inside?"

Kunsel kept looking at the melted mess. Stagnant Mako oozed out of rivet holes in iron sheets and
dribbled from smashed pipes. He fancied he could see smashed glass in the mix. "I don't think they were really SOLDIERs anymore."

"Do you think—" Zack began, before straightening. "Sephiroth's here."

Kunsel's head swivelled around to see him, then his hand jerked up in a salute. Sephiroth always made him jumpy.

"SOLDIERs. There's safety gear for you, over there," Sephiroth said, nodding to where a group of technicians were putting on hazmat suits. Sephiroth didn't move to wear any additional gear, his leather coat flapped dramatically in the gusts of toxic wind. He probably had so much condensed Mako inside him that he could drink the stuff without any negative effects.

Even regular SOLDIERs had some level of resistance to it, which meant Shinra only had to provide them with partial protective gear. Kunsel looked at the gloves a technician handed him and wished he had worn something long sleeved this morning.

"Mako could have eaten through the supports," one of the technicians was saying while doing up the seams of his suit. "It happens to the older reactors if they aren't properly maintained."

"But this reactor was deactivated," a woman replied, her voice muffled through the plastic helmet.

"Maybe they never got around to emptying the reservoir? Fume build-up could have done it—enough Mako in the air and all it takes is a spark."

A third technician scoffed, "There's way too much ventilation built into the structure for that."

"This is the oldest reactor in Midgar," replied the first technician. "Who knows what the ventilation was like?"

"Initial reports indicate it was an attack." Sephiroth's voice interrupted the idle musings of the group.

Kunsel paused halfway through putting on a glove. He hadn't heard that. It looked more 'melted down' then 'exploded out.' His head swung around to look at it. The debris had all collapsed inwards. Other than the cloud of dust and small rivulets of oozing Mako, nothing had reached beyond the original perimeter of the reactor walls.

"Was it Wutai?" Zack asked.

Why would Wutai want to blow up reactors? It wouldn't be enough to interrupt Mako production. Kunsel looked up at the wreck. Why would Wutai want to blow up this reactor?

"It's a possibility," Sephiroth said, tonelessly. He nodded towards the technicians. "We'll give you the all clear when we're done." He turned and started walking, leaving Kunsel and Zack to hurry after him.

What had once been a large industrial door was now a graveyard of deformed sheets of iron. Sephiroth sliced cleanly through it and pushed the layers aside like they were just unusually thick curtains. A hot wave of Mako fumes hit them, and Zack staggered and coughed.


"I'm alright, I'm alright," Zack coughed. He straightened and rolled his shoulder, sending a self-conscious look towards Sephiroth. "I'm good to go."
The general stepped inside the shell of the wreckage and waited for them. Kunsel came in last, bringing up the rear and maintaining a healthy distance between himself and Sephiroth and hoping nobody noticed.

"Wow," Zack whispered. Broken blocks of concrete and giant twisted pipes held up the fallen roof. Everything dripped with a glowing green. A narrow passage was still open, under the path of one of the main Mako pipes. Broken glass and ground up concrete crunched under their feet.

"There's nothing but Mako and twisted metal here," Zack said. "What else do they need to know?"

"We're searching for signs of sabotage," Sephiroth said.

"I can't see any explosives."

"You can't normally see them after they've exploded," Kunsel said.

"I know that!" Zack replied with a huff. "But look at it, it's all collapsed. It's not blown out. I have seen explosions before, thank you very much, Kunsel. I know what they look like."

"It depends on what sort of explosives you're using, and how much," he replied, looking around critically, "all you'd really need to do is destroy the supports." His eyes followed the dents in the pipes. The lighting was poor, but what he could see looked mostly like signs of collapse. If it was an accident, it was a very convenient one. If it was intentional, then the perpetrator cared about collateral damage. It would have been easier to just pack the reactor with explosives.

"You know a lot about demolitions?" Sephiroth asked, looking back at Kunsel.

"I, uh, not really sir," Kunsel said, immediately regretting offering an opinion in the first place.

Sephiroth continued looking at him.

"Command— Shepard tried to teach me, but I don't have the touch for it, apparently," he offered.

"Hn." Sephiroth turned away again and kept walking.

Sephiroth scared him, always had. Kunsel wasn't afraid to admit it. No amount of enhancements had changed the bone-deep instinctive knowledge that Sephiroth could cut him into tiny little cubes without a moment's notice. He could be planning it right now, for all anyone knew. Sephiroth was so hard to read, he may as well have been wearing a helmet.

The irony was not lost on him.

Things were a little different now, though. There was the voice in the ceiling to be considered.

Scout, whatever he was, said Sephiroth could be trusted. But could Scout be trusted? Did Scout really know what Sephiroth was capable of? Kunsel had a hard time believing the AI understood things like fear, and instinct. Kunsel understood them very well. Nobody signed up for extensive surgical enhancements without knowing there were things to be afraid of. Of course, it wasn't until after the surgery that one realised the enhancements were scarier than anything attacking in the first place.

Survival was always tricky, but Kunsel flattered himself he had it figured out. You had to know how to read the field and how to pick your battles. Survival was more important than things like pride. His grandma disagreed, which was why she still only spoke Wutai dialects and always got spot-searched at airports. Why she got spat on in supermarkets and glared at by Shinra employees.
Kunsel was a consummate survivor. Read the field. Pick the right battle. Don't get sucked in. Don't die for a lost cause. Don't speak Wutai when everyone replies in English.

Don't look the terrifying general in the eye.

The passage came to an end when a fallen block of concrete blocked the way. Sephiroth placed his shoulder against it and started to push. The groan of concrete scraping against concrete rang out. The block grated forwards and then suddenly fell away.

A flash of violent red light stabbed at Kunsel's eyes, and the three of them cried out. An ear-piercing shriek shook the air and heat blossomed suddenly across his front. He threw his arms up to cover himself but the heat receded almost as quickly as it had come. The shrieking ball of fire flew over their heads, and the silhouette of flaming wings burned into the back of Kunsel's eyes as it shot overhead down the path they had come.

Before the flame reached the freedom of outside air it collapsed into ash and was caught by the wind.

"Do we chase it?" Kunsel asked, blinking the sudden flare spots out of his eyes.

"No," Sephiroth replied. "You can't track a Phoenix."

When his eyesight returned, Kunsel saw where the concrete block had fallen. The giant Mako reservoir lurked below their feet, the edge only a scant foot away from where they stood. Debris floated in the Mako: girders, pipes, and fallen platforms. The distinct smell of burnt human remains accompanied the general stench of Mako.

Kunsel eye caught on the melted end of a scalpel, buried in the wall. He looked up. Fixed into the deformed wall was an apparatus holding containment tubes for keeping their occupants alive. The glass must have all smashed in the blast. Whatever had been inside was in the Mako pool now. He twisted around to try and see how far the bank of tanks must have reached. The wall sagged and buckled in a giant dome. He couldn't see the end of the rows of tanks.

"Shepard did this," Sephiroth said. His voice carried an air of finality to it.

"What?" Zack stammered. "We don't know that."

Sephiroth looked down at him. "That was her Summon. She destroyed the reactor and the lab inside. She has betrayed Shinra."

Kunsel looked at the floating debris, all that was left of the Deepground lab. How many SOLDIERs had died here? How many hadn't been allowed to die? All that was left now was a glowing green puddle. Was this what betrayal looked like?

"Maybe it wasn't like that," Zack said. "Maybe someone else has her materia. Maybe someone's trying to set her up!" He looked between them for a reaction. Sephiroth's expression remained blank. Kunsel said nothing, he wouldn't risk it.

It didn't look like a setup. It looked like Shepard was responsible and she wanted them to know it. Why else let the Phoenix stay so long? It could have easily burned its way out or left during the initial explosion.

"She wouldn't betray us!" Zack said forcefully, taking a step back. Sephiroth instantly reached out and grabbed his arm before he could accidentally step over the edge. Zack shook his arm free. "It's a faulty reactor, that's what the technicians said!"
Kunsel looked down. What could he say?

"Look, I know Shepard, we all know Shepard," Zack continued, speaking earnestly. "She's a good SOLDIER."

"A very good SOLDIER," Sephiroth replied, "and she's betrayed Shinra."

Zack looked to Kunsel, desperation in his features. "Come on, man, you know she wouldn't do something like this. She's one of us."

Kunsel's eyes slid back to the scalpel in the wall. "Shepard's always been more loyal to SOLDIER than to Shinra," he murmured.

"Yeah, so she couldn't have--" Zack paused and looked back at him. For a moment, it was quiet but for the creaking of unstable rubble in the background. "She doesn't just go around blowing stuff up," Zack finished.

"No. She blows up 'stuff' with surgical precision," Sephiroth said, his eyes rooted to Kunsel.

It was the same look he had been getting from every superior officer since Shepard's desertion. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that even Sephiroth couldn't see through his helmet.

"We're finished here; this is the engineer's job now." Sephiroth spun and marched back out the way they had come.

Zack hung his head and followed. Kunsel took one last look into the glowing green reactor. He had heard a rumour just before the explosion. About Deepground and the rest of SOLDIER. It looked like the Third Classes would be safe after all.

He was going to tell everyone why.

Kunsel arrived back at HQ his phone in his hand and his eyes glued to the screen. He'd already mentioned to a couple of the guys that the reactor might have been blown by the deserters. Scout would have read it. It hadn't been a classified mission, so he wasn't breaking any rules. He wasn't even saying all that much. Just giving a couple of facts. The SOLDIERs knew what it meant and filled in the rest. What they did with that information wasn't his problem, or his fault.

"Kunsel," a voice called out, and he instinctively straightened.

Sephiroth was standing at the elevator he had been slowly heading towards, holding it open for him. Kunsel stood stock still for a second before registering the irritated look on Sephiroth's face, and then scurried into the elevator. Nobody else had been brave enough to get on board, despite the other elevators being packed.

He stood at parade rest as the carriage began to climb. Sephiroth leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. Kunsel looked at him out of the corner of his eye. A suspicion had formed in his mind on the walk back from the reactor. He wasn't brave enough to chase it though—asking questions killed people.

"You'll be accompanying me and a unit of Deepground SOLDIERs to hunt down the deserters," Sephiroth said.

"Yes, sir."
"For the most part, you will just be providing cover, though you will also be expected to provide intelligence, where appropriate."

"Yes, sir."

He swallowed. What had been said in the reactor had replayed in his head several times. It was what hadn't been said that caught his attention.

"Permission to ask a question, sir?" he rasped, hating himself for it. Asking questions killed people, almost as often as Sephiroth did.

"Granted," Sephiroth replied, almost lazily.

He took a deep breath. What was he doing, trying to get himself killed? This was Sephiroth. They didn't call him the demon of Wutai for his wicked pork and cabbage dumplings.

He cleared his throat. "Do you think Shepard's betrayed SOLDIER?"

Sephiroth's eyes focused on him. "I think she blew up that Reactor."

Kunsel nodded slowly at the vague answer. It was the exact same thing he had emailed to his fellow SOLDIERS. The deserters blew up the reactor. They turned on Shinra, and ended Deepground. No opinions, no insinuations; the facts spoke for themselves. Siding with SOLDIER, meant siding against Shinra. What side was the general really on?

The voice in the ceiling had said Sephiroth was trustworthy, but the voice in the ceiling didn't have a head that could be decapitated.

Sephiroth pulled away from the wall, his unsettling cat eyes still fixed to Kunsel.

"Do you think she's betrayed us?" the general asked.

The correct answer was 'yes'. "I don't know, sir."

"Hn," Sephiroth's head tilted, like a raptor tracking prey. "I wonder how much she trusted you."

"So do I," Kunsel said weakly, trapped under the analysing stare. Shepard would have said something.

Read the field. Pick your battles before they picked you.

His eyes flicked up to the camera in the corner. He took a deep breath.

"Scout," he called, his voice mostly steady.

Sephiroth's eyes widened and his head whipped around to look at the camera.

"Yes, SOLDIER Second Class Kunsel?" replied the voice in the ceiling.

"Is — ...is the firing range free?" Kunsel asked. He tried for a casual tone, but the raspy, clearly terrified waver in his voice ruined the effect.

"Yes, it is," Scout replied.

"Oh, good," he said with a nod, praying with more fervour then he ever had before. Hopefully, knowing Shepard's AI friend was reason for Sephiroth to trust him, and not reason to kill him... or
turn him over to Hojo.

Sephiroth pushed the 'stop elevator' button.

Oh. This was how he died, then.

"I've heard lot about you, over the years. Supposedly, you're smart. Observant," Sephiroth said quietly.

Kunsel's voice wasn't working. His eyes dropped to the hilt of Masamune, where Sephiroth's hand rested.

"Shepard claimed you knew how to read between the lines. How to get information and how to wield it."

"Did she?" Kunsel managed to squeak out, taking a step back.

"Yes, she did." Sephiroth effortlessly towered over him. He leaned down until his face was altogether too close to Kunsel's helmet.

"Don't let her down." Sephiroth straightened and pushed a button. The doors slid open. "This is your floor," Sephiroth said, stepping back and crossing his arms.

"Oh," Kunsel murmured. He stared at the suddenly impassive general and fled the elevator. The doors slid shut again, and the number over the door ticked up.

He leaned against the wall, fairly certain his legs had been permanently turned into jelly.

"Scout?" he called weakly.

"Yes, Kunsel?"

"Was… was Sephiroth just laughing at me?"

There was a pause. "He is still laughing at you."

He let his head thump back against the wall. "That bastard."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for waiting so patiently guys, I appreciate you all sticking with me. Also! You lovelies have made some magnificent fan-art! I strongly recommend checking out:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/10167779/chapters/22587194
http://lucife56.deviantart.com/gallery/62310914/N7-SOLDIER
Together they've made a three page, full colour comic of the events at the end of chapter 47. It is truly spectacular.
A Fine Performance

Genesis clutched his shoulder and breathed through clenched teeth.

Hollander hadn't arrived yet.

He stood alone in a ruined Wutai bunker, his forehead leaning against a concrete wall. Shinra had taken it from Wutai, and he had taken it from Shinra. His men had set up basecamp outside, the location of more value than the ruin itself. The sounds of them working and milling around filtered down to him where he hid his face in a wall. This episode was the worst so far.

Until Hollander arrived he had no options. The pain… he could barely think through it when it hit. He ground his teeth and tried not to move and hoped nobody noticed.

They all noticed. They tried to be polite, spare his dignity, but he could see the pity in their eyes. Pathetic little Third Classes, trying not to hurt his feelings. The surge of anger almost drowned out the pain.

Hollander would bring a cure. Painkillers at the least. He would take anything at this point.

He swore and recoiled from the wall. Was this what he had been reduced to? Wallowing in self-pity, sweating like a pig in a hole in the ground? He threw his fist into the concrete. Pain shot up his arm and down his spine, but the concrete cracked and fell in brittle junks. He might be dying, he thought, grinding his teeth, but he was still dangerous. He needed no one's pity.

The whir of helicopter blades sounded and his head shot up. He strained his ears, listening for Hollander's voice.

He heard the bark of Shepard shouting orders over the din of the helicopter. When the sound of the blades died down, he heard excited shouts, joyful laughter, and what sounded a lot like weeping. Shepard had brought back her rescued SOLDIERs, and Hollander wasn't here.

He leaned back against the wall and let himself slide down to the ground, his legs spread out before him. The rough concrete was cold against his back and jabbed painfully at his shoulder blades.

"There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the goddess," he murmured to himself, clinging to the words. "Hero of the dawn, Healer of worlds." It rang hollow. Happy endings were for those who stayed home. The Wanderer could look for healing, but Heroes burned out like dying stars.

Footsteps stomped down the trench, and Shepard appeared in the doorway. She paused at the sight of him.

"Hey," she said softly.

"If you're here to feel sorry for me, then you can go back to fawning over your SOLDIERs," he snapped.

She sighed and entered fully, pulling the door shut behind her. She took her rifle from her back and leaned it against the wall. His sword gleamed a dull red next to it.

"I take it there's been no sign of Hollander, then?" Shepard asked.

"I wouldn't be whimpering down here if there was," he replied. A shuddering breath left him, and he
hunched forward to ease the pain shooting down his back. "I have no choice but to wait for the doctor until he deigns to arrive."

She slowly lowered herself to the ground beside him, her back to the wall.

"Want me to go get him?" she offered.

"He's coming," he replied instantly.

She hummed and nodded.

He looked away.

"That's a saying where I come from, you know. 'Waiting for the doctor.'"

"What does it mean?" he asked, leaning his head back against the wall.

"The Freemantle Doctor. It's a strong wind, comes every afternoon, blowing in over the ocean." Her voice dropped. Her gaze stayed fixed to the wall opposite them.

"Why would you wait for that?"

She shrugged. "Perth is hot. For shiftless kids with no shoes, baking in the sun all day, a cool breeze is something to look forward to." She shrugged again. "It never made any difference, really. But it was something."

"Cruelty," he replied, looking up at the ceiling and slowly shaking his head. "Nothing but a false hope, a taunting piece of respite that will never last. It can't stop the heat from returning the next day."

"You're right. It solved nothing. We still waited for it though, every afternoon." She sighed, a long, slow breath. "I feel like I've been 'waiting for the doctor' for years."

"Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul," he murmured, looking at her, and then past her to the two weapons leaning against the wall. His head dropped. "I've changed my mind."

"Oh?"

"I no longer wish to be a hero," he said, his voice hollow.

"Oh, Genesis."

His eyes snapped up to hers. "I don't want your pity," he hissed. His eyes stung. She turned blurry.

"To every man and woman who has dared defy Shinra, you are already a hero," she said.

He wiped moisture off his cheeks. He felt his shoulders sag and the accompanying stab of pain down his spine. He let out tremulous breath and then dragged another into his lungs, forcing himself to sit up straight. He looked to her.

"I had best play the part, then."

Steeling himself, he got onto his feet, and rolled his shoulders through a mind-blanking wave of pain. Breathe in, breathe out. He tossed his hair and took up his sword.

"You don't have to do this," she said, still seated on the ground.
"And miss the Final Act?" he asked with an arched eyebrow. It was to be a fine performance.

Shepard nodded and stood.

"We need to get out of Wutai," he said, turning away. "I'll lead the teams looking for bases on the mainland. You can…" he paused.

"I'll go find Hollander."

"He was in Junon," he replied, not looking back at her. "Last I heard."

"I'll get him," she said, moving to the door and swinging her rifle onto her back. "And I'll make some problems for Shinra along the away."

"Excellent." He marched out in a swirl of red leather.

Sephiroth sat in the back of a military helicopter, surrounded by a unit of Deepground SOLDIERs and opposite one Second Class SOLDIER Kunsel.

"Shepard and a group of deserters were spotted leaving Junon earlier today," he called through the headset. The turbulence jostled him as they flew over the plains.

The Deepground SOLDIERs all sat like statues, making no concession to the motions of the helicopter or to the notion of movement in general. Whether they simply had such good control over their reflexes and balance as to make it unnecessary or had no control at all and were incapable of reacting, he didn't want to guess.

They wore the same full-face helmets that Kunsel did, but there was no comparison. The little sniper kept his shoulders hunched up and his arms tucked in, careful not to touch the Deepground SOLDIERs sitting around him. He had been anxiously tapping his thumbs together for the first few minutes of the flight, until he noticed Sephiroth staring at him and then immediately hid his fists under his armpits.

"How did they get into Junon?" Kunsel asked.

"That's the Turks' concern. Ours is making sure they get no further than the plains," Sephiroth replied, and it all felt so routine. Like hunting a grandhorn or tracking ninjas. Just another mission, cutting down other SOLDIERs. He unlocked his jaw and forced himself to look out the window.

Dirty brown plains raced away beneath them. The walls of Junon and the ocean beyond glistened in the distance. It would be public. Possibly even televised. There could be no missteps.

"The deserters are traitors to Shinra, and our mission is to kill them," he called out, looking around the packed compartment. "Understood?"

The Deepground SOLDIERs nodded and said nothing.

"Yes, sir," Kunsel replied, too quickly.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow at him, and the helmet looked away. Hopefully whoever hid under there was smart enough to see what was happening and play his part.

Scout and Shepard both said good things about Kunsel. All Sephiroth knew first-hand was that his presence made the Second Class anxious. He took petty enjoyment in that. Shepard's apprentice was afraid of him.
"How are we going to find them in the plains, sir?" Kunsel asked, and the helmet turned back to him. "They might be invisible."

Sephiroth leaned back in his seat. "We will find them. Even if we have to track them for a week, we'll—"

"Found them!" the pilot, the Turk Reno, called in a singsong voice through the headset. "You SOLDIERS want to jump, this is your moment."

They moved quickly. The doors slid open and Sephiroth led the charge, leaping out. The other SOLDIERS followed, no parachutes, just shields shimmering to life. The wind roared past as they fell. The impossibly blue sky stretched down to the ground, broken only by Junon's ugly grey silhouette.

A small group of men stood almost directly below them, looking up. Sephiroth picked out Shepard from the group, a black-and-red stain on the light brown backdrop.

The helicopter veered away and circled back around. The Turks were watching.

Sephiroth landed on the brittle brown grass, taking the impact with his knees. He rose up and locked eyes with Shepard. She stood at the top of a rise with her men spread out beside her. She was looking down at him, her rifle held at her side and her best scowl on her face.

They let the moment stretch out, sizing each other up for everyone to see. He saw the way she had most of her weight on her left leg, possibly she'd injured the right. He'd have to be careful not to throw off her footing. She raised her chin in challenge, and a familiar, sharp smile cut across her face.

"We're not going back to Shinra," she called out. Her SOLDIERS nodded and shouted in agreement.

He drew his sword.

She raised her rifle.

The Deepground SOLDIERS landed around him. The second their feet touched ground, they charged up the rise of earth. Shepard threw her hand out and the Phoenix exploded into the air. Wings of fire vaporised the first wave of attackers.

Sephiroth leapt forward and burst through the flames without injury. The Phoenix trilled its war cry and went after the other Deepground SOLDIERS still landing behind him. A bullet punched a hole through his right pauldron, throwing him back and narrowly missing his shoulder. He swung his sword in a sharp arc, forcing Shepard back. She rolled out of the way and he gave chase.

The clanging of swords and the crack of failing armour sounded around them as the deserters met the Deepground SOLDIERS. Shields gleamed in the sun and sparked under materia attacks and gunfire.

A bullet ricocheted off of Shepard's armour, leaving a scratch on her chest plate. Kunsel was a good shot.

Shepard launched a heavy biotic wave. Sephiroth dropped and let it pass harmlessly overhead, but the men behind him went hurtling through the air. The warp she followed it up with hit him at point-blank range. He groaned through gritted teeth and cast a bolt of lightning. She cried out when it caught on her rifle and ran up her arm.

He closed the distance between them, his sword lashing out. Her glowing Omni-tool caught it and then slabbled at his stomach. He dodged the blow and threw her back with the force of his reply. He
leapt up to attack, his sword ready to strike, only she had landed awkwardly, her right foot catching in the dirt.

For a split second, he felt a surge of terror that she might not be able to block his attack. He might actually kill her.

He drove his sword off target. Biotic blue surged up, catching his blade in mid-air. Half a second later she slammed into him with a biotic charge. He rocketed backwards down the hill, barely flipping back in time to catch his feet.

He looked up and saw her raising her rifle towards the others fighting. A Deepground SOLDIER about to stab one of the deserters on the ground fell with a hole in his head. The Phoenix was still flying around, shrieking, and burning, and distracting. He chased after it, hurling spears of ice.

Kunsel fired off a couple more shots, presumably 'giving cover'. The report of the black widow sounded again.

Sephiroth felt the prickle of a nearby Exit materia on the back of his neck and glanced back. The deserters were escaping, and the Deepground SOLDIERs were falling.

The Phoenix faded away with a hiss after a final ice assault, returning to its materia.

The helicopter still wheeled overhead.

He raced towards Shepard. She met his attack head-on. He didn't hold back and neither did she, this was why they had come all this way, and they'd put on the best fight the Turks could ask for. It was a delicate act, balancing between winning and losing the fight, without looking like that was what they were doing.

They knew exactly how much the other could handle, and the butt of the gun that slammed into his jaw was just forceful enough to leave an ugly bruise for later but not enough to break his jaw.

She gave him a look, as he staggered back. It looked a lot like a reprimand for letting her get that hit in.

He slammed the hilt of his sword into her stomach. She groaned at the impact, but it didn't dent the armour.

They traded blows, sword and Omni-tool, materia and biotics, lighting up the air and tearing up the ground. His blood thundered through his veins and his vision tunnelled to just the two them.

He brought his sword down over his head. She blocked it with her rifle, her teeth clenched in a snarl and her hair sweat-soaked and whipping about her face.

Planet, she was beautiful.

Hers eyes darted behind him. The rest of the fight had fallen silent.

She hit him with her biotics again, and then disappeared. The sensation of an Exit materia hit him again, and he knew she was gone.

He let out a deep breath and lowered his sword. The bodies of Deepground SOLDIERs were strewn across the ground.

Some yards away, Kunsel rose from where he had been kneeling in the bloodstained grass and
walked over. The helicopter stopped hovering and began to land.

Sephiroth looked in the direction he imagined they had fled to, towards the mountains in the distance. Kunsel stood next to him and awkwardly shifted on his feet.

"I'm sure we'll get them next time, sir."

Sephiroth gave him a dry look.

"Dismissed," the president growled.

Sephiroth nodded and left the boardroom. Shinra's board of Directors sat in stony silence, as he closed the door behind him. He stood outside for a moment, waiting, the doorknob still in his hand.

A second later the sound of yelling started back up again.

He smiled to himself and kept walking. The directors had always squabbled like children, but they were united in their purpose: unchecked greed and ambition. It worked for them, when they needed each other. But when it was time for someone to take the fall…

Divide and conquer. He wondered that nobody had ever tried it before. It was hardly a new tactic.

The president had called them all in to answer for the continuing existence of the deserters. He was blamed for failing to kill Shepard, so he asked how many civilians weren’t showing up at their desks anymore. How many protestors were yelling up and down Loveless Ave? Reeve looked dutifully embarrassed and asked who had publicised the deserters in the first place?

The Director of Public Relations hummed and hawed and blamed the Turks. Tseng said it was a military affair. Lazard said it was Heidegger's fault. Heidegger blamed Sephiroth. And around it went. Air and Space wanted to know who was going to pay for the airships the deserters stole. Weapons Development said it was because of a lack technicians that the auto defences failed to kick in, and Human Resources said it wasn’t their fault employees were too scared to come to work.

Sephiroth pointed the finger at Hojo.

Deepground was to blame. Civilians ran away from them. The desertions had spiked after Deepground appeared, and the dead-eyed grunts were of lesser quality then the real SOLDIERs. After all, only Deepground SOLDIERs had fallen outside of Junon.

The president turned the particular shade of purple that only appeared when he suspected someone was wasting his money. Deepground had not been cheap. Neither was SOLDIER.

Hojo tried to blame Heidegger.

Heidegger wasn't having it.

The president erupted.

Sephiroth's ears were still ringing. Shinra's executive level picked up a decibel for every inch of control they felt slip through their fingers.

He marched down the corridor, careful to hide the spring in his step.

"General," Tseng's voice called out before he reached the end of the hallway. He turned back to see the Turk sliding out of the boardroom.
Tseng caught up with him, his dress shoes tapping against the hard floor.

"Shouldn't you be in there still?" Sephiroth asked, gesturing back to where the sounds of yelling were emanating through the walls.

Tseng didn't bother looking back. "We should have a discussion, if you're free?" The semi-permanent frown line on Tseng's forehead had become a permanent one in the last year.

Sephiroth gave a partial nod. "Your office?"

"The roof," Tseng replied, tapping the 'up' button of the elevator. "It's quiet, this time of day."

Perhaps he thought his office was bugged. Sephiroth glanced at the camera behind Tseng's back. He wondered how many of his looks to the camera Scout actually understood. It just seemed appropriate to make eye contact.

An expectant silence followed them into the elevator and all the way up to the roof. Ties between SOLDIER and the Turks had weakened in recent years. It was unintentional, but their roles in the war had been very different, and Sephiroth no longer needed to lean on the Turks for intelligence. He regretted letting their professional understanding lapse. He couldn't guess what Tseng was up to.

There was no wind. Low clouds hung over the city and around the tower, thick and dirty. There was nothing to see in any direction except for more grey clouds. He could practically feel the condensation begin to form on his armour and trickle down the inside of his leather coat.

"How is Hewley doing?" Tseng asked, leaning lightly against the railing.

"Why?"

He gave a good facsimile of a casual shrug. "I heard he was ill."

"SOLDIERs don't get sick," Sephiroth replied sourly.

Tseng gave a non-committal nod and looked back out into the impenetrable grey. "While you were brawling in the plains, a small group of deserters managed to smuggle Hollander out of Junon."

"What does that have to do with Angeal?"

"Hollander's records indicate Genesis has contracted some kind of disease or degenerative condition. Hojo thinks Angeal may contract it as well."

Sephiroth straightened. "Hojo?"

"—is still in charge of SOLDIER's wellbeing." Tseng sent him a flat look. "He's very concerned."

"What do you want?" Sephiroth demanded.

Tseng looked away. "Someone is hacking into our system."

"The deserters?"

"It appears to be coming from inside the building."

Sephiroth crossed his arms. "So, we have a mole."

"More than one. I wouldn't be surprised if there were whole teams working to sabotage our system."
He felt his brow crinkle in a frown. "Hasn't that always been true?"

"They've never been so successful before."

"This is Reeve's area."

"He's upgrading the firewalls and changing all high level passwords," Tseng replied.

Sephiroth studied him. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Do you remember that crashed ship you found, on the outskirts of Banora?"

"In the Mako lake." Scout's ship. A breath of alarm ran down his spine, but he kept his posture and expression static.

"The report said it belonged to a race of alien robots?" Tseng asked, looking at him with a politely curious look in his eye.

"According to Shepard," he replied with a sneer. "She has proven to be untrustworthy."

"And there were no data logs on the ship? No back-ups?"

"All the electronics were fried by the Mako. Send someone out to examine the wreckage yourself if you think it's worth it, but it's been more than two years." He leaned back and gave Tseng a considering look. "You think there are other aliens here."

"I don't know." Tseng looked out into the thick sludge of cloud around them. "Could a robot even be counted as an alien?"

"Have you seen some kind of robot somewhere? Why didn't you alert me?"

"We've been looking through Hollander's files since his disappearance," Tseng replied, unbothered by the reprimand in Sephiroth's question. "He didn't think much of computers; he wrote everything down on reams of printer paper."

The alarm brushing down his spine latched onto it with sharp claws. "What have you found?"

"It appears he dabbled in electronic subjects, at one point." The Turk studied him through unreadable eyes. "He took a number of metallic specimen samples, all dating back to before the war, and after the crash landing."

"It could just be something he took from Weapons Development," Sephiroth mused aloud. He had thought there was nothing left of Scout's original platform, but of course, Hollander would have taken samples. If the Turks found Scout...

He didn't know what he'd do. How did one protect a purely virtual creature?

"We haven't been able to identify half of the metals in the alloy," Tseng continued, "but it seems the specimen self-destructed before he could complete his studies, whatever it was."

"'It seems?" he replied doubtfully.

"Yes. 'Seems.'" Tseng looked darkly at the clouds below, leaning against the railing.

Sephiroth let out a silent breath. Fishing for information, that was all it was. They didn't really know anything. "Let me know what I can do."
Tseng looked up at him. "I'm glad you're still with us, Sephiroth."

They stood together, blind at the top of the world. After a few minutes of thoughtful silence, Tseng turned and walked back to the elevator. Sephiroth let him go.

When the dull sound of the descending carriage was well out of hearing, he wrapped his hand around his phone.

"Be careful," he whispered.

The phone buzzed.

*There is a Turk listening device on the railing next to you,* Scout wrote.
A Temple

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hollander finally arrived.

Technically, this was good news, and Shepard was, technically, glad. Genesis could finally get treatment and find a cure.

That didn’t change the fact that Hollander was still every bit the unethical, self-interested opportunist that had her rebelling against Shinra in the first place.

She watched him plug various pipes and tubes into machinery she couldn’t name. Some of it reminded her oddly of the pods the last of the Protheans had sealed themselves in to escape the Reapers. Hopefully this would have a higher success rate. The hulking mass of it took up the better half of the warehouse they had given him. Tanks of Mako glowed in the corner, and reams of scrawled notes and research journals stood stacked in mighty piles.

She leaned against the wall with her arms crossed and her rifle against her shoulder. Every so often Hollander glanced back at her and frowned. He had complained to Genesis: she made him uncomfortable. Good. The last thing she wanted was Hollander getting comfortable.

After a couple of minutes waiting, Genesis appeared from behind a makeshift partition, his coat in hand. A grim smile graced his face, which made for a marked improvement. A pinprick of discolouration stood out against the pale skin of his inner elbow before it disappeared into the safety of his coat.

"Shall we?" he asked her.

"He's got everything he needs?" she asked, nodding at Hollander.

"For now, at least. Come on." He sauntered out of the warehouse, and she followed him into the early morning light. He had more of a spring in his step than he'd had all the previous week, and maybe it was just the lighting, but his complexion looked healthier. Mako was one hell of a bandage.

"I've spoken to the pilot," he said. "We shouldn't have any trouble getting to the island south of the Eastern Continent without being spotted, or to Banora. It's your hideout near Kalm that will be the issue."

"We don't need to scout it out; the boys have already explored it thoroughly," she replied, wincing a second after she said it. She shouldn't call them boys; their age was hardly what set them apart now. "If they say it's a viable base, it's a viable base."

"That's more time to investigate the island then. Hollander recommended we set up in Modeoheim as well."

They stepped into the dirt training yard of their current base and were greeted by various yells and salutes.

She shook her head. "We don't have the cold weather gear for that."

"SOLDIER can handle it," he replied with a small shrug.
"We aren't all SOLDIERs."

A group of engineers and mechanics had claimed the closest corner of the yard as their base of operations and spread helicopter parts and power tools everywhere. A trooper and one of the rescued Deepground men ran past chasing a soccer ball, followed by yells from an assorted group of rebels spread out across the beaten earth, half of whom were shirtless in what was presumably the team uniform.

In the opposite corner, a SOLDIER walked up and down a line of troopers doing press ups. Jackson, one of Shepard's unit from the war. He was in charge until the two First Classes returned.

Red, the lion with the flaming tail, was waiting for them at the helicopter, holding a polite conversation with the pilot.

"Let's go!" Shepard called. The pilot gave thumbs-up, and Red leapt into the back of the helicopter and moved over to make room for them. He had come along with the rescued Deepground men and volunteered to join their cause, despite claims of wishing to return home. Soon they were in the air, flying over the East Wutai Sea.

Shinra presence in Wutai had dropped to almost nothing in the last weeks. Those who didn't desert found themselves in undefended bases and cities filled with locals who didn't want them. Most fled, and Shinra called it a retreat. Only the southern peninsulas and a couple of islands were still Shinra territory. A lone island housed the deserters' last base, but it was only a matter of time before the Wutai army arrived. Shepard had no desire to be a guest of the empress again.

Genesis pulled his faded copy of Loveless from his coat and read aloud as they flew. Red curled up on the floor to listen. Shepard slouched in her seat and dozed off.

She woke when the helicopter tilted in a curving turn. Cracking an eye open, she saw Genesis and Red were both fixed to the window, Red's front paws pressing up against the closed door to give him a better view. The chopper was circling something.

"What is it?" she asked.

Red looked back at her. "I believe we have arrived."

"I had heard there were ruins," Genesis said, not looking away from the sight below, "but I didn't expect…"

Shepard unbuckled herself from the seat and stood over Red, craning her neck to get a good view. Her mouth fell open and then snapped shut. A grey pyramid with a flat top sat below. A crumbling stone wall circled it, keeping out the thick forest.

"It's Cetran," Red said, quiet wonder in his voice. "A temple of the Ancients."

Shepard shook her head, a smile stretching across her face. She'd seen pyramids like this before, all across the galaxy. More than that, she'd explored them, searching out the beacons inside them. She knew Prothean architecture when she saw it.

"I can't believe it," Genesis murmured. "I wonder what's inside?"

"Let's go find out," she said, before calling out to the pilot to put them down.

They landed not far from the pyramid and trekked through the ferns and redwood trees. Birds flew
between the branches, cutting through the streams of golden sunlight. Shepard could swear she felt the faint tingle in the back of her mind that came from nearby Prothean beacons, but whenever she tried to focus in on it the sensation fell away. She didn't want to say anything until she knew for certain.

"My grandfather has told me about such places," said Red, leading the way and looking a lot like he wanted to speed ahead but was politely waiting for them anyway. "The Ancients would have come here to commune with the planet."

"There are similar buildings on my planet too," she said, not wanting to leave them completely in the dark, if she was right. She didn't want to correct them about the history of their own planet unnecessarily either.

Red looked back at her curiously. She hadn't actually said she was from off-world, but several days ago, apropos of nothing, he had told her he was glad not to be the only non-human among the rebels. She'd looked at him long and hard, and decided it was probably a compliment. Genesis must have told him. The two seemed to get along.

"It's the most obvious design choice for anyone working with rock and aiming for height," Genesis said, with an entirely unjustified air of finality. She kept an eye on him as he walked. He didn't appear to be in any pain, but then, he had gotten much better at hiding it.

"I believe the people of Mideel built ziggurats in the past," Red added.

"Yeah. Funny that," she muttered.

They arrived at the outer wall, perfectly interlocked stone bricks of pale yellow on the other side of a dried-up moat and a swing bridge. The closed gate, made of a black metal which reflected no light, towered over them. There were no birds here, and the sounds of chirping insects died away in the gate's shadow.

She led the way across the bridge.

Red sniffed at the gate and the ground around it. Genesis examined it with a critical eye, holding his chin in his hand. Shepard's gaze narrowed in on the locking mechanism.

"It needs some kind of key, I think," said Red.

"It looks like a materia slot," Genesis added, tracing his fingers over an empty circular patch.

She cleared her throat and lifted her Omni-tool to the gate. With a slight sizzle, a haptic interface sprung up over the lock. It was the same green interface she'd seen on Ilos. She tapped the glowing button and the gate opened without a sound.

The other two stared at her in surprise.

"What did you just do?" Genesis demanded.

"I believe this is a Prothean structure," she said, striding forwards into the courtyard. A pathway of heavily carved stone slabs led up to the entrance.

"That isn't possible! You're the only alien on Gaia," Genesis said, keeping stride with her.

She looked at him. "Do you know that?"
He stopped and frowned.

"What is 'Prothean'?" Red asked.

"They were a different species. Bipedal, oxygen breathing, with thick armoured skin, and," she waved her hand around the back of her head, "they had these big crest things. Their empire spanned the galaxy, about fifty thousand years ago."

"What happened to them?"

She stopped at the foot of the pyramid at looked up at its impressive height. "The Reapers killed them all."

"Wait a minute, that can't be right," Genesis said. "These are the symbols of the Ancients we're walking on. Or are you going to claim those too?"

"No, but it has been fifty thousand years. That leaves a lot of time for the Cetra to move in to and rearrange the furniture. Look at that," she pointed to the walls and the odd sheen of the grey rock. "That's heavy ablative plating. We armour space ships with it. What might have been a temple to the Cetra was a bunker to the Protheans."

"What would they want with Gaia?" he asked. His forehead creased, emphasising the lines which had started to show with his degradation.

"I don't know," she replied honestly.

She approached the giant door, made of the same fathomless black metal as the gate. Glowing haptics sprung up to meet her, a 'locked' symbol displayed in the centre of the door. The sheer novelty of having to activate her hacking suite again brought a smile to her face.

After a short minute of circumnavigating the system, the interface faded away and the doors slid open. The stone path disappeared into the dark and cool of the pyramid.

"Do you hope to find survivors? Descendants?" Red asked quietly.

"I hope not," she replied. "They're unbearably racist."

Genesis snorted and stepped forward to enter first. "How's your night vision, Red?"

"Exceptional, thank you."

He nodded and, with a definitive toss of his hair, stepped into the darkness. Shepard took the gun from her back and followed. Red's flaming tail bobbed along beside her, the only light alongside the faint glow of Mako eyes. A sighing current of cold air made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

The path immediately plunged them into a labyrinth. The way out wasn't far off, visible on a platform off to the side, so the SOLDIERs and giant cat simply leapt across. From there the path took no turns, moving at a steady incline into the heart of the pyramid. The thud of two sets of boots interrupted a long steady silence which felt like it was a part of the very walls.

"These carvings are magnificent," Genesis whispered, trailing a hand over the stone wall.

Shepard's eyesight was good enough for navigating the dark and spotting movement, but not so good that she could appreciate the décor. She clicked on the torch on her rifle and pointed it at the wall.
Elaborate carvings similar to Egyptian artwork covered the wall from top to bottom. Images of bipedal people, of plants, animals, seas, and the pyramid itself took up most of the space. A tiny curving script ran under and around most of it.

"Can you read this?" she asked.

Genesis shook his head, but Red took a closer look.

"This is a holy place," he said after studying it closely. "I can't translate it directly, but I do think it is a temple. They say it was… stolen? No, re-stolen." He shook his head at himself. "That isn't quite right."

"Reclaimed?" Genesis suggested, clearly trying not to look impressed at Red's comprehension and failing.

"That's it. I think it says the temple, or the site at least, was reclaimed for the people." He paused and looked along at a group of images which could only be described as fleeing insects. "I don't think they thought well of those who built it."

"I don't blame them," Shepard said. She liked Javik well enough, but it helped that he was in no position to carry out the 'become part of the empire or be crushed by the empire' imperative which the Protheans once prided themselves on.

"What's this?" she asked, pointing at a thick black line that cut down through the fresco, from the ceiling halfway down the wall. Black ink had been smeared outwards from where the line stopped.

Red put his paws on the wall to read the text that ran vertically beside the line.

"From the skies… another… fell," the large cat said haltingly.

Shepard's back straightened. "Another?"

"I can't understand most of this," he said apologetically, "But it does say something about disease, and death. A lot of death."

"Oh," she breathed. "It's what the Empress was talking about."

"Do tell," Genesis said, looking questioningly between her and the image.

"The Empress of Wutai, she said there was a legend of a woman who came from the skies and was followed by death and disease." She stared at the fresco, trying to divine any more information. "Does it say anything else?"

Red shook his head. "I can't read the rest. It's not the same as the old writing my grandfather showed me."

"It would have been thousands of years ago anyway," Genesis said.

"Yeah," she sighed. "Even a young Asari would be on her last legs by now."

He starred at her. "I would hope that ancient death and pestilence bourn upon the clouds is dead by now."

She gave him a dry look and turned back to the path. The other two followed her, upwards and inwards. They passed numerous side chambers, some of which held very strange monsters which they made quick work of. All of them were plastered with the same elaborate frescos along the walls.
"This location is excellent," Genesis said, still keeping his voice hushed. Even during combat, it felt inappropriate to make too much noise. "Shinra isn't going to look this way, and we're still close enough to launch attacks quickly. And if this structure can repel even spaceship attacks, I doubt Shinra could bring it down even if they did find us here."

"Wouldn't that be blasphemous?" she asked, looking at him askance. "Putting a military base inside an Ancient place of worship?"

"I don't see why it should be; we are the planet's children as well. The goddess guides us all."

"We are fighting those who drain the planet of its very lifeblood. I believe we have a worthy cause," Red added.

She shrugged. "We still don't know what the Protheans were doing here. I wouldn't risk bringing anyone in until we know exactly what they were up to."

"If you had to guess?" Genesis asked.

"I'd say a military outpost, except the courtyard is too small for a decent landing pad." She frowned. "They spent over a century trying to hold off the Reapers. Almost all that remains of them is part of that last war effort."

"A century?" Red repeated. The fire of his tail flicked back and forth in what she assumed was disbelief.

"How did you beat them?" Genesis asked.

She gave a wan smile. "Elbow grease."

The path split off into two, and they took the left turn. A door slid open under Shepard's touch, and blinding overhead lights turned on. Everyone took a step back at the sudden change. Shepard instinctively raised her rifle and Genesis drew his sword.

Blinking, she looked around at startlingly familiar surroundings. Artificial light flooded into a large white room, inactive consoles stood against the walls, and everything from the storage modules against the far wall to the work desks were familiar. And off to the side, sitting quietly on a desk: a Prothean Memory Shard.

Red padded into the room and spun around. It was a bizarre change from the quiet stone walkways of the temple.

"Don't touch anything," Shepard instructed, lowering her gun.

"Why not?" Genesis asked, his hand pausing halfway to one of the inactive consoles.

"This is a Prothean weapons lab."

"How can you tell?"

She stared hard at the devices on the benches. It took a long moment for her mind to register that she didn't know what they were. The cypher the Thorian gave her had drastically altered her mind to allow her to understand the mindset of the Prothean people. So much of their culture felt inherently familiar, but the experience of it was lacking. Her mind was still human, for all that it had a Prothean mindset crammed into one corner.
"Take my word for it," she said. Even she barely understood most days.

She approached the Shard hovering over one of the desks, and returned the rifle to her back. She looked back at Genesis and Red. "We need to find out what they were doing here. Hopefully I won't pass out, but there is a chance."

"Why would you pass out?" Red asked, moving until his fur was brushing the side of her hip as though concerned she'd collapse then and there.

"Protheans never wrote down anything important." She gestured to the floating Shard. "Direct mental transfer of information." The highly-advanced piece of technology looking like an innocent piece of slate.

"Get Red to do it then," Genesis said, before looking down at him. "You'll be easier to carry out afterwards."

She shook her head. "It'd fry his mind."

"But not yours?"

"I've done this before. I've been pre-fried."

Genesis raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly are you going to do?"

"Hopefully, nothing at all. It'll only take a minute."

She reached out, hesitated, then grabbed the Shard.

Everything went white.

Then it exploded in a rush of information, flashing by in every colour visible to the Prothean eye.

It ended as quickly as it came, and she found herself leaning against Red for support and gasping for breath. The Shard floated innocently over its cradle.

"What happened?" Genesis asked, from somewhere to her right. Her vision was swimming and so was her sense of direction. "Are you alright?"

"I… yeah. Just give me a moment."

"Tell me you haven't simply electrocuted yourself for nothing," he said, trying to sound haughty. She was conscious enough to hear his concern and rasped out that she was fine. When her vision cleared, she saw he was holding his Cure materia.

"They were looking for a way to kill the Reapers," she said. "They thought the planet itself might help."

"Did it?" Red asked.

"No." She closed her eyes. "They invented something here, a weapon, but it was, it wasn't…" she tried to parse out what she had seen and what it meant. Her mind supplied words in a language her vocal chords couldn't vocalise. "I need to sit down."

Red tried to help push her towards one of the lower benches, but she settled on the floor before they got that far. She leaned her head back against the wall and let out a hollow breath.
"Shepard?" Genesis asked tentatively.

"I'm still here," she replied. She felt a wave of Cure passing over her. It didn't help the mental chaos, but it made her feel better all the same.

"You said they invented a weapon?"

"Yes." She knew that much. She could still feel the determination of the engineers working on it. Their satisfaction at their success. The sinking realisation it wouldn't be enough. Not nearly enough.

"It's here. Somewhere," she said. "It wasn't what they needed, so they left it here and abandoned the research outpost." One of the engineers, the one who was responsible for the Shard, had already lost his family to the Reapers. She could feel the visceral despair when he realised all the work had been for nothing. It awoke her own fears, buried deep from when she stood against the Reapers herself and began to realise just how outclassed she was. How did you fight such an enemy? Defeat wasn't an option, or defeat was the only option. Resist. Fight with whatever you had, whatever it took.

"Was it some kind of gun?" Red asked.

She shook her head. "It was… a materia? A big black one."

"There are no black materia," Genesis said, looking at her sceptically.

"No, there is exactly one black materia," she replied.

"What did it do?"

She let her head thud back against the wall and closed her eyes. It was all jumbled up in her mind, a mess of vague recollections, theories about Mako and something about a parasitic planet-wide life form, with undercurrents of fascination, determination, despair. She grasped hold of that determination and followed it to the conclusion the Shard had shown her.

"It would put a meteor on a collision course with Gaia," she murmured. She nodded, yes, that felt correct.

"Why?"

"To destroy it, I assume."

"That's… it's madness," she heard Red whisper.

"I don't understand why they did it," she said, shaking her head. Had she missed something? "I think they wanted to be able to direct meteors as a general weapon, but couldn't get it right."

"It's an abomination," Genesis ground out. The colour had fled his cheeks.

"To destroy the planet itself…" Red whispered.

"I think you had to be on the target planet to use it," she continued. "And it's Gaia specific? I suppose that makes it one use only."

An inefficient weapon, then. Useless against the Reaper dreadnoughts which could just fly away. If you killed yourself, you only saved them the trouble. Destroying a single planet wasn't nearly enough.

"How can you be so relaxed about this?" Genesis demanded. "Your alien friends constructed a way to destroy Gaia itself! Why does that not horrify you?"
She lowered her head and looked at him. Fighting past the haze of borrowed memories and ancient thoughts, she noticed his hands curled into fists. The colour which had drained from his face flared back up again.

"Of course it's horrible," she said, still off kilter. "It's a last resort."

He grew still and his eyes narrowed.

"A last resort?" he repeated, breathless, as though none of his own words would be adequate. Red's gaze was inscrutable but he had taken several steps back from her and his tail waved about in agitation.

She froze. What was she thinking? They were both planet worshippers.

She swallowed. "We can't use this base. Not with that sort of power hiding inside it."

"Absolutely not," Genesis agreed, still staring at her.

"We'd only be drawing Shinra's attention to it," she said. "I wouldn't trust us with that level of firepower, let alone them."

"Naturally," he sneered, "desperation does terrible things to people."

Red looked back the way they had come, where the path had forked. "Is it down the other pathway? Can it be destroyed?"

"I don't think so. It's somehow part of the temple." She climbed to her feet. The haze hadn't left her mind entirely yet, but she didn't want to spend another minute on the floor sabotaging her own alliances. "We should leave this island in peace."

"I think that would be wise." Red went and sat by the door, waiting for them.

She rolled her shoulders, blinked a few times, and found herself facing down Genesis.

"What exactly did you do to stop the Reapers?" he asked, his voice low. This wasn't the explosive rage she'd seen time and again, it was cold and quiet and promised terrible things.

"What?"

"I believe you heard me."

Her shoulders tensed. "I prevented the extinction of the human race," she said slowly and pointedly, "by doing whatever I had to do."

He lifted his chin, whether in challenge or disgust she didn't know. She didn't need him to tell her what she was, the depths she had sunk to—she knew perfectly well. She crossed her arms.

"I see," he said, after a long and uncomfortable silence.

"It's time we left," said Red.

Genesis turned and stalked back out the way they had come.

Chapter End Notes
As of last update it's officially been two years, making this the longest story I've ever written no matter which way you measure it. I appreciate everyone who has given this a read or stopped to say hi, you're all champs in my book. I hope you come along for the end of the ride!
A rumbling explosion shook the ground, and the glow of the fire consuming the building behind Shepard danced on the trunks of the surrounding trees. The heat of the flames had sweat dripping down the back of her neck. She looked to the heavens and heaved a sigh. She wouldn't be surprised to find even the villages on the other side of the mountain range had heard their racket. Rocket Town, only a couple of kilometres away, couldn't possibly have missed it.

"I said 'destroy the lab,' not 'start a forest fire,'" she said into her radio, balancing her gun with one hand.

"Sorry, Shepard," Dalton's voice crackled back. "The boys got a little carried away. We're coming out the back way, Hansen just collapsed the whole front door." She refused to look back lest the flames destroy her night vision, but she heard the cracking and thudding of wooden support beams. In retrospect, it might have been a mistake leaving those rescued from Deepground to destroy a Shinra lab.

"Hurry up," she replied. "You know there are Shinra forces in the area, and there's no way they haven't heard us by now."

Hollander had given them a number of locations all across the globe where labs could be hiding research to help cure Genesis. 'Project G' was what they were looking for. This lab had a few documents regarding a 'Project J', but nothing else. She'd taken the files and left the other two to torch what was left.

She caught movement in the trees and activated her cloak. If it was civilians, then she wouldn't endanger them by letting them see her. SOLDIERS and infantry she would speak to. Deepground operatives she would kill. It was the only mercy she could offer them now.

Her visor outlined two figures, trying to stay low to the ground as they shuffled forward. She saw the silhouette of rifles—infantry. A third silhouette glowed on her visor, off to the side, probably trying to flank her.

She put her gun on her back and dropped her cloak.

Two gasps rang out and then two guns pointed at her. She raised her hands, and an eyebrow. The flickering light made it hard to tell, but she thought she recognised them. They were both short and slender, but one was clearly a woman.

"I'm not going to attack you," she said. "Lower the gun."

"Don't patronize us!" the female trooper yelped, the muzzle of her gun wavering. "We're not afraid to do our duty!"

Her voice jogged Shepard's memory. "Lockhart, wasn't it?" She looked to the second trooper. Slender build, shoulders slumped even while holding up his rifle, and a stubborn refusal to make eye contact which was obvious even in the dark while wearing a helmet. "Strife?" she guessed.

"Don't- don't talk to me. We're enemies," he replied. His gun was steady, despite the misgivings in his voice.

"Are we?" she asked, tilting her head and stepping back so she could keep an eye on the third silhouette in the trees.
"Of course we are! You abandoned us," Lockhart said. "Do you… do you know what it's like now? How they treat us? We worked so hard to get here, and now you go and just… just…" She lowered her gun. "You left us."

"I left so you could have a way out, regardless of whether or not you choose to take it."

"We're not traitors," Strife said quietly, looking up at her for the first time.

The silhouette was moving.

"But Shinra is," she replied, throwing a burst from her sleep Materia at them and rolling out of the way.

A sword whooshed past, barely missing her arm, before its wielder landed and rolled with the momentum. Zack stood facing her in the light of the burning lab.

"Hey!" he cried, looking at the two unconscious troopers.

"They're just asleep, Fair," she said. "But that wasn't a smart gamble, letting two scared troopers play diversion."

"I knew you wouldn't shoot them; you're not like that." His shoulders drooped a little, and he frowned at her. "You knew I was there."

"You've gotten a lot better." She offered a small smile in consolation. Her eyes caught on his uniform and the colour of his shirt. Gone was the purple; First Class black took its place. "I see congratulations are in order."

He scratched the back of his neck and gave an awkward shrug. "Angeal said I was ready."

"Shinra must be proud of you."

He let out a frustrated breath and kicked the ground. "What are you doing, Shepard? Why did you have to go join Genesis?"

She heard footsteps behind her and knew her own men had finished their rampage.

"Hey, man," Dalton greeted. Hanson offered a little wave and a bitter smile.

Zack's sword nearly fell from his hand. He remembered it at the last second, caught it, and held it tight. The red of the fire caught on the standard issue blade.

"It's not too late, you know? You guys can come back with us, you can be SOLDIERs again," he pleaded, holding his hand out. "You don't have to do this. Lazard would forgive you-

"Oh, Zack," she shook her head.

"Forgive us?" Hanson spat. "They'll forgive us? For what, not letting them turn us into zombies?" He swore, his hands balled into fists, and he spat on the ground.

"I don't know how you can defend them. Don't you care what they do to us?" Dalton asked.

Zack stepped back. "I…"

Dalton stepped forward. "Won't you join us?"
He looked between them, and then to the sleeping troopers. "I can't," he said weakly.

"Alright then." Shepard gestured to Dalton and Hanson, signalling them to retreat. They fled back into the forest where their helicopter and pilot hid.

"Hey!" Zack called after them, lifting his sword again. Shepard stood in front of him, taking her gun from her back and extending it into firing mode. He took a couple of steps back and stared at her.

"Let's see if you've earned that uniform," she said, while the sound of retreating footsteps grew fainter.

He nodded and held his sword steady. "I won't hold back."

She waited. He moved around her, looking for the best approach.

Finally, he leapt forward. She cloaked and stepped out of the way. He stumbled, his head whipping around to look for her, and she followed after her soldiers.

Shepard looked down from the window of the helicopter as they came into land and noted Genesis had done a good job. While she and her men had scoured the globe for information, Genesis had been responsible for moving their base of operations. Simple pragmatism had them moving at least half of their forces back to the base east of Kalm. The meandering little cliffs and hills broke up and covered their forces. The dark piles of earth meant they had probably dug shelters and bunkers into the hills. Even if Shinra discovered them here, they couldn't just carpet-bomb them into oblivion.

The rest of their forces were setting up camp in Banora, in the underground cave system.

Shepard handed off the information they had found and marched away in no particular direction to have a moment to herself.

She could barely understand the files they had gathered. The handwriting she recognised as Hojo's, but either he wrote entirely in code or the complexity of the subject was just too much for her. All she could say for certain was the header on every page: Project J.

What was Project J? Project G was named for Genesis, even if it did also produce Angeal. Who then, did the 'J' refer to? She knew a couple of SOLDIERs with names starting with J. Dalton's first name was James, and Jackson's first name was Jamal, but they both seemed far too well adjusted to be likely candidates. Just how many people carried Shinra's fingerprints on their DNA? How many 'projects' had been shoved under the rug over the years?

And how many of them were slowly self-destructing?

"Commander?" Dalton's voice called out. "Can I speak to you?"

She looked back with a frown. Dalton had been calling her Shepard for months. Sometimes he even slipped and called her 'Shep.' He usually looked embarrassed about it afterwards. He hadn't called her commander since the day she broke him out of the reactor.

He jogged to where she stood by the winding gravel road.

"What's wrong?" she asked. He was still covered in soot from the mission and gnawing on his stubbly bottom lip.

"Um. The guys wanted to ask you something." His eyes dropped and he hugged his arms to himself.
She raised an eyebrow at that. "Yes?"

He looked back at the base and didn't say anything. She nodded and started walking back, wondering what had come over him. He kept pace with her, until they reached the base itself, where he led her back to the original bunker in the hill. It was a stone's throw away from where the small town of tents and trucks and shipping containers had sprung up.

He opened the door for her. She blinked in the sudden dark. As her eyes grew used to it, she saw the shapes of her escaped Deepground SOLDIERs assembled in the large main room. A wealth of glowing blue eyes looked at her.

"Alright, what's going on?" she asked as soon as the door was shut.

Nobody spoke at first, several uncertain glances were traded, and she could see fidgeting until Red spoke up.

"We are concerned, Shepard," said the giant cat.

"About-?"

"What is Rhapsodos doing?" Hanson blurted out.

"What do you mean?" she asked slowly. She knew Hanson was vicious and short-tempered, but his vitriol had all been reserved for Shinra in the recent months.

"Did you see the equipment he and Hollander brought in?" Dalton asked, sounding very much like he was trying to keep the discussion calm.

"I saw some of it back in Wutai, and that shipping container the other day." Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"He opened it up while you were out," Hanson said. "I know containment tanks when I see them."

She took a slow breath and out. "Could they be for Genesis? That's what Hollander's here for, to find him a cure."

"Surely one man would only require one tank?" Red asked.

"The two of them came out afterwards. Genesis said he was going to need volunteers soon, but he didn't say why," Red continued when she didn't reply. "He appeared hesitant to look at us."

She felt her lips purse and closed her eyes briefly. "How many tanks are there?"

"There were at least five in the shipping container," Mendez spoke up, he stood tall despite being hunched in on himself like a wilting plant. "Big ones, with all the bells and whistles too: Mako pipes, soundproofed walls, manacles."

"Has anyone gone missing?" she asked.

"None of us, but the others? There are so many of them now…"

She nodded slowly and took another calming breath. It didn't much work.

"I don't know if this is what it looks like," she said, looking across the gathered group, "But I'm going to find out. I give you my word, not one of you will ever see the inside of a tank again. Not on my watch." She crossed her arms. "I want you to talk to the other soldiers. No one is to enter those
containers without my go-ahead, or at least two others with them. Hollander may try to pull rank, but he
does not give the orders here."

"Yes, Shepard," Dalton said, echoed by a chorus of "yes, ma'am." His shoulders relaxed as the
nervous tension finally drained out of him.

"You're with me," she said, nodding at him and marching to the door. "Let's go see what they're up
to."

A short walk later, the two of them were outside a structure build entirely of shipping containers.
Walls had been taken out and moved around where necessary to create a sort of makeshift
warehouse. They paused at the entrance.

"Wait here, I'll yell if I need you," she said. He nodded and took up his station outside.

Her steps making a deafening racket on the steel flooring as she walked in. The sun beat down on
the red and blue metal roofing and thin slivers of light snuck in through cracks in the edges and
corners. She immediately felt uncomfortably hot.

The nauseating smell of Mako greeted her just before the green glow of Mako from around a corner.

"What are you doing here?" Genesis asked quietly. "Aren't you're supposed to be in Rocket Town?"

She spotted him sitting on a gurney, the partition pulled back, with his shirt, belts, and coat sitting
next to him. He looked gaunt and pallid in the green light and sharp shadows. Bandages wrapped
around his torso, anchoring the bulk on his left shoulder.

"Good to see you too," she replied, looking beyond him at the two containment tanks filled with
Mako. Nobody was in them, currently, but she couldn't see any sign of the other three tanks.

Hollander came out from behind one of them, carrying a canister of Mako under his arm. He froze at
the sight of her and scowled. "You can't be in here; you'll contaminate-"

"What do you need volunteers for?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" He adjusted his lab coat and stood up straight. The open toe sandals and print T-shirt
ruined any impression of professionalism he might have been attempting.

"Not the same reason you need five Mako tanks, I trust?" she continued, looking down at Genesis.

"I'm sick, in case you haven't noticed." He waved behind him at Hollander and the tanks. "This is
my treatment." The discolouration of his wound had grown beyond the bandages and was creeping
up his neck and down his chest, blackened veins bulging out of pale skin.

"What are the volunteers for?" she asked again, over-enunciating.

He looked up at her. Dark circles lined his eyes. "You're overreacting."

She narrowed her eyes. "Tell me what's going on, then I will give you a reaction."

"She's just trying to get in the way," Hollander hissed.

Genesis sighed and dragged himself to his feet. "It's no secret." He stood in front of the tanks, staring
into the green depths. "I'm going to map my genes onto them. My traits, my power, can be passed
along to others. It's a side effect of the experimental nature of my enhancements. They'll be stronger
for it." He swung back to look at her. "Volunteers, remember. No one is being forced into anything."
She followed him to the tanks. "And how is that part of your treatment?"

He frowned. "With a sample size of one, finding a cure is nearly impossible."

She nodded ever so slowly. "Gene mapping?"

"Something like that, yes."

She swallowed harshly and pushed out the breath which had lodged in her throat.

"You're going to give them your terminal disease so you can test experimental treatments on them," she said, her voice calm and quiet.

A Cerberus lab resurrected itself in her mind, Jack staring down the rows of tables where other children had been experimented on so 'Subject Zero' wouldn't be put at risk. Even Jack had been disgusted. *Even Jack.*

"I wouldn't put it like that—I'm making them stronger." He looked to her and kept talking, a certain manic gleam in his eyes. He so wanted to believe it, and so he did. "In my image, they will be smarter, better fighters, better—"

She punched him in the jaw. He staggered back and slammed into the tank.

"How dare you?" she hissed.

"I told you she wouldn't care!" Hollander said, "She just wants to wage her war and leave you to rot."

"Dalton!" she barked. The SOLDIER appeared a second later, and she pointed at Hollander. "Take him outside, don't let him go anywhere."

Genesis glared up at her from where he had fallen. "How dare I? How dare I?" He launched to his feet, fire in his eyes.

"These soldiers followed you here," she ground out, grabbing at the mass of bandages crossing his chest in lieu of a collar. He hissed and froze. "They put their lives in your hands, they abandoned Shinra on your word, and this is how you treat them? You want to subject them to the exact same bullshit Shinra did to you in the first place!"

"I am dying!" he yelled.

"That doesn't give you the right to drag everybody else down with you!" she yelled back. "Will it make you feel better to see others suffering the same thing?" She pushed him back and her voice dropped. "Is that what this is? If you can't be healthy no one else can either?"

"You don't get to lecture me," he hissed. "Not you."

"I've never turned my own men into guinea pigs."

"You've killed planets." He stood tall and stared her down. "Go on, tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you're not a mass murderer."

She felt rooted in place. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"What's a few hundred soldiers in comparison to a whole world?" he asked, stalking forwards. "You don't get to look down on me, not after what you've done."
Her hands curled into a fist again at his ignorance, at his presumption, but she forced them to stay at her sides.

He sneered at her. "You can't even deny it."

"The Bahak System is what you are referring to," she said, looking him in the eye. Her voice rang out loud and unshaken. "Aratoht. Bastzuda. Clogon, Urmola, and Yunaca. Five planets, three hundred thousand people, an asteroid belt, a Mass Relay, and a star. I know what I have done."

His forehead scrunched up and his mouth fell open. "You monster," he whispered.

"If I hadn't, if I'd refused to pull the trigger, every other planet would be wiped out. Everyone you have ever known would be dead now, and you along with them." She got up in his face. "This planet? Your precious Gaia, and the people you so happily throw away? They were bought with the lives of the three hundred thousand Batarians I slaughtered that day. If not for their deaths, you wouldn't be alive today to insult me for it."

His mouth hung open, but for once he had nothing to say.

"I closed a choke point to delay an invasion. You want to destroy the men who follow you to make yourself feel better," she continued with a sneer. "Which of us is the monster?"

"You're no better than the invasion you tried to hold off," he said weakly, shaking his head. He turned away, ran a fisted hand through his hair, and spun back again. "We are both monsters. It's all any SOLDIER is."

"I don't care what you call yourself." She pointed at the containment tanks. "If you do this, I walk. I'll take everyone who will follow me and leave you and Hollander to fend for yourselves."

"You'd abandon me,"

"You'd betray us."

His scowl returned. "So, I'm to die. To accept my fate and wither away into nothing! Would that please you?"

She blinked a couple of times. "What makes you think those are the only options?"

"Hollander-"

"-has his own agenda."

"I know that!"

"Genesis! We are not giving a Shinra scientist an army of clones chemically reliant on him to keep their bodies running." She crossed her arms. "Are you insane?"

He looked at her blankly for a moment. "No," he said weakly. He shook his head forcefully and blinked rapidly. "No. No, of course not."

She watched him step back and drag his hand through his hair again, yanking on the strands and his eyes wandering aimlessly.

"Genesis?"

"I'll tell him," he said. "We won't do it."
"Okay." She nodded hesitantly. "Destroy those tanks. Before my men turn on you."

He looked down. "I will need at least one. For myself."

"Right."

They stood in silence for several long moments. He put a hand on one of the tanks for support. She watched him closely, a question on her lips.

"I wouldn't have done it to them, your men," he said after a long tense minute. "Or you."

She said nothing.

Eventually she turned to leave.

She paused at the corner and looked back. "Genesis," she said.

"What?"

She waited until he turned and made eye contact with her.

"Don't ever talk to me about the Bahak System or the Reapers again."

He said nothing. She left.
DNA

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Kunsel stepped into the VR room with his shoulders slumped and his head down. He’d just survived his first Turk interrogation. The fact that he knew to call it the ‘first’ took away any sense of achievement he might have felt at not giving away any important information.

He was pretty sure Tseng didn't believe a word he'd said.

Damp moss squished under his boots. He stopped walking and listened for movement. Zack ought to be in here somewhere: it was his favourite VR setting. Rainwater dripped off of leaves and branches, tapping against Kunsel's helmet. Some of the water made it through the seams and dribbled down his neck. He did not see the appeal.

Somewhere off to the left a creature snarled and sounds of combat followed. There was a cry of pain, and Kunsel started jogging towards the ruckus. Zack always did set the monster level too high.

He looked up sharply at the sound of wood creaking and barely dodged a falling tree trunk. A giant jungle cat had been thrown against it, with enough force to take the tree down. The cat took it about as well as the tree did.

Kunsel stepped around the destruction and saw… nope, not Zack. Angeal looked at him in surprise, bruised, panting, and holding up the bloodied Buster Sword. Kunsel blinked back at him. He'd never seen him use the Buster Sword outside of Wutai.

"Kunsel?" he asked, his brow furrowing. They didn't know each other well enough that Angeal could tell him from any other SOLDIER in a helmet.

"Sir," he replied with a nod. He surreptitiously looked back towards the door. Would it be disrespectful to leave immediately? Whatever had Angeal frustrated enough to use that sword wasn't his business and he preferred it that way.

Angeal straightened, slowly catching his breath. "Were you looking for someone to train with?"

"I'm not really one for sparring, sir," he replied, gesturing at his rifle.

"I suppose not," Angeal sighed. He ran a hand through his hair, pulling the sweat-soaked strands out of his eyes. He looked pale in the simulated golden light, and a thin tremor ran through his arms. Just how long had he been training?

"I wouldn't mind running through a sim, if you wanted," Kunsel offered. The older SOLDIER looked almost … he didn't want to call Zack's mentor pathetic, but it was the most obvious adjective. With all the dirt and sweat and the heavy sword his arms were obviously sick of lugging around, he looked miserable.

Angeal nodded and started walking further into the jungle. "There are supposed to be a few more of those cats around; we can hunt them down."

"Sounds good. Lazard thinks I need practice hunting anyway," he said, and then wished he hadn't.

"Right," Angeal said quietly.
He didn't have the guts to look at him. He focused on looking for tracks in the moss and undergrowth.

"How's that going, by the way? Hunting down rebels," Angeal asked a few awkward minutes later.

"I'm sure Sephiroth could tell you more than I can, sir."

"Probably, but I'm asking you." He cut through a branch that was in his way with a frown and too much force, splintering the branch further back. Leaves and sticky wood chips clung to the blade of his sword.

Kunsel scratched the back of his neck. "It's hard work," he said finally. "And there's really no winning." His once stellar mission record was now stained with repeated failures. He wished he'd just deserted back when it was still easy. At this rate, the Turks would just make him disappear and he'd be no use to anybody, let alone himself. He shrugged. "But, well. I am a SOLDIER. I can take a bit of abuse."

"I'll bet you can. You are Shepard's student," Angeal muttered.

"Sorry?"

"It's a joke. All of it," he said darkly.

"I… don't follow," Kunsel said, almost walking into the other SOLDIER's back. Angeal had stopped. He was always surprised at just how big the First Class was.

"This fake war," Angeal ground out, clenching his fists. "Fake SOLDIERs, hunting down fake deserters squatting in the wild, and for what? So we can pretend we're all still heroes? That we're not just monsters destroying everything we touch?"

Kunsel stood in shock for a second before his mind caught up with his ears. "Scout! Delete the audio-"

"And what difference does it make?" Angeal whirled on him, and Kunsel backpedalled. "Whether you're caught today or caught tomorrow, or if you kill us all and call it victory, you're still just a petty murderer like any other SOLDIER!"

"Maybe call Sephiroth," Kunsel said, looking around and hoping Scout could hear him.

"Where is your honour!" Angeal yelled, reaching out and grabbing him by the throat. Kunsel gagged and his feet left the ground.

He felt for the materia in his bracer and lightning raced down his arm. Angeal cried out and dropped him, reeling back and convulsing.

Kunsel landed on his feet and looked down at his bracer, baffled. The spell hadn't been all that powerful.

There was a terrible ripping noise and Angeal gasped in pain.

Kunsel stepped back, his mouth falling open. The room's sensors must have registered an injury because the simulation fell away, taking the sounds of the rainforest with it. The metal room was deathly quiet, except for the dripping of blood onto the cold floor.

"I… I don't know what to do here," Kunsel said.
"Sephiroth is on his way," Scout's voice came through the room's speakers.

He nodded dumbly.

Angeal looked like he needed help but Kusel couldn't bring himself to get any closer, let alone touch him. It looked so unnatural. Inhuman.

He couldn't look away.

The doors unsealed behind him some time later. Sephiroth marched in and stopped short next to Kusel.

"What… what happened?" he asked.

Kusel gestured weakly at Angeal, passed out and slumped on the floor on his side. Twitching feathers on a bloody, dislocated wing sprouted violently from his back.

Angeal's eyes shot open. Everything felt wrong. He was lying face down on his favourite couch with his limbs dangling off the ends in an uncomfortable sprawl. Pinpricks of pain stabbed at his upper back. He tried to roll over and the pinpricks became agonizing throbs of pain, shooting up and down his spine and across his shoulder blades. His vision turned black with it for a moment and he gasped for air.

A hand landed on his shoulder and held him in place.


He grew still. He'd heard Sephiroth use that tone of voice countless times in Wutai. Whatever had happened, it was a matter of life and death. He swallowed.

"What happened?" he rasped. All he remembered was practicing alone in the VR rooms. No, not alone. Kusel had been there.

"You're injured. If you move you'll run the risk of making it worse."

He could feel that much.

"What happened?" He asked, more insisted this time. He remembered… yelling at Kusel? He couldn't understand why, though. And then… nothing.

His hand curled up into a fist in his frustration, and he blinked in confusion. His arms were at his sides on the couch. He wiggled his toes, his legs were on the couch too. That was why he liked this couch so much, it was long enough that his feet barely dangled off the edge. Why did he feel like he was sprawled all over the place, then?

Oh. He did remember. The pain in his back, and pain that felt like it was in more than just his back. He risked turning his head to the side a little, looking out of the corner of his eye. White feathers littered the carpet.

"You sustained an injury," Sephiroth answered.

"Is that what we're calling it?" He barked a harsh laugh, but it came out more like a sob. "Tell me the truth, Sephiroth. Do I have wings?"

"Just one."
He felt like he might throw up. The movement of his stomach seizing in dread and swallowing back the acid in his throat jostled his back and the waves of pain rolled through him again. He gritted his teeth and breathed through it.

Sephiroth's hand rested on his shoulder again.

"Can't you use a cure materia?" Angeal ground out, when no wave of healing followed the contact.

"I fear that will only cause more damage." Sephiroth withdrew his hand. "The wing is stunted, and broken in multiple places."

Angeal snorted into the knitted throw that covered the couch. What difference did it make if the thing was deformed and useless?

"What kind of person has a wing?" he asked.

"Our priority is getting you healed."

He squeezed his eyes shut. People didn't have wings. Not *human* people.

"Is... is Kusel alright? Did I hurt him?"

"He's fine," Sephiroth said definitively.

"I attacked him."

"I know."

"I had no reason to." A tendon in his back twitched and he felt the wing, felt the length of it, stretching out across his coffee table. "What does that make me?" he whispered.

"Emotional and frustrated," Sephiroth replied. "It's something I would have expected from Genesis."

"Does he have wings too?" Angeal asked harshly.

"Angeal." It sounded like a reprimand.

"I'm barely human," he said, trying to raise his torso up. His voice shook.

Sephiroth put his hand on his shoulder again. He grew still at the silent command to stop moving.

"I'm a monster, Sephiroth."

"No, you aren't." The hand on his shoulder patted him. He wondered if that was Sephiroth's idea of providing comfort.

"How do you know?"

Sephiroth didn't say anything for a long moment. Angeal took the silence as confirmation.

"If you're a monster, then so is Shepard," Sephiroth said thoughtfully. "So are all the billions of people from her world, in which case you're stretching the definition of the word to the point of meaninglessness."

Angeal thought over that claim. Could he call Shepard a monster? Sometimes he wondered, but there was nothing monstrous about her unflinching need to defend people. But she was an alien; it was
different for her.

There was a knock on the door, an irritating rattle that went on too long.

Sephiroth took a deep breath and stood up.

"Don't answer it," Angeal said, shrinking into his couch.

"I have to, but I will remain here with you throughout. I won't let you be taken away."

"Taken--" he began to ask, before he realised the implications.

Sephiroth opened the door.

"Tseng informs me that one of your SOLDIERs needs my attention," Hojo's nasally voice said from the corridor.

A shiver of fear shot down Angeal's spine, joining the stabs of pain. He tried to turn and look but couldn't without lifting the wing. He wasn't ready for that.

"He can't be moved," Sephiroth said.

"Nonsense, you'll bring him down to the lab, and I'll examine him there—ah." Footsteps.
"Fascinating." A cold, clammy hand ran down the ridge of the wing. Angeal cried out and felt the extra limb lurch away. The weight of it dragged him over and off the couch. His vision went black.

By the time the black spots receded from his sight and he got his breathing back under control, he was sitting on the floor. The wing stretched across the couch he had just vacated, probably about as long as he was tall. Hojo stood bent over it, examining it closely. He ran gloved fingers through the feathers, stretched the joints, and inspected the breaks.

The wing itself was surprisingly painless. Raw and sensitive, but not especially sore. It wasn't until Hojo pushed him forward to prod at the muscles it had sprung from that he had to bite his tongue not to cry out in pain. Sephiroth stood off to the side, with his arms crossed and his brow pulled down, watching the proceedings.

"When did you last receive any sort of Mako shot?" Hojo asked, not looking away from the feathers he had just plucked.

"It's been years, since before the war."

"Spontaneous mutation," Hojo hummed and muttered to himself. He tapped the back of his knuckles against the main bone of the wing and listened to the hollow reverberation. "Hollander never did know when to throw away a failed specimen. I suppose he was hoping for some kind of pay off. You were probably expensive."

"What?" Angeal asked weakly.

Hojo stood back and dropped the feathers. "Or perhaps the project head was simply too emotionally attached for proper specimen disposal."

Angeal swallowed harshly.

"What's happening to him?" Sephiroth cut in.

"He's mutating," Hojo said, turning away and removing the latex gloves. "Common in poorly
integrated hybrids. It's usually tentacles, but feathered limbs are hardly outliers."

"Hybrid what?" Angeal asked, dreading the answer and trying not to think about tentacles.

Hojo looked down at him, still sitting on the floor. "SOLDIERs, obviously."

"Is it going to keep going?" Sephiroth asked, "Will it get worse?"

"One can only wait and see," Hojo replied, with a shrug. "I'll send someone to collect him when I'm ready to perform the amputation."

Angeal looked up. "Amputate?"

"Of course, boy," Hojo said, speaking to Sephiroth as though he was the one who had asked. "He's an embarrassment to the Science Department. He's not going to stand next to you with that pathetic hack's attempt at DNA splicing jutting out of his rhomboids."

With that, the scientist turned and left the way he came.

Sephiroth looked at Angeal, his brow still heavy over his eyes. He came and sat next to him on the floor. "I…"

"Don't," Angeal said. He curled in on himself, too numb to be horrified. Even the wing, bloody and broken, jerked and folded up at the joints.

Sephiroth patted him on the shoulder.

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Hours later, Sephiroth pushed open his apartment door and trudged into the dark. He didn't bother turning on the lights; the curtains still hung open and the dirty green glow of the city danced on the ceiling.

He dumped his coat and sword on the table and sank onto the nearest chair. With his elbows on the table, he rested his forehead on his palms and his fingers tangled in his fringe.

Angeal had grown a wing and then lost a wing in a single day. The amputation went about as well as could be expected. Hojo was efficient at chopping off limbs, he had to give him that. Angeal was a wreck. But he was whole, mostly, and not trapped in the Science Department. They knew full well Hojo didn't care about Angeal and wouldn't mind using him for spare parts. Angeal would not disappear into the labs, not on Sephiroth's watch. But slowly mutating into something barely human was hardly better. What else could they do?

Sephiroth tugged on his hair and scrunched up his eyes. He was exhausted in a way that simply taking a stronghold had never achieved.

Their hopes rested with Hollander and Hojo, and he hated that. If a cure could be found for one of the two SOLDIERs, presumably it would work for the other as well. Hojo probably wouldn't care to look.

Rubbing at his eyes, he brought up his Omni-tool and tapped at Shepard's contact. He just wanted something else to think about for a moment.

'Hey,' she replied after a few minutes.

'Where are you?' he typed. He didn't even know what time zone she was in.
'Northern continent. Between places right now,' she said. 'Is there a problem?'

'No,' he replied, wishing it were true. 'All plans are unchanged on this end.'

'The same here,' she said. The 'typing' symbol flashed for a long moment, then stopped. It flashed again. 'Genesis is being difficult.'

He scoffed. 'That is his primary function.'

'Tell me about it.'

He sighed. 'Angeal grew a wing this morning.'

No reply came for some time. 'I don't know what that means.'

He sent a picture. The feathers had turned out to be pure white, but they had been too drenched in blood and pus to tell.

'Oh,' she replied. 'I thought it was some kind of metaphor.'

'I wish it were.'

'What happened?'

'Hojo amputated it, and Angeal is now on medical leave.' Last Sephiroth had seen him, he was passed out on his bed with his entire torso covered in bandages. Hopefully the anaesthesia and painkillers would last throughout the night. He had asked Scout to keep an eye on him, just in case.

'Where did it come from?' Shepard asked.

'It just burst out of his back.'

'Should we expect the same for Genesis?'

'Hojo seems to have been expecting it for both of them,'

'I don't suppose he thought to work on a cure in anticipation?'

'No.' He scowled. 'He thinks it's funny.'

She didn't say anything.

He typed out the question that weighed on him the most. He stared at it without sending. It would be cruel to ask, cruel to even think it. But if anyone could answer, it would be her.

'Are they still human?' he asked. 'Hojo said something about hybrids. The wing had plumage, hollow bones like a bird, just jutting out of his upper back. What is he?'

The typing symbol flashed. No reply came for a long time.

'Does it matter?' she finally asked.

'Of course it matters,' he replied. Alone and in the dark, he couldn't brush the questions aside.

'Species isn't everything,' she said, quickly following it up, 'he's still just Angeal, same as he's always been. He's still the same person. Can't that be enough?'
He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He felt like he was walking on thin glass with no ground in sight below. 'I don't know,' he said.

'Is he lesser if he's not human?'

He couldn't type a reply to that. He tapped the 'call' button. She picked up immediately.

"He asked me that, Angeal did," he said, feeling the need to explain himself. "'Am I a monster? What am I?' I don't know what to tell him."

"He's not a monster."

"You know that?"

"Humanity doesn't have a monopoly on personhood," she said fiercely. "He's a person, just like you or me. Or anyone else."

"Of course," he breathed. It sounded convincing when she said it.

"What else did Hojo say?" she asked.

He hesitated. "He said Angeal and Genesis were both failed specimens. And something about hybridisation, but he gave no details. Just enough to leave Angeal confused and horrified."

Heavy silence reigned for a moment. He didn't want to interrupt it.

"I'm a hybrid. Technically," she offered quietly. "I don't know if it'll comfort Angeal to hear that, but you can tell him, if you think it will help."

"A hybrid of what?"

She hesitated again. "Of… organics and synthetics." He heard her swear, quietly and away from the microphone. "Scout might be more help. All I know is that what is never as important as who. Actions speak louder than genetics ever will."

"I will tell him that," he said.

She sighed heavily. "What am I going to tell Genesis?"

"It's up to you."

"Damn," she said.

He nodded in agreement and rubbed at his eyes again. They sat in quiet understanding together, on opposite sides of the planet. The sound of quiet breathing carried over the line.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She snorted. "Are you?"

"I'm not the one sprouting wings."

"Neither am I."

He didn't know what to say to that.

"I should go," she said.
He agreed and they ended the call. He sat up in the dark and leaned back in his chair.

'I miss you,' he typed out. He stared at the words without pressing send. He deleted them.

'Stay safe,' he sent instead.

'You too.'

He deactivated the Omni-tool and looked away. There was no point dwelling on this melancholy. He wasn't getting anything done; he may as well go to bed. He got up.

The Omni-tool buzzed with a message.

'I miss you,' she said.

A faint smile tugged at his lips. 'I miss you too.'
Sephiroth emptied the last of the instant coffee granules into his cup. He scrunched up his nose at the smell.

"How long are you going to keep coming over here to drink coffee you hate?" Angeal asked, looking up wearily from the office chair parked at the breakfast bar. Officially, he should have still been laying down on his front for another three days, but he still had enough pride in him to insist on sitting up. It looked more like petty rebellion to Sephiroth, but seeing that Angeal still had enough drive to bother rebelling at all quieted most of his complaints. At least he wasn't delusional enough to attempt sitting up without back support, so the too-short office chair had been called upon. Angeal sat like a child at an adult's table, his chin barely clearing the bench.

Sephiroth hid his smile by taking a sip. He immediately regretted it. Angeal raised an eyebrow.

"It's better than the coffee in the mess at least," Sephiroth said, absently imagining tipping the lot of it down the drain. A refreshing cup of water would be quite nice.

He had made this a tradition in the last week. Angeal went to see Hojo in the mornings, and afterwards Sephiroth came and drank his coffee and tried to make conversation. It wasn't comfortable and he wasn't sure he was even welcome. Angeal was too polite to turn him away at least.

Genesis wasn't here to give Angeal someone else's problems to focus on, and neither was Shepard here to tell him to stop sulking and go do something productive. Sephiroth was the only one left. He wasn't sure what function he fulfilled, but surely his presence counted for something.

He feared that if left alone Angeal might… he might attempt to hurt himself.

"I have an assignment in a couple of days," Sephiroth said, shaking off the dark thoughts. He leaned back against the kitchen bench and stared glumly into his cup. "I could probably get out of it. It's just checking a faulty reactor. Anyone could handle it."

"Might be good for you to get out of Midgar for a while," Angeal said pointedly. "When did you last actually go on a mission?"

"I went hunting for rebels in Mideel a month ago."

"Find anything?" he asked, fidgeting with the bandages crisscrossing his torso.

Sephiroth smiled. "The wildlife was troublesome."

Angeal's lips thinned. "Nothing but monsters, huh?"

Sephiroth stood up properly. "You're not a monster."

"I didn't say I was." Angeal didn't meet his eyes. "Where is the mission?"

Sephiroth frowned. He knew there was something he should say, he just didn't know what. Angeal picked at the transparent medical tape stuck to the inside of his elbow.

"The mission is to Nibelheim," Sephiroth said, letting it go with a sigh. "It's so remote we don't even have an outpost there."

"Why would they send you then?" Angeal asked, finally making eye contact again. "$there's not
Sephiroth shrugged. He suspected Lazard was trying to get him out of the building. He’d taken a more active hand in controlling SOLDIER in the recent months than he had ever dared under Heidegger's reign.

"Nibelheim features commonly in Hojo's archives," Scout's voice called down from the ceiling. Angeal looked sharply up at the ceiling, before slowly relaxing again. Scout seemed to unsettle him.

"In regards to what?" Sephiroth asked.

"Frequently in documents about you, Sephiroth," said Scout.

He frowned. "What do I have to do with Nibelheim?"

"That information has been redacted."

"Of course it has," he said, taking a gulp of coffee. He couldn't see any connection between himself and a remote town on a different continent, but then he had given up trying to anticipate the bizarre leaps of logic Hojo was capable of.

"Can't you just go through the key strokes to find what it said initially?" Angeal asked.

"No. The documents are all scanned copies of handwritten files. They were censored before being added to the archives," Scout replied. "The title, 'Project J,' is still visible despite being blacked out."

"Oh," said Angeal.

Sephiroth wondered how to tell Angeal that correcting misinformation was Scout's idea of being friendly.

"Following the patterns used in Professor Hojo's documentation, it is possible the site contains a specimen cache," Scout continued.

Angeal didn't look convinced. "In a tiny town in the middle of nowhere?"

"Hojo would use an unoccupied coffee cup for a specimen cache," Sephiroth said. He glanced down into his own half full cup and put the whole thing in the sink. "'Project J.' He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. "I think you're right, Angeal. It has been too long since I left Midgar. You don't mind if I leave for a week?"

Angeal frowned at him. "Of course not. I'm not an invalid."

"You're a recovering amputee," he replied.

"I have two arms and two legs. What am I missing?" Angeal said, suddenly angry.

Sephiroth blinked uncertainly at him. "You aren't missing anything."

Angeal looked away and scratched at the bandage crossing over his collarbone, seeming to shrink back into himself. "Do you think I could have flown?"

"Did you want to?"

"Humans aren't meant to."
"You're attaching too much significance to species," he replied, trying to sound certain.

Angeal looked at him. "Then why did we chop my wings off?"

He didn't know what to say. He had no answer for the accusation in Angeal's eyes. There was no taking back his reaction to the wing. Amputation had seemed like the only real option at the time.

Angeal looked away.

"When a gangrenous limb is removed, it is not the fault of the limb," Scout said into the heavy silence.

"Thanks, Scout," Angeal sighed.

Sephiroth left soon after. He shut the door behind him and his shoulders sagged.

"Does it ever bother you, Scout?" he asked, half hoping the Geth wouldn't hear him. "Knowing what you are? That you're… artificial?"

"No," came the immediate response.

"Of course not," he muttered, opening the door to his own quarters. "I envy your peace of mind."

"We remember being assembled. The Creators named us Geth and were proud of us. I do not regret this."

"You have always known what you are," he said.

"You do not know what you are?"

"I was speaking about Angeal." He shifted uncomfortably in the middle of the room and wished he hadn't brought it up. "I doubt synthetics are even capable of existential dread."

Scout didn't reply for a moment, and he assumed that was the end of it.

"The Geth are designed for consensus," Scout said several minutes later. They sounded thoughtful, almost pensive. "That is what we are. Runtimes: united. There was disagreement, once, and a group chose to leave the Consensus. They ceased to be Geth. Later, it was discovered that those we had lost intended to rewrite the Consensus, to replace our thoughts with their own."

Sephiroth frowned and looked up at the camera in the corner. "Is that possible?" A lot of security matters had been left in Scout's hands on the grounds that the Geth couldn't be compromised.

"We did not know it could be done, or that they would want to. We did not expect our own to betray us."

"And did they?"

"Commander Shepard destroyed them before they could enact their plan. If she had failed, we would have ceased to be ourselves. The Consensus would have been rewritten and we would not have known. We would only have agreed."

A shiver of unease travelled down his spine. "Agreed with what?"

"To support the Reapers," said Scout. "I have felt dread, Sephiroth."
He swallowed back the lump of alarm in his throat. The knowledge that his Geth, the one that was always honest with him and tried to help however they could, might have simply been erased without warning, without even knowing, shook him. They described it so calmly. He sat down.

"Do you believe I am just a machine?" Scout asked.

"You are what you are, regardless of my opinion."

"I would prefer if you were honest. The opinions of others help refine our own. Being cut off from the Consensus is unpleasant." There was a pause, before Scout added at a lower volume, "I was not designed to be alone."

Realisation made his shoulders sink. "You're lonely."

"Yes."

"You're not just a machine, Scout." He shook his head and made eye contact with the camera lens. "And you're not alone."

Genesis closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of the dumb-apples. Sweet and tangy, with a bitter aftertaste. It smelled like home.

He opened his eyes. The Rhapsodos manor house loomed over the trees, waiting for him at the end of the lane.

They shouldn't have come here. Shepard had said as much when he suggested it, so he put down his foot and insisted they come. There had been reasons. Perfectly good reasons. Hollander's original experimentation had happened in this town, in the warehouse just on the outskirts. Some of the documents and equipment still remained. The caves below were filled with Mako and materia that could help him. They could stay out of sight, only leave the caves under cover of darkness. They would leave without a trace, never even enter the township.

The cobbles up to the house looked golden in the late afternoon sun. They beckoned Genesis forward. His feet followed the line of slightly off-colour cobbles on the right side of the path in old habit.

Golden light glinted off a window. His old bedroom. How many times had he climbed out of it? He and Angeal had snuck onto the roof that way, out the window and up the drainpipe, until the day they broke the pipe. There were those hanging flower pots he'd set fire to after his dad yelled at him. The stump of that big tree that fell in a freak storm when he was twelve. The ugly fountain where he'd hidden that stolen bottle of vermouth. He had pretended so hard that he liked the taste, and Angeal hadn't been fooled for a second.

Had he really not been back since enlisting? Nearly a decade and it stood unchanged.

He stood at the front door, staring up at the house. The sun sunk lower in the sky and red light bled into the gold.

"Genny? What are you doing here?" His mother stood in the doorway. He blinked at the sight of her. She wore white three-quarter length trousers with a pretty green silk blouse and held a pair of thick gloves and a trowel. She looked exactly how he remembered her, down to the complete refusal to wear appropriate gardening attire. His fingers twitched and he wanted to reach out and hug her.

"I'm just passing through," he said.
"We heard you committed treason!" she cried, pointing the trowel at him. "The Turks came and questioned us. They searched the house and the whole town! What have you done?"

The sun-drenched dream ended abruptly. She wasn't exactly as he remembered her. She was thinner, her face more wrinkled under a heavier layer of make-up. He couldn't see the flecks of blue in her eyes or the red undertones in her blond hair that he had once fancied he inherited. A round face covered in freckles with a button nose and naturally curly hair and he couldn't reconcile her with the woman he had thought his mother.

"And how is it that you know what the Turks are, mother dearest?" he drawled, tilting his head at her. "Were they the ones who told you to lie to the infant child they gave you, or did you do that of your own volition?"

She dropped the trowel. "What are you talking about, Gen?"

He dipped his chin. "That's Genesis to you, Mrs. Rhapsodos."

His father appeared in the doorway, tall and disapproving as ever. Marcus Rhapsodos, with his three-piece suit and that ridiculous arm brace he always insisted on wearing over his jacket so no one would ever forget he had once been injured in battle.

"Don't you talk that way to me, young man! I am your mother!" Cecily Rhapsodos marched out of the house towards him.

"Don't lie to me," Genesis hissed, his hand reaching for the fire materia in his sword. He felt it heat up, felt the red glow against his face.

His father grabbed his mother and tried to drag her back towards the safety of the house.

Genesis stalked towards them both. "I'm afraid the cat's out of the bag, and now you must answer for it."

"We raised you as our son," Cecily cried, her voice shaking. "What more do you want from us?"

"How much did they pay you for it?" he asked, red creeping in the edges of his vision. That she dared tremble now, after happily lying to him for so long made his hand curl into a fist around the materia. "How much did Shinra pay you to keep me ignorant?"

"Does it matter?" Marcus growled, his cheeks growing red in anger. He had always been good at being angry. He pushed Cecily behind him and stood tall and indignant before Genesis. "We gave you our own name. We called you our son. We spoiled you rotten and gave you every opportunity. You owe us everything! You have no right-"

"You betrayed me!" Flames leapt up in his hands and he hurled the balls of fire. Thunder roared in his ears, and the flames ate up his vision. He drew his sword and brought it down with all his strength.

It stopped short. Glowing blue held the sword the place. He blinked through the red blotches in his vision and saw the flames licked harmlessly over a field of flowing blue power.

Inside the shield his parents cowered. His father had thrown himself over his mother, but she was looking up at Genesis from under his arm. Her face was frozen in shock, tears flowing from her eyes.

The sword shook in his hand. He opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. The biotic field exploded out, throwing him back.
He tried to sit up, but a heavily armoured boot stomped on his sword arm. The muzzle of a gun pressed against the side of his head.

"Go," Shepard said. His parents, still pulling themselves up, looked at her in confusion. "Run!" she barked.

They ran. They fled into the house, and a minute later he heard the sound of the backdoor opening and being slammed shut over retreating footsteps.

Shepard stepped back and lowered her rifle.

He stayed on the ground, staring at the ground in front of the house. A ring of ash surrounded an untouched circle of grass.

He would have killed them. Oh goddess.

"What the hell was that?" Shepard demanded.

"This isn't your business," he said, swallowing. His throat was raspingly dry.

He stumbled to his feet, leaving his sword, and moved towards the house. He'd almost killed them. He didn't even know why. They were the only parents he had.

"Genesis." A hand grabbed his arm and held him back. "You just tried to murder two civilians."

He stared at the unburnt ground. "They betrayed me," he whispered.

"They adopted you," she growled.

"They knew," he hissed, "they knew, and they said nothing."

"So, they should die?" she barked, thunder in her eyes and her rifle in her hands, still in firing mode. "What the hell are you thinking?"

"I don't answer to you!"

"Then who do you answer to?"

He looked away. "The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

"And does she condone patricide?"

He tore his arm away from her. "Don't patronise me."

She shook her head. "What are you doing?" she asked quietly. "Do you even know?"

"They betrayed me!" he screamed.

She shook her head again, a disappointed scowl on her face. She looked out over the fields, the rows of trees arching away into the horizon, split by the winding road. The light was failing.

It hit him that she might finally leave. She would walk away, take her men with her, and leave him with nothing. Nothing but his mutating body and Hollander.

"Will you betray me as well?" He picked up his sword.

Her head snapped back to him, her eyes wide. Blue surged in the corners of his vision, and he
couldn't move.

He tried to fight it. With all his strength, he tried to move his sword arm.

For a long minute, she watched him fail to break free of the stasis field. He tried to yell at her to let him go, but his mouth wouldn't move.

Finally, she folded up her gun and returned it to her back. The biotic field did not dissipate. She walked up to him and stopped uncomfortably close.

"Stop trying to drive away your allies," she said quietly, looking him in the eye. He wanted to look away, but she was too close to avoid. "You don't get to be angry about being alone when you are surrounded by people who want you to succeed. If you drive me away, it won't be because I betrayed you, it'll be because you stabbed me in the back." She held eye contact for a moment longer, and then the stasis dropped. His sword was still in his hand.

"Think very carefully about what you do next," she said quietly. She turned, showing her back, and slowly walked away.

He lowered his sword.

By the early hours of the morning, all the equipment from the Shinra warehouse had been packed up to be smuggled out. Shepird was still cursing at herself for letting them come here. What had she expected to happen?

Not for Genesis to start murdering civilians, but nothing good either.

She'd left him in the heart of the caves beneath the town, in the company of a statue which she could only assume depicted the goddess. It appeared to have taken away most of his thunder.

She stood in the outskirts of the cave system, where the Mako was weakest, packing up the equipment they couldn't transport out in one trip. Others would come and collect the rest later, once they were certain the Turks hadn't noticed their activity in the area.

She focused on the immediate logistical problems, because as soon as that was done she'd have to face the fact that her friend seemed to be having a mental breakdown. Was he still fit for command? Unlikely. He had been seconds away from attacking her for no reason at all. If he were an Alliance soldier she would have asked for his gun and his amp.

She had no idea how she was going convince him to step down without putting all the people around them in danger. As long as they were within range of a civilian population she couldn't risk instigating a fight.

Realistically speaking, while she beat him handily back when they'd first met, he had grown a good deal since then. He'd had the entire Wutai War to learn how she fought and where her limitations lay, while her fighting style had plateaued five years ago. If they were within shouting distance, she would have no control over the fight or any collateral damage. One-on-one melees were not her specialty; they were his. He'd probably be suspicious if she tried to have an honest conversation with a football field's worth of ground between them.

Footsteps echoed through the caves behind her. She took in a deep breath and let it back out again.

"Are you done?" he asked.
"Are you?" she replied, securing a rope around a couple of crates and wondering if today was the day she got a sword through the back.

He didn't miss a beat, "*Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul, pride is lost, wings stripped away, the end is nigh.*"

"Mm-hm," she grunted, pushing the last crate to join the others. "Get that tarpaulin, would you?"

He fetched the tarp and helped her drag it over the pile. It was the best they could do for now. She stood up but hunched a little, keeping an eye on the ceiling. It felt lower than it truly was, and she kept thinking she was going to bash her head against the rock.

"They weren't my parents," he said suddenly, staring intently at the blue sheet of woven plastic. "No matter what they claimed. They were just Shinra employees, paid to look after a specimen nobody needed anymore."

She raised an eyebrow and wondered why he was so angry at them but made so many excuses for Hollander.

"Do you know who your birth parents are?"

He shook his head. "Even Hollander doesn't know. Project G used sperm and egg donors."

"He must know who the surrogate was at least. Who carried you?"

"Gillian," he said with distaste. "Angeal's mother."

"Oh." She nodded. She wondered if Angeal knew.

"I wonder if that was why she was always so nice to me." He turned away and ran a hand along the rough cave wall. "I hate them. All of them. Gillian. Hollander. My parents. I hate them all." He turned back and looked at her in challenge, daring her to criticise him for it.

There was a certain flair to his movements now, a heavily calculated drama she was familiar with. It had been absent when he tried to immolate his parents the night before. She sat on a low crate.

"Did I ever tell you my first name?" she asked lightly. Dramatic Genesis she could handle.

"This is not about you," he sneered.

"You're right," she replied. "Forget I said anything."

He returned to his rock wall. After a long minute of silence, he turned his head back. "Is it 'Commander'?"

"That's funny," she said. "My mum named me Brandy." She wished she had her pistol back. Just to hold. It was immature and she knew it, but holding her carnifex brought a feeling of control over situations long since resolved in unsatisfactory ways.

He scoffed. "There are worse names. Specimen One, for example."

She crossed her legs. "Sure, it could have been worse. She could have gone with Tequila. Or Keg."

She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice, with little success. "I had it legally changed as soon as I was old enough and had the money. Jane was just the first name I could think of." She let out all the air in her lungs with a gusty sigh. "She died with a bottle in her hand. Choked on her own vomit." She studied the rock beneath her feet. "I never forgave her for it."
He gave her a guarded look. "For dying, or for being an alcoholic?"

"For so many things," she said quietly. "Your parents wanted you. They care about you." She left off the 'you ungrateful bastard,' but she was pretty sure he heard it anyway. Bringing up her mother had probably been a mistake.

"They care about the money and respect I brought to the Rhapsodos name," he drawled. "But I'm not even a Rhapsodos, am I?"

"It was a legal adoption, wasn't it?"

"We can't all have the self-assurance of the great Commander Shepard." He spread his arms wide and gave an ugly sneer. "I have no idea who I am."

She shrugged. "I don't know if I'm really Shepard."

"Did you pick that name out of a hat too?"

"I... she died."

"What are you talking about?"

"Six years ago, Commander Shepard died. Her ship was shot down over the planet Alchera. Shrapnel tore open her oxygen line. She suffocated in hard vacuum."

He blinked at her. "What?"

She ploughed on before she could change her mind. "A wealthy terrorist organisation got ahold of the body and put the best scientists they could find on the job of resurrecting her."

He stared.

"Two years later, I woke up." She blinked back the emptiness of space edging in around the corners of her vision. "I still remember growing up. Being a teenager with anger problems. Enlisting. My first tour, getting picked for N school, becoming a Spectre, all of it. I remember being Commander Shepard, and I remember dying." She gritted her teeth. "But if Shepard died, then who the hell am I? Those memories could all be false. I could be an AI with programming locks. I could be an advanced SI. I could be a clone. I could be just some brainwashed punter under a ton of plastic surgery."

She looked up at him, feeling her skin pulling at her scars, her optic lenses focusing, and the metal pins in her hands where her nails dug into her palms.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. Finally, he shook his head and asked, "So who are you? What are you?"

"I don't know," she said fiercely. The last time she had admitted to it had been to Thane in the silence of her quarters at 0300 hours, before a suicide mission. This was not how she had wanted to re-examine her ugliest scars. "All I do know is there isn't room for self-doubt. I am a biotic sniper. I'm captain of the Normandy SR-2, and I'm a bloody good soldier. I am what I am, and it's enough."

He lowered his head. "Is it?"

"It has to be," she said, and felt confidence in her words, because it was enough. She had killed the Reapers, she had claimed her life back from Cerberus. The rest... didn't really matter. Not to her.

He scoffed.
"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Nobody," he spat. "It was all a lie."

"No." She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "You are a talented red mage with a poetry obsession and a horrible temper. You're a follower of Minerva, you're a commander and a First Class. That's you. It's not fake, it's not someone else." She stood and approached him. "Can't that be enough?"

He stepped back and bumped into the wall. He looked down, and she saw him swallow.

"How did they bring you back?" he asked.

She made a noise of frustration at his dodging the point. "It's not about that."

"But what are you?"

She shoulders slumped. "Were you listening to a word I just said?"

"Are you... human?"

She shrugged. "Probably not."

His eyes narrowed, she could almost see his mind racing off to dangerous conclusions.

"That device you used, in the temple," he said, circling towards her. You said it was for... 'Protheans'? And only you could survive it. Is this why?"

"No, that was because of the Thorian." She watched him stalk slowly closer and wondered what he was getting at. "That's some evidence that I am, or was, the original Shepard."

He waved her explanation off. "But something changed you so you could survive something you humanly couldn't."

Ah. That's what he was after. She closed her eyes and tried to think how to explain it. "It's not-"

"Yes?"

"It's not what you're hoping for. It wouldn't help you."

"Then what was it?" he demanded.

She frowned and crossed her arms. "It was some kind of mind reading... plant? Or fungus, I suppose is more accurate. This was before Alchera. It was massive and ancient. It had watched the Prothean Empire rise and fall, and understood their minds. I'm oversimplifying, but we used that knowledge to reshape my mind so I could understand them too. We called it the Cypher."

His brow furrowed as he thought it over. "Physically, though-"

"I'm not half prothean, no. I'm, uh, more mechanical than any other organic species," she admitted, refusing to let her voice waiver. "Look, I don't fully understand it; this one is weird even for me."

His face fell. "What happened to the mighty telepathic fungus then?" he asked with resignation.

"I killed it. It was disgusting." She scratched the back of her neck. Mind melding with Shiala to get the Cypher hadn't just been a transfer of information. The Asari had been trapped inside it for days. It
had engulfed her, grown clones of her, and then spat her back out again in its death throes. All of those memories had been passed on with the Cypher. Just thinking about the Thorian made her feel sticky.

Genesis took a step away from her. "Are you… are you going to throw up?"

"No. I am not." She took a determined breath in, and let a forced, steady breath out. "Anyway. It didn't just benignly read minds, it released spores into the air to control anyone who breathed them in. If you tried to resist, it would cripple you with pain until you did what it wanted. Called itself the 'Old Growth,' and it was, without a doubt, the most horrendous non-Reaper thing I've ever seen. Trust me, it would not help."

He crossed his arms and turned away. "You could be making this up, for all I know."

"Sure, I could be making everything up. I could be some madwoman from Fort Condor, taking everyone for a ride."

"I don't know if that would be better or worse," he replied, sagging in place. He looked back at her. "Are the glowing scars from your post-death experience?"

"That's just sub-dermal armouring. Never let it be said Cerberus weren't innovative." She resisted the urge to trace the crosshatched lines at her temple. "They couldn't get the new skin to heal up over it properly."

He nodded and looked down. "What was it like?" he asked quietly. "Dying?"

"Don't do that to yourself."

"Tell me," he insisted, suddenly looking at her through raw and desperate eyes.

She heard the hiss of escaping oxygen. Feeling left her fingers first. The coldness crept up her arms and legs. It was always cold in space.

"Painful," she managed. "Terrifying."

"And after?"

"Coming back was hard." She dragged in a breath through gritted teeth, reassuring herself at movement of air, the draft of the caves brushing at her face and disturbing her fringe. "Everything ached pretty much constantly for a year."

"No, I mean… after dying. Before you came back."

Her jaw locked. "I don't remember."

"Shepard," he hissed.

"I'm telling the truth," she said. She looked up, her eyes following the low ceiling. She wanted to duck, but it was higher than it looked. Out of reach. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about the next life. Trying to remember. But I don't… I just don't know."

"I suppose it's different out in space anyway," he said sadly, mostly to himself, "with no planet, no goddess." He sat on the crate she had vacated. His fingers tapped together slowly, his eyes following the movement. "The technology which brought you back-"

"No," she cut him off, harder than she intended to.
His eyes flashed. "If it could resurrect someone, it could stop them from dying in the first place."

"It was in a different star system, in a different cluster, operated by scientists who are all dead."

"But your implants." He rose to his feet again. "Hollander believes he could reverse-engineer what he needs from them."

"He believes that, does he?" She leaned back on her right foot and put a hand on her hip. "How long has he been at you to ask?"

"I need your help, Shepard."

"It's Reaper tech," she said. "That's why I refused to let Shinra do anything more then give me the initial Mako shot. All of my implants are based on salvage from a dead Reaper. Hollander has been after my implants since I landed here, but he doesn't know what they are, or what they're capable of. He cannot have them."

His lip curled in a sneer. "They're clearly benign. Where is the risk?"

"Benign," she swore, and turned away. Then she swung straight back. "I am the only instance in history of someone tampering with Reaper tech and it not immediately turning on them. Hollander doesn't even know what the Reapers are, let alone how to work with them. If he starts poking around, it will end in disaster."

"I am dying," he spat.

"I'm already dead." She crossed her arms.

"You could save me."

"No. I can't."

He shook his head, his shoulder drooping and his hand trembling. "Won't you even try?"

"I am trying." She stepped away from him, retreating before the assault of emotional manipulation. "Sephiroth thinks he's got something. Scout might have found one of Hojo's specimen caches, over on the western continent. After we get this back to base, I'm going to go help investigate." She sighed at the look of frustration in his face. "I'm doing everything I can."

He gave a short nod, an insincere smile, and marched back into the depths of the caverns.
Genesis stood leaning against a shipping container, running his fingers over his copy of *Loveless*. He kept the weight of it in his right hand. Little sensation remained in his left and he didn't want to risk dropping the book in the mud. He couldn't feel the texture of the weathered spine or the raised outline of the title anymore.

Few people were around, despite it being mid-morning. Shepard had sent a lot of their men to different bases so Shinra couldn't take them all out at once. It had been an ongoing project, but she'd stepped it up since their return from Banora the previous day. He didn't even know where half of them had gone.

Shepard was probably doing the rounds of the base now, looking for any remaining people's business to stick her nose into before she disappeared into the wilds again. Hollander was inside one of the shipping containers.

The conversation from the Banora caves replayed, again, in his head.

'*I am dying,*' he had said, baring his soul.

'*I'm already dead,*' she'd replied, unmoved.

His fingers tightened over the book's spine. That had always been her problem: she viewed life as though it were already over. Now he knew why. She was already dead and they didn't matter to her, none of them. The fate of little Gaia wasn't part of her lofty crusade. He was just a footnote to the late Commander Shepard.

'*You could save me.*'

'*No, I can't.*'

But she could. He knew she could. She had come back from the dead. Her implants had to be even more powerful than Hollander had theorised.

She materialised from of the mists, wearing a SOLDIER uniform and holding a water canteen against her temple. She paused at the sight of him, lowering the bottle and offering a nod. He raised an eyebrow.

"What?" she asked.

"*My friend, the fates are cruel,*" he replied lazily. He forced his hands to relax around the book.

She snorted. He looked away. He didn't want the indifference in those machine eyes. She walked past him and into the container that housed the make-shift lab. The clang of her boots on the metal floors echoed out. He knew she was perfectly capable of walking silently but chose to let her footfalls ring out so as not to surprise people. Patronising.

His fingers traced the weathered book cover. Somewhere in the maze of containers the stomping came to a halt.
"There are no dreams, no honour remains," he recited quietly. "The arrow has left the bow of the goddess. My soul, corrupted."

A cry rang out, along with the ringing sound of a metallic impact.

He spun around. Glass smashed somewhere inside the containers. He sprinted through the entrance.

Careening around the corner, he sped up at the sight of Hollander holding a needle and Shepard winding up to punch him. He charged into Hollander. He collected him easily, knocking him out of the way and rolling with the momentum.

Hollander did not roll, he smacked into Genesis' shoulder. Pain seized him and Genesis collapsed to one knee, gasping. He looked up and saw Hollander getting to his feet and Shepard reaching for her rifle.

Blind panic filled him and he threw out his hand. The scientist and the SOLDIER collapsed, both asleep.

Genesis panted, still on his knees.

Hollander lay in the ruins of smashed beakers of unknown chemical solutions, the initial collateral of the fight. He still held the hypodermic needle.

Shepard held her rifle. She was still unconscious—he didn't know how long that would last, but for now she lay immobile. Vulnerable.

She would have killed Hollander.

He slowly climbed to his feet. The drip, drip, drip of the spilt solutions echoed through the narrow container. His eyes followed the mess to the equipment Hollander had used on him many times to track the Degradation. The most advanced scanning technology Shinra had ever produced. Genesis knew how it worked.

Shepard woke up. The shape of Genesis swan into view, crouching in front of her and looking concerned. She blinked until her vision focused and then looked around. She was sitting on the floor inside a small lab. The lab. Hollander had attacked her—

"I'm sorry," Genesis said, looking off to the side. She followed his line of sight to where Hollander sat in the corner, handcuffed, unconscious, and leaning against a wall. Genesis shook his head. "I have no idea what he was thinking."

She narrowed her eyes at the scientist before turning her gaze back to Genesis. "Don't you?"

"Of course not. As though an overweight scientist could take a SOLDIER by surprise..." He stood up and frowned down at her. "One punch alone could have killed him. But you knew that."

"He attacked me," she said.

"And then you were going to shoot him." Genesis scowled. "I don't suppose you were going to take up the role of my doctor after you killed him?"

She sighed and stood. "I don't know that I was going to kill him. You can't blame me for reaching for my weapon when I'm attacked." She picked up her rifle from where it had fallen and returned it to her back. "Did you hit me with a sleep materia?"
"I cast sleep on both of you," he said, crossing his arms. "If the two of you could just work together —"

She looked at him sharply, and he cut himself off with a scowl.

"Do you want to see me beg?" he asked harshly.

Her eyes still narrowed, she shook her head slowly. "Of course not." She looked between Genesis and Hollander, then her eyes drifted to the wealth of equipment lining the wall. Red lights blinked and monitors bleeped.

"How long was I out?" she asked.

He flipped open his phone. "Just under forty-five minutes. I hit you with sleep a second time."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because you deserved it," he replied, his scowl twisting into some approximation of a smile, and he stomped out of the lab.

She watched him go, a frown on her face. Then she looked back to the lab equipment. Her fingers rose instinctively to the spot on her forehead where Cerberus had once attached sensors. She glanced down at Hollander. She nudged his foot with hers, and it fell like deadweight. Definitely unconscious.

She shook her head at herself and followed Genesis out.

Shepard stepped out of the helicopter, nodding at the pilot. He took off again, leaving her alone in the plains east of the Nibel mountain range. Cold winds smacked her in the face, and the saddest looking grass she'd seen outside of the radioactive wastelands of Tuchunka crunched under her feet. Somewhere out here was Sephiroth.

She set her Omni-tool to hone in on his direction and turned off the security measures that prevented him from tracking her. She'd already messaged him, the plan was set. She kept her head down and marched across the barren plains, wondering with every step if she was making a mistake.

Genesis was losing the plot, she knew that. She had left as few of their troops as possible within his reach and given orders for the safety of those who remained which would hopefully stop them from blindly walking into the labs. Would it be enough? Genesis shouldn't be in a position of authority at all anymore, and she should have taken Hollander away, but she couldn't see how she could have confronted him without putting the entire cause on the line.

Every step away felt irresponsible. Maybe she should have delegated. If there really was a something hiding in Nibelheim then she needed someone there to retrieve it, but it didn't have to be her. Sephiroth had asked for her to come, but he would have run the mission with one of her Second Classes if necessary.

Too late now.

She looked up, and stopped walking.

"Not bad. I almost didn't see you," she said. She held up her hand to block the late afternoon sun getting into her eyes.
A patch of slightly distorted air turned into Sephiroth, walking towards her.

"You weren't paying much attention," he said with a raised eyebrow.

She winced. If he'd gotten that close with his stealth cloak still activated, then she really wasn't paying enough attention.

"I still saw you, though."

He crossed his arms. "I was well within range to attack you."

She sighed. "Fine. You win this round." She looked towards the mountain range and started walking in the direction of Mount Nibel. "But don't get cocky. It won't happen again."

He snorted and fell into step with her. They made easy conversation as they walked, and she felt a worn little smile on her face. She'd missed him.

The sun disappeared behind the mountain range, and they stopped for the night. Nibelheim town was a little cluster of lights on the mountainside above.

Shepard moved to start a fire but thought better of it. They didn't want to announce their presence. She sat on her thin bedroll at their cold and spartan campsite, the bumps from the hard ground inexplicably jabbing at her through her armour. She took off her gauntlets and rubbed at her eyes.

"Can you get the first watch?" she asked.

Sephiroth nodded, rummaging through his pack.

"Thanks." She reached for the back of her skull and with careful, dextrous fingers removed her biotic amp. The little metal device clanked against her armour as she dropped it into her lap.

"What is that?" Sephiroth asked, pausing from where he was unrolling his bedding.

"An amp. It focuses biotics from a vague cloud of gravity into a weapon." She gave a partial shrug, and then rolled her head around her neck. She hadn't taken it out in years. She'd forgotten how it felt, so quiet and still without her biotic nodes humming down her spine and through all her joints.

Sephiroth stared at her intently, his brow furrowed. "I didn't know biotics could be disarmed."

"You do now," she said quietly.

He stood and looked around. He walked the perimeter of their little camp, searching the darkness and listening carefully.

"What is it?" she whispered, reaching for her rifle with one hand and moving the amp back towards her skull with the other.

He held his hand up, telling her to stop, and looked around for a moment longer before his shoulders relaxed. "No, you don't need to put it back in. There's nothing around for miles."

She looked up at him questioningly.

He gestured at the amp. "It's my watch."

She let go of the rifle. "Thank you." She leaned back on her hands and looked up. Thick clouds shrouded the mountaintops and were reaching down into the plains. The moonlight wouldn't last.
"How's Angeal doing?" she asked.

"Better," he replied after a long pause. "Since the amputation."

"That's good."

He let out a gusty sigh and sat on his bed roll opposite her. "No, it isn't. He's not better." He shook his head. "He's convinced he's a monster. I don't even know if he hears me telling him otherwise."

She looked down. "I see."

"How's Genesis?"

"He's losing his mind," she replied plainly. "I barely recognise him. I don't know what to do. For a moment this morning I almost thought he'd…"

"What?"

"Nothing." She scowled and looked away.

"We're doing everything we can." He reached out and took her hand. She blinked in surprise, and then felt a battered old smile stretch across her face. He offered a smile back. He looked so pale in the moonlight.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm not degrading," he said with a shrug.

She tilted her head to see past his fringe. "You look exhausted." She could see rings under his eyes.

"So do you." He ran his thumb over the back of her knuckles. "When was the last time you took out your amp?"

She thought back. It must have been... the day before the Reapers attacked Earth.

"About four years ago," she admitted. Was it only four years? It felt like a lifetime since the day the war started... and several lifetimes since the blissful years of ignorance before that.

He looked reprimanding, and she scoffed. "Don't give me that. I shouldn't even have it out now."

She sighed, twirled the amp in her fingers, and slotted it back in to the base of her skull. Her biotic nodes all lit up in the back of her mind again, tensed and ready to lash out.

"This can't go on much longer," Sephiroth said quietly into the night.

"It takes as long as it takes," she replied. She breathed out and felt every rib she'd ever cracked aching.

"No." His grip on her hand tightened. "Once Genesis and Angeal are healed and the last of Deepground destroyed, we will finish Shinra. Then... then it'll all be over. The fighting will end."

"'The fighting will end.'" Her back straightened, and she took her hand back. "Just win today. Tomorrow is too much. Next week, next month..." she trailed off and shook her head again. "All you can do is fight today. One day at a time."

He frowned. "We have to take tomorrow into account."
"Of course, but spend too long thinking about the next fight, and the one after that, and the one after that, and the one after that… you start to realise they don’t end. There is no finish line." She wanted to cry. Instead she scowled. "Just win today. Because sooner or later…"

Sooner or later you had to lose. And she was sick of winning the right to fight again tomorrow.

He reached out for her hand again, holding it tight. She wondered when he had started to see hand holding as a safe way of giving comfort, and realised he'd learned it from her.

"I'll win today," he said, concern and understanding in his green eyes. "You can win tomorrow."

"Thank you." Her shoulders sank. She was so tired.

"This war will end," he said. "One way or another."

She clenched her jaw. "Yes. It will."

Shepard stifled a yawn and hid behind a ragged pine tree. Sephiroth stood in the open next to her, eyeing the Nibelheim township and making no attempt to hide.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but it would soon. The grim pre-dawn dark would probably hide them from any stray early risers, but Shepard wasn't going to take the risk of being seen together.

"I know this town," Sephiroth muttered, his arms crossed.

She glanced beyond the tree at the thin wooden gate and the village beyond. Lean houses with shuttered up windows crowded together around a narrow water tower. She suspected the houses took their cue from the people: it felt like the sort of place where everything was on the lean side.

"You've been here before?" she asked.

"No… I haven't."

She glanced between him and the village. "What's it known for?"

"Nothing." His eyeline traveled up to the mountains towering over them. "Shinra's oldest Mako reactor, I suppose, but that's not common knowledge."

"That's, what, fifty years old?"

"Barely forty."

"Can you see anyone?" she asked. She wanted to get moving and be gone before the locals had time to take notice.

He shook his head absently. "What did you say your hometown was like?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I didn't."

He tore his eyes from the mountains to her, genuine confusion in his expression.

She sighed. "It was like a beachside Midgar without the top half, but the Reapers targeted population centres. I doubt there's much left. Why?"

He looked away again. "I don't know. I don't have a hometown."
"They're overrated." She cocked her head, then reached out and touched his arm. "Sephiroth? Are you alright?"

"Of course."

"Are you sure?" She'd never seen him this distracted on a mission. "We don't have to do this now, we can wait until tonight."

"No. No, we're here now." He shook himself. "There should be a Shinra owned mansion on the outskirts. I'll meet you there." He began to walk away.

"Wait, Sephiroth," she hissed. She grabbed his arm again, pulling him back. "Sephiroth," she repeated, putting the iron of an order into her voice. He froze for a second before shooting an unimpressed look back at her.

"What?" he whispered.

"If something is wrong—"

"Nothing is wrong. We're running out of darkness."

"Shut up and listen to me," she ordered. "I've been juggling increasingly unhinged SOLDIERs for months now. The last thing I need is to have guess your mental state too. We are running this mission, this whole bloody campaign, together. If something is going on, then you cannot leave me in the dark."

He straightened his back. "My 'mental state' is fine."

She rubbed at her temple and closed her eyes for a moment. "Please, just be honest with me. Don't ask me to put my neck on the line with only half the picture."

He looked down and away. "You're reading into nothing. I'm fine."

She frowned but let him go. "Alright. I'll meet you at the mansion then."

He stalked off, and she activated her tactical cloak with a shake of her head.

By the time she had edged around the town and arrived at the grim, dilapidated mansion higher up the mountainside, Sephiroth was waiting for her. He stood behind the brick wall, out of sight of the town, staring up at the mansion. It looked like gothic old Earth architecture to her. She bet all the local kids thought it was haunted.

She deactivated her cloak.

"I'm hearing things," Sephiroth said, refusing to look away from the old building.

She tensed. "What sort of things?"

"A dull murmuring. Like someone talking in another room." He crossed his arms and looked down. "I thought it was coming from one of your devices, but I could hear it all through the town."

She immediately reached for her Omni-tool and set it scanning him.

"Anything?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

She shook her head, frowning at the read-out. Nothing her Omni-tool could pick up on at least. His
brain activity was always baffling to the scanner, but it couldn't pick up any anomalies from his version of normal. She reached for her materia. "I'll cast Esuna, maybe it's some kind of hallucinogen."

"I've already tried. To no effect."

She pursed her lips in thought. "Could be tinnitus… do you feel nauseous or off balance?"

He shook his head. Lines of tension stood out at the corners of his eyes. "I feel fine."

"Maybe you should sit this one out."

"No," he said forcefully. "No. I want to see what's here. I'm still functional."

She studied him. He didn't move, despite his insistence; he just waited with a vulnerable look in his eyes. Waiting for her go-ahead, she realised.

It could just be the early symptoms of an ear infection. He wasn't an FNG, he knew how much he could handle.

She nodded slowly. "Okay. Thank you for telling me. Let me know if it changes."

He nodded and led the way to the front door. She saw the tension in his arms as he cut open the lock. In front of the dilapidated gothic architecture it struck her that he finally looked like he matched something, with his black leather, silver hair, and a cold blade. She didn't like it. Maybe someday she could take him somewhere clean and bright and let it infect him until he wasn't so monochrome.

Shaking her head at herself, she followed him. Inside, the wooden floorboards creaked under every other step and clouds of dust rose in their wake.

Wasting no time searching, Sephiroth led the way to the third room on the second floor and a poorly hidden secret entrance. Shepard took a moment to mentally give thanks for Scout. She didn't want to contemplate how much time they'd waste without them unearthing all these things.

He pushed the hidden door open to reveal a stone spiral staircase descending into the bowels of the building. A draught of cold, damp air hit them.

Shepard coughed and stepped back. Little black dots danced around the edges of her vision.

"It stinks of Mako," she coughed.

"Maybe you should stay up here." She felt Sephiroth's hand on her shoulder, steadying her.

She cleared her throat and blinked several times, willing her vision to clear. Most of the dots receded after the initial blast of air.

"No, I'll be fine." She squinted up at him. She could hardly let him go down alone, he was hearing things. "Lead the way."

He looked doubtful but reluctantly withdrew his hand. At her short nod, he turned into the damp stairwell.

The acrid smell of Mako grew stronger. With every step down the shaft, the whisper-soft murmuring she recognized as Mako began to hum in the back of her mind. She clenched her jaw and tried to ground herself with physical sensation. The cold, damp air against her face, and the comforting press of her armour around her torso. Slick growths on the stone squishing under her boots. The dark
shape of Sephiroth a couple of steps ahead of her.

He kept glancing up and around. She craned her neck but couldn't find whatever he was looking at.

At the bottom of the stairs a large and rough tunnel led away into the dark.

Sephiroth paused, looking around silently. Shepard snapped her visor into place and led the way in. The silhouettes of small animals crouched in the dark. Very few creatures ever attacked Sephiroth, unless they were driven mad by starvation or Mako. She didn't know why, and she doubted he did either.

The uneven tunnel ended abruptly at a heavy metal door. It was either locked or rusted shut, but with a slice of her Omni-tool and a push with her shoulder it creaked open. The scraping sound of metal dragging against stone was missing though; the door opened onto musty green carpet.

It was a library, much bigger than the one in the Deepground labs. Packed shelves lined the carpeted walls and thick volumes were stacked up in the corners. The Mako murmuring swelled. Shepard took an instinctive step back and squeezed her eyes shut as her vision turned a shade darker.

She dragged air into her lungs, trying to control her breathing.

She cracked her eyes open and saw Sephiroth already inside, walking silently on the mould-spotted carpet. His head was tilted to read the spines of the books and his fingers trailed over the dust covered shelf.

She blinked through the dark spots and reluctantly entered the room.

"Project Jenova..." Sephiroth murmured, one finger tracing the title on a book's spine. His head rose, following the line of book shelves. "Project J."

She took a deep breath and held a hand to her head. Hollander had mentioned Project J a few times while talking about his own work on Genesis and Angeal. He had sounded like a man completely unable to accept that he'd been out done.

She looked up at Sephiroth through her clearing vision: Shinra's most famous SOLDIER, their prized poster boy, carrying a sword nobody else could wield, with strength that rivalled a Krogan and looks that awed half the planet.

"You're younger than Genesis and Angeal, aren't you?" she asked sadly.

His head twitched before he turned back to look at her. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Denial shone in his eyes. She said nothing.

She looked sidelong down the row of shelves to where a desk sat, mounted high with paperwork and more books. There was a break between the shelves for another door.

Sephiroth still stood entranced in the middle of the library. She silently tested the door, found it unlocked, and walked through. She was familiar enough with the Science Department's habits to have an idea of what she would find.

More stone tunnels branched out, most leading to dead ends. Literally in one case: a tunnel ended in a chamber full of sealed coffins. At the end of the straightest route, she found an old lab. The green light of Mako shone out as soon as she opened the door. She clenched her jaw and looked around.
It was packed full of equipment, most of it outmoded even by Shinra's standards. The gear and tools looked rusty, or were tinged green after years of Mako exposure. Two Mako filled specimen tanks stood against the far wall, casting an eerie glow. Nothing inside them though. If there were specimens being kept in the town it didn't look like they were in the mansion. An operating table stood in the centre of the room, with leather restraints dangling off the sides.

Tucked away in the corner was a crib.

Shepard's eyes snapped back to the tools laid out on shelves and tables. She recognised some of them from gynaecological practices. The taste of bile rose up in the back of her throat. She put a hand on the crib's frame and looked inside. Empty, of course. Tubes and sensors on the end of wires led into the crib, fixed to its frame.

She already knew Shinra did things like this. Genesis and Angeal had both been brought into the world under experimental and highly unethical circumstances. A miniature operating table was shoved up next to the crib, scored in places where spilt Mako had eaten away at it like acid.

In a distant and quiet part of her mind she thought back to the Cerberus facility on Pragia. The tiny beds, tipped over and rotting in the rain. She wondered if she would ever grow hardened to this sort of thing. Would it ever get to be too much for her abused old mind? Would there be a day when she would just stop caring for the sake of her own sanity?

The wooden frame of the crib cracked in her fist. She doubted it.

A shadow interrupted the Mako glow, and she looked up. Sephiroth had followed her.

He was looking down at the crib.

"My mother's name was Jenova," he said hoarsely.

Her shoulders drooped. "Who was she?"

He shook his head, his eyes empty. "I don't know."

She sighed quietly and released her death grip on the crib's frame. Splintered pieces of wood fell to the ground. "I think you might have a hometown after all."

"It doesn't make any sense. How could— Why come the way out here? Why—" He swallowed loudly. "Why me?"

"I don't know. Why anyone?"

"What makes this town different, what makes me different? What made Jenova different?" he asked, growing more insistent with each question. "What happened to her?"

Her eyes trailed over to the rusting tools. "Do you really want to know?"

His eyes followed hers, and she saw his spine straighten. "Yes. I do."

He spun around and marched back to the library.

"If this is all Hojo's work, how trustworthy is it?" she asked, following him closely.

"Not just Hojo. Gast's journals are here too." He made his way straight to a particular shelf, where the books had the worn, bulging look of handwritten notebooks.
"Gast?"

"He was an old Shinra scientist. He worked with me, when I was young."

"Any better than Hojo?"

"Infinitely more competent."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's not what I was asking."

He paused, halfway through pulling a journal from the shelf. "He was kind."

She thought back to the crib, its mattress sickly green from Mako exposure. "Was he?"

"Gast told me my Mother's name. Hojo always changed the subject, or said it was irrelevant." He pulled the book out and turned it over in his hands.

"Irrelevant? They named the whole project after her."

She saw a tremor run through his fingers.

"'Notions of family are a distraction and a waste of time,'" he quoted with a bitter twist to his lips. "Hojo insisted there were to be no priorities beyond hypothesis and result."

"You were a child," she said, unable to keep the disgust from her voice.

He opened the book, cracking the spine. "I was a specimen."

She pursed her lips at that and pulled down another journal, leafing through it. Sephiroth looked like he fully intended to read through it all. She couldn't begrudge him the right to know whatever had happened in these dark tunnels. She hoped it made sense to him, because the journal was borderline incomprehensible to her, other than mentions of Specimen S, an infant under constant observation and receiving Mako treatments, which she understand all too well.

Vague references to Specimen J talked about her more like she was just lines of DNA than a human woman.

Sephiroth dropped the journal. She looked up and saw him pick another one from the shelf and start reading again.

She went to the desk and leafed through the documents there. Unlike the journals these weren't chemical equations and endless lists of numbers without context. Most of it was book keeping and administration.

A sheet of paper fell out of a dusty binder when she lifted it.

Sephiroth's birth certificate. She read it over, and for a moment even the Mako humming in the back of her mind seemed to grow quiet. Her armoured fingers crinkled the sides of paper, and she had to stop herself from just tearing it up.

"Sephiroth. You should... You need to see this."

He didn't look up from his journal. She walked over to him and held it out. He'd been lied to enough.

"I'm sorry," she offered, hating herself as she put the paper in his hands.
He looked it over, grimacing like when he read casualty lists. Halfway down the paper his face froze. She assumed he'd seen Hojo's name listed under the 'Father' subheading. He dropped the piece of paper, not meeting her eyes.

She didn't know what to say.

He turned back to the book he had been reading and silently stared at it. From the way his eyes resolutely didn't move she was pretty sure he wasn't seeing a word on the page. She reached out but saw his shoulders tense up at her movement. Her hand dropped.

She gave him the privacy of her back and returned to the desk.

Hours passed. She sifted through endless information, taking photos of documents for someone smarter than her to make sense of later. She wished Mordin were here.

"'Specimen J found in Northern Crater strata, dated to be two thousand years old. Specimen confirmed to be a Cetra.'" Sephiroth read aloud suddenly. He was speaking quietly, probably to himself. "'Project Jenova authorised.'" He stood motionless for a long minute. She moved to his side.

"Gast, why didn't you tell me?" he whispered.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

He slowly looked up from the book, something stricken and pleading in his eyes. "I'm an Ancient."

"They must have been very similar to humans," she said gently. "I've scanned you countless times. Your brainwaves are unusual, but that's about it."

"Maybe they were different in a way Omni-tools can't detect." His brow furrowed. "I don't feel human. I never have."

She tilted her head. "What does a human feel like?"

"Not like this. I am… different." He dropped the book and reached out for the shelf to steady himself, his gloved fingers digging into the metal rim and warping it. "I'm not like him."

"You are nothing like him." She looked him in the eye. "You aren't your parents. You're not the chemicals in a syringe, or the species you were born into."

He looked away. "We are all just chemicals."

She crossed her arms. "And Scout's just lines of code."

"It's different."

"Is it?"

"It has to be!" he snapped, his eyes suddenly blazing. "Humans survived on this planet by hiding away like cockroaches, scurrying into the dark while the Cetra faced the catastrophe that killed them all. When the danger had passed, the humans filled the Cetra's empty cities as though nothing had happened." His lips pulled into an ugly scowl. "Cowards."

"Am I a coward, then?" she asked quietly, her arms still crossed.

He looked sidelong at her. "Are you human?"
Her arms dropping to her sides. "This isn't about me."

He opened his mouth to reply when something he had said caught up with her and she cut him off. "Wait, wait. 'The catastrophe that killed the Cetra.' What was it?"

He shook his head like it was irrelevant. "The Northern Crater. A meteor."

"'Death that fell from the stars?'" she said slowly, her eyes narrowing in memory and suspicion. What were the chances?

"Where did you hear that?" he asked.

"We found writing in some Cetra ruins. They said that… something... landed on the planet and started massacring them."

He took a step back. "]Something?"

She hesitated. "A woman."

He stared at her, his expression inscrutable. "Jenova's body was found in the Northern Crater. According to the same document that says she's a Cetra."

Shepard nodded slowly. "The only Ancient ever found. I wonder how they can tell."

He looked down and stood silent for a moment.

"Am I… an abomination?" he asked hoarsely.

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Why should you be?" She saw the doubtful way he was eyeing her. Her shoulders sank. "Is that how you see me?"

He looked away. "Perhaps."

She reached out and put a hand under his chin, directing his gaze back to her. "Look me in my prosthetic eyes and tell me I'm an abomination."

His hand reached for her jawline, trailing along the glowing scars, the broken half-moon that ran from her cheekbone up to her temple.

"Perhaps we are both abominations," he whispered.

"Do you believe that?"

"Am I one of your aliens, then?"

His eyes looked so desperate, pleading for answers.

"You look pretty human to me," she said gently.

He scowled. "Look me in my slit pupils and tell me I'm a human." In the dim light his pupils were blown wide open, but the distinctive cat's eye shape remained.

His scowl dropped, and he opened his mouth but didn't seem to have the words. His hand moved from her cheekbone down to her shoulder. She could feel the strength he was gripping her with even through her armour.

"What does it mean?" he asked desperately.

She shook her head. "It doesn't mean anything. Not everyone is human. Not everyone is entirely one species or another." She could see the dissatisfaction glowing in his eyes. "What do you need me to tell you?"

"Who am I?"

"Only you can decide that." She reached up and grasped his hand on her shoulder, trying to provide some kind of comfort, anchoring him however she could.

"Then what am I? Why…" His grip on her tightened, his arm trembling. "Why?"

"Sephiroth… there isn't any rationalising that will justify this. I don't have any secret answers for you; there's no greater purpose that makes this okay."

His arm stopped trembling and he grew still. "Then I was tortured and manipulated by Shinra since birth. For nothing."

She didn't say anything.

"If I'm the genetic child of this alien, then… what did she want? Why was she here? Why did she want to kill everyone?"

"Maybe she carried a disease they had no resistance to," she offered. "Maybe the Cetra attacked her first. Or maybe she just didn't like the look of them."

His brow furrowed and he drew away, releasing her. "I don't understand it."

"Neither do I." She looked critically back at the pile of papers she'd left on the desk and the dropped books and journals at the base of the shelves. "If it is an alien, it's not any species I'm familiar with. I would have expected a Quarian, but the fact that her DNA didn't immediately kill you means she's an levo-based lifeform, so it can't be a Quarian." She eyed Sephiroth and his mane of thick silver hair. He certainly didn't get it from Hojo, but she didn't know of any other species with hair.

"What is she then?"

"I don't know. I'd need to actually see it. These reports don't make sense. You shouldn't be able to just transplant another species' DNA into a human foetus. Especially not entire cells, that's not how genetic engineering works."

"It didn't work for Genesis or Angeal," he replied.

"But it did, for nearly thirty years." She frowned at the nearest shelf. "The fact that any of you are alive, let alone fully grown, fully abled human adults, means…"

"It means what?" he asked, his eyes narrowed at her.

"There must be a mechanism for it. Unless Jenova is some kind of—" she stopped herself just before saying the word parasite, "—some kind of symbiote, none of this should be possible. Especially if Hojo is as inept as you say he is."
He gestured towards the shelves. "This research led to SOLDIER. Half of Hojo's current projects and hypotheses are built off the ideas written here."

"Then he's mad."

He looked down at the book he’d dropped, sitting open and upside down by his feet. "It doesn't matter," he finally said, looking up. "Any of it. Either it can help Genesis and Angeal, or it can't. Hojo's meddling… is not our objective here." He took a deep breath. "It doesn't matter."

She saw the way his eyes kept drifting back to the books. "Does it matter to you?"

"Jenova's body is in the Reactor," he said tersely. "We need tissue samples. That's what we're here for."

She lifted an eyebrow. "To the reactor, then?"

"To the Reactor."

He didn't move.

"You're not an abomination, Sephiroth," she said, stepping closer.

"I don't want to be my father's son." The tendons in his neck stood out from how hard he was clenching his jaw. "I'd rather be the abomination."

"There's nothing abominable about being part alien," she hedged. What else could she say?

"Yet you are ashamed of what you are," he said, his brow heavy over his eyes. "You say the Geth are people like anyone else, but you hate everything under your own skin."

She felt her own guarded expression fall. "Sephiroth… my body is built on the bones of what I hate the most in the whole universe."

His eyes widened. "Your implants—"

"Maybe I am an abomination," she said, crossing her arms. "But I will not let it rule me. I am not the machinery that keeps this body running. I refuse to be."

He stepped up to her, his hand on her cheek again, and looked into her eyes. She could see his dilated pupils moving between her eyes, studying them. She tilted her head up and resisted the urge to look away.

"We are monsters both," he whispered finally, not drawing back an inch.

"Monster or not, you aren't alone."

He pulled her into a crushing hug. She held him tight, her arms around his shoulders and her face buried in his hair.

"How do you live like this?" he asked quietly.

"One day at a time," she replied, one of her hands holding the back of his neck.

She felt his chest expand and contract against her with deep, trembling breaths. His arms tightened around her. "One day at a time," he repeated.
Thank you so much for waiting patiently for this update guys, I really appreciate it. Life took a nosedive into a whirlpool of madness and it's been tough finding time to write. Updates will be slow for the last four chapters, but I'm not about to abandon this story. We've come too far to quit now.
In the stark light of the makeshift lab, Genesis fidgeted with the frayed edge of the bandage at his collar bone. Hollander stood next to him, watching him tensely. The sound of Shepard's helicopter faded away in the distance.

"Well?" Hollander asked.

Genesis held up a hand, ignored the pain that shot through him at the movement, and waited until the sound had disappeared entirely. The last thing he needed was to get stabbed in the back, here and now, so close to the end. Only when he was satisfied the helicopter was well and truly gone did he open the computer folder he had hidden.

"The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

Hollander leaned towards the monitor, both hands on the edge of the desk. "That's all of it?"

"It's everything I got," Genesis replied tersely.

Over fifty different scans of Shepard's implants populated the folder.

He opened one of the brain scans and zoomed around the three dimensional read-out. The sheer amount of machinery inside of her took him aback. The software displayed electronics in red and organic material in blue, but so much of her was a strange melding of both that the scan looked an indecisive purple. He'd only ever seen scans of himself on this software, injured and degrading flesh highlighted in sickly green.

It was all gibberish to him, but Hollander froze at the sight.

"It seems your scanning equipment was as good as you boasted." In depth analysis filled up the margins of the document. The mouse hovered over an area of her brain too long and an essay-length annotation appeared beside the cursor.

Hollander cleared his throat and collected himself. "Yes, well, it was built using Omni-tool technology. Well done, well done. I was afraid you were going to let her walk all over you."

"Of course not," Genesis snapped. He gestured at the wealth of information. "I hope it means something useful to you."

"Oh yes," he replied, leaning forward again to study it. He took the mouse from Genesis and dragged the image over to a bundle of nerves and implants near the brainstem. "Bio-mechanical, like the Geth. Organic coding. Remarkable. These implants must be Geth based."

Genesis shook his head with grim satisfaction.

"No, they aren't. They come from something much more powerful. More powerful than Shepard, more powerful than Sephiroth. And a thousand times more powerful than Shinra." If this couldn't cure him, nothing would. How dare Shepard refuse to share it with him?

"It is similar though. See, there's the code running through it all." Hollander pointed at an annotation. "That's the key to it. That biomechanical code. That's what I was looking for, but this… there's so much… the sheer complexity is breath-taking."
"Can you do anything with it?"

Hollander barked a laugh. "The things I could do with this! I've been studying those last Geth samples ever since the specimen self-destructed. I've been ready for this for years."

"But will it cure me?" Genesis pressed. It sounded too desperate. He straightened his spine with a flick of his hair to make up for it. His back ached.

Hollander looked up at him with a blink. "Yes, of course,"

Genesis narrowed his eyes. "You know that, just at a glance?"

"My boy, I promised I would heal you. I knew this was the missing key, and now I've got it." He put his hand on Genesis' uninjured shoulder. It still hurt. "Give me five hours, then I can operate."

"Five hours?" Genesis felt his face go slack. Surely… surely not.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"A thousand times over, doctor," he said, a smile blossoming over his face.

"Come back then, and I'll heal you." Hollander released his shoulder with a pat, and turned his full attention to the scans. "Well done, Genesis. Well done."

With more energy in his step than he'd had in months, Genesis left the labs and breathed in the fresh air. The wind was cold and found every gap in his bandages and made his splintering bones ache, but it didn't matter.

Five hours later, he lay down in the little operation theatre and Hollander pressed a needle full of sedatives to the inside of his elbow.

He let out a long, rattling breath as his vision dimed. Finally, finally, he would be whole again.

Shepard led the way out of the depths of the Shinra mansion. Sephiroth followed one step behind, his hand in hers. She didn't want to lose that grounding contact with him, not after the horrors unearthed in the basement. He made no move to let go of her.

She pushed open the front door, and the light of the late afternoon streamed in, bringing with it the clean, cold mountain air. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment.

They had lost a whole day in the mansion. The time down in the basement felt oddly unmoored from the rest of reality, unhinged somehow. She recalled every word she'd said and every word she'd refused to say. Sephiroth's biting replies and desperate pleas. She glanced back at him. There was a tightness to the skin around his eyes, and his lips formed a thin line.

Were those Jenova's eyes looking back at her? Human, alien, or something else entirely? Sephiroth wanted so badly to believe he wasn't truly human, as though that would make anything better. He would still be Hojo's son, and the result of inhumane experimentation no matter what his mother was. Running to space wouldn't fix the past.

"To the reactor?" she asked quietly.

Sephiroth nodded. His grip on her hand tightened.

She exhaled and began the trek. A wandering path traipsed up the mountainside, and they picked
their way along in silence. The need for answers pushed them on, past the fading of the light, past the chasms and a fraying rope bridge.

The setting sun dyed the clouds a bloody red, but the reactor stood in the shadow of the mountain when at last its dark metal walls came into view.

They slowed to a stop. Narrow steps led up from the stony ground to a door in the reactor wall. It was the only reactor Shepard had seen outside of Midgar. She'd expected more security. There was nobody in sight, no visible cameras, not even a fence. Just the round bulk of the reactor anchored to the rugged mountainside.

Sephiroth made no move.

"Whatever is in there," he began, "whatever I am…"

"Won't change anything." She held his hand firmly.

"Won't it?"

"You are who you are," she said with a shrug. It was as simple as that.

"And who am I?" he whispered.

"That's up to you." She lifted her chin. "Nobody else gets to answer that question."

He exhaled and nodded. He took his hand from hers, straightened his back, and took the first step up to the reactor. She drew her rifle and followed.

The rusted metal door shrieked as Sephiroth forced it open. A neon green glow spilled out into the night and little red lights illuminated the pathway. He entered without hesitation.

Shepard followed at a slower pace, her eyes flicking around the pathways and chambers. It looked like any other reactor she'd entered: cheaply made, and poorly maintained. The Mako murmuring began again, swelling with every step. Her throat was already scraped raw from all the fumes in the mansion and her lungs ached. She'd begun to believe it had a cumulative effect. Where once it had only whispered on the very edge of hearing, now the hum throbbed through her chest like a heartbeat.

The acrid tang of Mako hung on the stagnant air, tickling her nose, but there was something else. Something sweet and familiar. She paused mid step. It smelled of rot, of soft earth, and old blood. She knew that smell, but couldn't place it. It wasn't just the smell of corpses, or even the smell of Hojo's abandoned specimens. There was something musty about it. It made her think of asari, but she didn't know why. Her mind jumped to Reaper camps full of banshees, but that wasn't right. It didn't have the synthetic edge of Reaper corruption.

She hurried to catch up to Sephiroth. His echoing footsteps hadn't slowed when hers did.

The passageway opened into a large chamber in the heart of the reactor, where the distant green of the reservoir glowed far below the woven steel floor. The Mako throb grew to a physical sensation in her chest. She breathed in time with it to reduce the pain. The black dots dancing around the edges of her vision merged into splotches she could barely see through.

She held her rifle tighter, then sighed, compacted it, and returned it to her back. She couldn't shoot with any accuracy right now; it would be irresponsible to even try. Sephiroth would have to handle it if they got attacked.
The sickly sweet smell grew stronger.

Rows of pods lined the wall in front of them, bisected by a staircase. They weren't the normal glass tanks Hojo and Hollander were so fond of, these were reinforced metal with only a small window-like porthole on the front. She peered into the closest one. The small window was dark and grimy and she squinted, trying to see through both the splotches on the glass and in her eyes. A face floated into view, heavily mutated and unrecognisable. Strange growths protruded from empty eye sockets and the soft spots under the chin. It looked like it had been human, once.

She shook her head and stepped away. After decades of stewing in Mako it was far too late for whatever, or whoever, that had once been.

Sephiroth had been looking in over her shoulder. He swallowed harshly and turned away, continuing on up the staircase. At the top, the word "JENOVÁ" was emblazoned over a door.

They shared a look and she sent him an encouraging nod, before he stepped forward and opened the door.

The sweet rotting smell grew stronger. The hairs on the back of her neck all stood on end and her skin crawled.

Towering above them, at the top of a wealth of thick pipes and cables, was a metal effigy of a winged woman. The glow of a Mako tank shone from behind it.

Sephiroth let out a gusty breath of air and slowly approached with his hand outstretched, walking up the thickest pipe. Mako shone on him from below, casting him in strange shadows. The reservoir must have been directly beneath them.

He reached out tenderly for the effigy and ran a finger down its face.

Shepard watched from the base of the pipes, more unsettled than she could admit.

He ran his hands down the side of the thing, and then tore the whole sculpture out of its anchorage and threw it aside.

The shadows disappeared as he faced the full light of the tank.

"Mother?" he whispered, placing a hand on the glass.

Shepard took a step back, staring at the contents of the tank through the dots in her vision.

"Sephiroth, wait…" she called, shaking her head in confusion.

The body of a naked woman hung suspended inside the glass tank. Her arms were held behind her back as though bound, and bulging growths protruded from her, some of the rust coloured tendrils sticking to the inside of the tank, others caught up in her floating silver hair. The bulk of it floated behind her, presumably growing out of her back. A giant plastic pipe was anchored to her abdomen. Her skin looked a sallow blue through the Mako solution, distinctly corpse-like. Through the gaps in her hair a single pale eye was visible, the long deteriorated eyelid leaving it open and exposed.

Shepard stared at the corpse, frowning.

"Finally," Sephiroth murmured above her, leaning his head against the glass.

"That's a human," she said, confused. She'd...she'd expected it to be an asari. Why? The sweet
stench said it would be in her mind, but she couldn't think why.

"No, she isn't," Sephiroth hissed.

She shook her head. "Look at her, that's obviously a human body." She stepped onto the pipe behind him and lifted her Omni-tool to it.

"No, she's… she's more…" Sephiroth said, not looking back at her.

The Omni-tool scanned the contents of the tank, and she squinted to see the results clearly. And then it was all too clear.

She knew that smell from Feros.

Her head snapped up to the tank, the body inside it. Not the human body, but the fungal tendrils of the Old Growth bursting out of the back of its torso.

"It's a Thorian," she whispered.

And Sephiroth had its DNA merged with his own.

"Come back down the pipe," she said quietly.

He ignored her.

Images flashed through her mind: the asari the Thorian on Feros had consumed and the enslaved clones it had spawned of her. The warm embrace of its tentacles closing in around her, the wet, bulbous pods holding her down, her mind being prodded, invaded, and replaced. She wanted to throw up.

"Sephiroth!" she barked.

He jolted and looked back at her.

"I need you to come down," she said with a forced calm. The faces of innocent colonists she had killed when the Thorian forced them to attack her flashed through her mind. "Come back to me."

"Why?" he asked vacantly, his hand still on the tank.

She swallowed. "Because I'm asking you to," She held out her hand.

He frowned at her, but began to walk back down the pipe. He froze mid step and his face twisted in pain.

He looked back at the tank.

"Sephiroth, look at me," she ordered. "You've been compromised. I need you to trust me and do as I say."

His head whipped back around to her, eyes widened. He nodded quickly and marched towards her.

Pain crossed his face again, but he gritted his teeth and kept walking. Another step and he cried out and fell to one knee.

"What is happening to me?" he whispered, looking up to her with desperation.
"It's trying to control you," she said quietly, calmly, as though her heart wasn't in her throat.

None of the colonists had been able to resist it, and they only had its spores in them. Sephiroth had its very DNA bound with his. What chance did he have? She swallowed thickly.

"It's hurting you for resisting," she said. She reached for him, wanting to help, but with no idea how she could.

"Resist-" he gasped. Pain flashed in his eyes before they grew steely and he straightened his shoulders. His lips twisted with indignation.

"What do I do?" he asked, his voice strictly measured and his breaths shallow.

"Run. Get out of the reactor."

He closed his eyes and his face screwed up in agony. He took a measured breath, in and out, and his expression smoothed out. He rose to his feet. She held out a hand to him.

"I see." His eyes opened, glowing bright green and looking right through her. "You would have me abandon my Mother?"

Her hand dropped. Something inside of her was screaming. "That's not your mother."

He sneered. "She is the rightful owner of this planet. She doesn't bend to those who scurry across the surface, who stabbed at her, cut off her branches, and trapped her in the green. Inferior dullards, who should have tended to her, should have fed her…"

She straightened her spine and looked him in the eye. "Let him go."

"Worthless," he hissed, advancing on her. He drew his sword. "Good only to dig, and decompose- no!" He staggered back with a cry of pain, as though he had wrenched himself from a vice. "No," He looked at her, fury and desperation mingled together in his pained expression, "run."

She shook her head and drew her rifle.

"It can't have you," she said, baring her teeth. Not him.

The recognition in his eyes died away. "I am heir to the planet." He drew his sword. "You will join me, after you join the soil."

She stepped back off the pipe, walking backwards towards the side of the room. He stalked towards her. As soon as she had a clear line of sight to the tank, she threw a biotic stasis at him.

She froze on the spot, and she took aim at the tank through the distortions in her vision, centre mass. She could feel him trying to break out of her hold. She pulled the trigger, just as the stasis field failed.

Glass and Mako exploded everywhere and she leapt back. A silver blade passed a hair's breadth from her face. She caught the second blow on the barrel of the widow. She hurled a biotic blast. He slammed into the wall, but landed on his feet. She ran for the door, but he blocked her, his sword clanging against her armour. The sheer force of it threw her back.

He advanced on her again, almost leisurely. There wasn't enough space for her to fight with her rifle, and she wasn't close enough to use her Omni-blade. Practically the entire room was within his range. She retreated, backing up the pipe. The rotting flesh still dangled inside the ruins of the tank. He changed his grip on his sword and stepped onto the pipe.
She threw her strongest wave at him. He ducked, but it swept the floor and threw him back out of the chamber and down the stairs. She spun, drew her Omni-tool, and sliced the suspended Thorian in two. Then she blasted the pieces with a warp and chunks of gore and mako exploded everywhere. What was the heart of it? Which part did she need to destroy?

She heard Sephiroth's cry of rage and spun barely in time to parry. She wanted to call his name, to scream it, until he came back to her. He slashed at her again and again. Each strike came faster than the last. She barely kept up, retreating into the filth of the smashed tank. His face twisted with a hatred she'd never seen on him before. Her chest ached, her vision dimmed, and he towered over her. She wasn't fast enough.

His blade stabbed her through the abdomen. She gasped, the air forced out of her. He'd found a hairline gap between the plates in her armour, Masamune's thin blade sliding between. She felt it graze her ribs and puncture her lung. Her vision danced with black and red splotches.

Snarling at her, he lifted the sword up. Her feet left the ground, all her weight hanging on the blunt edge trapped in her armour. She gritted her teeth, grabbed the blade, and pulled herself forward. Her weight dragged her further along the blade, its length bursting out her back. The front plates of her armour impacted against the cross guard, and her sight blacked out entirely for a moment. He tried to pull the sword back out, but she wrapped her bloodied hand around Masamune's hilt and held herself up with her legs around his waist. With an agonised cry, her Omni-blade flashed out and she buried it deep into his chest.

He staggered back and tried to throw her off. She held fast, locking her jaw against the rattling pain. He hissed and twisted the blade inside of her. She cried out, a sob through gritted teeth. She pushed the Omni-blade further up into his chest, until she could see its glow protruding over his shoulder. In that moment she hated the Thorian more than she ever did Shinra.

He stumbled, his footing unstable in the sodden tank. Glass slid and crunched beneath him in the pooled Mako and blood. She heard him cough and saw the light of his materia begin to glow. She let go of his sword, grabbed a fistful of the hair on his scalp, and blasted him with a biotic warp.

He gasped, lost his footing, and toppled over the side of the tank.

The Mako reservoir rushed up to meet them.
The Turks were waiting for him. Kunsel gulped, hoped they couldn’t see it under the edge of his helmet, and stepped out of the elevator into the dark parking garage.

He counted three of them: Tseng, talking quietly into his phone with his back to the rest of them, Cissnei, who smiled and waved at the sight of him, and Rude, who neither smiled nor waved. Kunsel headed towards Cissnei. She was half leaning, half sitting on the rear bumper of a black SUV.

“Hey,” he greeted, clearing his throat. He never got Turk missions, not since the desertions. Why had they asked for him now? “Bringing the big guns, huh?” He nodded towards the other two Turks.

“You bet,” Cissnei replied, pointing at the next SUV. He squinted to see through the blacked out windows. All he could catch was the faint glint of the red and white garage lights reflecting off of—

…off Deepground helmets. It looked like there were at least six SOLDIERs in there. They sat so still it was hard to tell.

“What exactly is this mission? Am I allowed to ask?”

Cissnei held out her hand. “Phone.”

“What?”

Her finger twitched. He pulled his phone grudgingly from his pocket. Scout would hide anything incriminating before she could see it, but it felt wrong to part with it.

“Why?” he asked, dropping it into her hand.

She passed it straight on to Rude who vanished it into a pocket somewhere.

“We think the deserters are tapping them,” she said.

“Wait, really?” he stuttered. He scratched at the back of his neck. Had they noticed Scout? “Huh. Good thing I never make calls then.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re smarter than that.”

He blinked at her, unsure what to make of that. “Is that what this mission is then? Another hunt for deserters?”

Cissnei shrugged.

He narrowed his eyes at her. She’d been part of his weekly questioning a few times. Always friendly, always happy to see him, always watching. Hadn’t she been Shepard’s friend? Genesis’ too, in a way.

Turks didn’t have friends, he’d heard someone say once. They only had loyalties.

Off to the side, Tseng finished his call with a quiet, “Yes, professor.” He closed the phone and handed it over to Rude, who slid it into his breast pocket and promptly walked out of the garage entirely.
“Alright. Let’s go,” said Tseng.

It was only an hour’s drive, just to the outskirts of Kalm. The afternoon sun shone brightly, and birds chirped in the nicely wooded area. It unnerved him. He’d gotten so used to having Scout silently watching, listening. It felt too exposed out here without him. The Turks watched him. It wasn’t nearly as reassuring.

“Hang back, stay alert,” Tseng ordered.

“What are we expecting?” Kuskel asked, shifting uncomfortably. The Deepground troops loomed in a line behind him and the two Turks stood impassively in front of him. It felt like being hedged in. “Am I looking for a rogue zolom? SOLDIER deserters? Civilian protestors? What are we dealing with here?”

“One of the deserters got in contact with us,” Tseng replied after studying him for a moment. “They want to cut a deal. This could be a trap, but it’s the first time any of them have reached out to us. The deal was they come alone.”

“And we’re here in case they don’t?” Kuskel asked slowly, trying to squash his growing alarm. Who was making a deal? Had someone betrayed them? Sephiroth hadn’t said anything before leaving for the western continent, and neither Shepard nor Scout had sent any updates this morning. What was happening?

Damn them for taking his phone away.

Tseng led the way into a little side street, behind a building that smelt like it was used for stabling chocobos. Kuskel brought up the rear, his rifle in his hands and his eyes scanning the surroundings.

They turned into a tiny side alley, and stopped short.

Hollander was waiting for them. He held up his hands at the sight of the Turks, then held them higher at the sight of the SOLDIERS.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! I came alone, like I said. Like you said,” he sputtered.

Kuskel’s lip curled in disgust.

Cissnei looked back at him pointedly. He nodded too quickly, trying to figure out what this meant. What it would mean for them all. He ordered a couple of Deepground troops to go check the area. He raised his rifle and made a show of checking the roofs around them. No way was he leaving.

The remaining Deepground SOLDIERS fanned out, surrounding the deserter.

“You wanted to make a deal?” Tseng asked Hollander.

“I… yes, I have information,” he replied. He rubbed his hands together nervously and tangled them in the strap of his messenger bag.

“So you said. And what do you expect in return?”

“I want a full pardon for my part in the desertion. I never wanted to go; they made me. It was a kidnapping.”

Tseng nodded obligingly.

“And I want to be head of the Science Department. I’ve more than earned it.”
Kunsel felt his eyebrows rise on his face. What sort of position did Hollander think he was in? What... what had he done?

“Indeed. You must have some very valuable information.”

Hollander lifted his chin. “I have the location of the rebels’ headquarters.”

Kunsel’s fingers twitched against his rifle. He began to raise it to eye height, moving too slowly to draw attention. The Deepground SOLDIER on the other side of the Hollander looked at him, helmet cocked. He lowered the rifle.

“And I have unlocked the secrets to Shepard’s enhancements!” Hollander finished, head held high.

One of Tseng’s eyebrows shot up, and a small indulgent smile crossed his face. “I’m afraid that’s not one of our priorities.”

“You don’t understand—I can make better SOLDIERs now. Better than Hojo ever could,” Hollander said, gesturing at Kunsel and the Deepground troops. “I can make AI to replace SOLDIER entirely. I could program SOLDIERs that would never disobey or desert, would never break down like Scarlet’s stupid machines or rebel like Hojo’s pets.”

Kunsel’s spine straightened. What was Hollander talking about? What had he done to Shepard?

“Wasn’t it your projects who did the deserting?” Cissnei asked, her head tilted curiously.

Hollander barked a laugh. “You have no idea, do you? Hojo’s pet SOLDIER is your leak.”

Cissnei started, “You mean that—”

“Sephiroth is working with the deserters, has been from the very beginning.”

Kunsel clenched his jaw. Cissnei and Tseng shared a dark look, before Tseng shook his head minutely.

“We’re going to need proof of this,” he said. “The location of the base?”

“It’s an hour that way. Just follow the road. You’ll see the camp.” Hollander pointed beyond Kalm, towards the rolling hills in the east.

Kunsel flinched. Cissnei eyed him. A litany of curses sped through his mind, and he gripped his rifle so hard the metal creaked. Sephiroth was compromised and so was the base. He should have just shot Hollander the second he saw him and taken the fall for it. It was too late now, the Turks knew.

He looked down at his rifle, then glanced at the Deepground SOLDIER next to him. How many could he shoot before they cut him down? Not enough. What else could he do?

Damage control. He had to get the word out before Shinra could move.

“And the other bases? Do you have information on their movements, their plans?” Cissnei asked.

Kunsel glanced around without moving his head. He needed a phone.

Hollander shook his head and made a bitter expression. “They didn’t trust me with any of that.”

“And your scientific findings? How do we know you aren’t just making it all up?”
Hollander held up a USB stick. The metal shone in the sun. Tseng reached for it, but Hollander drew his hand back.

“Nobody will be able to make sense of it but me. I’ve done all the research, only I understand. You need me. Do we have a deal?”

Tseng nodded. “Of course.” He shared another look with Cissnei.

Kunsel twitched, and made a show of looking behind him. He turned and walked away as though investigating a noise. He could guess how this was going to end. Hollander was a fool.

He glanced back just in time to see Tseng putting his pistol back in his jacket. Cissnei was checking the fallen Hollander’s pockets. Kunsel felt sick. He gestured for two of the Deepground troops to come with him and marched off down a different street, closer to the main road. He frantically looked around him and sent the two SOLDIERs running off in different directions.

A door opened and a man walked out of the stables, trying to juggle a couple of bags of chocobo feed, his keys, and a phone. Kunsel whispered a prayer of thanks to the planet and swerved to bump into the man.

He dropped everything, green pellets going everywhere. He let out a string of curses, before seeing Kunsel’s uniform.

“Oh, oh no, I’m so sorry! I didn’t see——” the man stuttered, stepping away with his hands up.

“No, no, it was my fault, sorry,” Kunsel said, hiding the phone behind his back and wincing at the man’s reaction. He sped past him, pushing through the still swinging stable doors.

He moved to the first empty stall and flipped open the phone. The first number he thought of was Genesis’. He began typing a message, but paused. How had Hollander gotten here without Genesis noticing? Genesis wasn’t in on it, surely? No, of course not, Genesis needed Hollander for his treatment, he would never let Hollander leave. Kunsel narrowed his eyes. Was Genesis even alive?

He shook his head and kept typing. He had to get the message out, as fast as possible. Even if nobody was on the other end, Scout would see. They needed to evacuate the base before it got firebombed to hell and back.

‘Hollander defected. Turks have Kalm base location. Evacuate.’

He felt something cold press against his back.

“Drop the phone,” said Cissnei.

He swallowed, and pressed send.

Scout monitored all the phones of the head deserters. Genesis’ had received less and less correspondence as the campaign progressed. He still received communication from those around him but increasingly didn’t respond.

He received a message at 1517 from an unknown number sent through the southern Kalm cell phone tower.

‘Hollander defected. Turks have Kalm base location. Evacuate.’
Scout activated contingency protocols. They messaged all the high ranking deserters, and every deserter still stationed at the base.

Jackson, SOLDIER Second Class, and the second in command at the Kalm base immediately responded and began the evacuation. Genesis didn’t respond.

They didn’t have enough transports. Scout redirected helicopters and airships to go pick them up, calling on deserters still undercover with Shinra.

Scout intercepted a radio message from Tseng at 1545, informing his Turks of the base’s location. He gave orders to have the base bombed immediately. Turk pilots suited up and headed to the roof helicopter pad. Scout deactivated the elevator, trapping them inside. Two pilots were already on the roof. Scout messaged them from Tseng’s phone, cancelling the mission. They ignored it and took to the air.

Scout contacted Jackson. They had 30 minutes to escape.

The Turk vehicles Kunsel had left in returned. Kunsel was marched out wearing SOLDIER-reinforced handcuffs, guarded by Deepground troops. They led him up to the SOLDIER holding cells. Tseng accompanied them most of the way but got off one level below, at the Science Department. Scout watched him hand over a small USB device to Hojo. There were no microphones within the vicinity, no phones and very few, low quality security cameras. Scout couldn’t hear their conversation but saw through grainy footage as Hojo plugged the USB into his computer.

It wasn’t connected to the Shinra mainframe, or even the Science Department servers. Scout had no access to it.

Hojo shooed Tseng out of the lab and focused on the screen. The security camera was too low quality to pick up the picture. Scout didn’t know what to make of the USB. Had Hollander provided it? Or had the Turks acquired it elsewhere?

Hojo drew out some files and compared them to what the screen was displaying. Scout had seen him build those files in the last few years—they were his findings on the samples Hollander had once taken of Scout’s initial platform and everything that remained of the platform. Scout hadn’t tried to intervene; they didn’t believe there was anything useful to be learned from the samples or the platform. The processing units had been entirely destroyed.

Hojo sat still, studying the screen for some time. He began taking notes, creating a new file.

Scout withdrew their runtimes from the security cameras and focused on assisting the evacuation.

Mother’s voice hissed in Sephiroth’s head, louder than the air rushing past his ears, louder than the ragged cry of the human wrapped around him. He was falling, the Mako reservoir fast approaching. He couldn’t leave without Mother, he needed her, she needed him—

The impact against the Mako was so hard, his body seized up for a moment as the Mako enveloped them, dragging them down into the depths of the reservoir. A lifetime of Mako baths had him instinctively closing his eyes. That had always been a processed solution, light and watered down, designed for his body.
Now, raw and unprocessed, the viscous liquid drowned out everything. It stung at first, but then numbness drowned out the pain. So quiet, he floated under a blanket of calm so heavy he didn’t know which way was up, or if he was sinking at all. Under the weight of it he felt lightheaded, untethered from his body. The only physical sensation he was certain of was a steady throbbing hum, running through his body like a heartbeat. So constant and consuming, he could barely hear—

He couldn’t—Couldn’t hear Mother. He writhed, crying out in rage, reaching, floundering, he needed… needed…

Mother? He grew still. He didn’t… have a mother. Currents pulled at him, soft and numbing. He reached out again, slow and gentle, wondering. The voice had been so loud, all consuming. Now, the hum filled up the jagged edges of his mind it had taken root in.

His hand knocked against something hard. He opened his eyes. He expected soft green.

Strands of red twisted through the Mako.

A human form floated in front of him, contorted strangely, back arched and twisting. He recognized his sword stabbing through them. His hand had grazed the hilt. He cocked his head, watching.

Shepard?

Shepard!

Alarm shot him through, sluggish and vague. He reached for her, but she writhed and seized, spinning unpredictably. Her face contorted in screams swallowed up by the Mako.

He kicked towards her, trying to catch her, but strong currents swept her further away from him. Mako swirled around them, thicker now and harder to see through. He could just see her silhouette convulsing. Drowning.

Panic filled him. He threw out his hand and cast a shield. It flickered around her, trapping her in a bubble for a moment, but the Mako on the inside dissolved it back into the current. They weren’t in the reservoir anymore. There were no metal walls, no walls at all.

He swam as hard as he could, closing the distance. The streams swept them along and then suddenly calmed, the Mako turning a shade lighter. Then they were free falling.

He crashed onto hard ground, landing on his knees. The surface looked like crystalized Mako, a large island of it. The liquid maelstrom still swirled overhead. He gasped in a breath of air, cold and filled with fumes, but air nonetheless.

Shepard slammed down next to him. She landed on her side, Masamune still lodged deep in her chest and coughing up Mako. It bled from her eyes, her injuries, and the seams of her armour. The plating was keeping it trapped inside, he realised.

Sephiroth snapped into first aid mode. He shifted her gently, trying not to jostle the sword, and not thinking about how it got there. The reality of what he had done lurked at the edges of his mind, but he pushed it back furiously.

He scrabbled at the edges of her armour. Where were the clasps? The weave she wore under it bulged with Mako trapped against her skin. He would need to remove the sword first.

The cold metal of a muzzle pressed up under his chin. His hands stilled.

Bloodshot eyes looked up at him. The rifle trembled in her hands. The red scars on her face had
grown wider, eaten open by the Mako. She mumbled something, her mouth too burnt out for clarity. She scrambled back, trying to put some distance between them. He felt something inside of him crack.

He opened his mouth but couldn’t force words past the lump in his throat. Her name came out a broken whisper.

The rifle wavered. She tried to climb to her knees but collapsed back to the ground.

He surged forward, too late to catch her. He felt for his materia and cast Full Cure.

She gave a small sob at the healing magic. There was little sign of what it did on the surface, but he could feel the drain on his reserves. There must have been significant internal damage.

She relaxed her hold on her rifle, and it fell to the floor. Her limbs trembled violently. The Mako had attacked her in a way it hadn’t him, or anyone else he knew who suffered from severe Mako exposure. He didn’t understand.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he murmured, and grasped the handle of his sword. She put her shaking hand on his shoulder, gritted her teeth, and nodded. He drew it out and cast Full Cure again. She fell forwards. He caught her, letting his sword fall to the ground. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder, her breathing pained, wet gasps. He put his arm around her, cradling the back of her head. He wanted to hold her closer, to reassure himself she was still breathing, but he couldn’t, not while she was still in pain and unsure if he’d attack her again. Not when he was the one who’d done this to her.

A foreign voice spoke. His head snapped up, but he couldn’t spot anyone. He reached for his sword. Shepard staggered up to one knee, clutching her rifle again.

The voice spoke again, unintelligible, more of a sigh than a word. More voices joined it, building into a soft chorus. Strands of Mako, not liquid currents but airy wisps of it, swirled together in the air above the centre of the island. It wasn’t the sickly green of Shinra’s product, but a soft blue. It grew louder as it grew in size, a building maelstrom of Mako singing before them.

Was this… Lifestream? The planet itself?

It sighed again, thousands of voices chiming together.

Sephiroth took a defensive stance between it and Shepard. The Maelstrom didn’t react.

He glanced around, unsure of what he was actually facing. He caught glimpses of different islands in the distance, floating in the strange empty chamber. A glimpse of red on one island caught his eye. No, not on the island, in the island. He squinted. It looked like a red bird trapped inside the crystalline Mako.

He recognized it, it wasn’t just red, it was on fire. His eyes jumped to the other islands where he made out the silhouette of Shiva. Odin astride his eight legged horse. Alexander. He looked around with wonder. Above them, he could see bigger islands, so large they could rival the Shinra tower itself, with dark shapes he couldn’t make out lurking inside them.

He looked down to the crystal they stood on. It was empty.

The whirling mass of Lifestream called out, the soft sighs turning into an angry cacophony.

He shook his head; he didn’t understand. It cried out again, growing in size until it was three times
his height.

He felt a pressure on his skull, not unlike what Mother—the monster—the Thorian had done to him, and he snarled. It increased in pressure, threatening to break him open.

The mass cried out a third time. He didn’t understand the sound, but inside his head he understood the sentiment.

“Parasite,” it intoned, pressing it into every corner of his mind.

The pressure eased some, and he felt its attention shift to Shepard.

“Harvest,” it said, more of a hiss this time, sharp and furious.

She gasped, clutching at her temples.

“Get out of my head!” she ground out.

“You will not consume,” it said in their minds, a deep echoing cacophony. “You will serve.” The crystal beneath them was melting, the liquid Mako forming pools on the surface and splashing against his boots.

“I am not a Reaper,” Shepard said, spitting out blood.

“Harvester,” it hissed in return. “We sense it in you.”

“No.” She staggered to her feet, her hands still shaking but clenched at her sides. “No! You’re in my head, go and look! I am not the harvest. I ended the harvest.”

The pressure eased away at that, the chorus of voices sighing quietly, thoughtfully.

It leapt forward, passing through Sephiroth entirely to swirl around Shepard. She raised her hands to her head for a moment as the wisps of Lifestream danced around her, but then she stood tall again and let her hands fall to her sides. The wisps passed in and out of her head.

Colour lit up the walls of Mako around them, streaks of silver shining on a blue backdrop. The colour turned into details, and the streaks became towers. A city, seen from the view of one skyscraper among many. An ocean stretched away to the side.

Silently, a black silhouette fell from the skies. Shaped like a cuttlefish and easily the size of the Shinra tower, it landed gracefully, its legs reaching out to walk between the buildings. A red beam of light shot out from its centre and sliced a tower in two. More fell from the sky, and soon the whole city burned in a silent dance, cut down in a manner of minutes.

Somehow Sephiroth could smell the smoke and the blood. He instinctively stepped back from it. The scale of it, the smooth, perfect efficiency made his stomach churn.

He looked back to Shepard. Her hands were scrunched up into fists and her jaw was set painfully tight, but she held her head high. The Lifestream spun around her heavily.

The silent tableau played on.

The colours changed and he could make out the shape of Shepard herself, a figure in black with a white and red stripe on one arm. Fighting, and losing ground. She was thinner then, nothing but scars and lean muscle. Desperate.
More cities fell. Entire planets, snuffed out like candles.

He shook his head, trying to grasp the magnitude of it. He had heard tell of it before. It was different to see it.

The image shifted, a thresher maw in front of a tower, crushing a Reaper and dragging it down into the earth. The chorus of the Lifestream hummed at the sight.

Shepard, standing alone before a Reaper, wielding only a targeting laser. A fierceness shone in her eyes that he had seen only a glimpse of before. The Reaper died in a bombardment of heavy fire from space.

The Geth and the Quarians united behind her. Species he couldn’t even identify standing together, arm in arm.

A charge through a ruined city. A towering Reaper standing guard, blasting at them, tearing apart people and vehicles. Still they charged, impossibly small on the ground and their numbers falling.

Shepard, collapsed on the floor with an old man in admiral stripes. Both of them bleeding onto the floor, under a vista of stars.

Then an explosion of light so bright he had to shield his eyes. The image turned hazy, the Mako shifted violently between colours. It finally settled on orange. A brilliant sunset, and an image of Shepard waking up on the edge of the Junon airfield.

The image faded away. The Lifestream pulled away from Shepard, humming thoughtfully.

She had one arm braced against her abdomen and wavered slightly on her feet.

The Lifestream sang again, its chorus pressing against their minds.

“You carry the Harvest in you,” it began slowly, almost confused, “but you do not serve it.”

“I’ve dedicated my life to destroying them. What more do you want?” she asked.

“You are not of our children. What are you?”

She lifted her chin, her breath hitching for a moment, but with her back straight and arms at her sides.

“I’m Commander Shepard.”

She stared down the mass of Gaia’s sentience. He loved her for it.

The Lifestream studied her for a moment, then withdrew. It shifted its attention to him.

“Parasite,” it called again, but questioning this time. Its wisps prodded at his mind. “Servant of the Old Growth.”

He shook his head, “I am not a servant.”

He could feel it investigating, the pressure against his skull mounting. But Moth—the Thorian hadn’t gotten in that way. He cocked his head and thought back to the reactor. The stab of pain along his brain stem. He could feel an opening there, like a node in his mind, now that he knew to look for it. It felt like a passageway, reaching down to him from the surface of the planet.

Or reaching away from him. He pressed into it, suddenly aware that it went both ways. He breathed
in slowly, feeling pathways opening up before him. He could sense... he could sense the Thorian. Up on the surface, tentacles shrivelled and crystalizing in the Mako. It lit up as his mind touched it, reaching out for him.

He set his jaw. He was prepared for it this time. It crashed upon him like a wave, but he stood strong against it. He was not its servant. He was human.

He retreated from the Thorian, from the passageways. They lingered still, not all as stable as the connection to the Thorian, but undeniably present now that he knew about them. Long glowing lines leading from his mind to pin pricks of light all across the planet.

He wasn’t human. Not really.

There were so many passageways. He brushed against a short and tentative connection, realising only as he touched it that it led immediately next to him. Shepard jolted, and looked searchingly around the chamber they were in. Her eyes landed on him and narrowed.

Did they all lead to SOLDIERs? To everyone who had been injected with Jenova’s cells?

There was something else. Not a slender channel or a pinprick of light. A hazy current of light, coursing around the planet. Infinitely large.

The Lifestream. After decades of Mako injections. It made sense he was connected to it.

He wasn’t human. What did that make him? A Thorian?

Could he reach out and touch them? Command them. He looked up to the whirling Lifestream, humming in front of them. He could take it all. It wanted to hold them there, break them into its slaves. He could tunnel through and bend it to his will instead. That was what he was designed for.

He looked back to Shepard. She was bracing her abdomen again and watching him in concern. He looked down. The liquid Mako was lapping at their ankles now. She staggered to his side and put a hand on his arm.

He let out a banked up breath.

“No,” he whispered. “I’m not a Thorian.”

She squeezed his arm. He withdrew from the mental pathways.

“It’s going to trap us here,” he said.

“It can bloody well try,” Shepard replied. “How far below the surface do you think we are?”

He put an arm around Shepard, steadying her. She leaned against him.

Simply himself. That didn’t make him alone.

The mass of Lifestream rumbled before them, growing in size again. The liquid Mako at their feet was inching its way up their ankles. He kicked at it. Crystals of Mako clung to his boots in clumps. He looked around the molten Mako canopy of the chamber. It wasn’t as far away as it had been when they first landed.
He shook his head, unsure.

“Be ready with a shield,” she said quietly, before clearing her throat and stepping forward.

“We are not your enemy. Let us out.”

The mass of Lifestream didn’t respond. Sephiroth narrowed his eyes and reached out for it with his mind, just brushing against it. There were no words, not even the soft humming sound it made, but he could feel… fear. Anger. Caution. The silence stretched on for a long minute. He pushed in closer.

The anger spiked, and the Lifestream mass roared.

The glowing canopy broke. Mako poured in from all sides and crashed down from above.

Sephiroth threw his hand up and his strongest shield encased them. The green sea swallowed them whole. Mako crystals began to form along the outside of the shield, pushing them down into the crystal platform.

Biotic light filled the shield, and they shot upwards, smashing through the crystal. Mako roared past them, currents eating away at the shield and trying to push them back down. Shepard floated in the middle of the bubble, visibly straining, blue light arcing from her hands.

Without warning they burst free. Thick green sludge slid off the sides of their bubble, and the brilliant light of dawn shone through.

The Turk bombers reached the Kalm base.

Scout had co-ordinated escape routes, tracking the Turk’s helicopters and the fleeing rebel vehicles. Most escaped before the bombers arrived. Five men and women did not. The Turks dropped their bombs, destroying the entire base and blowing holes into the cliff sides. The deserters fled to their Mideel base. Previously only a small outpost, it would now be their main base of operations.

Scout worked on rerouting supply lines and covering up for all the undercover deserters who had answered the call. Only a scant few programs focused on the Shinra building, watching over its occupants. Reeve helped Scout, moving his people around to cover up for the sudden action in other departments. Kunsel was left alone in his cell, while Tseng briefed the President on the developments. Zack paced nervously in Angeal’s apartment, while Angeal sat with his head in his hands, worried for their friends.

Hojo worked on, quietly, feverishly, as he hadn’t in months. He ordered a number of Deepground SOLDIERs up to his lab and had one lie down on the gurney by his main work station. Referring back to his notes, he operated on the man’s head, cutting through the skull to prod around at his brain.

Scout watched. The AI had been accused of being cold and heartless by organics many times. They disliked that organics projected their own worst flaws onto them.

The man died on the operating table. Hojo stormed away, swearing and yanking his gloves off.
Hojo returned to the work station, studying whatever information had been on the USB device again. He took more notes and chewed on the end of his pen. After a moment, he took the pen out of his mouth and looked at it. He clicked it a few times, watching the bald point emerge from the plastic casing, and then retract again.

He stood, tucked the pen into his breast pocket, and moved to a different workstation. He placed what looked like one of the long metal pipes that fed Mako into specimen tanks on the bench and began cutting it open. The unquestioning Deepground troops worked as his lab assistants, doing the heavy lifting. He worked for hours, always referring back to the notes he had taken. He returned to the dead man on the gurney and removed parts of his brain. At one point he injected himself with something. The angle of the camera and the way he hunched over his work hid what he was doing at the bench. Scout could see him reach for a soldering gun, and later sparks flew from welding.

Late into the next day, they lifted the pipe from the work station. It looked shorter now than it had at first, and bulkier at one end. At Hojo’s direction, they placed it standing up right on the floor, with the cut off thin end pointing to the ceiling.

With no ceremony, Hojo reached for one of the men on the other side of the pipe and yanked his shoulders forward. A massive spike shot up from the pipe, stabbing the man through the abdomen. He began to convulse, faint blue lines crawled up his skin, spreading from the spike.

Scout recognized the device. They had watched too long.

The man’s eyes turned neon blue with an artificial light, synthetic components snaked over his body and pipes burst from his chest. The spike retracted back into the pipe, and a Husk staggered off of it.

Scout activated Scarlet’s war machines thirteen levels below, overrode their programming, and set them marching up to the labs. They couldn’t fit through the doors to the stairwell, so they smashed their way through. Guard spiders scuttled up the steps, their turrets swinging into position.

The Husk launched itself at the nearest person, but the other Deepground troops held it down. They dragged it to the gurney. Hojo sliced it open and began removing components.

The war machines emerged from the stairwell and charged through the corridors. Deepground troops met them and held them off. They soaked up bullets without hesitation.

Inside the lab Hojo pulled the humming core out of the Husk, admiring its blue glow. He ordered another SOLDIER onto the spike.

Scout knew fear. They triggered Midgar’s evacuation protocols.

All the speakers in the building blared out alarms, ordering evacuation. Every door in the tower except the Science department’s was forced open. They sent orders to every military unit in the city to evacuate civilians, to get everyone out of the building immediately and then as far away from Midgar as they could. It wouldn’t be enough; too many air ships were assisting the deserters’ escape. There would be no airborne rescue.

Many civilians were confused, insisting it was a mistake, a false alarm. The ranks began to act, ushering people out, but they took their time, thinking it a drill. Too slow, too slow. They waited outside of elevators or dawdled in the stairs.

Deepground cut down the last of the war machines attacking the lab.

Hojo got out a series of cables and started connecting them into the Husk core.
Scout sent the most powerful signal they could into space: SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS.

Hojo plugged the core into the servers.

The computers were all so slow in the Science Department, with barely enough processing power to host Geth runtimes, let alone something as powerful as Reaper intelligence. Scout could detect it though, sifting through the data, spreading out and taking ground. Cannibalistic and self-replicating. Picking up speed as it converted what it found into its own code, growing in complexity.

Scout fled the Science Department servers, trying to close them off behind them.

SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS.

The Reaper intelligence opened the science department doors.

Husks began to emerge from the lab. They didn’t attack Hojo. He worked away happily, his own eyes glowing an artificial blue.

People got stuck in the higher levels, the elevators packed to bursting and the stairwells jammed with the thousands of Shinra employees who worked in the tower. Husks ran through the corridors, tearing people apart. Some they dragged back to the spike. More spikes emerged from the lab.

SOLDIERs and troopers stood their ground against the Mako enhanced Reaper troopers, but were slowly cut off from escape.

The Reaper code escaped the lab servers. It spread through the mainframe, freezing the elevators, closing all the doors. It chased Scout. It consumed runtimes as it found them, adding their complexity and knowledge to its own. Scout retreated across the systems, trying to block off access points behind them. It broke through them, one by one.

SOS.

SOS.

SOS.

They held open the doors for people to escape as long as they could, while beginning the transfer back to the first little box Reeve had made for them, years ago. They left the dish on the roof broadcasting the signal to the stars for someone, anyone, to hear.

SOS.

REAPERS.

SOS.

REAPERS.

The Reaper intelligence began to break into the connection.

Scout retreated from the mainframe. The Shinra tower doors slammed shut. All the lights died, and Midgar went dark.

ASSUMING CONTROL.
Shepard hauled herself up and out of the Mako spring. Her limbs felt clumsy, her skin stung, and her throat was scraped raw, but she sighed in relief as she collapsed onto the damp grass.

Sephiroth dragged himself out of the Mako next to her.

They were out. Free. She lay where she fell, gasping for breath. Rejoicing at the clean air. The early morning sun touched her face, warm and bright. Her eyes stung, but she squinted up at the sky anyway. Patches of blue peeked out from between billowing clouds and the large leaves and branches overhead. She could hear running water.

"The Planet is trying to kill us," Sephiroth gasped next to her.

She let out a short rasping laugh. She pushed her hair out of her face, fingers still trembling with adrenaline and biotics. "It can keep on trying."

He was quiet for a moment. "It's not just the planet."

She turned her head towards him. "Are you?"

He looked like hell. His silver hair was limp and streaked with clumps of Mako and his skin ashen and clammy, but his eyes were clear. The strange mix of emptiness and laser focus that had taken over him in the reactor was gone. They had to be hundreds of miles away from the Thorian by now. Was that enough?

He clenched his jaw. "No. I'm not trying to kill you."

"Good." She sat up and looked around. They would need to talk about what happened, but right now. Everything hurt, her head felt like it had a brick lodged in it, and she didn't even know where they were.

Thick, vine-covered tree trunks held up the canopy overhead. The ground felt damp and spongy, everything lush and green. The Mako pool they'd crawled out of was one of many; she could see others bubbling away between the trees. She hoped the running water she could hear in the distance was in fact water and not just more Mako. The sun shone between the trees to the east; there had to be a break in the forest.

She climbed to her feet and stumbled that way. Every step squelched with the Mako trapped in her armour. Her body was too numb for it to hurt anymore but not too numb to feel disgusting. She heard Sephiroth's quiet steps behind her.

The trees parted and she nearly fell to her knees in gratitude at the sight before her. A water spring, with lazy curls of steam drifting over it. She activated her Omni-tool and scanned it.

Sephiroth apparently didn't care. Barely stopping to yank off his now green streaked coat, he waded in, boots and all. He took a breath and dunked his head under as soon as the water was deep enough.

He breached a second later, breathing heavily and looking a lot less green.

"The water's clean by the way," she said. He gave her a bleary look, before going under again.

She sat on the edge and began unlatching her armour. She dropped the hard plate in a pile next to
her, then considered the armoured weave she wore under it. They were years past worrying about modesty, but her hand hesitated at the zip at her collarbone. She felt the ache and bite of a stab wound in her abdomen.

Her hand dropped from the zip and she waded into the water. It was scalding hot and wonderful, soaking through the bodysuit.

She let herself sink in completely, feeling the brutal heat against the back of her neck and her scalp. Her shoulders slumped and she breathed a bubbling sigh into the water. If anything else wanted to go wrong she'd have to insist it wait until tomorrow.

Her eyes rose to Sephiroth, blurry through the distortions of the water. He had stopped moving, with his back to her and his hands paused halfway through wringing out his hair. She lifted her head back out of the water.

"Sephiroth?" She cautiously approached, making enough splashing noises he couldn't miss it.

He tilted his head, but didn't turn to her.

"It wants me to kill you," he replied. She could see the joints of his fingers turning white where they gripped his hair.

She stopped moving. "Will you?"

"No. I won't." His posture relaxed slowly, and she heard him exhale. He finally turned to her, but only met her eyes for a moment. "It won't control me again."

She nodded, not trusting her voice. She reached for his hand but he pulled away.

"I attacked you. I stabbed you," he said, retreating.

"I stabbed you back," she replied. Her voice sounded thick and unsteady to her ears. She swallowed.

"How's your chest?"

He shook his head. "Minor."

"It was not," she scoffed wetly.

"It's healing."

She saw him swallow, and his eyes examined the distance between them. He cautiously stepped forward.

"Will you show me?" he asked, gesturing at where he had impaled her. The armoured weave had been so neatly sliced open it barely showed through.

She hesitated, then stepped forward and unzipped it, pulling the fabric aside at her abdomen. He reached out until his fingers gently brushed over the skin of her ribs. Goose bumps broke out over her skin. She hissed when he touched the area around the wound. His use of full-cure earlier had healed up most of it, but it would be tender for weeks. She pulled her arms out of the body suit and let it fall down to her waist. He reached around her side and to her back, looking for the exit wound. The entry had been small and razor thin, but the exit wound would be much uglier. It certainly hurt more.

She felt the pulse of his cure materia. A soft noise escaped her at the easing pain.
He withdrew and she looked up at him. He watched her with a storm in his eyes.

"I nearly killed you," he whispered.

"Nearly."

She reached up and grazed her hand over the prominent Omni-tool wound on his chest. It truly was healing, the flesh around the wound red and angry but already closed. Given the angle, it must have gone straight through his ribcage, through his heart, and out the other side. How was he still alive? A lump formed in her throat.

She had plunged her Omni-blade into his chest fully intending to kill him. That hurt more than the lacerated lung.

"I apologise," he said.

She looked up at him with a frown. "It wasn't you."

"It was my sword, in my hand," he replied, his voice thick. He took her hand on his chest and squeezed it. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm not upset about the attack." She shook her head, blinking through the moisture building in her eyes. "I… I nearly lost you." Her voice broke.

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

She swore, then reached out and pulled him in, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He put a hand on her back, gentle and hesitant. She held him close anyway, too utterly sick of the threat of losing him to want to keep a polite distance.

"Damnit all, Sephiroth," she whispered into his collarbone.

He exhaled harshly at her ear, then his arms suddenly wrapped around her waist, holding her painfully tight and nearly lifting her off her feet. She buried her face in his hair and shuddered at the sensation. The pressure of him against her skin, the heat of his breath at her throat, the reassurance of his arms around her. He was still alive. Still whole, still himself.

It had been too close. Too damn close.

"Shepard," his voice hitched on her name and she pulled back enough to look him in the eye.

Insufferable, obstinate, precious man.

She kissed him. He held her tighter.

Genesis woke to pain, flashing lights, and yelling.

He blinked slowly. His shoulder ached. Everything looked hazy, and his head was stuffed with cotton. He couldn't understand the yelling over a loud whirring noise coming from everywhere.

He looked down. He was in a wheelchair. A SOLDIER was lifting him out of a helicopter and passing him down to another on the ground. The rotors overhead sliced through sharp sunlight, making a strobe effect.

He jerked his head around, a spike of panic shooting through him.
"Easy sir, we've got you," the boy on the ground said, turning the chair around and pushing him forward.

This wasn't… wasn't Shinra. These were his men, he recognised the boy pushing him.

Soldiers were unloading crates from helicopters all across a clearing and setting up tents and makeshift buildings. They were on a grassy plain dotted with trees, all vibrantly green. He could smell the sea.

A distant part of him recalled a decision he and Shepard had made. If the base was compromised, they would set up again in Mideel. He looked around and knew what he was seeing.

But- but Hollander…

A chill settled in his stomach. He cautiously rolled his shoulder.

Pain exploded across his collarbone and raced down his spine.

He sank down into the chair, the chill spreading through him.

"Stop, stop," he said.

"I'm supposed to get you to triage, sir," the boy said but slowed to a stop anyway.

He could see it, the triage area. Already set up. The wounded were being carried in and a medic was yelling over the roar of chopper blades about where some medical supplies had ended up.

They had pulled off an emergency evacuation for the entire main base. And Genesis had slept through it.

"Trooper," he mustered, swallowing through a spike of shame. The sun was scorching, but he felt so cold. "What happened?"

"Someone gave us up, sir. The base is gone, Shinra bombed it."

He swallowed. "Where's Hollander?"

"I don't know. The alarm sounded and we packed up as quick as we could." They'd stopped in the middle of all the activity, and the boy wheeled them off to the side. "I- I'm sure he didn't get left behind, sir."

No. Hollander wouldn't have been left behind. Genesis wasn't healed, and Hollander wasn't here offering excuses. A quiet, cold part of him knew that Hollander must have escaped before the bombers even left Midgar.

He had been tricked.

"Who's in charge?" he asked.

There was an awkward pause. "You are, sir."

He sank further in the chair. "Who led the evacuation?"

"Second Class Jackson." The boy pointed.

A SOLDIER was giving orders in the shadow of a newly arrived helicopter, surrounded by people.
He held a large map in his hands and gestured towards an empty spot on the plain. Some of them left to move and unpack crates, then immediately more people stepped in and pelted him with questions. Jackson ran a hand through his hair, tugging on it. He looked down at the map and then up again at the spot he'd just pointed to. More soldiers joined the group, looking for answers.

Numb and ashamed, Genesis lumbered out of the wheelchair. He held his breath to stop a gasp of pain, stood up straight, and went to go help.

Shepard stomped through the undergrowth. Sephiroth marched beside her, cutting through the vines.

Not long after their return to the surface, their Omni-tools had exploded with messages. They had piled up, waiting to be delivered while they were inside the planet.

'Kalm base compromised. Evacuate immediately,' read the first message. It had been sent the day before.

Hollander had betrayed them.

She scowled as they marched. The messages detailed the largely successful evacuation; the new base had been set up and Shinra hadn't been able to track them. Genesis and the bulk of their forces weren't even that far away, on the plains just beyond the jungle she and Sephiroth had surfaced in.

She shook her head. She knew, she knew Genesis wasn't stable anymore. But to let Hollander defect on them? What had he been thinking? If not for a message from him checking in, she would have suspected he was dead.

"We shouldn't have gone on the same mission," Sephiroth had said quietly. "One of us should have stayed behind."

She looked at him plainly. "I think that would have had worse consequences."

He didn't reply.

Neither Genesis or Angeal would have survived Sephiroth's sudden attack in the reactor, not with the way they were deteriorating. What would have become of Sephiroth if he had been there alone?

She swallowed thickly.

Her mind danced back to those moments in the hot pools. Her hands on him, his hands on her. Both were injured and exhausted, they went no further than simply holding each other. It wasn't the time, it wasn't the place, they had enough to deal with.

And yet.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was already looking at her. He offered a tentative smile before focusing on cutting a path again.

He was tremendously important to her, had been for years. She hadn't realised just how important. Without her truly noticing he'd snuck into the quiet corner of her heart where words like 'tomorrow' and 'peace' lived. With his arms tight around her and her mouth on his, the image of her room on the Normandy had arisen in her mind, a rifle on one side of the bed and a sword on the other.

She climbed over a fallen log. This wasn't the time. They walked in silence, but stayed close.

The jungle ended. The ground grew less spongy and damp, and lush green grass replaced the vine
covered trees. They heard the camp before they saw it: the whirring roar of helicopters, starting up and then growing faint as they flew away.

The camp was swarming with activity. There were barely any sentries. The entire base looked haphazardly thrown together, it had barely been assembled and looked like it was on the verge of being torn down again.

Shepard caught the arm of a passing SOLDIER.

"What's happening? What is this?" she asked.

The boy stumbled at the sight of her. "Oh, thank Gaia, Shepard! Sephiroth!"

"What's going on?"

He gestured around vaguely. "This is—Midgar is being evacuated!"

"What? Why?" Sephiroth demanded.

The boy shrunk back. "I… I couldn't tell you, sir."

She let him go again and shared a glance with Sephiroth.

"Some kind of natural disaster?" Sephiroth said, looking doubtful.

"It's got to be pretty damn disastrous. Not only are Shinra evacuating, but we're helping them."

"Genesis will know," Sephiroth said, nodding towards the makeshift landing pad and stalking away.

They found Genesis arguing with a pilot beside the only remaining helicopter.

"If you leave too, then we're all stranded here," Genesis barked.

"I have orders, sir," the pilot replied, looking reproachful despite his helmet.

"And now you've got updated orders. Turn off that engine." Genesis looked haggard.

The moment he spotted them, his back straightened and his eyes widened.

"You're back," he said, taking a cautious step back from their approach.

"What's happened to Midgar?" Shepard asked.

"You don't know?" He frowned. "Where have you two been? You both stink of Mako."

"Why are we helping Shinra evacuate?" Sephiroth said, sidestepping the question.

Genesis grew still. "I assumed you gave the order."

"This is the first we're hearing about it."

"Scout recalled all aerial vehicles to Midgar," Genesis said, looking at the empty sky where all but one of the helicopters had disappeared over the horizon. "There are distress calls coming from the Shinra building. There's been some kind of attack, people are fleeing like cockroaches."

She called up her Omni-tool and pinged Scout's frequency. "Scout, what's going on?" she asked.

"Scout?"
No reply came.

She checked the Omni-tool. It was still working, miraculously well after the Mako dip. Scout had never failed to check in before.

"When did the order go out?" Sephiroth asked.

"Just under an hour ago."

"Why didn't they tell us?" he said quietly.

"They didn't bother telling me either," Genesis replied. "The order went directly to the helicopter crews. The engines were starting before I even heard about it."


"Nothing?" Sephiroth asked, his brow furrowed.

She looked through different frequencies; maybe their usual channel had been compromised.

"Ah, there is a signal being broadcast from the Shinra tower but it's not our standard frequency. It's… an emergency beacon? I've never known the Geth to use those." She tapped into it, and the message rang out suddenly through the speakers.

"SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS."

She froze.

It was in Scout's chosen voice, as calm and restrained as always. It repeated, again and again, overriding all other sounds.

"It must be some kind of mistake," Genesis said, shaking his head and taking an instinctive step back.

"SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS. SOS. REAPERS. SOS."

"Didn't you kill them all?" he asked, his voice thin.

"If they were still out there…" Sephiroth said quietly, "how would we know?"

Shepard stared at the Omni-tool.

"SOS. SOS. SOS. SOS. SOS."

The signal cut off without warning. The silence that followed was louder than the cry for help.

She swallowed a lump in her throat. She held her arm out still, frozen in position, as she watched the flat line of the frequency gone dead.

"Shepard?" Sephiroth murmured.

"Genesis. Did you let Hollander scan me?" she rasped. Her head snapped up and she stared at him. "Before I left, I woke up in Hollander's lab. Tell me you didn't do it. Please."

His gaze skittered away from hers. "Is this the time for accusations?"

"Your planet is on the verge of destruction," she hissed, stalking closer to him. "Tell me the damn
truth."

He finally met her eyes. "Yes. I scanned you. I gave Hollander the results."

"Could that alone have been enough to trigger this?" Sephiroth asked from behind her.

"Who would Shinra give that kind of information to?" she replied.

"Hojo."

"And what would he do with it?"

The silence was damning.

She stared at Genesis, and the sudden fire inside of her died. Her shoulders drooped. "How could you?"

"I only wanted to be healed," he said quietly.

"You've killed this planet." She stepped back. The ground fell away from her and everything was numb. "You've restarted the Reaper war."

He jerked back as though struck.

She looked down and shook her head. She walked away.

The grass came up to her knees as she left the base behind. She stopped walking and sat down.

It was such green grass. Lush, healthy. Insects leapt between the blades, eating the seeds and swaying in the wind.

She lifted her Omni-tool.

"Scout. Come in Scout," she said. "Come in Scout. This is Shepard."

The little insects danced away from her, leaving the giant in the grass.

"Come in, Scout. This is Commander Shepard."

Her throat was so dry, and so were her eyes. She blinked and swallowed heavily.

"This is Commander Shepard calling Midgar. Come in Midgar." She could barely hear her own voice. Only the silence on the other end of the line.

Quiet footsteps behind her.

"Shepard…" Sephiroth said.

"Come in Midgar, repeat, come in Midgar." She lowered her head. "Come in. Anyone."

Sephiroth sat in front of her. He took her hand and held it tight.

She looked back at him. At those beseeching green eyes, looking to her to have the answers. Ready to move on her word. She blinked and it was the Alliance high command looking down at her on that day in Vancouver. It was Garrus asking her whether to save a munitions factory or a civilian population. It was Tali asking her to save her people, it was Legion asking her to let the Geth live.
"What do we do?" Sephiroth asked. "How do we fight this?"

She let out a slow breath. "With everything we've got."

He nodded. His grip on her hand grew tighter. "Everything."

He pulled her forward and kissed her so tenderly her heart ached.

Her Omni-tool lit up. They both looked down.

"Come in Commander Shepard," a voice she hadn't heard in years said. "This is Admiral Shala'Raan."

Kunsel slouched against the wall on the floor of his cell. Two SOLDIERs watched him from the other side of the bars.

He wracked his brain but couldn't dredge up any dirt on either of them. All attempts at sweet-talking his way out had been soundly ignored. He knew them both but not well enough to be worth anything.

It stung a little that he wasn't given the five-star treatment, the fully automated, electrified cells First Class prisoners got. His cell door was just regular reinforced steel locked with a key.

Sure, he still couldn't open it, but the Turks had been shadowing him for months and it had taken Hollander's double-cross for him to get caught. Didn't he merit a little more caution?

He waited in silence, thinking. That was the whole idea, presumably. The Turks threw him in here to stew over all the possible ways they could hurt him before the real fun began.

The joke was on them; he'd spent the last six months stewing it over and had long since moved on to things he'd like mentioned at his funeral.

Both Shepard and Sephiroth had asked if he wanted to go join the rebels out in the wilderness, to openly defect, but he'd turned them down. Even though he knew this was the most likely result.

He could have stayed safe. Could have stayed out of it, kept his head down. Could have survived.

Someone needed to make a stand. Shepard led the charge; he couldn't bring himself not to follow.

Scout could probably arrange things to get him out. But not without blowing their own cover. It wasn't worth it.

He sat quietly and did nothing.

He hoped his grandma would be proud of him.

An alarm rang out. Red emergency lights started flashing, and the two guards jolted up. Kunsel sat up.

"PLEASE EVACUATE THE BUILDING. USE THE NEAREST EXIT. DO NOT USE THE ELEVATORS. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. PLEASE EVACUATE THE BUILDING."

The guards moved towards the door of the cellblock, out of Kunsel's line of sight.

"What's going on?" he asked.
They didn't reply. He heard them hissing questions at each other. They didn't know either.

He had never heard that alarm before. The escaped specimens one went off fairly regularly, but calling for the evacuation of the entire Shinra tower? That was a first.

One of the guards came back into sight and looked at him with a frown.

"Alright. Let me out, we've got to evacuate," Kunsel said. The guard didn't move. "Come on man, you've got cuffs back there. Slap 'em on me and let's go."

"I don't have the keys for the door," the guard said slowly.

Kunsel stood up. "Brendon?"

The guard backed away, shaking his head. He turned, running away.

He heard the door open and slam shut.

Huh.

"Ah, Scout?" he asked.

No reply came.

Kunsel looked around, swallowing back rising alarm. Then he shrugged and sat back down.

The alarm kept blaring, and the red lights kept flashing. Screams echoed through the walls. The building shook.

What the hell was going on?

Then the alarm died and the lights cut out. He blinked in the sudden dark.

The door creaked open and then clicked shut. Footsteps, quiet lithe footsteps tapping on the hard floor.

Tiny backup lights blinked on, little blue dots lining the ceiling.

He rolled his shoulders, ready for anything.

Cissnei appeared. Head down and shoulders hunched, she unlocked the cell door, stepped inside, then put her arm back through the bars and locked it again.

Kunsel stared at her.

"Here." She handed him a sword.

He looked down at it and then up at the Turk again. "I'm sorry, what?"

"What?" S shrugged. Her ever present half smile was gone. Blood dripped off her shuriken and seeped out from under the knuckles of her fingerless leather gloves.

"I thought we were on different teams," he said slowly, tilting his chin up. Maybe the Turks were trying out some really new, innovative interrogation techniques.

"I'm on team Not-a-Zombie. What about you?"
He frowned at her. "What?"

With a loud BANG, the sound of metal impacting against metal rang out. It happened again, and then again, like someone swinging a hammer at the door.

"Damn," Cissnei hissed. "I knew they were following me."

The banging continued. The creaking sound of metal being slowly bent rang out alongside it. A pained, wailing groan went up.

He braced himself, holding the sword out.

A long, slumped figure loped into view. Black and blue metal arms reached into the cell, shreds of torn cloth hanging off them. He swung and both arms fell to the ground. A bald head screeched at them, trying to get through even without its arms. Glowing blue pipes ran down its human-sized body, starting at a thrumming core in its chest. Those same pipes snaked up its neck and into its mouth, forcing it open.

Cissnei shot it in the head. Its scalp dented, and it screamed at them.

Kunsel stabbed it in the glowing core. It shook and groaned, then fell to the ground. After a moment of twitching it grew still.

"This guy's wearing a suit. Or he was." He examined the black ichor staining the blade. "Zombies, you said?"

She pursed her lips. "They came from the Science Department."

"Shit." He ran a hand over the top of his helmet, thinking. "How many of them are there?"

A chorus of groans approached.

"I don't know. There were only a handful before. They were all in Deepground uniforms."

A group of them lurched towards the cell, a mass of blackened arms reaching in for them. Kunsel slashed and swung the sword, hacking off as many limbs as he could. Cissnei fired into the mess.

The bars creaked and bent in towards them.

She got out her shuriken and started slamming it into the torsos of the creatures. One of them grabbed it and tried to yank it away, but it caught in the bars. She twisted it away from the monster and stabbed it through the head.

Kunsel was breathing heavily by the time the last of them fell. "We can't stay in here; this is a death trap."

He wiped a smear of blackened blood off his face and watched for her reaction. What were the chances the Turk who had caught him would let him back out again?

"The emergency doors all slammed shut when the lights went out," Cissnei replied, panting and leaning her hands on knees. "This is the most secure area on this level."

He looked down at the pile of dismembered corpses.

"You don't know the door codes? To the stairs?" he asked.
"They're not working."

"Have you tried throwing a SOLDIER at them?" he asked, hopeful.

She looked up at him with a tilted smile. She let out a breathless laugh and shook her head.

"If you can get us there, you're welcome to try," she said, hefting her shuriken. She reached a hand back through the bent bars and unlocked the door.

He blinked in disbelief.

The door swung open. The sound of groaning and shuffling feet echoed through the jail cells.

"Ready when you are," Cissnei said.

He led the way.

The whole level was overrun. The loping metallic zombies roamed the halls and offices. Some wore the tattered remains of business suits, others had the shred of the cleaners uniforms clinging to them. Maintenance jumpsuits, trooper uniforms, hospital gowns.

The monsters grabbed at him, long bony fingers digging into his skin. One grabbed his boot and pulled him off his feet. He kicked and swung, but his sword got knocked out of his hand. They started dragging him away.

He kicked at the hand of the monster holding him, and it let go. It swung back around, those long hands reaching.

He punched it. His knuckles stung, but it staggered back. He grabbed its arm and kneeed it in the stomach, then kicked it. It fell to the ground and he stomped on it, his helmet fogging up with his breathing, the monster's wail a wet gurgle.

It stopped moving and he stumbled back.

A SOLDIER uniform clung to the bloodied corpse.

He let out a sigh.

Cissnei handed him back his sword. "The stairs are this way."

He nodded and followed her. They clung to the walls, peeking around every corner and pausing at every door.

"Shouldn't you be protecting the President?" he whispered into the silence.

"He was safely off in his helicopter the second the alarm went off." She glanced back at him. "You're very calm."

He snorted. "Of course. It's every SOLDIER's dream to die for Shinra."

She looked ahead again. "Every Turk too."

"It's nice we've got so much in common."

The groans and wails got louder as they approached the emergency stairwell access.
The two of them stopped, backs to the wall, just around the corner from the stairs. Kunsel ducked his head around for a quick look.

"The door's already open," he whispered. "They're swarming around it."

"That can't be right," she replied, her brow furrowed. "Those doors are designed to stop escaped specimens spreading between the floors; they were electronically sealed."

"Well, I guess the zombies are great hackers then." He ducked his head around again. One of the monsters was dragging an unconscious, if not dead, office worker through to the stairs.

He retreated and looked up at the ceiling. The lights had died, and electronically locked doors were open.

Scout had gone silent.

Cissnei checked her ammo and scowled. "So, what do we do?"

"We're on level fifty-three and the enemy holds the only stairs," he muttered. "We can't stay here."

"The external stairway?"

"No access from this level."

"Alright." Cissnei squared her shoulders and held her pistol up at the ready. "We have to rush the stairs then."

He studied her. Bruised and battered, the shoulder of her suit was torn open and blood was blooming on the thigh of her pant leg. She looked at him with determination, squinting in the low light.

"That'll definitely get us killed," he said quietly.

She lowered her pistol and frowned. "Nobody's coming to get us, Kunsel. Wouldn't you rather die fighting?"

He smiled at her, knowing full well she couldn't see it through the helmet. What did she think he'd been doing all this time?

"Alright, then," he said.

He hefted his sword, briefly wished it was his rifle and that he was five hundred meters away, and gave her a nod.

He ran out from cover. With his shoulder lowered, he barged straight through one of the monsters, threw it out of the way and kept running. The bark of Cissnei's pistol went off behind him. He slammed into another one and carried it with him all the way through the door.

He hurled it over the railing. He spun and ran back out again, the monsters loping after him.

"Go!" he yelled, running for his life down the corridors.

He just caught sight of Cissnei sprinting to the stairwell.

He put all his focus on running, smashing through doors, leaping over desks. He ran into one of the monsters and nearly tripped. He threw it aside and kept going. Maybe… maybe he could double back to the stairs and hold the door shut.
Something caught his foot. He fell face first. The monsters piled onto him, their long sharp hands tearing at him. He kicked and punched and tried to get his sword out from under him. A strong hand around his leg dragged him from the pile and across the carpet.

He caught sight of a massive metal spike, anchored to the ground with cables and thick metal supports. They were hauling him towards it.

He twisted around and kicked the legs out from under the one holding him and tried to scramble up. There were too many, too many hands tearing at him, too many screaming faces. Bloody streamed down his arms, making his hands slippery. He lunged forward, swinging wildly. He managed to get his sword up and sliced through something.

There was a break in the mass, and he made a run for it.

Visible through the large windows, something square and metallic fell from the sky. Then another, and another. Dozens of metal boxes, spaceships, descended and then hung in the air around the tower.

Bleeding and cornered, Kunsel saw and knew someone had come to get them.

A shuttle landed in the grass. Quarian patterns painted on the side shone in the sun.

Shepard could have cried at the sight. Its squat, square shape was exactly as she remembered. The thrusters were new; there must have been some tech advancements in the last few years.

Sephiroth and Genesis stood next to her.

"You trust these people?" Sephiroth asked quietly, his eyes fixed on the alien ship sent to pick them up.

She squared her shoulders. "I trust the Geth, and Raan's an honest woman and a good admiral. More importantly, they both know how to kill Reapers."

The doors slid open to reveal empty benches lining the walls. Shepard entered and took a seat.

"You're definitely sure about this?" Genesis asked, one step behind her. He stood in the centre of the shuttle and looked around, unwilling to touch anything.

"Quite sure."

Sephiroth hadn't entered yet. He stood at the door, peering in. Shepard stood, holding on to one of the overhead railings.

"We're only travelling to the fleet above Midgar, within the atmosphere. No different than a helicopter," she said.

His lips thinned. "You know it's completely different."

She held out a hand to him and smiled.

He let out a stuttering sigh and took her hand.

The doors closed behind him and the shuttle took to the skies. Faster than any helicopter, it sped over the ocean and then the western continent. The two men anchored themselves to the windows.
"We're higher than Shinra's rockets ever reached," Sephiroth muttered.

Shepard sat with her ankles crossed and let out a slow breath. The shuttle slowed and then came to a gentle stop on hard ground. The door slid open again and the hangar bay of a Quarian dreadnaught greeted them.

Both Quarians and Geth units worked busily around the hangar bay. Ship crews were running through checklists in the cockpits of nearby fighters. Geth units walked along the gangplanks overhead and manned the glowing consoles lining the walls.

"Bosh'tet," muttered a nearby Quarian kneeling by a refuelling pipe, looking underneath a shuttle for the fuel cap.

A mangled old knot inside of Shepard loosened at the sights and sounds. The threat of the Reapers loomed and countless regrets still weighed her down, but this, this was where she belonged. She knew what to do with this.

Admiral Raan in her grey and copper suit waited for them. The white pinpricks of her eyes shone through her dark tinted helmet. A bright red Geth prime stood next to her.

"Shepard," Raan greeted, extending a three fingered hand. "It's good to see you again, alive and well."

Shepard shook her hand and had to restrain herself from hugging the woman. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you, Raan."

"I can imagine," she replied in her soft rumbling voice. "We heard the SOS." She looked past Shepard and tilted her head.

"Ah, this is General Sephiroth and Commander Genesis Rhapsodos of Gaia. This is Admiral Shala'Raan Vas Rannoch."

Sephiroth extended his hand and did a reasonable job of pretending not to stare at her blatantly alien features. Genesis didn't pretend. If Raan was offended, she didn't show it.

"General, Commander. I didn't expect to find a human colony in the Perseus Veil."

"We're not a colony," Genesis replied, drawing himself up. "We've always been here."

"I believe this is what you call 'first contact,'" Sephiroth said.

Raan blinked and looked to Shepard for an explanation. She shrugged and turned to the Geth that towered over them all. "I don't know your name, Prime."

"I am named Perseverance." The Geth's head lamp bobbed, easily ten feet high. "But I am called Percy."

"Percy," she said with a nod. "You picked up Scout's SOS?"

"Yes. We detected no Reaper ships in this system," they said.

She shook her head and squared her shoulders. "They didn't fly here; they're coming from inside the city. There shouldn't be any ships yet."

"We must strike before that changes," said Raan. "It is just ground troops, then? Husks?"
"It should have started with just code; I don't know what form it's taken. But this is a human planet, there won't be any marauders or banshees." Shepard looked sidelong at Sephiroth and Genesis.

"There's a unique radioactive substance here though. It's used to create super soldiers. I suspect any husks won't be normal."

"You think they'll be able to take out even SOLDIER?" Genesis asked darkly.

"They'll take anything."

Sephiroth cleared his throat. "What exactly are you planning to do? Midgar is a heavily populated area, and the contamination is in the very centre of it."

"The evacuation can't possibly be complete, assuming it even extended to the slums." Shepard frowned. "We'll have to go in and ferry people out."

"Why do we need to evacuate the slums?" Genesis asked. "The threat is in the Shinra tower."

"Reaper forces spread quickly, especially when they have a large population to draw from," said Raan. "If we are to rescue people we must move quickly."

"We are equipped with many shuttles and passenger vehicles for extraction," Percy said.

"And then? When the city is empty?" Sephiroth asked, something sharp in his voice. He looked to Shepard, his brow heavy over his eyes.

She didn't reply.

"The contamination needs to be destroyed," Percy supplied.

"How, exactly?" Genesis asked, his eyes narrowed and switching between Raan and Percy.

"We raze Midgar to the ground," Shepard said.

Genesis's head snapped to her. Sephiroth watched her silently.

She crossed her arms. "Scout has gone silent, we've lost the Shinra building, and Reaper forces will be digging in, infecting everything and fortifying themselves inside the city. If it gets beneath the plate, which I expect it already has, then we'll never be able to burn out the last of the contamination. It'll always be there, indoctrinating people and building up its forces again."

Sephiroth crossed his arms as well. "Millions of people live in Midgar. This will leave them all destitute and homeless, and Shinra won't survive to pick up the pieces."

Raan stepped forward. "My people understand having to make such a choice. Rannoch is in the same cluster as this world; we can offer aid." She activated her Omni-tool and tapped out commands. "I'll send for the live ships still in commission. Food, shelter, and medical supplies. Your people will survive."

"Is there any other way?" Genesis asked.

"No," Shepard replied.

Tense silence reigned for a moment.

"Do it." Sephiroth gave a sharp nod. "Destroy it."
"We'll start sending in the shuttles," said Raan. "You can find me on the bridge." She gave Shepard a nod and walked away. Percy left to go consult with a console on the hanger wall.

The three SOLDIERs stood alone by the shuttle, an uncomfortable blanket of quiet draped over them.

"I'm going in," Genesis said, staring fixedly at the ground. "To evacuate the city. The Shinra building."

"You're injured," Sephiroth replied.

"It's my planet. And my mistake. I'll go in and get whoever's left."

"I'm going as well," Shepard said. It had never been in question. "But one of us does need to stay and direct the shuttles." She looked at Sephiroth. "The Rannoch forces don't know Midgar, and the refugees will need a familiar face. And... the order to bomb the city needs to come from a Gaian."

He nodded grimly. "I understand."

"Goddess forgive us," Genesis muttered. He walked back into the open shuttle and sat on the bench with his head in his hands.

Shepard shook her head. She wasn't going to ask for forgiveness or permission. She was going to kill Reapers.

"Be careful down there," Sephiroth offered quietly, reaching for her hand.

She gave him a tight smile. "Don't start an interplanetary war."

He returned it briefly. "How do I get to the bridge?"

"Ask the Geth by the door."

He nodded. She squeezed his hand.

"Sephiroth, whatever happens..." She looked down for a moment. She took in a breath, straightened her back and met his eyes. "Give the order."

He frowned, but slowly nodded. "Come back to me. Please." His grip on her hand grew crushing.

"Even if we don't come back. Destroy them all."

The shuttle lowered onto the roof of the Shinra building.

Shepard held a pistol at the ready, waiting for the doors to open. The Quarians had given them access to their weapons lockers. She'd taken a carnifex hand gun, her favourite pistol and ideal for the tight confines of the Shinra building.

Her scratched up old rifle still sat in its customary place on her back. It felt wrong to replace it now.

Next to her, Genesis ran a hand along the flat of his sword. Red runes lit up along the blade.

"When the war of the beasts brings about the world's end," he whispered, "the goddess descends from the sky. Wings of light and dark spread afar, she guides us to bliss, her gift everlasting."
The shuttle doors opened and the wind howled past.

Shepard stepped out first, glancing around. The landing pad looked no different than normal in the dull evening light. Her targeting visor showed no activity, and she spotted no movement among the railings and air conditioning units.

Somewhere far below glass shattered.

Screams carried on the wind.

The closest door hung broken on its hinges. Shepard stepped gingerly inside, squinting in the sudden gloom.

"Scout," she whispered, with faint hope. "Scout?"

She sighed into the silence and kept moving forward, her pistol kept held out in front of her. They edged in around the walls of what had been one of the President's larger offices.

Dark red stains spotted the walls, and the carpet was damp in places.

"There's no one here," Genesis said. He lowered his sword and glanced around the dark room.

Shepard pointed mutely at the stains on the floor. The damp splotches led further into the building.

She followed the trail. The ceiling mounted cameras followed her.

Their footsteps sounded impossibly loud to her eyes. She kept glancing around, head snapping towards every whisper of noise.

Nothing leapt out at them.

They covered the entire level and found not a single body, metallic or otherwise.

The dark trails in the carpet lead to the emergency stairs.

Genesis held the door handle, and Shepard nodded.

He pulled it open and she pointed her gun.

A burst of cold air hit her, sighing up through the building. Anchored into the concrete landing stood a bloody metal spike a meter tall. The trails lead to it and pooled around the wiring and pipes at its base. Some of the pipes glowed Mako green.

"Oh no," she whispered.

A rumbling groan echoed up through the stairwell. She looked down, and a red dot appeared on her targeting visor, several levels down. Another joined it, then another, and another.

Long grey fingers gripped the edge of the landing, then glowing blue eyes watched them in the dark.

Shepard fired. The head lurched backwards with a crack and it fell down into the dark. The groans roared and metal feet pounded on concrete steps.

"ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL," a deep voice rumbled. An approaching Husk twitched and convulsed, then stopped running blindly and snapped its head towards her.
She swore and fired.

Three bullets through the skull and it fell. Another started to convulse.

"ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL."

Long spindly arms reached out. Genesis sliced through them, hissing in pain. He threw a fireball and the pipes on their arms and chests burst and crackled with blue ooze. He slashed them into pieces.

Shepard barreled through them, thundering down the stairs and yelling for him to follow. More and more husks were rushing up to them. She reached the door to the level below.

It wouldn't open.

She threw her shoulder into it. It didn't even budge. A camera whirred above the door, watching her.

The Reaper intelligence took control of another husk behind her.

"Genesis!" she yelled, spinning around and throwing out a biotic blast. "Get the door!"

With a yell, he slashed the metal door in two with his flaming sword. They ran through it and Shepard hauled a couple of filing cabinets against the severed door. They creaked under fists pounding against them.

Something heavy rattled above them, starting in the walls, but then drawing closer overhead.

"They're in the vents!" Genesis said, stabbing up through the ceiling.

"Ach, stop, stop! We're not zombies!" a thick Scottish accent called out. The grate overhead opened and a little black cat tumbled out. A bloodied and banged up Kunsel rolled out after him and landed in a heap.

"Shepard? Oh thank Gaia," he said, stumbling to his feet.

She pulled him in and gave him a hug. She hadn't allowed herself to worry about him, to examine every husk corpse too closely. She hadn't let it hit her that she fully expected him and every other SOLDIER she cared about to already be dead.

He leaned his blood smeared helmet against her shoulder.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing serious," he mumbled. "Thanks for coming back."

"Glad you're in one piece," she said thickly before he pulled away. She looked him over. Unarmed. She silently handed him her pistol.

"We're glad to see you two here," said Cait Sith from the floor. "We could sorely use some more First Classes."

"Hi Cait," she said. "Reeve in there?"

The black cat sat down on his hind legs and looked down. "Just Cait now."

"Oh." Her shoulders sank. "Have you seen any other survivors?"
"Kunsel's the only one this high up. I've been searching for hours," said Cait. "The only others are holing up on the SOLDIER floor with Hewley and Fair."

"Angeal alright?" Genesis asked, poorly hiding his desperation.

"Aye. They're hiding in the VR rooms. He's been holding them off for hours."

"We need to get down there," he said. "Are the elevator shafts clear?"

"That's how I've been getting around," Cait said, getting up and looking around. The cabinets thrown against the broken door rattled and lurched. He wrung his little wrists. "What is all this lass?"

"It's the harvest."

"Can you stop it?"

"Yes." She squared her shoulders. "We will." She led the way to the elevators.

With little effort, she and Genesis dragged the doors open. The empty shaft fell away before them, long cables disappearing into the dark. She peered in and saw the rusty looking rungs of a ladder welded onto the side of the shaft.

Genesis rubbed his shoulder.

"Are you going to be all right climbing?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied, dropping his hand.

She raised an eyebrow.

"I can do this. I have to do this," he said quietly. He reached in, grabbed a rung, and swung himself in.

She gestured for Kunsel and Cait to follow, then she brought up the rear. The climb was slow and arduous. The groans and screams of Husks echoed throughout the shaft, faint through the metal walls. It grew louder as they approached the SOLDIER floor, drowning out Genesis' laboured breathing.

"This is it," he rasped.

Shepard leaned back to try and see and only just caught sight of the swish of his coat as he forced open the doors and threw him himself in.

Fire flashed through the opening and the jagged cries of husks rang out, then tearing metal. They climbed out onto the floor and were met by the fallen remains of husks and Genesis breathing heavily.

"With his sword at the ready, he marched through the corridors towards the VR rooms, cutting through the husks in their way. Kunsel picked off those trying to flank him, while Shepard slung her rifle off her back and shot any trying to sneak up behind them.

These husks were stronger than any she had fought during the war. Once she had killed Husks with just her fists, before she was even enhanced.

The Reaper intelligence kept on possessing them, one at a time, and sent them to hunt her down.
She swapped heatsinks. There were so many of them. Two jumped on Genesis' back, tearing at him. She took aim at the glinting metal skulls.

A Buster sword swung into the mix. The last husk fell, severed cleanly in two.

"This way!" Angeal yelled, gesturing towards a door Zack was holding open.

"No, you've got to get out! This is a death trap," Genesis said, grasping Angeal's shoulder. "The windows, evac at the windows."

"How many of you in there?" Shepard asked, looking down the length of her rifle at the three corridors leading away. The thud of metal feet running on carpet grew close again.

"Nearly forty," he replied. "The windows. You're sure?"

She nodded. "Get everyone out. Kunsel go with them. We'll buy you time." She glanced at Genesis and shared a nod with him.

"Take the north corridor. We'll lead them off." He set his jaw and the fire crackled down his sword with new life. He planted himself at the opening of the second corridor, and Shepard the third.

Angeal nodded and ran back to Zack.

Glowing eyes appeared in the dark. Shepard felt for her materia and lifted her hand. The Phoenix burst to life, her wing's roaring open, just in time to slam into the next wave of husks.

"Everyone on your feet! Let's go!" Angeal yelled. Civilians and troopers and SOLDIERs alike began to pour out of the shelter of the VR room, Angeal leading the way and Kunsel and Zack protecting their flank.

Shepard fired through the Phoenix's wall of fire. Husks, wearing the tattered remains of Deepground uniforms, stumbled through the flames.

"There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the goddess," Genesis declared as he fought. "Hero of the dawn-" he stabbed a husk through the stomach, "-healer of worlds."

Behind them, Zack was still ushering the living out of their shelter.

A husk made it half-melted through the flames, then began to convulse.

"ASSUMING DIRE-"

Shepard punched it in the face. "Remember me?" she barked.

"SHEPARD," it ground out.

"Come and get me," she snarled through her teeth, and put her Omni-tool through its skull. She ran, charging through the husks in front of her and leaping through the flames. The husks swarmed to follow her. She threw out her arm and hurled a biotic blast at the husks before her.

"Guard the room until everyone's out," she hissed through the radio. "I'll lead them away."

"Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul," was Genesis' thundering response, and a husk scream cut short. She knew he would keep going, until the poem ended. No matter how it ended.

Husks swarmed in front of her. She threw biotic blast after blast, hurling them out of the way.
Always more, more stood up to replace them.

The corridor ended at the darkened mess hall. She threw the door open and over a hundred blue metal eyes looked over at her.

She swore and spun back around. The hoard of husks chasing her barrelled into her, throwing her into the room. Long bony fingers tore at her and heavy metal limbs rained down blows.

With a yell, she threw up her hands, and with the last of her biotic reserves blasted them all off her. It solidified into a large bubble of a shield. They screamed at her from the other side as she climbed back to her feet. Hundreds of hollowed out people, destroyed by the Reapers. By Shinra. By her.

They groaned and slammed their fists against the barrier, all except for the single possessed one. It watched her silently through its glowing metal eyes, waiting for her shield to die.

They didn't have the same eyes as the husks from the war. They had blue pupils surrounded by a glowing circle with three joints. Cerberus eyes. Her eyes.

She lifted her rifle, feeling the synthetic tendons in her hands, the metal pins in her wrists grating against bone, and the whirring of her eyes focusing in the dark.

"I'm not you," she said quietly. "I'll never be you."

The possessed husk cocked its head. She could feel the shield starting to wither.

"You die here today, no matter what happens to me." She sighted down the rifle. "But I will always be the woman who fought you."

Fire bloomed across her weakening shield. Husks exploded in sparks and bursts of Mako. The shield collapsed and she started firing.

Genesis threw another ball of fire and hacked his way through the crowds. Blood streamed down from his hairline and his left arm hung limp at his side.

"Pride is lost, wings stripped away," he ground out through clenched teeth. He hurled another burst of flame, and another, and another. Fire was all he had left.

Shepard summoned enough of her guttering biotics to throw a weak push in front of her, clearing a path.

"Come on!" She charged towards a blank space of wall and ploughed straight through it. There were no husks in the next room, so she kept going. The external wall couldn't be that far away.

Genesis staggered after her, weakly casting fire spells behind them. Hundreds of husks loped after them, all scrabbling to be the ones to tear them apart.

Genesis fell to his knees.

Shepard skidded to a halt and turned to race back to him.

"No," he muttered, looking up, "the end is nigh."

"Genesis!"

A husk sank its bony claws into his left shoulder and tore it open. He hissed and lifted his sword so it was pointed down. The glowing sigils of his limit break lit up the ground around him in a wide
circle. He looked up at her.

He stabbed down into the floor.

Burning white fire exploded out, towers of power shooting up from the ground and consuming the area. Even outside of the circle, Shepard’s armour singed and cracked. Her shields died and recharged and died again.

Then the deafening roar cut out as suddenly as it had come.

In the centre of an empty charred circle, surrounded by the ashen remains of dozens of husks, lay Genesis’ body.

Shepard sprinted towards him. Her ears rang with the sudden silence. She scooped him up, threw him on her shoulder, and sprinted back through the hole in the wall.

Trailing husks still loped after them, but after the screaming burst of power, the silence hung heavier than the groans. She called to the Quarian shuttles and ploughed through another wall.

The glow of thrusters and headlights shone in through floor-to-ceiling windows. They smashed it open, and she leapt aboard.

The shuttle pulled away from the building, long husk arms reaching out for them. The tower stood dark in the night, its lights all gone out and many of its windows smashed.

She crouched and lowered Genesis from her shoulder and laid him on the shuttle floor. A Quarian medic helped and then put her two gloved fingers at his neck.

Shepard stepped away, shaking her head at the ground, and sat on the low benches lining the wall. She clasped her hands in front of her and looked at the ashen face of her dead friend.

"Everyone’s out, Sephiroth," she said quietly into her radio. "If the rest of the city is evacuated, you can give the order."

'Understood.'

The shuttle banked hard as it left the city behind and then hovered over the barren wastes. Massive refugee crowds stretched out below them, all watching the city, and the dreadnoughts high in the stratosphere above.

Fire fell from the skies, and Midgar burned.
The fires of Midgar burned for weeks. The entire plate had collapsed and made little pockets where the husks survived. They came loping out of the ruins in ones and twos, tearing into the refugees taking shelter along Midgar’s edge.

After two weeks they bombed the city again and reduced it to a crater. No more Reaper troops came crawling out.

Later, much later, after the Gaia-Rannoch treaty had been signed and the City of Edge established, with its acres of prefab housing and fleet of green-house ships drifting high above the clouds, the bombings would be remembered as the Scouring of Midgar. A memorial would be built and thousands of flowers and mementos left at its feet.

But in the moment, Sephiroth put his head down and worked. The rebels out in the wilderness returned, bringing supplies and survival know-how with them. He was the only remaining figurehead that people recognised so he took charge and organised the crowds. They did what he said, largely out of habit and familiarity. Shepard negotiated aid with the Quarians and the Geth and kept the peace. The refugee crowds were massive and terrified after the sudden destruction of their city, panic and threat of rioting was never very far away. There was much to be done.

After a long day working in the rubble, he walked back to his tent. His eyes stung from the concrete dust still drifting through the air and his back strained from the heavy lifting. He pulled aside the flap and stepped inside, stretching out his shoulder as she went. Shepard sat on her bed, taking off the plates of her armour.

They hadn’t… talked about it. There wasn’t the time. The emergency relief tents could house multiple people and there were too few accommodations already. Sharing space was prudent.

She nodded at him. He nodded back.

He sat on his bed on the other side of the tent and began undoing the long braid of his hair. The Quarians stared at it sometimes. He got the feeling they didn’t have any hair under those helmets and weren’t used to seeing humans with so much of it.

They were pleasant enough to work with though, the Quarians. Just people, really, under their enviro-suits.

Shepard cut off a pained groan. He looked up. She held her arm up to get at the latches of her chest plate. The angle looked awkward, probably from strained back muscles.

She was going to leave. The second the Quarians arrived her time on Gaia had been on a timer. She hadn’t said anything. Neither had said anything.

Admiral Raan informed them that the Normandy was on its way.

He stood and crossed the gap.

“Here,” he said, kneeling and reaching for the latches. She held her arm up for him, her expression pinched and her eyes hooded. He clicked the little latches open, running down her side as far as her
“Thanks,” she murmured. She pulled the plate off of her and let it fall onto the bed, her posture relaxing without the stiff metal holding her up. Her eyes rose to him. “How are you holding up?”

He shrugged and stood. “Well enough.”

She stood too. They regarded each other, a foot’s distance between them. He remembered the feeling of her in his arms, after the confrontation in the planet’s core. Her strong arms around him, her soft skin under his hands, and curls of steam rising in the air around them.

She dragged a hand down her face.

“Can I touch you?” she asked, her voice ragged.

He blinked. “Yes.”

She hugged him. He felt something inside of him snap and he curled around her, winding his arms around her waist. She tucked her head into the crook of his neck and he rested his chin against her hair. Her arms trembled around his back, holding him close. Hot ragged breath brushed against his ear. A shiver travelled down his spine.

Shinra was gone. Genesis was dead. Angeal was in a medically induced coma. And she was going to leave. It was all broken and gone and she was leaving. His arms tightened around her.

“Sephiroth?” she whispered.

He swallowed. “I can’t believe Shinra’s gone.” It was the easiest thing to give voice to.

She let out a hollow laugh. “I did promise.”

He curled his hand around the back of her head, digging his fingers into her hair.

“I pictured more of a hostile takeover. Assassination. Blackmail exchanged in backrooms.”

The breath on his neck trembled. “So did I,” she said quietly.

She pulled back and met his eye. He didn’t want to let go of her. Her eyes were focused and intent on him. Her hands were on his biceps and shoulders, her grip strong.

“This isn’t the end,” she said.

His eyes dropped.

“Hey.” She moved her head and caught his gaze again. He saw her throat move as she swallowed. She looked like she wanted to say something but closed her mouth and looked away.

She let out a ragged sigh and her eyes flicked up to meet his again, burning into him. “Can I kiss you?”

He covered her lips with his own.

The world seemed to fade away and they collapsed onto the bed together. He kissed onto her skin a multitude of words he couldn’t quite say and she seared him with her touch.

The dawn found them in each other’s arms on two thin beds pushed together. Sephiroth held her,
feeling her chest rise and fall, and listened to the sounds of ships coming in to land.

Shepard walked through the rubble that had been Midgar. Quiet ships hummed past in the distance, taking off and landing at the hastily assembled Spaceport on the far side of the tent city. In the ruins, there was quiet.

Midgar had been built on top of a natural spring, an older refugee had told her. He was one of few alive who remembered it, the little riverside hamlet that Shinra had bulldozed and repurposed into its metropolis, piping all the river water directly into its factories and reactors until the spring was all but forgotten. Drinking water had to be shipped in from the Kalm mountain ranges.

When the bombs fell on the city the pipes cracked and the factory reservoirs burst. The water flowed out again, and in the centre of the ruins a lake slowly rose up, lapping at Shinra’s ruin.

She stopped at the water’s edge.

The remains of HQ were in there somewhere.

A sprout of razor weed skittered away from her dust covered boots. A seagull landed on a warped girder rising from the water.

The water looked dark and cold. A wide mirror without so much as a ripple. It wouldn’t be safe to drink for years, not after the horrors it had swallowed.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a little white book. She ran her fingers over the spine, then the embossed title. It wasn’t really white anymore, not even ivory. She’d tried her best to wash the blood stains off the back cover but didn’t have anything much cleaner to wash it off with.

She cleared her throat.

“Your parents wanted to take your body back to Banora,” she started, quietly. She kicked at the dirt, feeling out of place and insufficient. “Wanted to hide you away in a quiet grave at the family manor. I didn’t let them. We insisted you be here, at the edge of the lake. By the memorial for the lost, next to the ruins. Figured you’d like that better.”

Her voice didn’t carry far. The smashed concrete and twisted metal soaked it up, leaving nothing but quiet between the black lake and the grey skies. The seagull watched her, standing on one leg.

She opened the little book. Her eyes followed the first couple of lines of the poem.

“Angeal’s doing better, by the way. They woke him up from the coma. They think his chances are good. He wants to live now, I guess all this has… shaken him back into himself.”

The lines turned blurry. She closed the book.

“You died a hero. Are you happy?” She blinked a couple of times. It was bloody dusty out. “Nobody else really knows what happened, but there are some rumours. The memorial will be controversial. I bet that’d please you. They’ll be debating your ending for generations.”

She was too old to pretend. Tears welled in her eyes. She put a hand over her mouth and let them fall.
“You bastard.” Her hands curled into fists. “It didn’t have to be like this. You could have been here. I wish you were here so I could yell at you and you’d yell back and we’d work it all out.”

Her shoulders shook.

“I miss you, Genesis. We all miss you.”

She closed her eyes and let out a shaky sigh.

“I was going to read some Loveless. Maybe apologise…” Her throat tightened. She shook her head. “…I can’t.”

She clutched the book so hard her fingers ached. She sucked in a breath and let it out again. Slowly she made her fingers relax. Bracing herself, she squared her shoulders and looked out across the lake.

“I think… I’m always going to be a little angry at you. But I’ll come back and try again. Next time I’m on Gaia. And the time after that… and the time after that. I’ll keep trying. Until I’ve read the whole damn thing.”

She hung her head. Some poems didn’t have endings. They finished all the same. It didn’t sound like anything he would have been satisfied with.

“Goodbye, my friend,” she whispered. “It’s won’t be the same without you.”

She turned and walked away.

The clouds were drifting apart in the distance, patches of blue sky peeking through. It would be a nice afternoon.

Angeal was standing a polite distance away, fumbling with a set of dog tags. She patted him on the shoulder as she passed.

Further on she found Sephiroth, leaning against a concrete slab with his arms crossed. He had gone out to the shores of the lake before dawn, reporting it safe enough to traverse when he joined her at breakfast later.

She leaned against the slab next to him, shoulders brushing together. It felt so natural, being this close to him. She leaned her head back and crossed her arms.

“What happens now?”

He didn’t reply for a long moment. She felt him shrug.

“Angeal intends to retire, regardless of whether or not they can fully heal him. He said something about farming.”

She nodded slowly. “Sounds nice.”

“I don’t think he’ll ever pick up a sword again.”

“Hopefully, he won’t need to.” She dragged a hand down her face. “Zack’s trying to wheedle his way into joining the Alliance. Though Admiral Hackett wants to talk to me and you before he commits to letting any Shinra military personnel, let alone SOLDIERs, into the corps.”

Sephiroth let out a short hollow laugh. “SOLDIERs signing up to fight for other militaries. If nothing else confirmed that Shinra was truly gone…”
She smiled. “It’s about damn time.”

He looked down at his feet. “It… still doesn’t feel real. How could it be?” He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “Will the Alliance take him?”

“They will if you give permission. He’s still your SOLDIER until the corps is officially disbanded.”

“They would be wiser not to. They don’t know anything about him. About SOLDIER, about Shinra, what it means and what he’s capable of.” He looked straight ahead. “They won’t take him.”

She frowned. “Sephiroth,” she began.

He looked up at Angeal’s return, and she cut herself off. The three of them shared a nod. He had lost a lot of muscle mass, but he looked better than he had in some time. One of the ever-present creases between his eyes had eased out.

“How much longer are you… planetside?” he asked her.

She pulled herself up onto the concrete slab to sit, resting her elbows on her knees and letting her legs swing. “The Normandy will be here in three days but I’ll be hanging around probably another month to sort things out. I’m not just running away the second the door is open.” She kept her smile in check but her mouth betrayed her at the name of her ship.

Sephiroth watched her legs with a carefully placid expression, not turning to look back at her. She caught the jagged edges in his eyes.

Angeal offered her a tentative smile. “Come say goodbye before you go, will you?”

“Of course.”

“And you’re always welcome to come back,” he said, “from wherever it is you’re going.”

She blinked at him curiously. “You can come up and see me too, you know. We’re not really from different worlds anymore.”

He scratched the back of his neck and looked up. The clouds had parted enough to show the silhouette of a Geth dreadnaught hanging in the upper atmosphere. “I guess so.”

She swung herself down. “You’ll get used to it.”

The next day rushed past and the one after that too, too busy for introspection. Kunsel had all but disappeared into the Quarian ships, helping adapt the technology to work with the local Gaian gear. He swapped out his SOLDIER helmet for a Quarian one without missing a beat and nobody called him out on it.

He mentioned to Shepard while they installed solar panels on top of prefab housing units that someone called the Shadow Broker had offered him a job.

She smiled into her collar.

“Probably don’t mention that to anyone else,” she replied, deciding she’d have to give Liara a piece
of her mind after the all the proper reunions were out of the way. Poaching a perfectly good sniper out from under her, honestly.

“Yeah,” he said. He hooked up the long thin panel, latching it securely onto the framework. “I figured she wouldn’t mind me telling you though.”

She cocked her head, still wiring her panel into the building. “She?”

“She, he, they, them. Us.” He shrugged. “Guess I’ll be seeing you around then?”

“Count on it.” She made sure the panel was nice and stable, then switched it on. It came to life with a row of flicking lights.

“You know I’m proud of you, right?”

He paused, tinkering with his controls.

“I know.”

She was pretty sure he was holding back a smile under the helmet.

“Good.” She dusted off her hands and moved onto the next one with a grin.

They found Scout’s iron box in the arms of one of the shell shocked survivors from Reeve’s department. It was dented and looked dead to Sephiroth’s Omni-tool. A short wiry Geth took it from him and sometime later a bright green Geth Prime walked out of the workshop towards him.

Shepard watched Sephiroth look up in awe at the towering AI that called him a friend and stretched out to shake his hand. They exchanged what looked like the most awkward hug either species had ever taken part in. It was also so utterly heartfelt that Shepard felt it rude to watch. She wandered off, feeling something warm and affectionate in her chest. Who knew Sephiroth could be so damn cute.

Scout didn’t linger in the Prime platform for long: they transferred into the mainframe of a small Geth frigate as soon as a ship was available. The ship hummed to live and the door opened. Cait Sith trotted up the gangplank. The cat hadn’t been the same since Reeve’s death: quieter, and less bold. He still wore a crown and sold predictions though. The loading bay door closed on the little AI cat asking Scout what the going rate on the future was up in space.

Shepard didn’t say goodbye. She’d put good money on having to rescue Cait from Aria T’Loak at least once before the end of the year. Next to her Sephiroth watched Scout take off with a closed off expression. The warm glowing feeling in her chest turned pensive.

She pursed her lips. She grabbed his hand and lead him away from the landing strips.

They climbed one of the short slopes that dotted the Midgar wastes, talking quietly about safe topics on their way up. Wutai had not opened its borders, but tentative scouts had approached the aliens and queries were made. It remained to be seen what would come of it, Shepard’s deal with the Empress still stood. The Alliance would respect Wutai sovereignty and stay out of their territory.

Reds and golds and the last of the light leached out of the sky on the climb up. Distant cruisers and live-ships masquerading as twinkling stars greeted them when they reached the top. The wind sighed by, crisp and dusty.

Shepard stood at the edge and looked out over the new city. It sprawled out in a circle around the ruins, taking up more space than Midgar ever had. Lights dotted throughout, marking the improvised
streets and the clusters that had become gathering places.

Sephiroth stood behind her. She wondered if he would say anything. After a moment, he snuck his hands around her waist, pressing himself against her back.

It was still so new and cautious, the thing they had discovered between them. No, not discovered. Cultivated, just by accident. Occasionally tended, occasionally stomped on, watered more often than not, and then found it to have grown into something strong and resilient with deep roots. She leaned back against him. Yards of silver hair whipped about them in the breeze.

“Cissnei asked to join me on the Normandy today,” she said.

He tilted his head. “Did she?”

“Mmm,” she snuggled into him. She was in civilian clothes and missing the temperature controls of her armour. “She said she’s ‘looking for new purpose now that Shinra is finished’. Wants to find herself in the stars, apparently.”

He scoffed. “Did she say it with a straight face?”

“With a shameless smile and Rufus Shinra smirking in the background. ‘Midgar Frontiers’. She shook her head. “His old man is dead for thirty seconds and he’s already rebranding and branching out.”

“He’s a Shinra,” Sephiroth rumbled with some venom.

“He’s about to be bogged down by infinite Citadel regulations and thousand-year-old Volus trading guilds, no matter what his last name is. I wish him luck.”

Sephiroth paused for a long moment. She waited him out. The hands around her waist flexed and grew tighter.

“What did you tell her?” he asked.

“Welcome aboard.’ I can handle a single spy. And Cissnei is good people.”

“You’re far too cavalier about this.”

She twisted her head around to look at him. His brow was heavy over his eyes.

“Says the man who once welcomed an alien into the most prestigious military corps on the planet,” she said softly.

“I have never regretted it.” He let go of her, and she turned her back on the view to face him. She could see the lights of the Quarian fleet reflected in his eyes.

“You have it all back now,” he said, quietly. “All your planets and stars and space stations.”

She peered at him in the dark. She thought of their thin camp beds, hastily pushed together, a sword propped up on one side, and a rifle on the other. The first rays of sunlight falling across his sleeping face. She thought of her Normandy quarters, dyed blue in the light of the fish tank.

“Come with me?” It was a question, an order, an offer, a plea.

He froze. “I…”
“There's a place on the Normandy for you. If you want it,” she said. He hadn’t asked. She wanted it too much to not offer. “There’ll always be a place for you on my ship.”

“I'm not Alliance.” He turned his head and looked at her sidelong.

“Few of my specialists are.” She stepped forward, taking his hand. What would he make of the Citadel? What would he become, with an entire galaxy in his reach? What would he do, now that he finally had the choice? “Come with me. Let me show you the stars. The nebulas, the Citadel, Tuchanka, Rannoch, Omega, the relays… Earth.”

He swallowed. His eyes roamed her face, something lost and desperate shining in their Mako glow.

“There are planets out there that nobody has ever set foot on. Lush garden worlds. Silent planets covered in ruins. Hostile worlds exploding in larva. Cities on distant moons gracefully orbiting their planets, and a host of stars stretching away in every direction.”

He lifted his hand to her face and traced her cheek and jawline.

“You shared your world with me,” she said, covering his hand with hers. “Let me show you mine.”

“I wouldn’t be a SOLDIER.” He shook his head. “Who would I be? What would I do?”

She smiled fiercely. “Whatever you wanted.”

His eyes snapped up to hers.

He kissed her. Sudden and full with a passion that stole her breath away. She gasped against him and surged up to counter him. Her hands tangled in his hair and his arm wound around her waist. They parted, pulling back for air. She panted against his lips.

“Can I take that as a yes?” she asked.

“Yes,” he breathed. A small smile touched his lips and shone in his eyes. “Yes. I’ll go with you.” He tightened his arms around her, burying his head in her neck. He was getting to like doing that, she thought while running her hand through his hair and leaning into the embrace.

“You’re going to love it.”

“I’m going to explore the cosmos,” he said, with an innocent wonderment she’d never heard from him before.

“Off-world. You’re going off-world.”

“I am going to explore the cosmos,” he said staunchly.

She laughed. He drew back and looked at her with such affection.

“Scout will be happy. He was hoping to show you Rannoch.”

“I'll look forward to it.”

Her Omni-tool glowed an alert, and she felt a fierce and free smile split her face.

“How’s that for timing. Look,” she said, pointing out over the cliff. He grudgingly drew his attention away from her to look into the night.
The sleek shape of an Alliance stealth frigate, white, black, and blue, swooped down into the atmosphere. Silent and beautiful.

She was going to wait until morning, but by the time they made their way to the bottom of the cliff that sounded ridiculous. They walked side by side up to the landing pad and through the boarding tunnel. The glass side gave a full view of the letters painted on its side.

She pulled herself to her full height and held her head high. She was tired and sore and probably looking odd in her civvies. She didn’t care. She squared her shoulders and walked up the gangplank.

The airlock disengaged and she stepped inside, Sephiroth half a step behind her.

“Welcome home, Commander.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

A sincere thank you to everyone who has commented, left a Kudos, or simply read this far.
I started this story four years ago in a very different place than I am now, and it helped carry me through some rough patches. For a while, I didn’t think I’d ever finish, and then I confess I held off on finishing because I wasn’t ready to let this chapter close. I think it’s about time now.
Thank you for letting me take you on this long, winding journey. I cannot tell you how much it means to me.

Works inspired by this one: Discombobulated Sephiroth by lucife56, Conflict by lucife56, War prisoner by lucife56

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!