The Stranger in Their Midst
by The_Moss_Stomper

Summary

Post-Meteor, WRO scientist Tess FitzEvan struggles to build a new life on Gaia. Not the easiest task on a wounded, alien planet where old threats linger, new ones loom, and a charmingly infuriating Turk keeps whirling in and out of her life like a red tornado. It will get worse. Can it get better?

Sequel to "The Unwelcome Guest"

Notes

This is a sequel to "The Unwelcome Guest". You might want to read that one first to avoid confusion.

"The Stranger in Their Midst" continues the story of scientist Tess FitzEvan, who has finally won the freedom she craved and is now ready to explore the strange world of Gaia. Sounds like a grand romantic adventure, right? Well, in the shadow of survivor guilt and the constant fear of discovery, on an ailing world struggling to recover from its battle with
Meteor, the reality is anything but.

Romance is in the air, though at the end of the day this is me, the hopeless unromantic, writing about characters who are each kind of broken in their own way. There will be sweet moments and steamy ones, sure, but it will be one heck of a bumpy ride – heh, more like a train wreck at times. Getting together is easy, after all. It's staying together that takes work.

I do hope you give this a go and enjoy the ride! Special thanks to Mr. Stompington, fearless wrangler of English and executioner of commas.
A Last Day to Remember

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the low growl that alerted me to danger, a feral sound that kick-started my heart and flooded my veins with adrenaline.

Slowly I swivelled my head in the direction of the noise, scanning the desiccated landscape until I found the source. A wolf. Two of them, in fact, stalking closer with bared teeth and bristling fur. Careful to avoid sudden moves, I straightened up from my crouch and risked a glance to the right. I breathed a quiet curse. My rifle was where I had left it, leaning against the dune buggy. Too far from my reach.

Good thing I had another trick up my sleeve.

The wolves crept closer. Steeling myself for the charge, I took measured steps in time with their approach, keeping myself positioned between the two beasts. I could get them both, but I would have only one shot at it. The timing had to be perfect.

"Sparky..." I said, priming my hazard suit's systems for the command.

The larger wolf's muscles tensed.

"Blast off!"

The suit hummed to life, and with vicious snarls, they lunged. I willed myself to stand still, bracing for impact as every instinct screamed at me to run. Lightning danced over my body, but all I heard was the blood thundering in my ears and all I saw was their maws, monstrously wide – and then the bright blast of the power surge forced my eyes shut.

I gave myself two seconds before I snapped them open again. The force of the electrical discharge had flung the beasts back more than ten paces. One of them was little more than a smoking ruin. The other was still recognizable as a wolf, but just as dead as its companion.

My legs were limp as noodles. Without Sparky's support, I would have been a quivering heap on the ground by this point.

Actually, I would have been wolf chow without the hazard suit. The fangs had been mere inches from my face. One of these days, I would have to ask Reeve to come up with a defense mechanism that was less likely to end up as a suicide strike.

I let my eyes close again as my head slumped backwards, taking several deep breaths. I was immensely grateful for the suit's filtered air. The last thing I needed right now was the smell of charred carcass.

"Warning. Power at twenty percent."

It was lucky I had gotten them both in one go. Sparky wouldn't have had enough juice left for second surge. Maybe I should bring that up with Reeve too.

I shifted my weight from one leg to the other. Still shaky, but good enough to finish what I had been doing so I could get the hell out of here. Turning my back on the dead wolves, I returned to
my original spot to resume my work.

Like most of the vehicles I would strip for parts, this one was little more than a wreck on wheels, which had likely given its last while providing a few thrills to teenagers racing across the canyon floor. At least it came with a half-full tank of fuel. That alone would fetch me a tidy sum in today’s Mako-starved world, especially since I would have no need to fill up my own buggy after this trip.

Otherwise, there wasn't much money in salvage, but I was in no dire need of gil. Reeve and his newly-minted World Regenesis Organization took care of the bills. A bit of pocket change was always welcome, though, and it was nice to get out of the village now and then.

Well, most of the time it was nice. This outing had provided rather more excitement than the usual salvage run. My hands were still shaking, although Sparky allowed for a deceptively steady grip on the wrench as I loosened the bolts of the car battery. The suit also made lifting the thing a piece of cake.

As I dropped the battery on the ground, it knocked over the radio I had already pulled out, which tumbled into a tangle of shrubs. As I went to fetch it, I lingered over the silver-leaved plants, some hardy native of the canyon. It would be nice to have a memento of this place. Maybe a shrub as tenacious as these could survive my third-rate plant care.

The brittle red soil offered little resistance as I dug out one of the plants. I wondered what made them so well-adapted to the relentless heat and drought. Were they tough enough to survive the dead zone that surrounded Midgar? Perhaps I could put the shrub's cells under the microscope once I got to Kalm, to figure out what made them thrive where little else stood a chance. If I could still remember how, I mused; it had been ages since I had last set foot in a lab.

A rusty tin can found a new lease on life as a pot, after which the plant joined the nearby pile of lackluster loot. I brushed most of the dust off the suit's armor, then set about packing away my tools.

That was when I heard another growl.

I didn't look around this time. Fueled by a fresh surge of adrenaline, I just bolted for the gun. As soon as my fingers wrapped around the barrel I spun around, only to have a heavy weight crash into my chest. My head flew to the side from the impact, narrowly avoiding the snapping jaws, and the rifle fell out of my hand. I threw a blind punch as I fell back. It connected and sent the third wolf flying, but the abrupt landing knocked the air out of my lungs and I lost the advantage. By the time I recovered, the animal was back on its feet and leaping for my throat.

A snarling blur of red fur and glinting metal crashed into the canine and bowled it over. While the two tore into each other in a mess of dust, yelps and writhing bodies, I scrambled to my feet and dove for the gun. I had it pressed it against my shoulder and aimed in their direction just in time to see the newcomer close its maw around the wolf's neck. There was a quick twist, a loud crack and the smaller animal was unceremoniously dropped to the ground, its spine broken.

I lowered my rifle and grinned.

"Your timing is impeccable, as always."

Nanaki's laughter sounded like a dry cough combined with a purr.

"I do try."

I looked him over, checking for injuries. Nanaki was a curious sight, an embodiment of Gaia's
fantastical nature: his body like a red lion's, but with a tail alight with a heatless flame, legs wrapped with golden bracers and ears pierced with rings. He returned my scrutiny, giving me a once-over with a single, yellow eye. The other one had been lost long ago, leaving an empty socket bisected by a long scar.

"What brings you here?" I asked as I shouldered the rifle. "I didn't expect to see you this far out in the desert today."

"Your flash of lightning is difficult to miss, especially from the plateau."

I glanced back over my shoulder and caught the distant glints of the wind turbines, lazily spinning in the afternoon sun.

"You ran all the way from the village? I'm flattered."

"What would Reeve say if I allowed one of the WRO's scientists to get eaten the day before she is supposed to start her new job? My reputation would be ruined."

His torso was still heaving with deep breaths. Even when winded, Nanaki spoke at a calm pace with little inflection. It had taken me a while to pick up on the things he conveyed in body language, easily missed by a human listener. In this case, the forward-pointing ears and languid sways of his burning tail hinted at the humor in his tone. I smiled.

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?"

I picked my way over to the corpse. While smaller than my four-legged friend, it was still a large beast, though not one in its prime. The shaggy brown fur was matted and dotted with gray around the muzzle.

"It is strange to see Nibel wolves this far south," Nanaki commented. "Stranger still that they would choose to attack you. Your suit smells of metal and lightning, not of prey."

He had a point. I could count the times I had been attacked in Cosmo Canyon on one hand. Most of them had been due to me wandering into breeding grounds or the territory of creatures I now knew to avoid. Not once had I been hunted like this while wearing the suit.

"Yes, something was off about these guys. They were growling, drawing attention to themselves."

I dropped down to one knee for a closer look. I had never seen the Nibel region's version of a wolf before, but there was something clearly odd about this one. The teeth looked the wrong size and shape for its maw. I grabbed the jaws and pulled them apart to peer inside its mouth.

"Yikes. That doesn't look right."

The sharp teeth in the upper jaw continued beyond the first row, littering the palate with tiny fangs. Blood oozed through several fresh wounds on the tongue, trailing across countless scars before dripping into the dust.

"No wonder this guy was so aggressive. The poor thing must have been in agony. I glanced over the the two smoking carcasses a short distance away. "Now I want a better look at the other ones."

"Very well."

I squatted down beside the one that wasn't burnt to a crisp and peeked into its mouth.
"This one's different," I called, "but I don't think a forked tongue is very normal for a wolf either."

"Mutants," Nanaki concluded.

"Looks like it," I said thoughtfully as I returned to him. "I thought the Nibel reactor was supposed to be safe now?"

"It is. These are older animals, born this way years ago."

I hummed in response, trying to recall the geography of the region. Only the southern tip of the range separating the Gold Saucer desert from the Nibel area was visible from the highest point of the village. The Nibel mountains themselves were much farther north.

"That doesn't explain why they would suddenly roam all the way here, though."

Nanaki wrinkled his nose, his ears flicking back and forth a few times.

"Indeed."

"Think it's worth looking into?" I wondered, frowning at the mutated wolf by our feet.

He shook his massive head, sending mane and feathers into a gentle sway.

"No. This is an isolated incident, far from the village, and Nibelheim lies far beyond my territory."

"If you say so," I accepted with a shrug, then glanced around. "Do you mind keeping an eye out while I load up the buggy? I've been snuck up on enough times for one day."

"I suppose it is less of a bother than having to run back to save your skin."

It could be hard to tell when the great feline was joking, but I had learned to interpret that stretch of his lips as a smile.

My tube-framed buggy didn't offer much in the way of storage space, but the passenger seat was large enough to accommodate the day's haul. Flakes of rust and faded red paint floated to the ground with every addition to the weight, mixing into the dust of the canyon. I wasn't worried, though. It might be slow going, but the old beast had managed to haul back heavier loads in the past.

The engine sputtered to life with a doggedness that never ceased to surprise me. As I hit the gas pedal, I roared my customary challenge.

"Race you to the village!"

Nanaki darted ahead to avoid the cloud of dust kicked up by the wheels, but I caught up with him once my ride had accelerated to its top speed. I knew the rust bucket I was driving was no match for him, but he made a good show of giving it his utmost. He was sweet like that.

The buggy shook and rattled with every bump and pothole, a guitar solo blared through the speakers of my suit and the canyon was all ours. In the end, Nanaki even let me win.

It was a last day to remember.

Chapter End Notes
This will be a story about feeling lost and disconnected from the world around you, about grief, about making mistakes – but it will also be about working through it all, about healing and finding your place. It'll be about forming relationships, and the effort of maintaining them and making them grow. All of it served with dashes of action and humor.

In addition to Reno, the other Turks will make regular appearances in later chapters, including a few of the player Turks from Before Crisis. Turk-centric, in other words, but a whole bunch of other familiar faces will show up from time to time.

Rated M for Reno's mouth, the occasional steamy moment, and dark themes later on.

Thanks for reading!
Troublemaker

With a rather unladylike grunt, I heaved the chest piece of my protective suit into a wooden crate on the floor. Like the other parts beneath it, the red and black paint was scratched and scuffed. I could almost hear the reproachful sigh Reeve would release upon seeing it. Sometimes I wondered if the man had forgotten it was a suit intended for wear and tear, not a show piece for a museum.

Thinking of one old friend brought back memories of the other, Reno. Present in my thoughts, but absent in every other way. I wondered where he might be. If he ever thought of me. An odd sensation stirred within.

I brushed the dust off the name "FitzEvan" badged on the chest plate's right side. Before we had parted ways, Reno had suggested I change my name as a precaution. I had declined. My name was one of precious few reminders I had of my origins. The hazard suit was another. I was unwilling to part with either of them.

I held the helmet in my hands for a few moments, studying the golden visage. I could see my face in the reflective surface, distorted like some funhouse mirror. Most of the villagers were more familiar with that sight than my own face. These days, my suit turned fewer heads in Cosmo Canyon than the talking fire lion that was their guardian.

In the aftermath of Meteorfall, Cosmo Canyon had experienced something of a renaissance. People from all over Gaia had flocked to the village, defying the scorching heat in the hope of finding answers. Most of them wandered onward after speaking with the elders, but others remained to study the planet that had summoned such a magnificent display in its own defense. The small community had grown into a melting pot of scholars, born-again environmentalists and lost souls searching for a new direction in life.

With its fair share of eccentrics and free spirits, Cosmo Canyon was the perfect place for someone like me. In such diverse company, anything odd I might say or do by Gaian standards would raise few eyebrows.

Once I left this place, all that would change. I was more tempted to stay and enjoy the canyon's peculiar brand of acceptance, but Reeve and I had a deal. I wasn't one to break my promises.

With a sigh, I placed the helmet on top of the rest of the suit, then sealed up the crate. I looked around the room – well, private cave, to be exact – which the WRO had rented for me these past months. Everything else I owned was already packed into the backpack resting on the bed next to my rifle.

I touched the cool uneven stone that made up the walls of my room. My gaze lingered on the colorful woven rug, on the patchwork quilt that served as my bedspread, and I felt a twinge that was awfully close to homesickness. I would miss this place. That I wouldn't have believed when I first came here and realized I would be living in a cave for six months.

Stepping out of the cave's shade was like walking into a wall of heat. No wonder I preferred wearing the hazard suit when out and about during the day. Its cooling system was a lifesaver in this climate.

Another reason was the wildlife, and not just the monsters and the alpha predators. The canyon was crawling with snakes, scorpions and sand spiders. The first two I could handle, but the idea of stepping on a spider half-buried in the sand just gave me the creeps. At the thought I curled my
toes tight in my hiking boots, so flimsy after the safety of my suit. Maybe I should have stuck with Sparky, instead of khaki shorts and a black top that left my limbs bare.

I breathed a sigh of relief once I reached the solid stone floor of Cosmo Canyon's only indoors pub. The Starlet was situated in a large dim cave that flowed with cool air, whose rough walls were the same rusty-red stone as my room. As expected at this time of the day, only a handful of patrons occupied the wooden benches and tables.

"In before noon?" the bald bartender asked as I approached the counter, raising his eyebrows. "Should I be worried?"

"Only if you're going to miss seeing my face," I replied with a smile. "It's my last morning here. Thought I'd have one last Cosmo Candle before I go."

"In that case, no better way to start the day."

I took a seat on one of the stools as he fetched a shot glass and a few bottles.

"So, your studies are all done?" the man asked while he prepared the drink.

"Yup. Sold the buggy and packed up my gear. Now I'm just waiting for someone from the WRO to come pick me up."

He shook his head, focused on pouring in the thick red syrup that slid to the bottom and gave the drink its layered appearance.

"Hard to believe it's been half a year already. Time flies, huh?"

"That it does."

"Well, you ask me, it's a real shame you're leaving. I don't think we have anyone crazy enough to take over your one-woman salvage business."

The bartender glanced up with a grin and I scoffed playfully.

"Tsk, I'm not crazy. I'm well prepared."

"Whatever you say, Tess." The barkeep placed the finished shot in front of me, seams of color rising from red at the bottom to yellow at the top in the semblance of a flame. "Here you go. On the house."

I smiled and raised the glass in a salute before downing the contents in one go. Cinnamon overwhelmed my tastebuds for a moment, and then Pub Starlet's pepper-infused specialty set my whole throat ablaze. The Cosmo Candle delivered a burn fit for a chemical fire.

"I'm going to miss these," I croaked out a few seconds later, followed by a hoarse cough that was supposed to be a laugh.

"Damn straight you will," the barkeep agreed with no small amount of pride. "Many have tried, but no one can make a Candle burn like I do."

Another customer waved him over and while he busied himself with their order, I tried to recover from the kick. The burn soon mellowed down to a more bearable warmth and onward to a subtle tingling that would last for minutes. The final sensation was surprisingly pleasant – enough so to justify the initial torture.
"So, what's next?" the bald man asked upon his return. "You gonna work for the WRO now?"

"That's the plan," I replied after clearing my throat. "Looks like I'll be moving to Kalm."

"Kalm, eh?" His forehead creased in thought. "That's up north, isn't it? On the eastern continent?"

"That's right."

"That'll be a change, huh? I bet there's snow and everything."

"So I'm told."

As I spoke, the bartender tensed and pushed himself off the counter, his narrowed eyes aimed over my shoulder. I shifted in my seat and followed his gaze, and then my heart skipped a beat.

In the middle of the bar, exuding all the cocky confidence of a fox that had just waltzed into a henhouse, stood Reno of the Turks.

As he glanced around the bar, his half-lidded gaze lingering a touch too long on each patron, I noticed that the red ponytail now reached a little further down his back. Otherwise, the man looked much as I remembered him. He still ignored most of the buttons of his untucked shirt. He hadn't spent much time with a clothes iron, either.

When his eyes landed on me, his face broke into a toothy grin.

"Hey there, Fitz. Long time no see."

The last time I had seen him he had been heading out to Kalm. "It's work, babe. Don't worry, I'll be back soon." That had been six months ago. Despite the twinge of old disappointment, a smile spread across my face. Before I had a chance to open my mouth, however, the bartender cut in.

"We don't serve Shinra here."

The redhead's gaze snapped to the speaker and the grin turned into one of the most insolent smirks I had ever seen.

"Aw, you hurt my feelings. Whatever. I ain't here to drink, yo."

I felt something sharpen in the air. The Turk must have sensed it too, but his demeanor didn't change.

"What brings you here, Reno?" I asked before the situation could escalate.

"Heard you're lookin' for a ride, babe," he drawled. "Thought I'd drop by and give it to ya."

I was taken aback. The Turk had never been one to shy away from innuendo, but that was crass even for him, especially in front of an audience.

The barkeep leapt to my defense.

"Hey! Watch your mouth around the lady."

"What? I bet the lady wants what I've got."

The redhead seemed to delight in getting a rise out the other man. This was going downhill, fast.
"Reno!" I hissed, my cheeks burning.

"Show some respect or you're outta here!" my bald defender bellowed.

"I said 'lady', didn't I?"

The bartender slammed his palm on the bar and opened his mouth, but before he could speak, another voice cut in.

"Is there a problem?"

The sudden hush was filled with a chorus of swishing fabric as everyone turned to look at the newcomer in the doorway.

Nanaki's single eye was fixed on the Turk as he made his way around the man with measured steps, coming to a halt in front of me. A cold crept into Reno's eyes as he stared down the cat, and I watched a feral smile play across his lips. No one dared move while the two filled the air with unspoken promises of violence.

Reno glanced at me, then straightened up a fraction and raised his chin, pivoting from menace to mere impertinence.

"No problems here, kitty cat. Was just tellin' the Doc that her chopper's waitin' nearby, ready to take her to Kalm."

I let my head slump back with a long-suffering sigh.

"You could have said that from the start, you know."

"I did," he countered, then gave the bartender one of his smug smiles. "Dunno what baldy got so worked up 'bout."

I felt like planting my face in my palm. The man's attitude hadn't changed a bit.

Nanaki remained in place, shadows dancing over the uneven walls as his tail flicked back and forth.

"What does a Shinra Turk want with her?"

Reno gave him another appraising look and replied in a tone of studied indifference.

"This ain't Turk business. Just a favor for a friend." His gaze shifted back onto me. "I'm good to go whenever you are, Fitz. 'Til then... I'll be outside, yo."

He left the premises without waiting for a reply. The tension in the air began to dissipate as soon as the door swung shut behind him, and Nanaki eased out of his defensive stance.

"Such arrogance. Do you wish me to persuade him to leave the village?"

The way each "r" rolled into a miniature growl told me the persuasion would be rather more physical in nature.

"No, it's all right," I sighed. "Reeve must have sent him to pick me up."

"Reeve would send a Turk for you? I find that unlikely."

"He knows Reno. We both do. It's okay."
Nanaki's ears flicked once, twice as he looked back over his shoulder. His heatless flame was still drawing a restless figure eight in the air.

"The Turk reeks of stale blood and deceit. You may think you know him, but he is a viper on two legs. He will strike when you least expect it."

His words caught me off guard. I had never heard the village protector speak of a human with such hostility.

"Nanaki, please. I don't want any trouble."

"Then it is the human you should be speaking to. He brings it in abundance."

With that, he stalked out of the pub. Just as well. It wasn't as if I could disagree.
Out with the Old

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luggage-wise, there was little preparation to do. I foisted off the box containing Sparky onto a couple of helpful villagers who promised to take it to the helicopter. After a moment's deliberation, I also handed them my worn-out backpack. I didn't fancy lugging it around in the midday sun. It contained more books than clothes, after all.

Most of Cosmo Canyon's inhabitants had retreated to the caves to escape the heat of noon, so it didn't take long to track down those I wanted to say goodbye to. The last of them was the valley's protector, whom I found sitting on his haunches right outside the bar door.

"Safe travels," he rumbled.

"Thanks, Nanaki," I said with a smile. "As much as I've enjoyed my stay here, I must admit I'm looking forward to seeing more of the world."

"Hmm. I may do the same soon."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. I had picked up on a wistfulness from time to time when Nanaki had described places he had seen during his stint with the eco-warriors of AVALANCHE, but I had thought his role as guardian would keep him in Cosmo Canyon.

"Is that so? Anywhere in particular?"

Nanaki turned his head and peered out over the desert landscape with a distant look in his eye.

"There is much on the Planet I have not seen. I wish to change that."

"Well, safe travels to you too, then. Perhaps we'll run into each other."

His lips drew back into the feline equivalent of a smile.

"Perhaps."

Locating the Turk took a bit more effort. I squinted under the makeshift shield of a raised hand, regretting never getting around to buying sunglasses. I hadn't needed them, thanks to Sparky's helmet.

It was the weaving glow of his cigarette that alerted me to his position. Reno had propped himself up against the hewn rock wall in the deepest shade to be found around Cosmo Canyon's natural version of a village square. No wonder, really. The Turk uniform had to be stifling in this weather.

As I approached, I wondered why he hadn't chosen something more appropriate to wear, especially since the uniform seemed to be a warning sign for more than one of the villagers. Then again, perhaps that was the reason. Besides, different clothes wouldn't change much. The man flaunted disdain, laced with just enough menace to keep even the friendliest of Cosmo Canyon's hippies at bay. Between his outfit and his attitude, his brick-red hair was the only part of him that blended in around here.

He would have to try harder to deter me, though. I had a grievance to air.
"You ready?" he asked once I was within his little realm of shadow.

I crossed my arms over my chest and shot him a withering look.

"For you to 'give it to me'?"

I should have known an apology or even a look of remorse would be too much to ask for. Instead the reminder just intensified his smug satisfaction.

"You ain't mad 'bout that, are ya?" he chuckled. "Wanted to piss off baldy, not you."

"And why, exactly, would you want to do that?"

A slow drag on the cigarette, followed by an even slower release of smoke.

"Didn't like his attitude."

I scoffed and shook my head.

"So you decided the best way to deal with it was to make me sound like a slut. Gee, thanks."

A look of surprise flitted across the man's face, before he schooled his features into a mask of indifference.

"C'mon, Fitz, no one takes my bullshit seriously. 'Sides, anyone with frickin' eyeballs in their heads can see you're too classy to fool around with some fucked-up Turk."

It was not the reply I had expected, but it was the note of bitterness that caught me off guard. I studied his face for several moments, but discovered no more clues in the nonchalant expression.

"Let's just get going," I muttered, adjusting the rifle slung over my shoulder.

"Bout damn time, yo."

Reno took one last drag off his cigarette before grinding it out with unnecessary force, then led the way out of the settlement.

"Should I have suited up?" I asked as we passed underneath the sun-baked village sign, trying to recall the exact route to the airfield.

"Don't trust me to keep ya outta trouble, babe?"

"I trust you to get me into trouble."

I expected that to earn me a grin or even a laugh, but all I got was a quick tug of his lips.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I got no trouble planned this time. Just a nice smooth chopper ride, yo."

"Uh huh," I mumbled, gripping the rifle strap tighter.

Reno glanced at me, then snorted.

"Don't worry, Fitz. The talkin' cat's right behind us. I bet he's plenty happy to save your ass if we run into somethin' nasty."

"Nanaki?"
I peeked over my shoulder to see the telltale light of his tail swaying back and forth some distance behind us, easily spotted in the shadow of the cliff that supported the stairs we were descending.

"Yeah. He's been on my tail ever since I got outta the chopper." A sardonic twist of his lips. "Guess he don't trust me either."

"He doesn't," I said thoughtfully. "I can't help but sense a history here."

"Sharp as ever, darlin'. Let's just say I don't blame the cat for holdin' a grudge and leave it at that, all right?"

Well, that explained a whole lot. I didn't inquire further; I knew Reno liked to dwell on sordid past deeds just about as much as I wanted to hear about them.

As Cosmo Canyon's popularity had increased, an airfield had become a necessity. It was just a hangar and an open area kept free of excess sand, but it did the job. Today, the only aircraft present was a black helicopter. As soon as it came into view, the set of Reno's shoulders loosened and his gait slipped into the carefree strut I knew. I hoped that meant he would shake off the touchy mood, too.

"So, do I know the pilot?" I asked as we approached.

He shot me a sideways glance. To my relief, the cold edge in his eyes had been replaced by the twinkle I was used to seeing in them.

"Yeah, you know him."

"One of the Turks?" I guessed, eyeing the red Shinra logo on the side of the aircraft.

"That's right," he said, sliding the cabin door open. "Gimme that rifle of yours, will ya?"

I did as he asked. The Turk turned it around in his hands, checking the bolt mechanism and peering down the sights.

"Ifrit's ass, Fitz, what the hell are ya packin'? This thing oughta be in a museum."

"Well, Emmet did say it belonged to his grandfather."

"Emmet?" he wondered, glancing up.

"The village mechanic. He gave me the gun in return for a favor some months back."

"Can ya even shoot it without fallin' on your ass? It looks like it could take the head off a fuckin' behemoth."

His tone was teasing, but I detected a trace of excitement, too.

"The first time I tried, that's exactly what happened," I admitted, smiling at the memory. "Almost broke my damn shoulder. Emmet laughed until he was so red in the face I thought he'd have a heart attack. After that, I've only used it with Sparky's help."

Reno grinned. "Heh. Guessed as much."

Once the rifle was secured next to the crate containing my hazard suit, I expected to take a seat myself, but instead the Turk closed the door and headed for the front of the helicopter. I followed, but when he pulled the cockpit door open, I stopped and gave him a puzzled look.
"C'mon, in ya go," he encouraged with a flick of his head.

I stood on my tiptoes and peeked in. I had expected to meet the pilot, but both seats were empty.

"I'm sitting in the front?"

"Yeah. Figured you can make yourself useful. You're my copilot."

My jaw dropped. "You're the pilot?"

"You don't have to look so shocked," he said, laughing. "You're gonna hurt my feelings, y'know."

In a mild daze, I climbed in. The seat was warm to the touch, heated by the sun. I absently wondered if helicopters had air conditioning.

"Buckle up while I have a quick look at the bird. I know it's real temptin', but don't touch anythin', all right? Don't wanna get my head chopped off, yo."

I nodded, scanning the array of instruments before me. It was difficult to picture him in control of all this. When I thought of a pilot, the adjectives that came to mind were methodical and careful. Meticulous. Disciplined. None of them were words I would use to describe Reno.

Then again, it could have been one of his jokes. Maybe he left to fetch the real pilot. Yes, that made more sense. With that figured out, I could breathe a bit easier.

A few minutes later, Reno hopped into the other seat and handed me a headset before pulling on one of his own.

"'Kay, here's what I need from ya," he said once I had placed the headphones over my ears. "If you see somethin' comin' at us, yell and point at it. Otherwise, don't do nothin' unless I say so. Simple, ain't it?"

A nervous fluttering invaded the pit of my stomach as I watched him press buttons and flick switches.

"You're... not joking, are you?"

With a toothy grin, Reno started the engine.

"I happen to be the best goddamn chopper pilot east of Rocket Town. Just kick back and enjoy the ride, babe."

While he engaged in a dialogue with the airfield attendant, I watched the blades above our heads begin to chop. Even with the headphones, I could hear their rhythm over the whine of the engine, speeding up to a steady hum. My heartbeat followed much the same pace.

When the whirlybird lost contact with the ground, pushing me down into the seat, the butterflies in my stomach gave way to an exhilarating rush. A squeal snuck out before I could stop it, followed by a heat spreading over my cheeks when Reno's snicker filled my ears.

"Relax, Fitz. This'll be fun, yo."

He wasn't wrong. The ascent was smooth, more so than my first time in a helicopter. That was reassuring. Better yet, the pilot's seat soaked up the last remnants of the man's tension. As Reno sat back and settled into the journey, so did I.
"This is a bit like old times, isn't it?" I remarked once I had released my death grip on the seat edges. "You escorting me to a meeting with Reeve."

"Huh, guess so, when ya look at it that way. The view's better now, tho'."

Again, he was correct. I spent the first half an hour mesmerized by it, watching the rise and fall of Cosmo Canyon's rugged mountain ranges until they gave way to a short stretch of jungle. As we flew, Reno pointed out sights of interest, often with his own garrulous commentary. The gleaming spire of giant multilayered mushrooms that was the Gold Saucer inspired a whole anecdote of a magical night filled with drunken gambling and other misadventures.

Little by little, however, my attention shifted. I found myself watching the pilot almost as much as the landscape below. The last time I had seen Reno, the day after Meteorfall's terrible climax, he had been pallid and haggard, with deep shadows under his eyes. Now, his smiles were frequent and his skin had a much healthier hue.

"Enjoying the scenery?" Reno asked when he caught my eye.

I should have known the man would notice. The tone was teasing, but his grin was genuine and his eyes glittered. It was as if he had shed several layers of pretense, showing a more unguarded side I had never seen before. I responded with a small smile of my own.

"You could say that."

For a second I got to enjoy the rare pleasure of catching the Turk by surprise, but he was quick to recover.

"Well, you're in luck, baby. Except for a quick stop in Costa to refuel, you've got me all to your pretty self for the day."

"What a treat," I said dryly, although the smile didn't leave my face. "How did you get roped into being my chauffeur, anyway? I thought Reeve was sending someone from the WRO."

"No ropes required. I volunteered, yo."

Now that was a surprise. Back at the village, he had given the impression Cosmo Canyon was the last place he wanted to be.

"Really? You, volunteering for... Well, anything?"

"Are ya kiddin' me? Gettin' to fly my bird all day, with my fave scientist along for half the ride? 'Course I'm gonna fuckin' volunteer. It's like volunteerin' for a day in bed with a bag of candy."

"Well, I suppose I've been compared to worse than a bag of candy," I mused, craning my neck to peek at the coastal town of Costa del Sol as it took form on the horizon.

"Did I say a bag of candy? I meant, like, two bags of candy. At least."

I laughed and aimed a fond glance at the grinning man.

"It's good to see you too, Reno."

Chapter End Notes
This is the last we'll see of Nanaki for a while. I'll miss him - he's fun to write - but he'll be back in later chapters.
We touched down in Costa del Sol, to refuel both the helicopter and ourselves. Reno led the way to a small restaurant built to serve the airfield employees. It sported a tropical theme, complete with its own little jungle of potted palms and ferns in the center of the indoor serving area. The plants surrounded a large cage of exotic birds, whose squawks and trills drowned out the sound of aircraft engines.

"So, six months, huh?" I said once we had placed our orders. "What have you been up to?"

Reno shrugged. It made his unruly hair sway, and as it lit up in the bright Costan sun pouring through the windows, it reminded me of Nanaki's flaming tail. The guardian's heatless fire had tickled my skin. I wondered if Reno's hair might do the same.

"Eh, y'know," he drawled, "just runnin' around puttin' out fires. Same old, same old."

"'Same old'?" I repeated, raising my eyebrows.

"Yeah, all right, so that ain't exactly true," he admitted with a dry chuckle. "The bit about fires is, tho'. Midgar was a huge fuckin' mess after Meteorfall. Still is."

"I heard Midgar isn't safe to live in any longer, and that there's a new city being built nearby."

The wicker chair creaked in protest as Reno wiggled around for a more comfortable slouch.

"Yeah, it's called Edge. Ain't that smart to build a city smack dab in the goddamn wasteland, if you ask me, but that's what they're doin'. Guess there's just too many people without homes. People gotta live somewhere."

"It has to be pretty close to the old Mako reactors, then?" I guessed, frowning.

"Yeah. That don't seem so great either. Reeve's people are workin' on gettin' 'em all shut down properly, but it's gonna take time. Who knows when the damn things might spring a leak or somethin'."

It was a valid concern. I wondered if there had been any official tracking of fallout and other pollution in the area prior to Meteor. I knew it was now one of the duties of the WRO's science department, but they would need some frame of reference.

"Hey, that's what you're gonna work on, ain't it?" Reno asked, giving me a curious look. "Makin' the badlands come back to life?"

"Something like that, though the first step is to figure out if it can be done at all."

"If? Damn, that's a depressin' thought."

"It's a possibility, though I'm more hopeful than that. According to the elders in Cosmo Canyon, Gaia has an incredible ability to heal itself. It could be that the people need more help than the planet."

Our food arrived. The airfield restaurant had a meager menu, so we had both ended up ordering the same dish: grilled fish of the day with potatoes. Reno had picked the spicy red sauce, while I had chosen the milder green one. My mouth watered as I inspected my colorful plate. The lack of
variety when it came to food was one aspect of desert life I was eager to leave behind. I'd had enough of that back on Earth.

"Speaking of that, I also heard rumors of some strange illness," I said as I cut into the fish. "'The Midgar disease', they called it."

The white fillet was mild, but firm in texture. I dipped a tiny potato in the green sauce and popped the whole thing in my mouth. The flavor reminded me of coriander.


"What does it do?"

"'Eh, I'll tell ya some other time." Reno pointed at his plate with his fork. "Y'know, when we ain't in the middle of eatin'."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"Don't worry 'bout it," he said, then paused in thought for a second and sighed. "Uh, just so ya know, might be best not to ask Reeve 'bout it just yet. His mom died from it."

My eyes went wide. "Really? When?"

"Right after Meteor got smashed up, tho' Reeve didn't find out 'til later." 

"He never told me," I mumbled, thinking back at the brief, intermittent phone calls over the past half a year.

"I don't think he heard about it 'til after you'd been sent off," Reno pondered. "Y'know, the whole Stigma thing is why he sent ya to Cosmo Canyon all of a sudden. He knew your immune system ain't ideal for this place and was worried you'd get sick too."

"Wait a minute. I thought it was so I could learn about Gaia?"

"Sure, that was always the plan. You just got sent there sooner." A corner of his mouth tugged upward. "Was pissed at him 'bout that, actually. Didn't get a chance to say bye."

"I was a bit pissed off, too," I admitted with a chuckle and a shake of my head. "With you, though."

"Aw, that ain't fair! Wasn't my bad, yo."

His pout only made me laugh harder.

"I know that now. You're forgiven."

He grinned. "Cool."

"Not so sure about Reeve, though," I said, stabbing a potato with my fork. "I don't like being kept in the dark."

"'Eh, don't hold it against him. If you'd known there was a new disaster to deal with, ain't no way we'd gotten you to leave. We all know that, Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes."

"I'm perfectly capable of reason, you know," I complained, sending him a dirty look. "If Reeve had valid concerns, he could've just explained them to me."
"Nah, that wouldn't work. You'd just hop into that armored suit of yours and claim you're fuckin' invincible."

"What?"

I studied his face, confused by the turn our conversation had taken. The man's tone was playful, but an odd glint in his eyes told me he wasn't just fooling around.

"Don't try to deny it, babe," he teased. "I've seen it happen, yo."

"Hang on," I said slowly, "is this about my decision to go back to-- home?"

I caught myself at the last moment. Six months of watching my tongue in Cosmo Canyon, yet words like "Earth" still slipped out the moment I let down my guard.

Reno's smile widened, revealing a glimmer of teeth.

"See? It's true and you know it."

My grip on the fork tightened.

"I take it back," I said, narrowing my eyes. "You're not forgiven at all."

For a few beats, we locked eyes. Then, in an instant, his sharp smile was gone.

"Aw, dammit," he whined, slumping back in his chair. "Takin' it back ain't fair either, y'know."

"Puppy eyes won't save you this time," I said, hiding my relief with a stern tone, then allowed a small smile to return. "But... dessert just might."

"Bribes, eh? I can work with that."

Reno signaled the waiter, we moved on to other topics, and the little incident was soon forgotten.

After less than an hour on the ground we were in the air again, crossing the ocean between the eastern and western continents. The sky was cloudy, but the little white puffs never kept the sun hidden for long. I was following their shadows on the water, idly entertaining myself with the thought that one of them might be some fantastic Gaian sea creature, when Reno's voice sounded over the headset.

"Y'know, there's one more reason why I wanted to bring ya back myself. I got this for ya."

He fished a card out from his pocket and tossed it in my lap. It had my name and photo, along with my birth date and a bunch of other numbers that meant nothing to me.

"Citizen of Midgar, huh?" I commented.

"Like I said, Midgar's a mess. That includes all its citizen records and databases. No one's gonna think twice 'bout a Midgar evacuee with missin' info. This oughta be enough to get ya a real ID from Kalm or Edge."

I turned the card over in my hands, examining the details. I had never seen a Midgar citizen's ID before, but since a Turk had procured it, I had to assume it was a convincing fake.

"Won't they ask questions? I don't know much about Midgar."
"Yeah, and that's what we're gonna go over now. You got a cover story to learn, yo."

Instead of dictating my new background to me like I expected, Reno began with questions. He asked about the places where I had grown up, studied and worked, about family and employers. Once he moved on to the cover story, it was obvious he had tailored it to fit my real history, only changing details like the names of cities.

"Banora, in Mideel. Way down south. That's where you're from. Firebombed 'bout eight years ago, most townfolk got killed."

I sent him a searching look. "Shinra?"

"Who else?" he countered with a faint, cynical smile. "Dumbapples and First Class SOLDIERs, that's all anyone remembers 'bout the place now. A perfect fit for ya."

Reno grilled me with more questions, only now he expected the answers he had tweaked for me. There was more laughter than frustration as the session unfolded, but the Turk was a tough teacher to satisfy. He didn't stop until I had provided perfect replies for each one at least twice.

By that point, the coastline of the eastern continent was coming into view. It wasn't long before I could make out the symmetrical wedge of Junon jutting out into the sea from steep cliffs.

"Still looks weird without a big-ass gun stickin' out of it," Reno commented.

I glanced over in time to see him pop a piece of gum in his mouth and start chewing.

"I'd offer ya some," he said as he slipped the pack back into his pocket, "but I'm guessin' you don't want nicotine gum."

My eyebrows knitted together.

"Hang on, I saw you smoke in Cosmo Canyon."

"I ain't quittin', if that's what you're wonderin'. I always bring this stuff on long flights. Tseng will string me up from my balls if I smoke in the chopper."

"Please don't tell me you know this from experience."

Reno snickered.

"Nah. That ain't my kinda kinky, so I've behaved, yo."

"That's a relief," I said, mirroring his grin.

"I've had to cut down, tho'," he added after a while. "You know how much a pack of smokes goes for these days? It's fuckin' ridiculous, and even if ya can afford 'em, the traders are usually out."

"Is it the supply or the demand?"

"Eh, bit of both. The factories that made 'em don't get enough juice now that many of the Mako reactors are down, and people are pickin' up all sorts of bad habits after Meteorfall." His smile was crooked. "Maybe there's somethin' 'bout comin' close to the end of the world that makes ya think you're fuckin' invincible."

"Huh. That's weird."
"Well, I dunno. Maybe everythin' just sucks too hard these days and people need somethin' to look forward to. Even if it's just their next lungful of tar."

There was truth to it, I supposed. Nothing like a vice or two when you were in need of a distraction.

"Yet you're cutting down," I pointed out.

"Yeah, well, if there's one thing ya learn as a Turk, it's that no one's invincible. That, and I ain't made of gil."

"Shinra doesn't pay you enough?" I teased.

"The pay's still good, but I'm still damn good at spendin' it too," he quipped with a grin. "'Sides, everythin' costs an arm and a leg in Edge. A guy could go broke eatin' nothin' but noodles."

"Well, where's the fun in that? You may as well spend it all on smokes, booze and women, then."

"I like the way you think, babe."

We exchanged smiles, then fell into a companionable silence as we approached Junon. My thoughts drifted to my upcoming meeting with Reeve and a couple of representatives from the WRO's budding science department. I knew little of my new colleagues, but I was aware that some were former Shinra employees. I wasn't pleased with that thought, but Reeve had assured me that none of Hojo's old cronies worked at the Kalm branch, where I would be stationed. In fact, I was told its director wasn't shy about his anti-Shinra sentiments nor his dislike for the late Professor Hojo's methods.

I became aware of the insistent tapping on my thighs and clasped my hands together to keep them still. Eager for a distraction, I let my gaze roam the cockpit, examining the byzantine rows of switches and gauges. Eventually I reached the man in charge of it all. My eyes lingered on his hands, on the calluses and the tangle of thin, faded scars around the knuckles. Despite their rough appearance, his hands gripped and guided the controls with a light touch. His fingers had been warm, I remembered, and wondered if that was still the case. I imagined them cradling my cheek, the way they had during our goodbye, right before I returned to Earth, and--

I snapped my eyes toward the scenery, feeling heat rush to my face. Where the hell did that come from? That was... I took a deep breath. That was something I shouldn't think about right now. My life was already going through a major upheaval. I didn't need the complications of an old crush.

Fortunately, the redhead had been too focused on the landing procedure to notice anything. For once.

"So, ready to meet your new boss?" he asked as the blades began to wind down.

"Don't say things like that," I groaned. "I'm already nervous enough. It might not matter much to you, but I'm not looking forward to introducing myself to a bunch of my new higher-ups while I'm wearing this."

I gestured at my shorts and top. My reliance on the hazard suit meant my wardrobe was sorely neglected. Smart-casual attire was far from a necessity among Cosmo Canyon's eclectic inhabitants.

Reno glanced at me, a smile playing on his lips.

"Well, funny you should mention that. I got some of your old stuff in the back. Clothes, too."
I gave him a blank look.

"What? My old clothes?"

"Yeah, what I got for ya to wear 'round HQ, remember? Found some of 'em after you left. Thought they might still be of some use to ya, so I brought 'em along."

"You're kidding me."

"Check for yourself. They're in the bag next to Sparky's box."

He gestured toward the back of the helicopter. After some fumbling, I succeeded in unbuckling myself and climbed out of the cockpit. A duffle bag strapped into one of the seats contained a pinstripe skirt and a couple of shirts. He had even found my pumps. I hadn't seen them since I had ditched them outside my cell. The memories floating back to me felt strange, as if I was looking at a different lifetime.

"You can change right now if you want," the Turk called to me from his seat. "I ain't gonna peek."

"I think I will. Thanks, Reno. You're the best."

"Yeah, ain't I just?" he chuckled.

I paired the skirt with a powder blue blouse. I had rounded out a bit now that I was no longer stuck with hospital food, so the skirt was tighter around the hips, but not unbearably so. The heels were far less comfortable, as always, but I doubted my hiking boots would work with the rest of the outfit.

"How do I look?"

Reno's head appeared in the doorway. He looked me over with a gaze that sent the butterflies in my belly aflutter, then shot me a grin.

"Like a secretary." He must have noticed the dangerous glint in my eye, because he was quick to add, "I mean a foxy secretary. Real foxy. Like, rawr."

"Oh, good," I said dryly. "Just what I was going for."

He ducked back out of view, laughing.

"Seriously, you look great, babe," he called from the cockpit. "As sharp as Rude, and that guy's always dressed to kill, yo."

What a choice of words. Intentional, too, knowing Reno.

When he joined me in the cabin, there was a small frown on his face.

"Hey, uh, before we head out... You ain't still pissed off, are ya? 'Bout the dumb shit I said in the bar?"

I needed a few moments to connect his enquiry to the scene he made in Pub Starlet. At the time, I had been livid. Now, my main reaction was surprise that he brought it up again.

"Well, I'm not thrilled about it."

He made a face and rubbed the back of his neck, looking down at his boots.
"Look, I was just bein' an ass. You know I didn't mean nothin' by it, right?"

Didn't mean to be so inconsiderate? Didn't mean to hurt my feelings? Didn't mean to imply he was interested in me in that way? Why was the last option suddenly the one that bothered me the most? I needed to sort out my priorities.

"I'm not angry," I sighed. "But I don't like you saying things like that about me in public."

In public? Why on earth had I added that?

"Yeah, I get it now. Won't happen again, Fitz."

With that promise, Reno slid the side door open and hopped out, offering me a hand.
Junon smelled of oiled metal and saltwater. Seabirds screeched above us as we made our way from the landing pad to the elevators, their cries trounced at times by the ear-splitting roars of engines. Aerodrome workers scurried among airships and helicopters, loading and unloading cargo like bright orange ants, and contributed to the cacophony with their shouts.

"Busy place," I remarked to Reno once we reached the relative peace of the cargo elevator.

"Yeah. Reeve's campin' out here with the 'RO 'til their shiny new HQ is finished, and they got a lot on their plate."

He looked indifferent, but I could have sworn there was a wistful tone to his voice. It made me wonder what state the Turks were in these days, but before I could follow that train of thought, the elevator jerked to a halt and the doors rolled open. On the other side stood Reeve, wearing a dark blue suit and a big smile.

"Tess, welcome!" He stepped forward with an outstretched hand. "It's so good to see you."

"Reeve!"

I broke into a grin, then surprised us both by flinging my arms around his neck.

"Aw, this guy gets a hug, but I don't?" Reno whined. "No fair, yo."

"As I recall, you were too busy insulting people to bother with hugs," I pointed out as I released the former executive.

The redhead grinned, showing no trace of shame. "Oh, yeah. Oops."

"Did Reno stir up trouble again?" Reeve asked me, casting a suspicious glance at the other man.

"No more than usual."

"Oh dear," he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Well, you can fill me in after our meeting. The others are already here."

"I'll let you guys get on with it," Reno said, heading back into the elevator. "See ya after, yeah?"

"That's the plan," Reeve confirmed. "Do you know where the workshop is?"

"I'll find it."

During the flight, Reno had informed me that we were staying the night in Junon, giving us an opportunity to catch up with Reeve. I was thrilled. It had been far too long since the three of us had spent time together, chatting and tinkering. Our get-togethers had been my only source of camaraderie on Gaia. My only source of safety.

I blinked, pulling myself back to the present. Coming face to face with old friends was sending my thoughts down strange paths today.
First, though, we had a meeting to attend. As Reeve escorted me through the bowels of Junon, the jitters in my stomach grew stronger and stronger. The position was already mine, but I couldn't help but feel like I was heading into a job interview.

An interview deep in the belly of some stitched-together metal beast, no less. I hadn't expected a labyrinth of riveted walls and bulkheads. Our destination was more pleasant than the journey suggested, though: from the warren of tunnels we emerged blinking into an airy conference chamber. Tall windows spanned the length of one wall, granting a view of the waterfront. The hardwood table in the center of the room was large enough for a dozen people, though only two were waiting for us.

"Dr. FitzEvan," Reeve began, "this is Professor Dana Rayleigh, the head of the WRO science department."

Professor Rayleigh was a stern-looking woman in her forties. She wore a beige, no-frills dress suit, making me doubly glad I'd had the opportunity to change into more formal attire. After a piercing look over the rim of her glasses, she offered her hand.

"Doctor," she greeted in a tone as firm as her handshake, then nodded toward the man beside her. "This is Orin Faro. He will be your liaison at the Edge branch."

Orin looked about my age, pale and dimpled. His sandy hair was long enough to reach below his ears and seemed unwilling to stay combed.

"Dr. FitzEvan, it's a pleasure. I look forward to working with you."

His phrases were stilted, his hand damp. At least the poor man wasn't literally quaking in his boots.

"Likewise," I said with a smile, hoping to put him more at ease.

Reeve gestured to the table. "Let's begin, shall we?"

The new acquaintances sat down opposite of me, while Reeve took a seat at the end of the table. I introduced myself, using the backstory Reno had drilled into me, and Reeve smoothly handled any questions I wasn't sure how to answer. Professor Rayleigh summarized the projects of the WRO's science department, then went over my main responsibilities as one of Kalm station's researchers. Our team's goal was to understand and aid the recovery process of Midgar's wasteland – and, on a greater scale, Gaia itself. Orin stammered a few lines about the cooperation between our two branches.

It was over sooner than I expected. As the others left, Reeve pulled me aside and handed me a cell phone.

"As our newest scientist, you'll need a PHS. I've already added a few numbers for you."

I flipped the device open. The keypad-reliant interface was clunky and old-fashioned compared to the phone I'd had back home on Earth, but Reeve pointed out relevant buttons and menu options.

"The reception is still very patchy, I'm afraid. Meteor did more damage to our communications networks than we originally thought. The 'RO is working on it, but it will be a long time before coverage is fully restored."

It was the reason I had come to rely on my suit's radio for everyday use in Cosmo Canyon. Why get a phone that wouldn't work most of the time?
"The Worldwide Network is still down, too, but the 'RO stations use a private network for internal communication. Your account will be ready to use by your first day at work, complete with email and access to 'RO databases."

"What kind of databases?"

"When we took over the communication networks, we also acquired a significant amount of data from Shinra's old servers," Reeve explained. "It's still in the process of being categorized, but there appears to be a little of everything, from technical manuals to reports from the Wutai war. Nothing top secret, but much of it is useful."

"Shinra allowed it?" I wondered, surprised.

Reeve's smile was difficult to interpret.

"The Shinra we knew no longer exists. What little remains of the company has to learn to play nice with others, and they're well aware of that fact."

While Shinra Inc. had dropped from the public eye after Meteorfall, I had figured the company still existed in some form or another; I had been flown here in a Shinra helicopter by a Turk in uniform, after all. I couldn't help but wonder to what extent the WRO had learned to play nice with Shinra. I wasn't very comfortable with the thought.

"I expect you'll mostly be interested in the research from the Shinra Science Department," the man continued. "I'll make sure you have the necessary clearance."

"Right. Thanks."

I imagine my smile was more strained than the one Reeve gave me in return.

"Now, then," he said, "how about we go find Reno before he manages to set my workshop on fire?"

Tools and half-finished projects cluttered the worktables, while drawings and blueprints competed for space on the walls. The scent of freshly-made coffee was strong enough to make itself known over the smells of oil and ozone. I smiled. It was a different city, a different building and a different room, but it felt like arriving at a home away from home.

"You two took your sweet-ass time, yo!"

The Turk had made himself comfortable. His jacket was slung over the back of the chair he occupied, while his booted feet rested on one of the workbenches. With his head slumped back and arms dangling down the sides, he made a convincing impression of a boneless body.

"Miss us so soon, Reno?" I teased.

"You try hangin' out with a fortune-spewin' cat," he grumbled, keeping his eyes closed. "You'll be climbin' the walls in five minutes."

"Oi! That's not very nice!"

I jumped back and nearly fell into Reeve as a grinning black cat skipped into view from behind the redhead.

"It's all right, Tess," the former executive chuckled. "It's just Cait Sith."
Oh, right. My first meeting with Reeve's robotic cat in the depths of the Northern Crater was hazy – more like a bizarre dream than a memory – but Nanaki had mentioned the toy in some of his stories. I should have guessed Cait Sith would be here now that AVALANCHE was no longer active.

The other two paid me no mind and carried on with their little argument.

"I ain't nice?" Reno protested. "You're the one who said I'll live long enough to be a burden to my kids!"

"I was just telling your fortune! It's not my fault your future sucks," the toy sniffed haughtily, then turned its attention to me. "Hey there, lass! Good to see ya again!"

The cat gave a jaunty wave with a gloved hand. It wore boots, too, and what appeared to be a permanent grin. I stared, fascinated by its lifelike movements and natural speech, until it occurred to me that I was being rude.

"Uh. Hi."

It seemed content with my greeting and turned to its creator, giving him a similar wave.

"Hi, Reeve! You will find a thing! It may be important!"

The director of the WRO tilted his head, scratching his chin.

"Remind me to check your fortunes module, Cait. Sounds like it could use some work."

"A fortunes module?" I asked.

"That's right," Cait Sith answered in Reeve's stead. "I'm a fortune teller! Wanna hear one?"

"Uh..." I glanced up at my human companions and received a shrug from one and a sympathetic grin from the other. "Sure, go ahead."

"All right, here we go! 'Hidden in a valley, beside an open stream. This will be the type of place where you will find your dream.' The toy cat beamed, hopping up and down. "Hey, that one was pretty good. It rhymed!"

"Damn, Cait, that almost sounded like some real fortune-tellin'," Reno snickered. "You malfunctionin' or somethin'?"

"Just telling 'em as I get 'em," it declared, crossing its arms.

"Looks like Reno brought down the suit," Reeve said to me, gesturing to one corner of the workshop where the pieces of my hazard suit were laid out on a table. "Let's take a look, shall we?"

While I described the indignities my suit had been subjected to over the past months, Reeve inspected the pieces one by one. Occasionally, he tutted in disapproval and stopped to blow red sand out of joints and seams with a can of pressurized air.
"Well, poor Sparky is definitely in need of proper maintenance. With this amount of dust, I expect the air filters need to be changed and the battery contacts cleaned. We should check the fluids and the exoskeleton alignments, too."

Listening to Reeve's diagnosis brought a smile to my face. There was an undercurrent of reproach, but his excitement was tangible. I suspected his new duties kept him too busy to unwind in the workshop as much as he would have liked.

While Reeve took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, I looked over at the other two. Reno was sitting straighter now, with his feet on the floor, and had apparently been entertaining himself by winding up the plush cat.

"Oh, yeah?" it yelled, waving its tiny fists in the air by the man's knees. "Well, 'an upward movement initiated in time can counteract fate'!"

The Turk snorted. "The hell's that even s'posed to mean?"

"How would I know? It's your fortune!"

"So, you admit ya got no idea what you're talkin' 'bout, huh?"

The cat huffed and puffed, unable to come up with a comeback right away. Grinning, Reno fished out something from a brown paper bag on the workbench and popped it into his mouth, biting down with a crunch.

"What's that in the bag?" I wondered, both out of curiosity and to put an end to the poor toy's torment. "Toasted nuts?"

"Yeah, roasted with honey." The wicked delight that spread across his face alerted me to what was coming. "Hey, you wanna nibble on--"

"Hold it right there, honey nuts," I interrupted him, raising my hand. "We don't want to hear it."

Reno raised his eyebrows, but shut his mouth and pushed himself onto his feet. A smirk appeared on his face as he sauntered over to me.

"First you call me sweet cheeks, now honey nuts," he mused, offering me the bag. "Y'know, you sure seem interested in what I've got in my pants."

A blush flooded my cheeks. I snatched the paper bag out of his hand, less mortified by his words than what my body betrayed.

"If that's how you choose to interpret it, then knock yourself out, sugar shrimp."

To my surprise, Reno burst out laughing. Not one of the smug chuckles or the impish snickers, but one of those wholehearted laughs he so rarely let loose. I was caught even further off guard when he scooped me up in a hug.

"Damn, Fitz," he laughed. "I've missed ya, baby."

Before I knew it, a tingle had blossomed in my chest, a heat that radiated all the way to my face and deepened my blush. When he set me down a second later and those glittering eyes met mine, I think for a moment I forgot how to breathe.

Oh, who was I kidding? I was totally crushing on him. I was crushing on him just as hard as six
months ago.

A tapping on my leg gave me the perfect excuse to avert my reddened face. Cait Sith was standing next to me, looking up with an expectant expression.

"Hey, don't I get a hug too?" it wondered, raising its hands toward me.

"Eh, what the hell," Reno said breezily and snatched up the little cat, giving it a tight squeeze.

"This is not what I meant!" it cried, squirming in his grip while the redhead nuzzled the back of its head, sniggering.

"You're a bit too hard under all that fake fur, ain'tcha? 'Fraid Fitz is more huggable than you, kitty cat."

"Then let me go already! Help! Reeve!"

"Cait, don't bother our guests," Reeve admonished without looking up from his work.

"Me? I'm the one being attacked! Help!"

While the others were distracted, I tried to come to terms with what I had felt. It wasn't a huge revelation, of course. I knew after Meteorfall, I had hoped for... something. Anything. It was pointless, though. He wasn't interested. He had made that clear.

He said he missed you.

Not a single call during all those months in Cosmo Canyon. Not a single message. It had been silly of me to hold out hope. I had misread the situation. After all, Reno was hardly a shy wallflower. There had been plenty of rumors about his affairs around HQ, yet he had never made a move on me. All I got were his jokes and innuendo.

He flew halfway across the world for you.

My mind sifted through our first day together in half a year. He'd implied I wanted to sleep with him in one of the rudest ways imaginable and I had chewed him out, with good reason. He'd said I looked like a foxy secretary, so I had poured sarcasm on it. He'd suggested I might be interested in what he had in his pants, and I... I had compared him to a crustacean.

Ah, damn it. I was beginning to sense a pattern here, on both sides of the equation.

What if it was his way of testing the waters? What if he was afraid of going too far, afraid of our history and our shaky start? It was a fair point. Sex tended to complicate matters. I didn't want complicated, did I?

You want him, though.

I'd had casual flings, but never with friends. From what I had observed in others, it rarely ended well. I didn't want to risk that.

You want him, though.

Oh, god. What on earth was I supposed to do about this?
Thanks for reading!

Fun fact time: Professor Rayleigh is a very minor character from Before Crisis. Other minor characters will pop up from time to time in this story (some of them unnamed - I picture the bartender and mechanic from Cosmo Canyon as the NPCs you meet in FF7), but maybe I'll leave it to you to spot them.
At eight thirty in the morning, Reeve knocked on my door as agreed and took me down to Junon's mess hall.

"Reno isn't joining us?" I asked once we were seated at one of the smaller tables.

"No, he had an early start this morning. We'll meet up with him at the helipad."

I picked up a fork and poked at the yellowish mash in one of the compartments of my tray. The vague sense of disappointment was annoying. I would spend much of the day alone with the Turk in a helicopter. I wasn't that desperate for his company, was I?

"There's something I wanted to ask before you go," Reeve continued. "Would you mind leaving your suit here for a few weeks?"

I hesitated. I'd had to leave Sparky with Reeve for repairs when I was whisked off to Cosmo Canyon. It had seemed like the longest month of my life.

"What for?"

"We're testing a prototype radiation shield for the crews shutting down the Mako reactors. It's based on your suit's technology, so I'd like to integrate it into the suit as well. It might come in handy."

"Handy for what? I'm not planning to go traipsing through reactors any time soon."

"I would hope not," Reeve said with a chuckle, "but if you're going to study the effects the reactors have had on the environment, you might run into Mako leaks yourself."

"Good point," I admitted after some consideration.

"I've got your approval, then?"

Reeve couldn't fully hide the eagerness bubbling beneath his fussy professionalism. The poor man must have been starved for personal projects to distract him from the never-ending politics of his position.

"Sure. Go ahead."

He beamed, shedding his detachment for a moment. I couldn't help but smile back.

After breakfast, it was time to leave Junon behind. Reeve escorted me to the helipad, where the Shinra helicopter sat waiting. Reno had climbed the tail and was running a hand over the machinery attached to its rotor, tugging and prodding. As he turned around to come down, he spotted us and raised a hand in a quick wave.

"Mornin'!" he shouted. "Hop on in, Fitz, I'm almost done here."

"I'm afraid I need to get back," Reeve said. "I'll have Sparky delivered to you once the Mako shielding is ready for use."

I offered him a warm smile and my hand.
"Thanks, Reeve. I appreciate it."

"My pleasure," he said, clasping my hand with both of his own. "Have a good flight. Let me know how you settle in, all right?"

"Will do. Thanks again, for everything."

Reeve smiled, then headed back inside. I followed Reno's suggestion and climbed into my seat in the helicopter. A few minutes later the other door opened and the redhead hopped in.

"Buckle up, babe. Just got a few more checks to go through and then we're off."

Once I had strapped myself in, I watched him go through switches and buttons in the exact same order as the previous two times. Methodical and meticulous. I smiled, shaking my head as I remembered how nervous I had been the first time.

Reno's hand went still. When I glanced up, he was looking at me, a slight crease between his eyebrows.

"What?"

*Something nice, Tess. Say something nice to the man, for once in your life.*

"You're so... thorough."

...Seriously?

While I felt like sticking my head in a paper bag, Reno seemed amused.

"Course I am. I'm s'posed to fly this thing, y'know. Don't want any surprises while we're in the air, yo."

"I'm not used to seeing this side of you, that's all."

"What did ya expect? That I'd pull crazy air stunts all the way to Kalm?"

"Well..."

Reno let out a dry chuckle as he handed me my headset.

"Sure, a good pilot might know a bunch of flashy tricks, but the awesome ones know it's a dumb idea to do 'em just to show off. Guess which I am, babe."

I smiled.

"The best pilot east of Rocket Town."

Seeing his face light up with a grin was the best reward I could imagine.

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Kalm had changed. It had kept its quaint heart of townhouses and cobbled streets, but the town walls were now surrounded by a sprawling web of makeshift shacks and caravans. Some were occupied by future citizens of Edge, waiting for the completion of their new homes, Reno informed me as we walked toward the main gate. Other inhabitants simply had nothing left and nowhere to go. According to the Turk, it was a vast improvement over the refugee situation three months ago. I couldn't see how.
At the square, Reno soon pointed out a slim young man with blond hair gathered into a ponytail. He was looking around with an expectant air, frequently adjusting his glasses to get a better look at the faces of people passing by. In his other hand, he held a piece of paper with the name FITZEVAN written on it. I introduced myself.

"Good to meet you, Dr. FitzEvan!" he exclaimed, studying me with curious blue eyes as he shook my hand. "I'm Tyco Finneggan, Professor Grigori's assistant. He's away this weekend, so he asked me to welcome you to Kalm in his stead."

Tyco led the way to my new residence, coloring in some local history as we walked. Kalm had once been a prime location for wealthier Midgar citizens looking to while away their retirement days in peace, yet still within a reasonable distance from children and grandchildren who worked and attended school in the metropolis. After Meteorfall, many of them found themselves with no heirs and pricy properties that few among the Midgar refugees could afford. Some opened their doors to people in need. Others donated their houses to organizations like the WRO and fled far from the fallen city that had claimed their progeny.

My new home was one of these donations. Tyco brought us to a narrow row house with a steeply sloped roof covered in green shingles, tucked away on a side street a couple of blocks from the main square. A path of checkered tiles divided a patch of overgrown lawn. A white stone bird sat next to the front door steps, peering at us with beady eyes.

"Heh. Cute," Reno commented. "Let's check out the inside, eh?"

The layout was simple. The bottom floor consisted of a living room in the front and a kitchen in the back. The stairs along one wall of the living room led to the bedroom and bathroom upstairs. The wooden floors creaked and the walls were covered with beige damask wallpaper. The windows at each end of the house were large and grilled.

"Most of the shops are closed by now, so I filled the fridge with some necessities," Tyco said, gesturing us to follow him into the kitchen. "Oh, and we got you this, to say welcome."

He picked up a bottle waiting on the table and handed it to me. It contained an amber liquid, called "Paraiso" according to the label.

"We, as in everyone at Kalm station," he added. "You'll meet the rest of the crew on Monday."

"Thank you very much, Tyco," I said, glancing up from the bottle in my hands to give him a smile. "This has certainly been a very pleasant welcome."

Reno peeked over my shoulder. A familiar scent of spice and smoke wafted my way, and suddenly it was difficult to concentrate on the conversation.

"Costan rum, eh?" he said with a tone of approval. "The good stuff, too."

"Our intern travels to Costa del Sol every few weeks to see his family," Tyco explained, visibly pleased by our reactions. "If you like it, you can put in an order with him. Most of us did last time."

He continued the tour by showing us the upstairs rooms. The house was mine for as long as I worked for the WRO in Kalm, Reeve had promised me, and I was free to redecorate as I saw fit, which was fortunate. The furnishings were a jumble, ranging from quality hardwood furniture – presumably left behind by the previous owner – to cheap and cheerful plywood monstrosities filling in the gaps. Once I received my first paycheck, the crooked box that served as a desk chair would be the first to go.
I strolled through my new living space, trying to adjust to the idea of it as my home. There was nothing wrong with it, per se. As small and questionably decorated as it was, it was luxurious compared to my cave in Cosmo Canyon, not to mention the refugee camps outside the walls. This wasn't just a house, though. This was my first proper residence on Gaia. A physical reminder that I was to start a life on this planet. I could never go back.

"Well, I'll be off now," Tyco declared. "If you need anything, anything at all, just give me a call. I'll be in town all weekend."

"Thank you," I said with a polite smile, taking the keys he offered. "It's been a pleasure. See you soon."

"Enjoy your evening, Doctor. You too, Reno."

"Will do, yo."

I set the keys down on the dresser by the front door. It was one of the nicer pieces of furniture, with a set of drawers in dark, polished wood and a large mirror at the top. A pensive face looked back at me, a touch of apprehension in her dark brown eyes. A new home, all to myself. After my first crash landing here on Gaia it had been a room in a ward, a bunk in a barrack, a cave with shared amenities. Before, I shared an apartment with my former fiancé for years.

A red-haired man sauntered in behind me and flashed me a grin via the mirror.

"Well, Doc, it's been real good seein' ya again, but I gotta head out too."

"Do you have to?" I hurried to ask. "I was hoping we could, maybe, catch up a bit. You know, crack open the rum and celebrate a little?"

He seemed surprised by my suggestion, or perhaps it was just the speed with which I had whirled around to face him. He made a quick recovery, though.

"So long as there's Paraíso in my glass," he said with a lopsided smile, "I can party all night, babe."

"Great!" I said, relieved. "Make yourself at home, then. I'll get the drinks."

When I returned to the living room, Reno had sprawled out in one end of the couch. I set the glasses down on a cupboard by the kitchen door to pour our drinks, then joined him.

We traded anecdotes from the past six months, slipping into our old banter with ease. The rum was pleasant too, smooth and sweet with a hint of orange. One drink became two as we chatted and joked.

"How long have I been here, actually?" I asked as I got up to fill my glass for a third time.

The way his forehead scrunched up in thought was adorable. I wanted to smooth it out with my fingertips.

"It's gotta be somethin' like a year and a half now," he said. "No, more than that. You showed up in November '06, I think. A year and eight months."

"And add to that the weeks on Earth," I mused, setting the bottle back down, and turned around, leaning back against the cupboard.

Reno pushed a hand through his hair, leaving it in place at the back of his head for a few seconds
to massage his scalp. I wanted to do it for him.

"Gettin’ close to two years then," he concluded.

"I can't believe it's been that long already."

I took a sip of my rum and considered this for a few more moments, still eyeing his unruly hairdo. The color was so bright, so vibrant. I had assumed his hair was dyed, but the hue never changed.

"And after all this time, I still don't know if you're a natural redhead."

The words slipped out before my brain had a chance to catch up with what I was saying. Talk about giving him free ammunition. Maybe a third drink wasn't such a good idea.

He, of course, wasn't one to let an opportunity go to waste.

"Y'know, I could just tell ya, but I'm guessin' that won't do, what with you bein' a scientist and all," he drawled with a playful grin on his face. "If you really wanna find out, tho'... I'm sure I can come up with some kinda proof that'll satisfy ya."

A surge of jittery energy flashed beneath my skin and I whisked the glass up to my lips to hide my moment of weakness. It wasn't as if Reno really meant anything by it, I reminded myself. It was just a bit of joking innuendo, no different from the dozens I had brushed off before. A mocking dismissal, a sassy quip, a roll of the eyes; all of these were safe responses. We would grin, maybe laugh, and move on to other topics.

But the tingling sensation had pooled in my lower belly, building up to an expectant pressure that was difficult to ignore. I gazed at him over the rim of my glass, taking in the cocky tilt of his head, the faint pink the alcohol brought to his cheeks, the mischief glittering beneath relaxed eyelids. The man was bloody gorgeous.

Who knew when we would next have a chance to meet? It might be weeks. It might be another six months.

I swallowed my mouthful of rum and licked the sweet traces off my lips. His gaze flicked down, following my tongue until it disappeared from view. Before I could think too hard about the consequences, I locked eyes with the man and smiled.

"Careful there. I might take you up on that offer."

The redhead froze, the glass he had just emptied coming to a halt in midair as he stared at me. It was as if the whole world went still. I even held my breath while his eyes searched my face, though I couldn't stop the wild dance my heart was performing in my chest.

Then, there it was. A shift in the air. Reno cocked an eyebrow, then unfurled himself from the sofa and set down the glass on the table in one smooth, languid movement. A hunger crept into the smile on his face, and into the gaze he fixed on me with his hooded eyes. I had tiptoed the line, wary of going too far, but it seemed he was prepared to pull me all the way to the other side.

Coming to a halt in front of me, Reno reached for the glass in my hand.

"That so?" he asked, his tone as casual as ever.

His fingers touched mine as they wrapped around my drink and lingered for a moment or two. A physical extension of his question, and a promise, delivered in a fleeting caress. The desire coiled
tighter into a need.

"Yes."

My reply was little more than a breathless whisper. The redhead grinned slyly, drained the glass in one go, then closed the remaining distance between us. He leaned down and reached around me, bringing his face within inches from mine. Unable to trust my knees, I fumbled for the cupboard behind me, clinging to the edge with both hands for support.

"No strings attached, eh?"

I nodded in agreement. I heard the soft clink as the glass was put down, then felt his fingertips travel up along my arm, light as the brush of a feather, leaving goosebumps on my bare skin. His touch was just as warm as I remembered.

"I got no problem with that," he murmured. "In fact, I've wanted to fuck your brains out for a long time now."

My breath caught in my throat. His crass admission, so at odds with his soft voice and gentle touch, sent a quiver of excitement through my whole body. I was thrilled. Wet. Terrified. It had been so long.

"That so?" I breathed, trying to imitate his earlier breezy tone and failing.

He chuckled, a throaty sound that sent shivers racing up and down my spine.

"Uh huh." His hand reached my neck and when I leaned into his touch he leaned in too, ghosting his lips up along my sensitive skin until he reached my ear. "Every time I see your sexy ass swayin' in front of me, in a tight skirt like this, I just wanna hitch it up and bend ya over the nearest table."

His breathing had quickened and I could hear the lust in his husky voice, but still he teased. His lips brushed my ear as he spoke, while his hands explored the curves of my breasts and waist with light caresses that served only to entice, not satisfy. I remained still, half-dazed and unwilling to break the spell of the moment, but I couldn't take much more of this sweet torture. My insides ached with the need to be filled.

"Why don't you do that now?"

He didn't reply, but I felt his hands skim down over my hips until they reached the hem of my skirt. With two forceful tugs, he brought the garment up to my waist, then pushed me back against the wall, pressing himself flush against me. I gasped and arched into him, clawing at his shoulders, every sensitized nerve in my body singing. One of his hands slid down my thigh once more, lifting my leg and guiding it around his hips. His arousal was evident, hard and hot against my stomach even through the layers of fabric.

"I'll give it to ya any which way you please, baby," he purred, "but first, you gotta come for me. So what's it gonna be? My fingers?" He licked a slow trail along the outer rim of my ear, eliciting a needy whimper deep in my throat. "Tongue?"

"Tongue," I panted. "God, yes, definitely tongue."

He growled and nipped at the lobe of my ear, prompting another ragged gasp. I followed it with a delighted squeal as he dropped to his knees, sliding my panties down in the process. The air was cool on my flushed skin and I felt exposed, doubly so when one of my legs was hoisted over his shoulder. Then the wonderful heat of Reno's breath and mouth was on me, and all rational thought
crumbled and scattered. I moaned his name like a fervent prayer, tangling my fingers in his hair, and gave myself over to physical bliss.
I was roused from sleep by the light of the morning sun, sifting in through the blinds to warm my skin. I remained still, my eyes cracked open a fraction to adjust to the brightness, and let the rays caress my face. For a while, I just reveled in the gratification of a body thoroughly spent.

I opened my eyes further, letting my gaze drift across the bed. With its rumpled sheets, scattered pillows and bunched-up covers twisted around my legs, it was likely a good match for my own appearance. Also like me, the bed was missing a sexy redhead.

I reached out, running my hand over the spot where Reno had lain as I drifted off to sleep. It came as no surprise that the heat of his body had long since dissipated, leaving the sheets cool to the touch. I was surprised, though, by the intensity of the disappointment welling up in my chest.

Once upon a time, I wouldn't have thought twice about waking up alone after a passionate encounter. Indeed, more often than not I would have found it a relief. The years I shared a bed with a fiancé must have skewed my expectations. My lips twisted into something that was almost a smile, but the twinge in my heart made me shove those memories back into the dark corners where they belonged.

I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes to indulge in recollections of the previous evening's activities instead. Reno's body, all hard angles and wiry strength; such an intoxicating contrast to his lips, soft and tantalizing on my skin. His hands, calloused and rough, but capable of a touch as light as the fluttering of a butterfly's wing...

...until it was time for the act itself, that is. Reno had proved himself a generous, exciting lover, but a gentle one he was not, as evidenced by the dull, pleasant ache between my legs. The redhead had certainly delivered a wild ride. A smile returned to my face and I felt a familiar heat pool in my lower belly. Maybe the disappointment was for the missed opportunity of another round in the morning. For a few moments, I entertained the hope of an encore the next time I saw him.

Then I recalled his words: no strings attached. Last night, they had been the catalyst. Now, they made my heart grow heavy. It irritated me. Words had meaning; I had known that last night just as well as I did now.

It was better to leave this as a delicious one-night stand, anyway. Relationships, unlike words, had no universal meaning. You could spend years sharing your life with someone, only to have your hopes crushed without warning. A ring on your finger meant nothing.

I flinched, blinking rapidly. I... I needed a shower. Yes. Yes, that was what I needed. I freed myself from the tangle of covers and shuffled to the bathroom.

The hot water woke me up, but it wasn't enough to dispel the hangover, making itself known as a pervasive tiredness. A cup of strong coffee would fix that. As I waited for the machine to finish brewing, I took a stroll through my apartment. Just to gather the garments that had been scattered across it, of course – or so I told myself when clothes were all that I found.

It wasn't until I sat down, coffee cup in hand, that I spotted the error in my thinking. Reno wasn't some anonymous lay I picked up the night before. He was a friend, one of the few I had on this world, a friend I hadn't seen or heard from for six months. I was allowed to miss him. There was nothing wrong with admitting that I missed his company, even the bad jokes.
I smiled. Especially the bad jokes.

And now... Well, who knew how long it would be before I would hear them again. I wished I had asked for his number. He had even taken a look at my brand-new phone – well, PHS they called it here, but that term just didn't stick in my head – while Reeve and I worked on the suit, telling me I should lock it with a pin. Why hadn't it occurred to me then? Clearly it had been too long since I'd had a phone.

It had been too long since a lot of things, really, such as having a place to myself. I let my gaze roam around the old-fashioned kitchen. It wasn't going to be easy, adjusting to a life on my own again, but cooking was going to be the real challenge. No smart fridge or oven, no dishwasher, no built-in disposal system; instead I had cast-iron pans that weighed a ton, a sink and a garbage bin outside.

With a sigh, I got up for a peek into the cabinets. Most of them contained dishes, food or cooking equipment, but one was full of cleaning supplies. The bottom third of the cabinet was taken up by a squat gray cylinder with a flexible tube. A vacuum cleaner, I had been told by the cleaning lady who had used one in my room-cave in Cosmo Canyon.

I eyed the device with distaste. It had seemed like a noisy, sweaty task. Shinra had used sophisticated robotics for security at HQ. Someone on this world must have had the bright idea of using robots for cleaning, surely? If nothing else, Cait Sith ought to be able to handle one of these clunky contraptions. Maybe I could persuade Reeve to lend me his toy cat now and then.

Reeve would know Reno's number, I realized. I could just ask him for it. I considered it over another sip of coffee. It was a strange thought, the idea of being able to contact the Turk at will. It had always been his initiative, his decision. The idea of calling him to suggest coffee or a drink was utterly foreign.

I would ask Reeve, though. Later. When I was more awake and less hung over. Maybe tomorrow, or... later.

Someone I could call today, though, was my new workmate, Tyco Finnegan. Maybe he would be up for giving me the grand Kalm tour. Coffee cup in hand, I made a sweep of the bottom floor. Instead of my phone, I discovered a torn square of foil on the floor by the couch. I picked it up, making a mental note to check the bed for the other one, and amused my hung-over brain with the sound as I crinkled the material between my fingers. What might one deduce about a man who carried a pair of condoms around? A ladies' man, or just hopeful and prepared? Cocky enough to think he would get some twice, or experienced enough to know that one might break?

In Reno's case, probably a bit of each. I scrunched up the foil and threw it away in the kitchen trash. I had been the precious focal point of his desire for one evening. He had made me feel special. That was all I had asked for. I didn't need to be special.

The phone was next to the Paraiso bottle. I picked it up with a frown. I could have sworn that wasn't where I had left it. Then again, I had been surprised to find my bra in the bathroom, swinging from the door handle. Too tipsy and too pleasantly distracted to notice little details. Not a bad way to spend an evening.

I scrolled through the contacts to F for Finnegan, then did a double take as I found not the two entries I expected, but three. I had to reread the new addition a couple of times before I could believe what I was seeing, then shook my head with a delighted chuckle.

The new number was listed under the name Fitz's boy toy.
Kalm was even quieter on a Sunday afternoon, at least inside the walls. Since I had met up with Tyco for a walk around town, we had seen half a dozen people. It was for the best, really. I could handle a leisurely stroll, but first introductions were too ambitious for my current state.

"I'm afraid I may have overstated my abilities as a tour guide," Tyco said. "I can show you the town square, the nearest grocery store and a couple of decent pubs, but that's about it."

The young man spoke with a lilt that was unfamiliar to me. Judging from the accents I had heard around town, he wasn't a local either.

"Not Kalm born and bred, huh? Where are you from?"

"Bone Village, on the northern continent. What about you?"

"Banora, in Mideel," I said, parroting the lines Reno had taught me. "Way down south."

Lying to my coworkers before my official first day at work. My new life was off to a great start.

"Dumbapples and SOLDIERs, huh?"

I shot him a quick look out of the corner of my eye, but his expression held the same friendly curiosity as before.

"So you've heard of the place?"

"Banora Whites were a special treat up north. I guess you must be pretty sick of apples, though."

The touch of wistfulness in his voice loosened my shoulders. The thought of apple blossoms always brought out the same nostalgia in me.

"I've always preferred the flowers to the fruit, to be honest. The best part of spring."

"I thought dumbapples grew all year around? You know, too 'dumb' to grow in the right season?"

I felt my pulse speed up. I had slipped down memory lane, remembering the apple trees from my childhood home. The second I let my guard down...

"Well, yes," I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. "I meant the trees in our backyard. There were a few different varieties around."

"Oh, right. You know, I've always wondered, why call them Banora 'White' when the apples are purple?"

My smile felt too wide and crooked, like it had been painted on my face all wrong.

"Sorry, you're asking the wrong person. My family moved when I was young, so my apple-related knowledge is flawed. But speaking of," I hurried to add before he could start a new line of enquiry, "have you been in Kalm for long?"

"No," he said with a shrug. "I moved here when I got the job a couple of months ago. I'm still using the guest room at work."

I couldn't help but feel a little guilty. After months of crashing at work, he had watched some newcomer waltz into her new company house. I glanced at Tyco's affable face. If the man harbored any resentment, he kept it well hidden.
"I guess options are limited at the moment," I said, sticking to a harmless topic.

"Quite. I don't mind, though. I'm lucky to get a job like this. Elsewhere, I'd need my degree and getting all that sorted now that Midgar's gone, well... And in Edge, it's pretty much all construction work."

I hid a smile at that, a genuine one this time. With his slim build and delicate features, not to mention the argyle vest covering his short-sleeved shirt, Tyco was as far from a rugged construction worker as one could imagine.

"You were studying in Midgar?"

Tyco nodded. "Just a few months more and I would have graduated. Good luck finding the paperwork to prove it, though. Everything's buried in the rubble."

"So I hear."

I would have asked more about his studies, but my knowledge of the Midgar educational system was shaky. Afraid of blundering into more awkward situations, I said nothing more and the conversation petered out.

After showing me the locations on his short list, Tyco accompanied me on an amble through the peaceful streets of Kalm. He pointed out a couple of quiet parks and the steep gabled roofs of my new workplace. Before long, we arrived at the main town gate. Just beyond the bars, I saw a ragged line of beggars queuing down the main road, their arms and legs wrapped in dirty bandages.

"We'd best stay within the walls," Tyco warned. "The Geostigma is rampant among the squatters."

I had seen the same sight on our way into town, but had been too nervous and overwhelmed about my own situation at the time. My gaze traveled over the hovels and tents, the people huddled among them. It was a grim contrast to the idyll of Kalm's country houses.

"How much do you know about it?" I asked.

The blond man shrugged and placed his hands in his trouser pockets as he, too, eyed the shantytown.

"Just that it's something new. No one knows much about it."

"Is it contagious?"

"That's unclear, too. The Kalm town council decided to bar anyone with symptoms from coming within the walls a few months ago, fearing the infection would spread, but as far as I know, no one has proved it one way or another."

The WRO specialized in technology and environmental issues. As far as I knew, medical research was beyond our scope.

"Who's researching it? Not us, right?"

"Not the 'RO, no," Tyco acknowledged. "I heard the hospitals in Edge have started up some kind of joint project. They're trying to bring in Junon and Costa del Sol, too."

A pandemic, that's what it was. Whether due to the post-Meteor struggle or just inexperience, the people of Gaia were not prepared to handle disaster on this scale.
What did I know, though? I had never been involved in medical research, and though my immune system had been fortified over the past months, it was still weak compared to native Gaians. Without facts on the infectivity of the disease, getting involved might lead to a well-meaning but painful end. No, I would have to leave the Geostigma to those better equipped to tackle it. I couldn't do everything, and I already had a part to play in Gaia's recovery.

*You'd just fail them anyway.*

I turned on my heel and marched back to the town center, fleeing the pang in my chest.
Walk on the Wild Side

The houses on the south-eastern side of town formed a hedge of shingled roofs and window frames in matching blue. The only modern addition to the facades on this particular street was a modest sign beside the front door of one of them, identifying the building as the Kalm branch of the WRO's science department.

The rooms on the ground floor had been converted into laboratories and storage. The equipment was limited, but I appreciated the low-key atmosphere of the repurposed townhouse. After my ordeal as Hojo's specimen, I could no longer stomach the smell of disinfectant. These labs were routinely sterilized, too, but amidst the homely wooden floors and faded paneling, it didn't have such an intense effect on me.

The upper floor housed offices for the researchers. Mine was at the end of the hall, with a view out over the moors around Kalm, in the direction of Midgar's ruins. None of my Midgar-born colleagues had wanted it.

The WRO had acquired the house fully furnished. Bookshelves lined the wall around my office door and a few of them still carried leather-bound tomes left behind by the previous occupants. The desk was a massive beauty in a reddish wood like mahogany, with brass handles and carved floral patterns decorating the drawers. Every time I sank into the matching leather chair, I felt like a millionaire.

Professor Grigori, the Kalm branch director, was at a meeting in Edge today along with his assistant Tyco. The third scientist and her intern were in the field. I had the building to myself. After spending the morning composing a checklist for my future work, I grabbed my music player and headed downstairs to check what was available in the labs. Halfway down the stairs, a goofy thought popped into my head. I hopped onto the wooden banister and with the squeal of a five-year-old at a playground, I slid the rest of the way down.

Oh, I had wanted to do that since the moment I first set foot in this house.

By the time I entered the labs, the first song was in full swing. I danced from cabinet to cabinet, humming to the music and ticking items off my list. The fourth song had just kicked into gear when I spun around and nearly slammed into the towering bulk of Professor Grigori.

My cheeks burned as the professor eyed me up and down. I hadn't been able to figure out if the scowl on his face was permanent, or if it just seemed that way from his bushy eyebrows, but there was no doubt that the one he wore right now was anything but intentional. Adopting what little dignity I could muster, I straightened up and removed the ear buds, but before I could come up with a greeting he spoke.

"Doctor?"

Ouch. He had the tone of deflating disapproval down to a T. I forced a smile and waved my list in the air.

"Just doing a bit of inventory, Professor."

He remained as stony as ever. I had yet to see Grigori smile; then again, the man sported a beard even bushier than his eyebrows. That shaggy thatch would hide anything less than a full-on toothy grin.
After a stare that went on far too long for my tastes, he turned on his heel and marched out of the room. Soon, I heard him tramp up the stairs. With a sigh, I pushed a hand through my hair. After facing Grigori's glare of shame, I was in dire need of a break.

The kitchen-turned-break room was occupied. I spotted Grigori's assistant pouring himself a cup of coffee and considered fleeing to the solitude of my office, but he had already noticed my arrival.

"Good afternoon, Dr. FitzEvan!"

Tyco's boyish face was as bright and happy as the colors of his argyle vest. Shame he was so darned inquisitive. I pinned on a smile once more and entered the room, hoping his questions would be of a less personal nature this time.

"Hello, Tyco. I didn't think you'd be back so soon."

"Oh, the professor wanted to prepare for the meeting tonight. The visit to the Edge office gave him a few ideas for how to organize the labs. You know, protocol and rules of conduct, that sort of thing."

"Goodie," I muttered under my breath, fetching my cup from the cupboard above the sink. Grigori had probably gone upstairs to append his rules of conduct with a subclause on dancing.

"I'm glad he did, though, since now I have the chance to talk to you before the weekend. I wanted to ask you something."

"Oh?"

I kept my back to him with the pretense of pouring coffee, fervently hoping it would be about the properties of desiccated soil or the expected expansion rates of native pioneer weeds.

"While we were in Edge, I searched their database for research journals with your name, but it came up empty."

_Well, bugger._

"That's not a question," I noted out loud.

"Well, have you published anything?"

"Yes, but the 'RO databases are incomplete. A lot was lost during Meteorfall."

"Oh. Of course."

I braced myself and turned around, leaning back against the counter as I stirred my coffee with a spoon.

"So, what did you work on before joining the 'RO?" Tyco continued, undeterred.

"Corporate research and development. It's classified."

"Ohh, I see," he said, his head bobbing up and down in a knowing nod. "For a company starting with S and ending with A, right?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny."
"Hey, it's cool," he was quick to assure me. "I know the professor has his opinions, but I don't have a problem with it. Loads of people worked for Shinra back then."

"Sorry, Tyco. I really can't talk about it. Classified, remember?" His face fell, but I knew that his curious spark was far from extinguished. "I'm afraid I have to get back to work," I added before he could come up with something more difficult to dodge.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Doctor, didn't mean to keep you."

His sunny smile filled me with a guilt that lingered long after I had sat down in my millionaire's chair. None of it had been a lie, exactly, but the constant evasion wore me out. It was also a stark reminder that no matter how hard I tried to fit in, I just wasn't one of these people. I didn't belong on this planet. I would never be able to let my guard down.

Without conscious thought, I had picked up a paperclip. I stared at it for a while, twirling it around and around in my fingers. Not all that long ago, the mere sight of one would have been enough to spike my blood pressure. Now, though... I reached for my phone, snapping it open to type a text message to my self-proclaimed boy toy.

Hey, how's it going? Want to meet up some time? Maybe catch up over a drink? -Fitz

That was about as candid as the answers I had given Grigori's bright-eyed assistant. While I doubted Reno would mind being propositioned, I couldn't bring myself to be so straightforward right now. I wasn't sure if he would even be interested in more than that one night. It had been almost a week, yet I had heard nothing from him. No, vague was better. Safer. I hit send before I could change my mind.

Five minutes later, I was still trying to compose the first sentence of my project proposal. I peeked at the phone's screen, then sighed and returned to my document. After two more minutes, I made sure the phone's sound was turned on. Three more, and I checked the volume.

Minutes became an hour, an hour became two. By the third, a disconcerting thought occurred to me. I didn't know for sure that it was his number, did I? What if it was just one of his jokes? The whole afternoon trickled by, but the phone remained silent. With every hour that passed, I slipped further into melancholy.

The sound of the door clicking closed made me look up from the reports I was leafing through. I froze in place, staring. The red-haired Turk was slouching with one shoulder propped against the bookshelf by the door, his hands in his pockets.

"Hey, babe."

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out. The stunned smile on my face was probably a far better greeting.

"You called, milady," he said with exaggerated enunciation, arching an eyebrow.

I tried to form a response, but found myself distracted by the view. His hair looked as unkempt as ever, but I remembered how smooth it was between my fingers. As soft on my skin as those delicious lips, currently curved into a crooked smirk. The unbuttoned collar granted me a glimpse of pale skin and the first hints of wiry muscle that–

Reno pushed himself upright, moving that lean body with an easy grace, and I forgot all I knew about forming sentences.
"New office, huh? Nice."

"Huh...? Oh, uh... Yes. Thanks!"

*Oh, that's perfect. Sweep him off his feet with the dumbstruck idiot routine. Fantastic work, Tess.*

He didn't notice my regression into idiocy or was, for once, civil enough not to mention it. I started shuffling away the paperwork on my desk to hide my burning face, while Reno strolled in further, craning his neck this way and that as he took in every corner of the room. As he rounded the desk, he removed one hand from a pocket to run his fingers over the polished surface.

"Damn nice desk, too," he commented with a low whistle. "Fuck anyone on it yet?"

I fumbled with the files in my hands. Was he serious?

"Of course not," I scoffed, feeling the blush on my cheeks deepen. "I just started here a few days ago."

He grinned and looked me over with hooded eyes. "Would you like to?"

My heart skipped a beat. *Oh, hell yes,* was my first reaction, followed by a flood of objections from the rational part of my brain. *Here? Practically in public?* Grigori was in his office next door. His assistant was still in the building, too, and my other two coworkers were due to show up any minute now. What if one of them decided to drop by unannounced?

"'Cause I sure do," Reno continued, his voice taking on a warm, sensual note as he closed the distance between us.

I didn't protest when he reached out to relieve me of the reports, nor when his hand dropped the paperwork into my chair and went to the button of my jeans. Instead I gazed into his eyes, transfixed by their allure.

The sound of a zipper being pulled down brought me out of my reverie.

"I have a meeting--" My attempted warning was cut off by a gasp when his hand slipped into my jeans.

"It can wait a few minutes, eh?" Reno asked as he positioned himself behind me, his fingers gliding over the fabric of my panties, nudging my thighs apart as they delved deeper at a languid pace.

"I... I need to--"

The sudden shudder of pleasure, courtesy of his nimble fingers, scattered both my thoughts and my resolve.

"Mm, you like that, dontcha?"

He did it again. I groped for the edge of the desk, desperate for the support my knees denied me.

"Yes, but the... The meeting..."

"With Big and Beardy, right?" Reno brought his face into the crook of my neck and inhaled deeply before adding, "He's waitin' downstairs, yo."

That was enough to penetrate the heady haze I was already sinking into.
"What? Shit, I have to go!"

I grabbed his wrist, but as soon as my fingers locked around it, I hesitated. Lust clashed with my sense of responsibility, each as strong as the other, pulling me in different directions.

Reno went still.

"Want me to stop?" he murmured.

Still I hesitated. He began to withdraw, and instinctively I bucked my hips, aching for more of that wonderful friction. The idea of suffering through a meeting in this deprived state, knowing the target of my desire was within the same building, ready and willing, was unbearable.

"Ahh, shit... No... Don't stop."

He chuckled, his breath hot against the sensitive skin of my neck, as his fingers returned to their previous pursuit.

"That's what I thought."

"Cocky bastard," I hissed through clenched teeth, guiding his hand with my own as he resumed the slow, circular motion.

"Sure am, sweetheart, and you love it."

I couldn't deny it, but I wasn't about to fuel his smugness by admitting it either. Just then, a sliver of sense slipped back for a moment.

"Reno, the door..."

"So what if it's unlocked?" he purred in my ear, reading my concern. "It's more fun this way, yo."

"But someone could--"

His teeth sank into my neck. I jolted with a yelp and ground against his hand in the process, setting off a surge of pleasure. My eyes rolled back and another half-stifled groan escaped me as the clashing sensations stormed my senses.

"What's the matter?" he teased, nuzzling the bite while his fingers continued working their magic inside my jeans. "Worried your straight-laced 'RO buddies will catch ya with your pants down and a Shinra Turk balls-deep in ya?"

"Y-yes..." I rasped, but was so far gone that the mental image just evoked another rush of desire. I no longer cared about Grigori's opinions or the meeting or anything that wasn't Reno's touch and voice.

"Mm, we better be quick, then. And you gotta be quiet, so they don't get a reason to check in on ya, eh?"

"Oh fuck," I groaned, "you're such a bad boy."

His husky laughter traveled through my body like a ripple of physical delight.

"It's us bad boys who know how to show ya a real good time. Now bend over for me, baby."
The Art of Deception

When my mind finally descended from heady bliss to a semblance of sense, I lay collapsed on my front on the desk. Reno's body was draped over mine, his fingertips stroking up and down my arm.

"How's my sexy girl?"

Christ. What had I just done? Still basking in the afterglow, enveloped in Reno's scent and heat, the sting of remorse turned into giddy laughter.

"I'm... I'm not your girl," I panted with a daft grin on my face, then broke down in another fit of giggles.

With a low laugh, he pressed a quick kiss to my ear.

"A guy can dream, can't he?" he joked, pushing himself up to disentangle his body from mine. "Glad you agree with the sexy part, tho'."

By the time I had gathered myself up onto my own two feet and turned around, he had already cleaned up and was buckling his belt. While I did the same, I watched Reno's deft fingers work his clothing into a lesser degree of disarray. I thought of the pleasure they – he – had brought me, and came to regret my facetious answer.

"I'm good," I said, replying to his first question with more honesty, then corrected myself. "No, actually... pretty damn great."

When I looked back up at his face he flashed me one of those rare, genuine smiles, and just like that I was ready to melt in his arms again.

"Does that mean it was pretty much whatcha had in mind, Doc?"

I blinked in surprise, then cocked an eyebrow. "What I had in mind?"

"Uh huh. You and me both know that was a booty call you sent me, babe."

"That's an awful lot of reading between the lines," I mumbled, fumbling with the zipper of my jeans.

"Didn't need no lines," he drawled, sauntering up to me, "the way you undressed me with your eyes as soon as ya laid 'em on me."

His knowing smile sent a blush to my cheeks. Of course he had noticed me gawking at him like a besotted teenager. Hell, a blind man would have noticed it.

"Damn," I said with a strained laugh, averting my eyes. "Do I really seem that desperate?"

Reno scoffed.

"Shut up, Fitz. Ain't nothin' desperate 'bout it. If ya see somethin' you want, you ain't afraid to show it, s'all. I like it. It's sexy." He leaned in closer, then added, "$pecialy when I'm what you want."

The sound of his husky whisper sent a pleasant shiver up my spine. I smiled and looked up to meet his gaze.
"Well, to answer your question... No. That was even better than what I had in mind."

"Cool." He grinned and pecked me on the cheek, then stepped back. "Now enough with the pillow talk. Beardy's still waitin' for ya, y'know."

My eyes flew wide.

"Oh shit!"

The redhead laughed as I scooped up my bag and the necessary paperwork in a frantic scramble.

"Guess that means I did somethin' right, yo."

I didn't have time to come up with a comeback. I dashed for the door, only to come to an abrupt halt and stare at the knob in puzzlement when it refused to budge. Then, the realization hit me.

"You locked the door."

Reno chuckled again, leaning back against my desk with his hands in his pockets.

"Well, y'know, didn't wanna ruin your rep in your first week on the job."

"Saving that part for later, huh?" I asked with a wry glance in his direction as I unlocked the door.

"Damn, on to me already," he sniggered and pushed himself off the desk. "Well, it's been fun, but I gotta dash too."

"Will I see you later?"

"No can do, babe. Duty calls, yo."

The disappointment stung sharper than I had expected.

"You and me both," I muttered, yanking the door open.

I rushed downstairs to the small library that served as our meeting room and, predictably, was the last to arrive. I was only two minutes late, but Grigori was the sort of person who showed up ten minutes early and expected everyone else to do the same.

"Doctor FitzEvan," the professor rumbled, giving me the day's second glare of shame. "How good of you to join us."

"Sorry I'm late," I mumbled, flustered by everyone's attention on me. Good thing I had taken the time for a quick pit stop in the ladies' room on the way. It would have been much worse if I'd had to worry about how much the unexpected tryst upstairs had tousled my hair.

As soon as I sat down, Grigori launched himself into a report on their Edge visit and the organizational changes it had inspired him to enforce. Much of it was overkill for a station of this scale, but I supposed it was a good basis for future expansion. What I didn't understand, though, was why our leader felt the need to go through it all in such minute detail when a memo would have sufficed. I was glad the library had retained its original furnishings, as it meant we were congregated around a small coffee table seated in plush chairs and couches. At least our time was wasted in physical comfort.

"Does anyone have anything to add regarding the Edge visit?" Grigori asked after forty-five minutes of administrative protocol.
"Oh, one of the Edge branch assistants did mention something interesting during lunch," Tyco piped up. "He said that when he was returning to Edge after a visit to Gongaga, he spotted a swarm of kiyvilduns near Gold Saucer."

"Kiyvilduns? Aren't they native to the Nibel region?" asked Chelsea, the other female researcher on our team. She was a slim woman about my age, with tanned skin and uneven fingernails; telltale signs of her preference for field work, I suspected.

"Yeah," Tyco said with an eager nod. "Isn't that odd, having them pop up in the Saucer plains like that?"

"Sorry," I interjected, "kiyl-what?"

"Kiy-vil-duns," he corrected. "They're big green insects endemic to the Nibel mountains."

That got my full attention.

"Nibel, huh? That's funny. I was attacked by Nibel wolves in Cosmo Canyon."

"Attacked? What happened?"

"If the discussion has deteriorated into idle gossip, then I shall take my leave," Grigori declared, aiming a scowl in my direction.

Hat-trick! Go me. I wasn't sure what prompted my third glare of the day when Tyco was the one who had started the conversation, but I wasn't about to delay the professor to ask.

"Not much to tell," I said with a shrug once the bearded man had left the room. "A small pack of wolves attacked me while I was out in the desert. No reason, no warning."

"Hang on, you were alone? Fighting wolves?"

Tyco stared at me as if he couldn't decide whether I was pulling his leg or had suddenly turned into the biggest badass in the room.

"I have a protective suit for field work. It kept me alive, and I was lucky enough to have a friend show up to help."

"Must be one hell of a suit," Chelsea commented, giving me an appraising look. "Nibel wolves can be vicious."

"It is," I confirmed with a proud grin. "Not only protects, but can analyze the environment too. It's got sensors, spectrometers, that sort of thing."

The woman perked up and a calculating glint lit up in her eyes.

"Is that so? We could use that," she mused, glancing at Jonuel, her intern. "I've been wanting to get some readings deeper inside the dead zone, but it's too dangerous for just the two of us. Would you mind giving us a hand?"

"What kind of dangerous?"

"Rabid packs of Kalm fangs, mostly, so it'll be right up your alley," she said with a half a smile. "A few larger beasties from time to time, but nothing we can't handle with keen eyes and a big enough gun."
I was beginning to like this woman.

"Sure, I'm up for that. I'd love a chance to get out and stretch Sparky's legs."

The woman gave me a funny look.

"...Sparky?"

"Uh, my suit," I explained with a sheepish laugh. "It's a long story."

"Well, you can tell us all about it during our ride to the badlands," Chelsea said, rising to her feet. "I'll give you a call later, once I've ironed out all the details."

As the rest of us followed suit and began gathering our things, she spoke up again.

"Where are you from, Tess? Judging by your accent, you didn't grow up in Cosmo Canyon."

A sheet of paper slipped from my frozen fingers and landed on the floor.

"Banora, wasn't it?" Tyco supplied while I dove down to pick it up.

"That's right," I said, keeping my eyes aimed down at the bag as I stuffed my notes into it.

"Oh, okay," Chelsea said. "It didn't strike me as a Mideel accent either. Wasn't one of the SOLDIER Firsts from Banora?"

"Two of them, actually," Tyco corrected.

"My parents moved around all the time when I was small," I blurted out before the conversation could veer deeper into unknown territory. "I'm afraid my accent got muddled."

I'm afraid...? My words were odd, my speech too rushed. If I could tell, so could they.

"I guess you've seen a lot of the world, then?" Tyco wondered.

"Not as much as I'd like," I said with a tight smile, hurrying to the door. "Sorry to dash off like this, but I have plans tonight. See you next week!"

"Have a good weekend!" the assistant called after me through the closing door.

I didn't slow my pace until I was a block away. My heart thumped against my ribs, hard enough that I feared it would be heard by passers-by. In the melting pot that Cosmo Canyon had become, my accent was just one more in the dozens you would hear on an average day. Nobody had remarked on it there. I had to be more careful here, better prepared. If only Reno could have stayed. After that scare, I could have used a friendly ear and his shrewd advice.

I headed for a pub farther afield to give myself space to calm down. As I made my way to the Three Barrels on the other side of the square, I distracted myself with less touchy topics, such as Tyco's tidbit of news from Edge. First Nibel wolves and now those kiel... whatevers? Animal behavior had not been one of my specialties back on Earth. I knew even less about the strange creatures of Gaia, but these unusual animal sightings nagged at me, as if they should be reminding me of something.

The pub was dim, but cozy and inviting. The after-work crowd had begun to trickle in, filling the space with a pleasant murmur. At the bar counter, I gave the menu a cursory glance, checking the second item on the list. I was working my way down several menus in the neighborhood, one meal
at a time. As useless as I was in my own kitchen, I had plenty of appreciation for the abundance of
flavors on this planet.

The barkeep was busy taking the orders of a small group that had come in before me. As I waited
for my turn, I let my gaze wander across the wood-paneled room, scanning the faces with vague
interest.

My breath caught when I saw him. His back was turned to me, but there was no mistaking that
shock of scarlet hair. Reno sat at one of the smaller tables in one corner, chatting to a woman in a
red dress. They sat close to each other, legs and elbows touching. Judging by her titters and her
lingering glances, the attention was not unwelcome. A queasy feeling surged through me.

As he leaned in to say something in her ear, his hand found her lower back. It drew a small, languid
circle, then traveled lower over her hip. I just stared, unwilling to believe my eyes.

"Hi there!" the bartender greeted, tearing my attention from the pair. "What can I getcha?"

My stomach churned at the thought of food.

"Sorry, I... I just realized I need to be somewhere else."

I turned on my heel and fled out into the warm summer's evening. My heart hung heavy and solid,
a lump of lead in my chest. It was ridiculous. No strings attached. He had said so. I had agreed. I
knew what it meant.

You're not special.

It wasn't just that, though. I had suggested we meet up after work. What was wrong with my
company? Why would he choose that woman over me?

Prettier. Younger. Sexier. My brain had no trouble coming up with answers. In my mind's eye, I
saw his fingers skim down her arm. I saw him lean in to murmur some comment that was too
intimate for others to hear. Her smile, shy and inviting at the same time. His hand caressing the
small of her back, sliding lower.

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, as if that could banish the images. He didn't treat me like that. He
had never gone to such effort to woo me.

Why would he? You threw yourself at him.

Shame roiled in my gut. What had I been thinking? What the hell was I doing? This was getting far
too close to my years as a foolish undergraduate, desperate for distractions from a tomorrow that
might not come. Hadn't I grown out of this by now?

An easy lay, that's all you are. Some things never change.

He had claimed he was working. He had lied to me. Maybe the lie had been meant as a white one,
but it cut deep, slicing into the leaden lump in my chest until blood oozed out. He had lied to me
and here I was, pining for the man like some pathetic, lovesick adolescent.

My lip curled, baring my teeth in a sneer. Adolescent? I had swallowed the lies of my former fiancé
easily enough a couple of years ago. This wasn't naïveté. I was just too stupid to learn, that was all.

Well, no more. I didn't need him. I didn't need anyone.
You don’t have anyone.
The night teemed with uneasy dreams, but waking up to reality was no improvement. The weekend stretched out before me like the badlands around Midgar. For the duration of one drawn-out meeting, I had entertained the thought of calling Reno to ask about his weekend plans. It seemed all other ideas had died along with that hope. I had no energy. No enthusiasm. I just felt empty.

By noon, the empty had become a cesspool of emotion. *You don't need him*, I reminded myself as I forced myself out of bed in a fit of loathing. *You don't need him!* I repeated the line like a mantra until I had made myself presentable, then purged my head of all thoughts of him.

In my bag was the plain brown envelope Grigori had handed me the day before, containing my first week's pay. So quaint, this dealing with paper money. To be fair, though, this particular oddity wasn't due to Gaia's level of technology; the banking systems had gone haywire when online communications crashed during Meteorfall, and the collapse of several Midgar banks only added to the troubles. I transferred the bills to my wallet. I had a plan for my gil.

"Right," I declared with excessive pep, addressing the plywood box masquerading as a chair. "You, my butt-ugly friend, are out of here."

Juggling the box through the front door was harder than I had expected. I was so preoccupied with my task that I missed my audience until I heard a voice right beside me.

"So, you're our new neighbor."

It wasn't a friendly greeting; more like a statement colored by a touch of disappointment. A thin woman stood on the other side of the low brick wall separating our front yards, arms crossed over her chest. Gray strands wove through the brown of her hair.

With a polite smile, I shuffled the box around so that I could offer my hand.

"That's right. I'm Therèse FitzEvan. I moved in last week."

"I know," she said with a limp handshake. "I'm Elizabeth Cole. I've lived here with my husband for ten years."

"Oh, I see. Pleased to meet you."

She peered up at the house, scanning the facade with narrowed eyes.

"The Odells lived in that house for ten years, too."

"Is that so?" I offered, unsure of how to respond to such a comment.

"They lost their daughter during Meteorfall. Their son died of Geostigma last month."

"That's terrible."

My feigned cheer had evaporated. I knew all too well what it was like to lose family.

The woman's head bobbed up and down in a slow nod as she returned her attention to me.

"They were good people, the Odells. Good people."
And I was probably not, in Mrs. Cole's opinion, judging by the mistrustful stare that scrutinized my person. Had the Coles been home the day I moved in? I wondered how soundproof the walls were.

The stab in my chest felt physical. It had been a happy memory. All it did now was remind me of what I had witnessed the previous night.

The woman went back inside her house, leaving me with a vague sense of guilt to accompany my dashed hopes. As much as I wanted to drop my dumb box and crawl back into my undeserved house, I pushed myself onward.

By the end of my street, my arms had enough. I left the plywood box on the corner, with a note saying "Enjoy!".

The market was in full swing. I weaved my way through the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of the wares on display. There were so many people. So many faces I didn't know.

It was such a relief to spot the unmistakable combination of argyle vest and blond ponytail. Tyco was talking to a young woman with long bronze hair that hung free over her shoulders. Girlfriend, maybe? She kept her arms folded over her chest, and wore a grave expression as she listened. I dawdled along in their direction, unsure of whether or not to go over and say hi. If the look on the woman's face was anything to go by, I might be intruding at a bad time.

My stalling solved the dilemma. After looking over the knickknacks in the last stall of the row, I glanced their way just in time to see her leave.

"Take care, sis," I heard him call after her.

So much for the girlfriend theory. To be fair, it was an easy mistake. Appearance-wise, a slim build was the only trait they had in common.

"Hi, Tyco."

The young man spun around, his eyes wide.

"Oh! Hello, Doctor. Didn't notice you there."

"Was that your sister?" I asked, nodding toward the cascade of auburn locks, swaying in time with the girl's footsteps.

"Huh?" His eyes lit up with understanding once he followed my gaze. "Oh, yes, that's right. She's here to visit me for the weekend."

"Does she live in, um... Bone Village, right?"

"Bone Village is right, but no, she doesn't live there."

"Where, then?"

Tyco slid his hands into his pockets and looked after the woman again, a slight frown on his face.

"Nowhere, really. After Meteorfall, she decided to follow her dreams of traveling the Planet. I guess she hasn't found a new place to settle down in yet."

"Kalm isn't to her liking then?"

"Afraid not. Much too 'calm' for her tastes."
I smiled, more because of his goofy grin than the joke itself. Then the silence grew too long and my face too stiff. Every possible remark that popped into my head seemed like a minefield of ways to betray my otherness.

Finally Tyco cleared his throat and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

"Well, I need to head back to the station. Enjoy the fair."

"Thanks," I said, faking a bright smile. "See you Monday."

As I looked around, trying to figure out where to go next, an enticing scent drew my attention. The pang in my belly reminded me that I hadn't had any breakfast, so I followed my nose. Roasted luchile nuts, said the hand-lettered sign on the stand that sold them. They tasted a bit like almonds. I wondered if Reno had tried them.

The new twist in my gut had nothing to do with hunger. I shoved the nuts in my bag and dove into the market. I chattered with sellers, peppering them with questions about their business. Produce was plentiful, thanks to the farms in the surrounding countryside. Shame I didn't know what to do with any of it. I didn't dare ask for cooking tips. Even if I had, I wouldn't have known what to do with the answers.

Some vendors were local craftspeople; I picked up a handsome chair from a carpenter who boasted ten years of woodworking in his workshop a few blocks away. Most were from Kalm's shantytown, though. I bought a few of their wares without even trying to haggle.

In less time than I had expected, I was heading back home. There was little else for me to do. It would have been weird to tour the stalls for a second round of small talk.

Back in my kitchen, I moved the plant I had brought from Cosmo Canyon into its newly-acquired flowerpot. I ran my fingertips over the tiny leaves. The trunk and branches were woody and gnarled, but little grey hairs covered the leaves, making them shine silver when the light hit just right. Contrasted with the red sand of the canyon, they were truly beautiful.

I missed the desert. I missed the freedom of racing through the hard-packed sand in that rusty buggy of mine, finding new nooks and crannies to explore. Above all, I missed Nanaki. I missed our late-night conversations, huddled up by the Cosmo Candle at night or sitting outside his grandfather's observatory, high above the village. He had spoken of his mother and father, of being the only one of his kind. I had related in silence. I had told him about my incarceration at Shinra HQ, including my nightmarish encounter with Hojo. He had talked of similar experiences of his own.

Nanaki didn't know everything about me, but he knew more than most. I didn't need to watch my words in his presence. Not like this place, where I had been lying through my teeth from day one.

I had seen Nanaki make phone calls before, with the aid of the Starlet's public phone and bartender. It would be good to catch up with him again. Then again, Nanaki had probably set out already, like he had planned. Yes, he must have been beyond my reach by now, but maybe I could call--

I dismissed that thought before it had fully formed. There was even less use mulling over that option. Reno wasn't interested in spending time with me, that much was clear. I wasn't even worth the courtesy of a single drink. Apparently all I was good for was a quick fuck before the next one in line.

I slammed the newly-potted plant on the kitchen table by the window, then squeezed my eyes shut.
for several ragged breaths. Once my breathing eased, I let my gaze dart around the kitchen. My fingers tapped the table in an erratic staccato. It was only two in the afternoon. How slow could a Saturday be?

Maybe I could find something to do at the office. It wasn't like going into work on a day off, not really. It was a house with a nice garden and fiction on the bookshelves. Tyco lived there. With any luck, I might run into him again. Maybe meet his sister.

I entered the premises through the back yard. A gravel path cut through the garden, lined with birches and wide enough for the quad bike that served as our field trip vehicle. I had hoped the bike would be present, but the shed serving as its garage was empty. Chelsea and Jonuel were using it this weekend. The main building was empty, too. I ambled through the rooms downstairs, inspecting lab equipment and straightening piles of books and folders. Eventually, I made my way to my office upstairs and sank into my luxurious chair.

I eyed the clunky computer on my desk. If only the Worldwide Network had been available. It had been down since Meteorfall and would remain that way for many months, according to Reeve.

Ten minutes later I was composing a wish list for the laboratory. If Grigori was the man to ask about theory and statistics, and Chelsea knew all about field work, then I was the resident tech expert. I didn't have anything outrageous planned; just number of basic, sensible items every lab should have, along with a couple of gadgets tailored for our work. Then again, I also considered a fridge that kept track of its contents a basic, sensible appliance every kitchen should have, yet the concept had boggled Reno's mind.

Gritting my teeth, I shoved him out of my head. Again.

I checked the list, pursing my lips in thought. Maybe it would be best to start off with an enquiry as to what was available. My edgy Edge contact, Orin Faro, ought to be able to help me with that; Edge was the technical hub for the WRO's research and development efforts.

I had already reached for the phone when it occurred to me that normal people might not be too keen on work-related calls on a Saturday afternoon. I was too restless to wait, though. I fired up the computer, drumming a beat on the desk while it chugged through the startup sequence. Communications may have been patchy, but the WRO had its own network linking up its branches. Once the machine had woken up, I sent off a short enquiry.

Imagine my surprise when a notification flashed on the screen two minutes later, signaling the arrival of a reply, complete with a list of available equipment.

I typed up a thank you note.

Thank you for the speedy reply! I didn't expect one until Monday, nor such a biology-specific list. I'll read over it and get back to you next week.

The reply was quick to arrive.

My pleasure. I often work on weekends, so it's no bother. If you need something that isn't on the list, just ask. I used to work in biological research myself, so I can translate what you need into tech-speak for the others here. :)

He hadn't mentioned it in our meeting; I would have remembered a detail like that. Curious, I sent another message.

Thanks, I'll keep it in mind. So, another biologist, eh? How did you end up working at the WRO's tech R&D?
So it continued. It seemed written communication suited Orin, for his messages were often clever and humorous. I hardly recognized the shy, stuttering man I had met before. The exchange ended with an open invitation to the Edge office for a personal tour of the premises.

Maybe that was just what I needed. To see a bit more of the world, to meet new people. If there was one thing the past day or two had showed me, it was that my list of friends was woefully short.

I told Orin I would take him up on his offer, soon.
The Badlands

On Monday, I received a delivery from Junon. It was my hazardous environment suit, polished to a shine and better than new. I tore the package open with all the patience of a kid on Christmas and strapped on the suit straight from the box, right there in my living room. The lines of the startup sequence, spoken in the suit's monotone, felt like a greeting from an old friend.

The only visible clue of the Mako shielding at work was an iridescent shimmer that caught the light, like an intangible film of oil covering the surface. It was a little disappointing, I mused. I had half-expected to be engulfed in tendrils of shiny magic.

Tuesday had a less auspicious start. Ignoring my protests, Grigori assigned me responsibility for sample analysis. On the one hand, I couldn't blame him. It was a necessary task and of all the employees at the station I was best suited for it. On the other hand, the work he had dumped on me was time-consuming, tedious and a complete waste of my abilities. More than ever, I was grateful for my impulsive decision to contact Orin at the Edge branch. If nothing else, the acquisition project would be a more meaningful use of my time while I figured out how to convince the professor that I could do more than the lab equivalent of sorting mail.

On my way to the lab, I ran into Chelsea.

"Tess, hi," she greeted. "I was hoping I'd find you here. Are you still up for a stroll through the countryside?"

"By which you mean a grueling expedition into the badlands?"

"That's right," she grinned, eyes glinting. "Jonuel and I are heading out tomorrow morning."

"Perfect timing. I just got my suit back from maintenance, so I'm ready to go."

It was something of an understatement. I was itching to go. My experiences with Cosmo Canyon's wildlife had made me leery of heading out of town without my suit, but now that I had it back, I couldn't wait to explore my new surroundings.

"All right," Chelsea said with a nod. "We'll take care of equipment, water and all that, so you just need to bring yourself and this suit of yours. A gun isn't a bad idea either, if you've got one."

"I do, yes."

"Good. We'll meet up here tomorrow at seven in the morning."

I grimaced. "I guess I was right about the grueling part."

The woman's raspy laughter was infectious, and I caught myself grinning after her.

It felt good to have a day in the field to look forward to, and even better to put the suit to use again. The strange looks from passers-by didn't affect my mood in the slightest as I made my way to the WRO station. I found my companions in the backyard, waiting next to our transport: a quad bike with trailer, both painted an earthy green. The stunned expressions on their faces amused me.

"Damn!" Chelsea snorted once I had removed my helmet. "I'm not sure what I expected, but this isn't it."
Clad in khaki shorts and a loose linen shirt over a white tee, she made me think of old-school adventurers. The hunting rifle slung over her shoulder completed the look.

"Pretty cool, huh?" I grinned, then waved to the intern. "Good morning, Jon."

Jonuel was a handsome guy in his early twenties, with olive skin that owed as much to his Costan roots as it did to having practically lived in the field for the past couple of months. My greeting made him blink a few times and stand up straighter.

"M-morning, Doctor."


He flashed a row of white teeth in a sheepish grin. "I mean Tess. Sorry."

"Well, no time like the present," Chelsea announced, donning a pair of sunglasses and a cap, turning the visor backwards. "Shall we?"

The drive to our first checkpoint took about forty minutes. The intern and I sat in the trailer, so I spent the time learning more about him and his hometown. Jonuel's shyness meant I asked most of the questions. It was a relief to be in control of the conversation.

A dirt road cut through the grassy fields outside the nearest gate and led straight to the edge of the Midgar wasteland. The transition was startling. The grass came to an abrupt end as fertile soil was replaced by dust and blackened sand. The occasional hardy weed ventured to reclaim the badlands by the border, but a few steps in the dead zone took over, desiccated and lifeless as far as the eye could see. I recalled the picture Reeve had showed me back at Shinra HQ all those months ago. He had been right to worry. This desolation wasn't natural.

The goal was to gather soil samples at specific locations. My role was to use Sparky for preliminary analysis. The results would later be compared – and hopefully confirmed – by equivalent tests in the lab. We began sampling along the rim of the dead zone, continuing the task Chelsea and Jonuel had worked on for weeks. The physical labor was light and most of the time was spent traveling, giving us all a chance to enjoy the sunny weather. Half of the scenery wasn't bad either.

Some four hours later, Jonuel and I secured the latest batch of samples in the trailer while Chelsea checked her list of target locations.

"Okay, that's the perimeter done. Time to head into the badlands. Keep your eyes open, because this is where it gets dangerous."

I scanned the bleak landscape, pursing my lips in concern. Our trip had been peaceful so far, but if something happened, they would be the ones in greater danger.

"Maybe I should go alone? I know the procedure by now."

Chelsea had already taken the driver's seat, but sat back and raised her eyebrows, giving me a dubious look.

"That suit of yours is pretty fancy, but I doubt it makes you invincible."

"True, but I've been told it doesn't smell very delicious. Back in Cosmo Canyon, most of the wildlife ignored me."
Chelsea shook her head.

"There's plenty of territorial critters out here that don't care how you smell, only that you're wandering into their turf. No, I say we all go. Safety in numbers."

I shrugged and climbed onto the trailer.

"Well, you know the area."

As Chelsea steered us to our next checkpoint, I checked my rifle then let it rest on my knees as I sat on the edge of the trailer. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the intern mimic my actions and couldn't help but notice the unsteadiness of his hands. The poor guy looked decidedly pale.

"Have you ever run into trouble out here?" I asked him.

"No," he admitted, wetting his lips, "but we've never been this deep into the badlands before."

"Don't worry. We've got each other's backs, right?"

As soon as I said it I winced and looked away, hoping he hadn't noticed my expression. I had made the mistake of paraphrasing one of Reno's favorite lines. I had been doing so well, too. I had gone half a day without dwelling on him.

The first and second sampling inside the dead zone went without a hitch. Our third and last location was a new environment, an old river bed. Instead of fine hard-packed dirt, the ground consisted of pebbles interspersed with larger rocks, some as large as boulders. Jonuel stayed at the top of the bank near the quad bike, while Chelsea and I dug through the gravel to get at the soil below.

I had just finished a preliminary analysis, when Jonuel called out.

"Bugs!"

The panic in the man's voice made us both snap our heads up. Following his outstretched arm, I saw a group of insectile creatures about waist-high, their blue-black segmented bodies gleaming dully in the sunlight. They slithered like snakes, occasionally using two serrated limbs to push themselves off the ground and lunge forward with startling speed, and were advancing on us down the riverbed in an undulating wave.

"Grashtrikes!" Chelsea shouted, alarmed. "Start shooting!"

Jonuel ran to the edge of the bank as I yanked the rifle off my shoulder. He fired two shots, but they went wide. Chelsea had already taken a couple of steps up toward the quad bike, but swore and changed direction, heading toward her intern. I kicked my feet deeper into the gravel for a firm footing and raised my rifle, turning my attention toward the threat. I couldn't worry about my companions right now. It was better to have them at a safe distance anyway, in case I needed to set off Sparky's power surge.

My first shot missed, throwing up a spray of dust to the left of my mark. So did the second. Just after, a shot rang out on my right and the impact flung one of the beasts backward. Another sent a grashtrike thrashing on the ground. Chancing a sideways glance, I found that Chelsea was now wielding the other rifle.

"Get to the bike!" she yelled to Jonuel, reloading. "Start it up!"
As the intern obeyed her command, I took aim and fired for the third time. Luck was on my side. My target exploded, splashing black gore across the rocks and sending its screeching companions skittering to the sides.

"Keep going! Scare them off!"

My fourth was another miss, but the fifth resulted in another bug explosion. That was enough for the grashtrikes. They scattered, disappearing among the boulders as quickly as they had appeared. I lowered my rifle, peeling my tongue off the top of my dry mouth to draw in deep gulps of air. That had been my last round.

A scream rang out behind me and I whirled around to see Jonuel crash to the ground, pushed off the quad bike by one of the giant insects. Two more followed close behind, knocking over the bike as they lunged for the defenseless man. Jonuel scrambled backwards in a frantic panic to escape the claws of the first grashtrike, yelling in a language I didn't understand.

I dropped the rifle and ran. I heard Chelsea shout something and crack off more shots, but my eyes were riveted to the man on the ground. I was seconds away when the insect plunged its pointed tail into his stomach. He wailed as it went in. I screamed. I grabbed its tail and hooked my arm around its neck and tore the hissing thing off its victim.

Now what?! I couldn't let the creature go, but Chelsea couldn't shoot it while I was so close. Acting more on desperation than rational thought, I adjusted my grip on the thrashing tail and pulled. The grashtrike screeched and pummeled my torso with its clawed appendages, but it had no room for leverage. I kept pulling. The suit's servos began to whine and the insect writhed in a wild frenzy, a wordless yell tore from my throat and then there was a horrible, wet ripping sound. I flung the tail away, dropped the dying grashtrike and brought my foot down on its tiny head, ending its agony.

The next second I was clawing at the seal of my helmet and yanked it off, dropping my head down between my knees to fight the nausea. I squeezed my eyes shut to block out the still-twitching carcass, but the smell was almost too much for me. I coughed and sputtered, but in the end I kept my lunch down.

When I was able to look up again, Chelsea was kneeling next to Jonuel.

"How is he?" I croaked, straightening up.

"He needs healing," she said in an even but urgent voice, pulling off her shirt and pressing it to the intern's abdomen. "Stay with him. I'll get the first-aid."

She got to her feet and ran toward the upturned quad bike. Jonuel lay on his back, staring up at the sky with unfocused eyes, his breath coming in shallow, panicked gasps. His hands pressed down on Chelsea's shirt, the beige fabric already turning red.

Once I stepped into his field of vision, his gaze locked with mine.

"Holy shit," he panted as I dropped down to one knee. "You... Th-the thing..."

"It's all right, Jon," I soothed as best I could with my raw throat, placing a hand on top of one of his. "It's gone now."

"Yes! Y-you... You just..."

He stared at me as if he was physically unable to tear his eyes away.
"Shh, don't speak. Just – breathe in..." I inhaled, and to my relief he made an effort to copy my example. ". . . and out. Yeah, just like that. Just keep breathing. It'll be okay."

His brown eyes were huge and fixed on my face, making it easy to see that his pupils were dilated and the whites were becoming bloodshot. He was pale as a sheet, his skin clammy with sweat. I glanced over toward the quad bike and saw my colleague hunched over by it, trying to reach something underneath the vehicle. I schooled the frown off of my face, then turned back to the young man.

"I'll help Chelsea find the potions and then we'll fix you up, good as new. Just breathe and keep the pressure on here, okay?"

I patted the hand holding the bloodied shirt in place and he nodded.

"I'll be right back," I promised.

A grim-looking Chelsea was on her way back to us, though. As soon as we made eye contact, she stopped and waved me over. I met up with her halfway to the bike and took the bottle of water she offered.

"The first-aid kit was knocked open when the quad bike fell over," she informed me in a low voice while I rinsed my mouth."The potion vials broke and we don't have any Cures."

"Shit!" I took a few shaky breaths, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. Despite my efforts to show a calm face in front of the intern, my mind was racing as madly as my heart. "The ampoules! My suit has hi-potion ampoules, we can use them!"

It was too risky to remove my torso armor in the open like this, so I instructed Chelsea on how to open the panel over the gadgetry housed in the back. Within a few minutes, she had retrieved the ampoule rack. It was shaped like a trio of revolver cylinders side by side, each with six chambers. I popped out one of the green ampoules and handed it to Chelsea, who gave it a dubious look.

"There's not much of it, is there?"

"It's supposed to be injected, but try pouring it straight into the wound," I suggested. "He won't like it much, but it's better than bleeding out."

"All right."

She kneeled down beside her intern and pushed his hands and her shirt aside.

"Okay, Jon," she said, "this will sting a lot, but it's a good hurt."

By now, Jonuel was barely conscious. I took up position by his head, placing my hands on his shoulders. When I nodded, Chelsea broke the seal of the ampoule and let the contents trickle straight into the wound.

Two seconds later, his whole body went rigid and his back arched up from the ground. Holding him down was easy with Sparky's help, but Chelsea had more trouble with his arms.

"Easy, Jonuel!" she urged, raising her voice to be heard over his pained groan. "Stay still!"

He likely never heard her, but a few moments later he went limp. Chelsea checked his pulse, then pulled up an eyelid.
"Out cold, poor thing," she mumbled, then turned her attention to the wound. The flesh was knitting itself back together before our eyes, the skin stretching to reseal the tear. It was one of the freakiest sights I had ever witnessed.

"Well, that took care of one problem," she sighed. "Now we need to figure out what to do about the venom."

"Those things are poisonous?"

"Yeah, and the venom's a nasty one. He needs a hospital and fast."

"The purple ampoules have remedy," I said, pointing at the rack on the ground. "That's a general antidote, right?"

Chelsea shook her head.

"The trouble is, it's not a real poison as such. It's more like digestive fluid. Remedy won't work on that. The hi-potions keep the damage under control, but it won't be over until the grashtrike juice is out of his system."

"So how long will that take?"

She was quiet for a while, watching the unconscious intern on the ground.

"Too long," she whispered, then cleared her throat before continuing. "We'll run out of ampoules long before we get back to Kalm, or before Grigori can send someone for us."

Her shoulders sagged and a broken look had settled in her eyes. The woman looked ready to admit defeat already. I wasn't about to let her. I spun in a restless circle, scanning the desolate scenery for anything that might offer ideas, until my eyes landed on the silhouette of a manmade structure, nothing more than a ragged dot on the horizon. The ruins of Shinra HQ.

*Call him.*

"Let's head for the main road," I suggested. "We'll flag someone down. They might have a first aid kit or a faster car."

The trailer would only slow us down. With an unconscious Jonuel cradled in my arms and my colleague driving the quad bike, we aimed for the road between Kalm and Edge. We didn't get far before he started convulsing and we had to stop to give him another dose of hi-potion.

"It won't work!" Chelsea wailed, halfway between anger and desperation. "We can't get him there like this. We don't even know if anyone will come by!"

*Call him.*

I didn't need him. I didn't want his help. Why would he help us, anyway? Reno had better things to do. Too busy with "work". There had to be another way.

But Jonuel lay still on the ground and his face was ashen. Frothy saliva leaked from the corner of his mouth and dribbled down his chin.

*Call him!*

"Keep an eye on him," I growled, shooting up to my feet. "It's not over yet."
A glimmer of hope crept into the other woman's expression.

"What are you up to, Tess?"

"Edge!" I called over my shoulder, grabbing my bag from the quad bike. "Edge is closer than Kalm!"

To my relief, the phone was intact. I dialed his number, then paced in a tight circle as the dial tone kept ringing. I didn't dare breathe, until I heard the lazy drawl come in over the phone's speaker.

"Hey, babe, whassup?"

His voice was flirtatious. He hadn't noticed my silence over the past few days. Of course he hadn't. Why would he? I swallowed hard, forcing down my pride.

"Reno, I need your help."

There were a couple of seconds of silence. When he spoke next, the playful tone was gone.

"Tell me."
We tried making for Edge, but got an even shorter distance before Jonuel needed more hi-potion. We didn't try to move a third time.

"He's using them up fast," Chelsea remarked after emptying the contents of the fourth ampoule into the intern's mouth.

"They're meant to be injected," I sighed. "They won't be as effective this way."

"Did your friend say how long it would take to send help?"

The healing potion had put an end to the convulsions, but it didn't bring the color back to Jonuel's cheeks or remove the rattle in his lungs. The froth oozing out of his mouth had turned pink.

If he died, it was on me. Had I called sooner, help might have arrived already.

"No. We just have to wait."

She tutted and sat back on her heels, rubbing her eyes.

"Goddamn bugs. I didn't see this coming at all. Grashtrikes don't usually come this far east."

I hummed in response, racking my brain for some sort of conversation to distract us. Her comment reminded me of something.

"Is it like those ki– Uh, other insects from the Nibel mountains?" I wondered. "You know, the ones Tyco brough up last week?"

"What? Kiyvilduns? No, that's something else. Those never leave the mountains, but grashtrikes are known to wander from time to time." She huffed. "Shiva's tits, I should've known this could happen. I should've prepared better."

"It's not your fault. You can't foresee every eventuality."

It was mine, now. My fault. Jonuel was dying and it was my goddammed fault.

Chelsea didn't reply. I, too, retreated into silence, knowing my words were slim comfort at this stage. While she kept an eye on Jonuel, I climbed the quad bike for a better vantage point, to keep an eye out for potential threats and for our rescue. It wasn't enough to escape his struggle for air, though. Each labored gasp felt like nails on a chalkboard.

Ten minutes later, Jonuel was convulsing again. Chelsea administered his fifth dose. Far too soon, he needed another one.

"Last one," the woman said, letting the empty ampoule fall to the ground.

What the hell was wrong with me? I should have called Reno right away. My pride wasn't worth much these days. It was nothing compared to someone's life.

"Is there anything else we could use to slow the poison?" I asked. "Anything at all?"
"Like what?" she snapped. "We have nothing that--"

She cut herself off and whipped her head around. I heard it too; the distant vibration of a helicopter's rotor. I grabbed a flare off the back of the bike, set it off and threw it down near us, just as Reno had instructed. It blazed a red target against the blackened ground while we waited with bated breaths. The thrum grew louder and louder, and soon, we could both make out the dark silhouette flying low against the horizon. Chelsea let out a delighted squeal and began to jump up and down, waving her arms around.

"They made it!" she yelled. "I didn't bloody believe they'd get to us in time, but they made it!"

The helicopter came down a short distance from us, kicking up a cloud of dust. The side door slid open as soon as the wheels touched and a woman in a blue coat jumped out. She approached us at a low run, medical bag in hand.

"Dr. Lin Uzuki," she yelled over the din of the chopper as she knelt down beside Jonuel. "A grashtrike did this, right?"

"That's right," Chelsea confirmed. "We've been keeping the damage in check with concentrated hi-potion."

I stepped back to give the two room to operate. My colleague described the injuries while the doctor held out some kind of instrument. Soon, a glowing green light enveloped the motionless body on the ground. My attention was glued to the trio, so I jumped when I heard his voice shout right beside me.

"Hey!"

I whirled around and met a pair of concerned eyes, framed by red curved lines.

"Reno," I breathed.

"The one and only," he yelled with a quick grin, even though he couldn't have heard me. "You okay, Fitz?"

I snapped my gaze away from him toward the limp body on the ground.

"I'm fine. It's Jonuel who needs help."

"Reno," the doctor called. "We need to take off right away. Take us straight to Edge General."

"Gotcha!"

The Turk passed me the stretcher he was carrying, then hurried back to the helicopter while I set about helping the other two with the injured man. Together we got him strapped onto the stretcher and carried into the chopper. As the doctor secured him in place, I noticed Chelsea had not followed us in. Leaning out through the door, I found her standing outside, looking at the helicopter.

"Chelsea, we have to go!"

She didn't reply. Her eyes were fixed on the red Shinra diamond on the side of the aircraft as something like repulsion spread across her face.

"Chelsea!"
It wasn't until I hopped out and tapped her shoulder that she flinched out of her daze.

"We need to go," I urged. "Come on!"

I took a step toward the door, expecting her to follow, but she shook her head.

"I'll... I'll take the quad bike back. You go with Jon."

"What? By *yourself*?"

Reno cracked open the cockpit door and poked his head out, his ponytail fluttering in the wind of the whirring blades.

"You guys comin' or not?" he yelled.

As he watched us something twisted in the Turk's expression. His gaze hardened to a glare, aimed at my colleague.

"I'll be fine," Chelsea said, sending a dark look at the helicopter's pilot. "Now get going already! You're wasting time!"

Reno slammed the door shut. Chelsea turned around and hurried back to the quad bike in a crouching run. I stared after her for a few moments, my mouth opening and closing, but realized she was right. There was no time to argue or puzzle over their reactions to each other. With a growl of frustration, I hopped onto the chopper and slid the door closed. The doctor banged on the wall to signal Reno. The next minute we were in the air, bound for Edge.

Jonuel was laid across a row of seats. As I helped the doctor place a blanket over him, he grabbed my arm. I had to bend down to hear his labored whispers over the roar of the helicopter in flight.

"Will you tell my family what happened? If I don't make it?"

"I won't have to, Jon," I tried to assure him. "You're going to be okay."

I couldn't feel his grip tighten through the armor, but I saw the knuckles turn whiter.

"Please, tell them!" he insisted.

"You can tell them all about—"

"Tess, please!"

I started with a gasp. It was a different voice that rang out in my head, but the words and the desperation were the same. Seconds passed while I just stared down at Jonuel, seeing another face before my eyes. *You'll die!* it wailed. *We'll all die!*

But I hadn't died. I hadn't died.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pulled away, dropping down to my knees while my head spun. When I opened them again, Jonuel had slipped back into unconsciousness, and the doctor was giving me an odd look.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lied. "I'm fine."
She didn't look convinced, but didn't press me either.

I knew that it hadn't been real. I knew that I was on Gaia now – or did I? My body didn't. My heart was racing as if I was still back on Earth, still running through the underground labs of Cobalt.

Maybe my body was there, but my mind wasn't. I wasn't there. I was here. Wasn't I? My gaze roamed the hold, trying to find something to ground myself in reality. The hold was unfamiliar; I had travelled up front before. I didn't know the doctor. Jonuel... I couldn't bring myself to look at him. The smells were strange. I was aware of the vibrations through my seat, but they were muted. Distant. The only thing I could feel, the only thing that felt real, was my suit.

My pulse slowed, but the dislocation remained. The rest of the flight was a blur. When we landed, and I hopped out onto the roof of Edge Central, the half-constructed cityscape around us seemed more like a figment of my imagination. Struggling to stay in the present, I turned away, only to find that hospital staff were already wheeling Jonuel toward the entrance. I made to follow, but Dr. Uzuki stopped me before I could catch up with them.

"I'm sorry, but you can't come in here like that."

"What do you mean?" I snapped, wound too tight to think straight.

"She's right, Fitz," Reno piped up. "Hate to say it, but you really need a shower."

I looked down at my hazard suit, caked in black wasteland grime and spattered with insect guts.

"More like decontamination," I muttered with a grimace.

My shoulders slumped in defeat. I stepped away from the door, and hid my eyes behind my gloved hand as the weight of the day fell on me. I was exhausted. Utterly exhausted.

"I'll keep tabs on him," the doctor promised. "The best you can do right now is get some rest and come back tomorrow. It will take some time before the toxin leaves his system."

"Yeah, okay," I mumbled. "And thanks. For everything."

The doctor disappeared into the building. I spent several seconds staring at the door that swung shut behind her.

"So, what now?" Reno asked.

I just sighed and raised my hands in a half-hearted gesture. Since they wouldn't let me into the hospital, I was stuck in an unfamiliar town with nowhere to go. All I had was my suit, my rifle and my phone.

"If you need somewhere to clean up and stay the night, there's a place just a few blocks away," he suggested.

"I didn't bring my wallet."

"You won't need it. It ain't a hotel or anythin', just an apartment that belongs to Shinra. Us Turks use it when we're in town."

I was too weary to think about possible consequences. I could barely muster up a faint smile.

"Okay. Thanks, Reno."
He nodded toward the helipad.

"All right, hop back in then. Gotta park the bird somewhere else first, yo."

Reno left the helicopter at some private airfield. Shinra-owned, I presumed. I wasn't paying attention, really. It was impossible to miss the stares I received on the walk from the car to the apartment, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Maybe I should have. It would have been an easy way out, to focus on lesser worries.

Reno let me into the apartment, then excused himself, saying he had work to finish up. The guilt I felt for disrupting his day was a drop in the ocean. I spent a few minutes trying to reach the Kalm office, but the calls wouldn't go through. I gave up and headed to the bathroom, where I struggled out of the suit, trying to avoid both the disgusting goo that covered it and the painful twinge that shot through my shoulder whenever I made a wrong move. I must have pulled a muscle in the heat of battle.

Heat of battle. Christ. This was so not what I had signed up for when I enrolled in biology all those years ago. I wondered whether my old professor would be aghast or amused by my newfound skills at dismantling wildlife.

Unbidden, memories of the old days bubbled back up into my mind. My days at university. The labs at Cobalt. James.

_Tess, please! We'll all die!_

I slapped the water on, twisting the knobs until it beat down on me at full blast. I shoved my head in under the torrent, lifting my face upward. I cranked the heat up to the limits of what I could take, and then cranked it up some more.

The doubts were always ready to creep in the second my control faltered; the little whispers in the back of my mind, that I had made the wrong choice, that I should have found some other way, that I was to blame. And now, when I closed my eyes and I saw Jonuel's pallid face, that nagging voice returned, stronger than ever. I should have come up with better arguments. I should have gone in alone. I should have called sooner.

The click of the bathroom door brought me back to reality. I found myself hunched forward with both palms pressed against the shower wall, the tiles cold to the touch compared to the scalding water battering my neck and back. I turned my head a fraction, enough to see through the fogged-up glass of the stall door. On the other side, I made out a dark shape against the white wall, topped by red.

"Want some company?"

His voice was loud enough to be heard over the steady patter against the floor, but quieter than I would have expected. His question made me pause.

Of course I wanted it. As pathetic as it made me, I craved it. I wanted to feel him, taste him, be touched and be filled by him, until my mind was purged of everything that wasn't his body on mine. But... was it wrong of me to want it, when Jonuel was--

_Don't think. Don't think!_

But the water just wasn't hot enough.

I pushed the glass door open. Reno was leaning back against the wall, his hands in his trouser
pockets. I expected a lascivious smirk and a torrent of innuendo; instead I was met by a cautious frown. He remained still for a few moments, studying my face. Only once he had pushed himself off the wall and began removing his clothes, did his eyes stray down to the wet, flushed skin of my curves. I closed mine and let my head drop between my arms.

I felt him brush against me, heard the stall door close. The heat and force of the water lowered to a humane level. He moved in behind me, but again, Reno surprised me. When he touched me, it was to wash my back. His hands were cool and slick with soap, soothing the stinging skin with gentle caresses. Moving in closer, he continued with my arms, stroking back and forth at a slow and steady pace. His chest touched my back and his chin rested on my shoulder, yet he made no move to seduce.

It wasn't enough. I twisted around in his arms and gazed up at his face, trying to convey what I wanted, what I needed, without having to say the words out loud. He stayed still, watching me with caution, but when my hands began to wander, he was quick to respond in kind. I crushed my lips to his, demanding more, and Reno gave me exactly what I asked for. We devoured each other with greedy mouths and hands, working up a carnal frenzy that shrunk the world until there was nothing in it except our bodies, joining in a frantic scuffle under the cascading water.

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone think the doctor's name was odd? I thought long and hard about it, but decided that since the country is called Wutai and the ruling family's name is Kisaragi, it only seems appropriate to gleefully mix Chinese and Japanese together.
Consequences

I woke up in an unfamiliar room, in an unfamiliar bed. I stared at the empty spot beside me, willing away the heaviness in my heart. Just this once, I had hoped he would stay. Considering the circumstances, some foolish part of me had even dared to expect it.

On the bedside table was a folded piece of paper with my name written on it in Reno's scrawl. Inside, I found a note and four twenties.

don't take it the wrong way
this is lunch money
the diner on the corner is ok
i'm sorry, won't happen again

I sighed, feeling a pang of guilt to go with the shame. He shouldn't keep apologizing. It was just as much my mistake as his, but he had been very upset last night, once the heady rush began to fade. He had almost seemed shocked, mumbling one shaky apology after another.

Yes, it bothered me too that we hadn't used protection. Of course it did. Reno had pulled out and had afterwards sworn up and down that he was clean, but taking that kind of risk... I should have known better. I did know better. Reno had been conscientious about it every previous time, but that didn't make it his sole responsibility. We had both screwed up.

The curtains were drawn and the apartment was dim, but I didn't care enough to do anything about it. The coffee machine was already prepared, ready to go. I turned it on, then watched the pitcher fill up with dark liquid. If I focused hard enough on the slow drips, the thoughts stayed away.

Once I sat at the table, though, coffee cup in hand, my mind slipped back to its earlier line of thought. I knew better. I knew the risks. Sure, I'd had all the vaccines back on Earth, but this was a different planet with different pathogens. I knew that. Why, then, wasn't I more concerned? I had suggested we both get tested to put our minds at ease, had gone through all the motions, but it had been more for his sake than mine. On the inside, I was unable to muster up the proper response. Not even the thought of an unplanned pregnancy stirred any emotion. No matter how much my brain parroted that the risk was very real, it felt distant. Hardly relevant at all.

As my thoughts drifted further down that road, a new kind of anxiety did creep in. Could I be so sure pregnancy was a possibility anymore? Hojo's genetic testing had classified me as human by Gaian standards, but based on what I had seen of the technology on this world, they couldn't have compared whole genomes in that time. My file claimed they had profiled my DNA, then focused on the gene sequences that mattered for their projects. It was a fraction of the whole genome. What about the rest? What if there were fundamental incompatibilities?

On Earth, I had spent my life resigned to the probability that I would never be a mother. With the planet in the state it was, the idea of starting a family had been an abstract hope at best. Yet the option had been there. As limited as it was, it had been a choice. The thought that I might not get a choice at all...

I shot up, scraping the chair backwards along the floor. I had to get out of here. Do something. Anything.

My hazard suit lay in pieces on the bathroom floor, just as disgusting as I had left it. I decided to clean it in the easiest way under the circumstances: I suited up and took a shower.
Forty minutes later it was clear that a shower alone was not enough to remove the worst of the dried bug entrails. The techies at the local WRO branch were bound to have something useful, though, if I could make my way over there with the suit. Wearing it wasn't a very attractive option. Even if the hazard suit had been in a presentable state, it was too conspicuous for a stroll through downtown Edge. The undersuit alone wouldn't cut it either.

The bedroom closet contained a few Turk uniforms in different sizes. The smallest one had a more feminine cut. When I lifted it out, I noticed that the fabric was both stretchier and heavier than I expected, making me wonder if it was a special weave or treated somehow. It would make sense, considering the dangers of the profession.

The pants were on the short side and too tight around the hips for comfort, but I would survive an afternoon squeezed into them. I solved the short sleeve problem by rolling them up halfway to my elbows. I didn't even bother with the jacket. I wouldn't be turning any heads, that much was certain, but the outfit wouldn't raise eyebrows either. I found a box for the chest plate and arm pieces, then spent one of Reno's twenties on a bike taxi to the WRO.

After stepping out of the pedicab, I allowed myself a few moments just to take in the sight in front of me. I had known the WRO's Edge branch was much larger than our quaint office back in Kalm, but the towering edifice of glass, steel and white-painted concrete stood out even among its big-city neighbors. Was it designed for its current purpose, I wondered, or just another lucky donation?

As I labored up the steps to the main entrance, the taste of the air in Edge began to get to me – it had a rusty, metallic tang. It must have been all the corrugated metal, and the other Midgar scrap they had salvaged for temporary housing, but it just made me think of blood. I couldn't wait to get back to Kalm's country air.

Beyond the glass doors lay a spacious lobby. It was designed to impress, but with only the receptionist's desk and a few chairs along the wall, the effect was austere bordering on unwelcoming. The receptionist was a cheerful contrast to her environment, and kind enough to call Orin for me. Only after she suggested I take a seat did it occur to me that I should have called ahead. Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long before I saw a man with dark blond hair step out of the elevator and head my way.

"Doctor FitzEvan," he smiled, glancing down at the box on the seat beside me. "What an unexpected pleasure."

Despite fidgeting with the cuffs of his ill-fitting shirt, Orin Faro seemed more at ease this time around. I supposed it helped to be on home turf.

"'Unexpected' is the word, all right," I said with an awkward laugh. "I'm sorry to bother you like this, but there was an incident yesterday."

I explained what had happened, keeping it brief.

"Oh, dear," Orin said, his brow furrowing. "Is that intern all right?"

"I don't know," I sighed. "I tried calling the hospital earlier, but they wouldn't tell me anything. I'll have to wait for visiting hours this afternoon."

"Is there anything I can do?" There was a hopeful note in his voice, and I was reminded of an eager puppy. Lucky me.

"I was hoping you could help me with something, actually. I need these cleaned."
I picked up the box to hold it out to him, and had to hide a smile at the man's expression when he saw its contents. He sniffed, trying to be discreet about it.

"Uh, what are these?"

"Parts of my hazardous environment suit. I use it in the field."

"This is a hazard suit?" Curiosity mingled with the disgust on his face as Orin peered into the box of filthy armor. "What happened to it?"

"I used it in the field," I responded with a mirthless smile. "As you heard, things didn't go according to plan."

"The... incident?" When I nodded, he pointed at the chest plate. "So this black stuff...?"

"Grastrrike guts, mostly. A pressure washer should take care of it."

He gave me dubious look.

"Uh, right. I imagine they've got one in the garage. I'll, um... I'll call and ask." It took more than one call in the end. In fact, it took longer to locate the pressure washer than for me to use it, but at the end of the ordeal, I had a box of squeaky-clean suit parts.

"I really appreciate this," I said once we were in the elevator, on our way back to the lobby. "Thank you for the help. I'll get out of your hair now."

"Well, actually..." He cleared his throat. "It's about lunch time, so I was thinking we could discuss the proposal over lunch, maybe? F-for the equipment, I mean."

I wasn't in the mood, but it would have been impolite to just say no. Besides, I needed to eat somewhere in this unfamiliar city. May as well have a guide.

"Sure," I said with a polite smile. "I could use a bite to eat."

"Great! There's a place not far from here. Uh, just leave the box in my office and we can walk there."

Lunch wasn't as awkward as I feared. His long fingers twitched whenever there was no napkin to fold or cutlery to straighten, but our conversation flowed without significant pauses. The discussion revolved around the equipment order for Kalm station, and demonstrating his authority on work matters seemed to give the man some confidence.

A bit too much of it, really, when the time came to deal with the bill.

"I'll get this," I offered, but Orin was already bringing out his wallet.

"Oh, no, there's no need."

"There's no need, no, but I'd like to," I said, reaching for the bill. "It's the least I can do after the trouble I put you through today."

"No, I insist!"

The man leaned over the table and snatched the piece of paper out of my hand.
"P-please," he added, returning to his stutter when he saw the stunned look on my face. "I prefer it this way."

I raised my hands and leaned back in the chair. If that was how it was going to be, I was happy with whichever way would bring the lunch to a quicker end.

Back at Orin's office, he offered me a ride to the hospital in the company car. I was still annoyed with him over the bill, but since taking a pedicab would have meant a longer wait, I accepted the offer.

I came to regret that decision. Orin was a careful driver, not to mention slow. Very slow. My hands itched to take over the wheel through the whole ride and we arrived at the hospital twenty minutes into visiting hours. Once inside, though, my irritation was eclipsed by the relief of hearing that Jonuel was awake and well enough to receive visitors.

As we approached the door we had been directed to, I heard a familiar Costan accent, bellowing excitedly.

"...and then she just pulls, you know? Rips the damn thing in two! Bug guts fly everywhere..."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Orin whip his head around to stare at me. No names had been named, but he had seen the state of my hazard suit.

"...but the thing just keeps twitching, so she throws it down and stomps on it! Just hops up and down 'til it's dead!"

I tried to keep a straight face as I stepped into the room. Jonuel was lying in the bed closest to the door. He was pale but full of energy, and was illustrating his tale with lively gesticulations. His audience was a nurse on the other side of the bed, so he hadn't noticed us come in.

"It was so frigging awesome!" he exclaimed. "When I get my degree, I'm gonna get one of those suits and then I'm gonna kick some grashtrike ass!"

"You realize that tearing up the wildlife you're meant to study is a poor career move for a biologist, don't you?" I deadpanned once I had stopped by the side of his bed.

The energetic patient gave a start and whirled around.

"Doctor FitzEvan," he breathed.

There was something awestruck about the way he gaped at me. A glance at Orin showed me he wasn't faring much better. Even the nurse was staring at me. For a second, I wondered where the hidden camera was.

"Hi, Jon," I greeted. "Looks like you're doing much better today."

"Jonuel is recovering well," the nurse replied in his place, when his fumblings for a reply had stretched on too long for comfort. "Dr. Uzuki said he'll be released today."

"Oh, that's great news!"

A goofy smile spread across the intern's face as he bobbed his head up and down. The situation was growing a tad awkward.

"Jon, I'd like you to meet Orin Faro. He works at the RO here in Edge."
As the two shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, my phone rang. When I saw who was calling, I excused myself and darted back into the corridor.

"Reno, hi."

"Hey yourself. Got a sec?"

My initial surge of relief petered out. To think that the lack of a pet name would put me on edge.

"Sure," I said, a bit hesitant. "What's up?"

"Rude and me are headin' to Kalm today, so thought I'd check if you and the kid need a ride?"

"Yes, actually. Your timing is perfect. Jon will be released later today."

"Thought so. Gimme a call when he's out and I'll come pick ya up."

"Thanks, Reno."

"No prob. See ya soon, yo."

I stared at the phone for a while. His voice had been distant, impersonal, and his discomfort came through in the joking and flirting he didn't do. An apprehension stirred, finally strong enough to pierce my dull bubble of detachment. Was Reno that upset with me? I slipped the PHS into a pocket, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. I could only hope we would get a chance to ease the tension during the trip back.

"... shot two of the bugs first," I heard Jonuel say as I opened the door. "They just exploded!"

"Really?" Orin asked with breathless fascination.

The urge to hide my face in my palm was overwhelming.

"Yeah! She must have, like, explosive bullets or something. Or maybe it's fire materia? Can fire materia make things explode?"

"Not materia, just a rifle that's way too big," I said, and remembered Reno's reaction to it with a wry smile. "You know, the kind that's good for behemoth hunting."

"You... hunt behemoths?" Jonuel asked in awe.

"No, it was just– Never mind. Look, I just got some good news. We've got a ride to Kalm ready to go as soon as you're released."

The corners of Orin's mouth turned down.

"Oh, you're leaving so soon?"

"Yes, I'm afraid we can't stay. We didn't pack for a weekend in Edge." I turned to Jonuel. "I'll go suit up. Give me a call when you're ready to leave."

"Yes, Doctor," he breathed.

I suppressed a groan. It would be a very long ride to Kalm.
The apartment was a short walk away, so I left Orin at the hospital to help Jonuel with the discharge paperwork. It was a relief to have some time to myself, and the chance to exchange the tight Turk pants for the perfect fit of my undersuit. As I was laying out the armor pieces on the living room table for easy access, I got the all-clear from the intern. I informed Reno with a call that was as short and strained as the first, then suited up. As I was buckling on my arm guards, a key jangled in the front door lock.

"Hey," I said when the door swung open.

"Hey."

Reno remained by the door, his features schooled into an indifferent expression. I watched him out of the corner of my eye while I strapped on the last pieces of armor. Why wouldn't he come in? Why wouldn't he say anything?

"I borrowed some clothes from the wardrobe. Should I get them washed, or...?"

"Nah. Don't worry 'bout it."

Still he remained distant, with his side toward me and his hands in his pockets. His eyelids were heavy but I caught a sliver of pale blue. He was watching me. Why wouldn't he give me a hand? Why couldn't he just hold me for a minute?

"Ready?" the Turk asked when I slung the rifle over my shoulder.

"Good to go," I replied with fake pep.

I picked up my helmet and took a step toward the door, but his arm blocked the way. When I glanced up at him with wary eyes, Reno placed the hand on the side of my neck and stroked his thumb across my skin, just below my ear. My lips parted a fraction, but the sigh caught in my throat. He just watched me with an odd look on his face, then dipped his head for a fleeting kiss on my cheekbone.

"It won't happen again, Fitz," he murmured, his lips brushing against my skin.

Reno pulled away, and turned to leave without looking me in the eye. It felt like a goodbye. Alarmed, I placed a hand on his arm. He stopped, but kept his gaze on my hand, not me.

"I don't blame you," I said.

His lips thinned into a humorless smile.

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe you should blame me."

Reno was shaking his head before I had finished my sentence.

"You're such a sweetheart," he mumbled, then walked through the door.
I stared after him, unable to think amid a flood of worry and confusion. I followed in his footsteps without another word. I didn't know what else to do.

A black car was parked right outside the building entrance, a bald man in a Turk suit waiting in the driver’s seat. The piercings in his ear glinted as he angled his face toward us, but otherwise Rude made no acknowledgement of our arrival. It had been quite a while since I last saw Reno's partner, but his manner hadn't changed.

"Do me a favor, will ya?" Reno muttered as we approached the vehicle. "Don't mention that 'RO woman during the ride."

"You mean Chelsea? Why?"

"She's ancient history, and should damn well stay that way."

The venom in his voice surprised me, but Reno yanked the front door open before I could ask more.

"You remember Rude, yeah?" he said as he ducked into the car, back to his nonchalant manner.

I took the seat behind him; bewildered by the Chelsea connection and taken aback by his coldness, but able to conjure a smile for our driver nonetheless.

"Hi, Rude."

The Turk nodded. "Doctor."

His voice was even, his face blank. I wondered if playing chauffeur for us irritated him. It must have been Reno's idea, after all.

The hospital was just down the road. When Jonuel spotted the two Turks in the front seats, the poor guy looked just about ready to bolt, but he obeyed when I waved him over. He perched on the edge of the seat next to me, shoulders tense, while his gaze flickered between the three of us. I wondered if the Turks had made a name for themselves in Costa del Sol, too.

To my surprise, Rude was the one to put him at ease. He asked a few questions about life in Kalm, and soon the two had slipped into Costan with each other. Bit by bit, Jonuel shed his shyness, until he launched into yet another retelling of our badlands misadventure. I interjected at times, toning down his tale to a more accurate version of reality, but that didn't diminish his enthusiasm.

It was inevitable, then, that Chelsea would come up. Reno stiffened and glanced at the other two men with narrowed eyes, but said nothing. He made a few comments on other details, and I got the feeling he was trying to steer the conversation onto different tracks. I pondered the nature of this "ancient history". Reno was bound to have former flames here and there, but I wouldn't have expected him to show such bitterness for them.

A chill spread in the pit of my stomach. Was that what was going on between us? As the ride went on, I couldn't help but notice Reno never addressed me directly. He didn't even look at me. I kept up a brave face for Jonuel's sake, but I wished I could have hid inside my helmet instead.

Once we arrived in Kalm, Rude dropped us off by one of the smaller gates, away from the refugee camps. As Jonuel and I offered the Turks our thanks, Reno avoided my last attempt at eye contact. The heaviness in my chest turned into a physical ache, but I couldn't say or do anything more, not in front of Rude and Jonuel.
As I pushed the car door shut, the one in front of me flew open and the redhead stepped out. His mouth was a line, his eyes unreadable. Despite the sunshine, I felt cold.

"I didn't tell Jonuel about your request," I began, anticipating what he had on his mind, but Reno shook his head.

"Nah, don't worry 'bout it," he said in a low voice. "Rude's the one who went diggin'. Stubborn bastard."

In response to my quizzical look, the man pushed his hands into his pockets with a smile too weak to reach his eyes.

"So, looks like ya got a fan," he commented, with a small nod of his head toward the intern, who was waiting for me by the gate.

I shook my head with a half-hearted huff of a laugh.

"He'll get over it."

"Nah, you saved his life. He ain't never gonna forget that."

"So did you."

He shrugged, staring down at his boots. The possibility of jealousy entered my mind, but I dismissed that thought. Jealous Reno wouldn't have spent the car ride making casual conversation with a rival. In fact, I suspected that if he had allowed a rival into the car at all, it would only have been to push him out at high speed.

"Those bugs can be pretty nasty in groups like that," he said, eyeing a set of fresh scratches on the chest plate. "Not everyone could take 'em on, yo."

"Well, if this research gig doesn't pan out, I suppose I can become an exterminator."

A quiet snort and twitch of the lips, that was all I got. It was worse than no reaction at all. My gaze dropped to my helmet, examining its burnished face as I turned it this way and that in my hands. In its reflection I could see the Turk look out over the plains and run a hand through his hair. His mouth opened, but he shut it again with a small huff.

"Thanks again, Reno," I said when the silence became too oppressive. "I'm sorry I had to bother you."

"Hey, don't worry 'bout it. You did the right thing."

_The right thing._ Those three words undid something inside me. A lump swelled in my throat and all I could do in reply was to throw my arms around his neck. Reno tensed, but when he shifted in my grasp it was to place his palm on my neck, warm and comforting. He sighed and touched his cheek to my temple, and I began to suspect this may have been what he wanted all along.

"All right, you'd best let go of me now. We're gonna make Rude as red as my hair if we keep this up, yo."

My giggle was pitched a bit too high, but it was the closest I had come to genuine laughter that day. Reno turned his head to brush his lips against my temple, then flashed me a smile as we parted, and I realized that despite his request, his hand had remained on my neck until I stepped back. The ache inside lessened.
As I approached the gate, I realized Jonuel had seen the whole thing. I dove into the helmet, in sudden need of the protection of its golden mirror. The intern didn't seem bothered, though, and continued his friendly chatter while I walked him to his boarding house. He didn't mind the stares, either, instead smiling wider and standing a bit taller every time he caught someone looking. A fan, indeed.

I was not as keen on being a spectacle, so once we parted ways, I stuck to the back streets. I had reached the alley behind my house and was almost by the kitchen door, when my neighbor's door swung open and someone stepped out, straight into me.

"Oh!"

The plastic bag she was carrying dropped to the ground as the woman froze and gaped at me, shock plain on her face. I hurried to remove my helmet, so as to not spook the poor lady any further. When she saw my face, she breathed a sigh of relief, pressing her hand over her heart.

"I'm sorry," I said with an apologetic smile. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I should be the one apologizing, dear. I nearly smacked the door in your face!"

"Wouldn't have felt it if you had."

"I believe you," she said with a chuckle, dusting off her apron. "That's quite the getup you have there." Her gaze fell on the nametag on my chest. "Oh, you're the new neighbor, aren't you? Miss FitzEvan?"

"Yes, I'm Therèse FitzEvan." I looked at our houses and frowned. "I'm sorry, I thought the Coles lived here."

"That's right. Lizzie is my cousin. I'm Elmyra. Elmyra Gainsborough."

As I shook her outstretched hand, I took a better look at the woman. Her hair, gathered into a bun on top of her head, was brown and streaked with gray. The creases around her eyes hinted at a similar age as her cousin, too. Otherwise the two were nothing alike. While Mrs. Cole looked like she spent her days sucking on lemons, Elmyra offered a warm smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes.

"You're here for a visit?" I guessed.

"No, I live here too. Lizzie was kind enough to offer me a place to stay for now. I used to live in Midgar, you see."

"Oh. Yes, I see."

I wasn't sure what else to say, so I said nothing. I had found that those who had a need to speak about Midgar, would do so without my prompting. I was also exhausted, so while the woman seemed a more pleasant neighbor than her cousin, I didn't want to encourage more conversation.

"Well, I shan't keep you any longer," she said, picking up the plastic bag she had dropped. "It was nice to meet you, Miss FitzEvan."

"Nice to meet you, too, and just call me Tess, please."

"Tess it is," she smiled.
Once inside I dropped down on the couch, ignoring the creaking protests of the springs. I closed my eyes and let my head loll back as I dropped the helmet to the floor with a dull thud. What a crazy rollercoaster ride, these past two days. What a crazy new life. Two weeks into my new job I was already in dire need of a vacation.

Chapter End Notes

According to one of the "On the Way to a Smile" stories, Elmyra does move to Kalm after Meteorfall to stay with relatives. While I won't strive to follow those stories to the letter, I'll use the occasional detail from them from time to time.

By the way, Elmyra isn't the first minor canon character to make an appearance in this story. Have you spotted the others?
Rolling with the Punches

I ambled along the streets of Kalm – so quiet after a taste of Edge – at a loss for what to do with myself for the day. The few people I knew in town were busy with work, and Grigori had outright forbidden me from coming in today. Well, Jonuel had the day off too, I supposed, but I’d had enough of his star-struck ogling for now.

I caught myself wishing Reno could have stayed. It bothered me. It was bad enough that I had flung myself at him again. The last thing I needed was to fall for the man when he... I took a deep breath and exhaled in a huff.

It might be better to wait for Reno to call me this time. Yes, that would be for the best, for his sake too. It had gotten too intense between us. We could both do with a breather. A chance to cool down. Figure things out.

Strange how the decision didn't make me feel any better.

As I crossed the town square, I noticed a girl in a threadbare dress, selling flowers on a street corner. Cut flowers and readymade bouquets rested in a basket, and seedlings in newspaper pots were arranged in neat rows along the wall behind her. I asked her about them. Her face lit up and I ended up hearing more than I ever needed to know about Kalm's local flora. She even listed all the names of her flowers; I had forgotten most of them by the time I walked away, carrying a dozen seedlings the girl had selected as the perfect ensemble for my little front yard.

I wasn't sure how that had happened. Either the girl was the shrewdest businesswoman I had ever met or I was developing some serious domestic tendencies. Funny what having a house and a patch of dirt to govern can lead to.

Half an hour later I had changed into more suitable clothes and was ready to tackle my horticultural challenge. I stood in my front garden, the pockets and loops of my trusty desert shorts stuffed full of what I presumed to be useful gardening tools, and held up one of the seedlings for inspection. The bud was huge, showing a bit of red under the green protective layer. Sepals, some corner of my mind informed me. Also known as the calyx. Unfortunately, it had less to say about how to plant the damned thing.

It couldn't be that different from potting a plant, and I had managed that, at least. Dig a hole, plop it in, cover up and water. That was the basic procedure, right? Hardly rocket science. Yet as I stood there with the flimsy thing in my hands, recalling the flower girl's fondness for her plants, I found myself afraid of doing something wrong. The plant didn't look happy about the situation either. The stem drooped a little, as if the poor thing was already resigned to its demise at the hands of a clueless wannabe-gardener. I remembered withering lawns and dying apple trees, and a tightness pressed on my chest.

"Oh, you're adding some color to your garden, Tess?"

I started and looked up. Elmyra peeked over the low wall, examining the flowers waiting in their paper pots.

"Well, that's the plan, at least," I said with a sheepish smile. "I'm afraid my knowledge of plants is more theoretical than practical. I'm worried I'll ruin them."

"I'll give you a hand, then," she declared, rounding the wall. "Do you have a shovel?"
"Uh, well, I've got this."

I presented the large serving spoon I had found in a drawer in the kitchen. Elmyra burst into laughter.

"My daughter once did the exact same thing," she began, and her smile faltered for a second. She composed herself quickly, but I didn't have the courage to ask or comment. I knew what that look meant.

"Let's arrange the flowers first," she suggested. "Just place them on the ground the way you'd like them."

I did as she asked. Soon we fell into easy cooperation, with her giving advice and me following it. As we toiled, her smiles grew warmer and her eyes brighter. The sadness in them remained, but little by little it was tempered by contentment. I expect a similar change could be seen on my own face.

When I had only one flower left to plant, a haughty voice interrupted us.

"Myra?"

We both looked up to see Mrs. Cole standing by the wall separating our gardens.

"Hello, Lizzie," my gardening companion greeted. "How was your shopping trip?"

Mrs. Cole rolled her eyes with a deep sigh.

"Exhausting."

"That sounds nice."

Elmyra replied with a breezy geniality that was in stark contrast to her cousin's complaints, yet neither of them seemed troubled by the other's reaction. I struggled to hide the grin that tugged at my lips.

"When you're done playing in the dirt, I need help with dinner," Mrs. Cole said. "It's stew. Needs a lot of chopping."

"Oh, delightful. I'll be right there."

As the thin woman stalked into her house, Elmyra turned to me with an apologetic smile.

"Well, it's been lovely to 'play in the dirt' again, but I should get going."

"Thank you very much for the help," I said, carefully cradling the last plant she handed to me. "I'm sure I'll have a jungle on my hands in no time."

"Ooh, that'll make Lizzie happy."

She winked, and I chuckled. I suspect both our hearts had grown lighter that afternoon.

Reno didn't call that day, nor the next day when I returned to work. Jonuel was still recuperating. Chelsea was nowhere to be seen, and Tyco informed me that she was already back in the field. He
was also very curious about the incident – enough so to suggest catching up over lunch at the nearest pub. I obliged. The next day he had a different pub in mind, even though it was Saturday. By the end of the following week, it had become something of a habit. Jonuel joined us a couple of times, despite having the week off. Chelsea avoided me.

The seedlings perked up and began flowering, much to my surprise and delight. The yellow star-shaped ones started the show, soon joined by white lilies. The poppies came last. They were almost the same color as Reno's hair.

He didn't call. He didn't send any texts, either.

Time and absence brought perspective. For all his faults and rough edges, Reno had never led me on with false promises. He had been clear about what it was going to be. It wasn't his fault that I hadn't internalized what that meant. Now... Now I knew.

I called Reeve. Cait Sith answered, greeting me with some gibberish it called a prediction and told me Reeve was in a meeting. I said I would try again some other day.

My little garden blossomed. As modest as it was, my success at gardening sparked a whole new kind of pride. It was incredible, being able to stick something into the ground and just watch it grow. I had thought the experience would forever remain a nostalgic memory from the garden of my childhood home. I fussed over the plants most evenings, watering and weeding. At times I brought a few flowers inside, cheering up the living room with a spot of color on the coffee table.

When my phone finally rang, it woke me up in the middle of the night. It wasn't Reno.

"Tyco?" I mumbled, trying to convince my eyes to stay open. "What the--"

"Are you all right?"

His voice was firm, urgent. My drowsiness vanished.

"I'm fine. What's going on?"

"There's been a break-in here at the office."

It took a few seconds for it to sink in.

"Then why the hell are you asking about me? Are you all right?"

Tense as it was, his chuckle took the edge off my fear.

"Yeah, I'm okay. They ran as soon as I switched on the lights. The back door is busted, but I don't think they got their hands on anything too valuable."

"Did you get a look at them?"

"Not a very good one. There were more than one, but that's about all I can tell you."

I pushed a hand through my hair and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Two in the morning. No wonder it was hard to process this.

"Um, I don't suppose your couch is free tonight?" Tyco wondered. "I don't think I'll get much sleep around here. The police will be poking around for a while, and I bet once Grigori shows up he'll be doing a lot of stomping around and yelling at the world in general."
I hesitated. I wasn't in the habit of inviting men I barely knew into my home in the wee hours of the night. My first impulse was to suggest he ask Jonuel, but that didn't seem fair on either of them. Besides, the intern was still technically on sick leave; he definitely didn't need the extra worry. Grigori? No, I could imagine the professor's foul mood all too well after an incident like this. That left Chelsea, but I was pretty sure I knew Tyco better than she did.

"Sure... Come on over."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'll be there as quick as I can. You might want to check your doors and windows in the mean time. Just in case."

Once the call ended I remained still, holding my breath for the better part of a minute as I listened. All I heard was silence, so I got out of bed and tiptoed to the window for a peek through the blinds. The stillness outside only made me wonder when it would be broken. Having Tyco stay the night felt like a better decision by the minute.

I fetched a pillow and a blanket, resisting the urge to grab the rifle I kept below the shelves in the same closet. I did follow Tyco's advice, though, and checked both the front and back doors, then perched on the couch to watch the street outside as I waited. A tabby cat slunk by, but that was the only movement I spotted until Tyco showed up twenty minutes later.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said as I let him in. "The professor wouldn't let me go without an interrogation."

"Yikes. I can imagine." I looked him over while he took off his shoes, but the messy ponytail and untucked t-shirt were the only signs of trouble I could see. "How are you holding up? Want a cup of tea before hitting the couch?"

"I think the couch calls the loudest right now," he said with a weary smile. "It's been a busy night."

That was fine by me. I pointed out the blanket, wished him good night and answered the call of my own bed upstairs.

When the alarm clock woke me up, my eyelids felt as heavy as my limbs. Judging by the sounds of rummaging downstairs, my guest was in a much livelier state. My suspicion was confirmed a few minutes later once I came down to find Tyco humming a jaunty tune as he explored my kitchen.

"Good morning, Doctor," he greeted, flashing a smile as he closed a cupboard door.

"Morning yourself." I mumbled, trying to suppress a yawn. "You're pretty cheery for someone who came face to face with bandits a few hours ago."

"Eh, they didn't kill me, so I guess that means I'm stronger."

His grin made me smile too.

"I don't think that's quite how it works, you know."

"No? Then I guess it's just due to getting some decent sleep afterwards. Thanks for that, by the way. I was planning to make breakfast in return, but your kitchen is pretty empty."

He seemed completely unperturbed. I hoped that was how he felt and not a brave face he was putting on for my sake.

"I'm afraid I've been neglecting the fridge. I usually just grab something from the tearoom on the
"Esther's?" he asked, his face brightening. "Has she gotten you addicted to her pies yet?"

"She's working on it," I said, chuckling.

"Well, I guess I can give the old girl a hand with that. Pies for breakfast, on me."

It was hard to argue with such enthusiasm. I smiled.

"Sounds great."

After a shower and a quick cup of coffee, I was ready to face the day. The sky was laden with dreary clouds, but it wasn't as dark as the look my neighbor gave me as I stepped out of the house with Tyco in tow. Judging by her empty shopping basket, Mrs. Cole had been on her way out, but she paused halfway down her garden path to stare at us.

"Is this another one of your... gentleman friends, Miss FitzEvan?"

I summoned one of my sweetest smiles and mentally cursed her timing.

"This is Tyco Finnegan, my coworker from the WRO. Tyco, this is my neighbor, Mrs. Cole."

"Good morning," he greeted, smiling.

"How do you do," she said with zero enthusiasm.

Hugging her basket to her chest, Mrs. Cole stalked toward the square. Fortunately, it was in the opposite direction of the WRO house.

"Charming," Tyco commented once we were out of earshot.

"Quite. I guess I have committed the unforgivable sin of not being a local."

"I hear you," he said with a chuckle. "So... Gentleman friends, huh?"

"Oh, don't you start," I groaned.

He grinned. "It's the price you pay for the joys of small town life, Doctor."

"I think I'll try to keep my love life private a bit longer, if you don't mind," I said, my tone as dry as badlands dust. "Just for the record, though, it's not 'friends' plural. I don't get around that much."

"So, there is someone, huh?"

His grin was downright diabolical. I faked a dirty look.

"I can neither confirm nor deny."

Only once I said the words did I realize how true they were. Tyco laughed and finally changed the subject, keeping me distracted with idle chatter until we reached our workplace, but a heaviness had already settled inside of me.

Once we arrived, I examined the back entrance while Tyco exchanged words with the policeman who had guarded the building until morning. The lock was scraped and bent, while the door and handle were covered in smudges of black dust. The police must have finished their investigation
Once we had sat down in the break room to eat our pies, I asked Tyco to describe what had happened. He was only three or four sentences into his tale when we heard the front door open and close. Moments later, Chelsea's voice sounded from the corridor outside.

"There you are! I just heard. Are you okay?"

As Chelsea came in, Tyco repeated much the same reassurances he had given me the night before. She tensed when she noticed me and turned back to Tyco without a word. Before the man had finished speaking, Grigori barged into the room, shoulders hunched and eyebrows wild.

"It's a damned disgrace!" he boomed. "The police do nothing while those Midgar squatters do whatever they damn well please!"

"They know who it was, then?" I wondered.

"You don't need to be a detective to figure this one out. The squatters have been nothing but trouble ever since they showed up."

"Hang on," Chelsea protested, "you can't go around blaming the refugees for every bad thing that happens!"

"Can't I? You two moved here after they barred the gates to keep the thieves out. Before that you couldn't walk down the street without having your pockets picked." The professor paced the small open space at the end of the table, chopping the air with his hands as he ranted. "The weekend markets were absolute chaos. It's better now, but it won't be over until those camps are gone. They still find ways to sneak in over the walls at night."

Chelsea crossed her arms over her chest, her scowl growing darker with every line he spouted.

"Maybe if we tried helping them instead of locking them out they wouldn't have to."

"Oh, we've helped them all right," Grigori scoffed. "We had one orphanage in town, now we have a dozen. We opened our homes to the injured and had food drives every week. Think that did any good? The thieving started within days after Meteorfall, while the Stigma spread like wildfire."

"It wasn't enough!" she snapped. "Isn't this what the 'RO was created for? Restoring the world?"

As the argument went on, it was harder and harder for me to listen to them. It reminded me of the first major food crisis on Earth; the recriminations flung back and forth on all sides, increasingly bitter and self-serving as the veneer of civility crumbled under the need for self-preservation. I didn't want to think about that time. I didn't want to think about Earth at all.

I shoved a large forkful of pie into my mouth, determined to flee to my office as quickly as possible.

"The WRO does plenty for them," Grigori said, keeping his voice even despite the glower on his face. "We've been building housing in Edge since the city was founded."

"So, it's fine to just let these people wallow in misery while they wait for their turn? To squeeze families into tents in the mud while we hand over whole houses to our employees?"

I froze, staring at her in disbelief. Chelsea was facing Grigori, but it was clear who she was talking to.
"Leave that to the aid groups, it's what they're for," the professor said, spreading his hands. "We need to focus on our own responsibilities. Believe me, we're doing our part for the world."

"Are we? I'm beginning to think we're no better than Shinra, abusing our privileges like this."

She looked straight at me as she spat her accusation. I swallowed my mouthful with difficulty and set down my fork. My appetite was completely gone.

"You know, speaking of Shinra," Tyco interjected, "back in Edge someone mentioned looted labs. The 'RO sent teams to abandoned Shinra buildings in Midgar a while back to recover equipment. Junon too, I think, and a few other places. Most of the labs had been stripped."

Grigori turned to his assistant, dropping the argument with a haste that made me suspect he was as eager for a change of subject as I was.

"Do you think there's a connection?"

Tyco shrugged. "Possible, isn't it? There are only so many abandoned labs to go around. One like ours, in a small town with barely any security, is a pretty easy target to move on to."

"Who would be interested in stolen lab equipment? Who could afford it these days, for that matter? Shinra?"

"Shinra paying someone to break into their own property?" Tyco questioned, lifting an eyebrow.

"Why would Shinra hire others for a bit of dirty work, anyway?" Chelsea said, her tone still laced with irritation. "They've got Turks for that."

Again she shot me a cold look. Grigori glanced back and forth between us two, his eyes narrowing. I'd had enough. I got up and turned my back to them, forcing myself not to hurry as I put my pie away in the fridge. What else could I do? Speaking up would only seem more suspicious.

As I washed my plate and fork, Tyco said something about a locksmith. To my relief the conversation shifted to the practical aftermath of the night's incident and soon dwindled to an end. By the time I finished drying my dishes, Grigori and Chelsea had left.

"Don't mind her," Tyco said, keeping his voice low. "She's prickly like that sometimes."

"That doesn't mean she's wrong," I mumbled, wiping my hands on the towel.

"Hey, don't feel guilty for having somewhere to live. You deserve a break, too. I mean, it's not like you can go back to Midgar or Banora."

I took a deep breath, forcing the air past the sudden tightness in my throat. I couldn't go back, he was right about that. I could never go back.
My concentration was shot. Chelsea's barbed remarks still buzzed in my ears. How dare she? I hated her for being right. Every single person out there in the refugee camps held a better claim on the house I lived in. They belonged here, on Gaia. I hadn't even been born on this planet. I had been here for months – years, soon – and had accomplished nothing to deserve a place here.

*You're going to fail this planet too, aren't you?*

Gritting my teeth, I closed the soil sample report and opened the half-written project proposal I had been working on between my official duties. I would finish it, *today*, and hand it over to Grigori. I would work late and leave it on his desk if I had to.

At lunch I popped down to the break room to recover the rest of my pie. Tyco was chatting with a locksmith by the back door. They told me the locks would be exchanged that afternoon. An alarm system would be installed, too. I mumbled something in reply and retreated back to my office.

After an hour of overtime, I dropped off my document in Grigori's office. It outlined the experimental reintroduction of pioneer plants into the dead zone, including a followup study of their biological changes on a cellular level. I knew the Edge branch could provide us with the equipment we would need, and regardless of the success of the reintroduction, we would collect useful data for future work. The plan was solid. For the first time in weeks, I felt like I had accomplished something.

As I descended the stairs, I heard Tyco's voice.

"... didn't seem like pros to me."

"Yeah. This thing's a fuckin' mess. Ain't what you'd expect from a pro, that's for sure."

I went still for a second, while my heart sped up. I knew that drawl.

"I guess the question is, is that a good or a bad sign?"

Reno never replied, for they both noticed me as soon as I rounded the stairs.

"Well, I should finish up at the office," Tyco continued. "I'll be upstairs if you need me."

He smiled as he passed me. There was a smile on Reno's face too, but not in his eyes.

"Hey there, Fitz. Was wonderin' when you might show up."

His whole demeanor said he was on guard. I was just as cagey. How could it feel so weird to act normal? I had known sex might complicate things. This was exactly what I had been afraid of.

"Hey yourself," I said, walking up to him. "This is quite the surprise. What brings you here?"

"Heard you had some trouble," He held up the broken lock the locksmith had replaced. "Thought I'd look into it, but had to wait 'til that boss of yours was done for the day. Guy's got a massive stick up his ass 'bout Shinra, don't he?"
"Most of us here do," I said with a wry smile. "Which raises the question, why is a Shinra Turk investigating a burglary at the 'RO?"

He shrugged. "Just doin' Reeve a favor. Got time for a few questions?"

"I'm not sure there's much I can say. Tyco's the one who was here when it happened."

"Yeah, I already had a chat with Sir Argyle. Your turn, yo."

I thought I detected a change in his tone. Amusement, a hint of derision. I wondered if Tyco had mentioned where he spent the night.

"You don't have to call him names. Tyco's a nice guy."

He looked confused for a moment, then shook his head with a soft snort.

"Eh, it's just a habit, y'know? Don't mean nothin' by it or anythin'."

Then again, Reno had a nickname for everyone, some less flattering than others. Maybe he didn't know about Tyco's visit. Or maybe he just didn't care.

My gaze dropped to the mauled lock in his hands. It looked much the same as the locks on my doors. An unease crept in. I wouldn't have a well-deserved evening to unwind, would I? A night alone in my poorly-locked house, that's what was waiting for me.

"Any chance you've got time for more than questions?" I blurted out. "Drinks, maybe?"

"Can't, sorry. Got work to do."

*That's what he said last time.*

"Right," I said, struggling to keep a casual tone. "I get it."

A crease appeared between his eyebrows.

"Hey, I'd really like to, all right? I just wanna check up on a few things before the trail goes cold, is all."

I nodded, mustering up a smile, but what little cheer I had gathered with the day's work was gone. I just wanted this day to be over already.

"Can we do this on the way home, then? I've spent enough time in here for one day."

"Fine by me."

I took us on the scenic route through a nearby park. It was longer than my regular walk, but that was just... coincidence. This was quieter, better suited for a chat. The lawns and benches were empty, likely due to the dreary blanket of clouds in the sky. The wind had picked up, too. The silver lining was that it meant little chance of anyone overhearing our conversation.

Reno's interview began with the usual questions, like whether I had noticed anything or anyone unusual lately. He also wanted my opinion on my coworkers' reactions to the incident, which I didn't expect. I was surprised again when he asked how much the other WRO branches knew about ours. By the time he ran out of questions, I had several of my own.

"You don't think someone at the 'RO had something to do with this, do you?"
"Eh, it's just old Shinra habits, really," he said with crooked smile. "Everyone's guilty 'til they can prove otherwise."

My chuckle died in my throat when I realized it was closer to the truth than I wanted to think. Better a few false positives than let a guilty person walk free? That sounded like the line of reasoning that led to the demise of Sector 7.

"What about all the Shinra labs that have been looted since Meteorfall?" I asked, keen to move on. "Think there's a connection there?"

Reno turned his head to examine me with a sharp look.

"Whaddya know 'bout that?"

"Nothing more than what I just said, really. It came up at work this morning."

His gaze lingered a while longer, but he looked away and shrugged before it became uncomfortable.

"It's too early to say one way or another," he said. "The crime rate here in Kalm shot up after the Midgar refugees started floodin' in. It's calmed down now that most of 'em have moved to Edge, but a break-in ain't news 'round here no more."

Grigori had said much the same. That possibility was no comfort to me. If the thieves were desperate for gil, they might choose an easier target next time. Like, say, a small town house on a quiet side street. One with useless locks.

Reno slowed to a halt.

"'Kay, that's it for now. Might need to ask more later, tho'. You'll be in town this week, yeah?"

"Well, I'll be in radio range, at least. Thought I'd take Sparky for a walk on the weekend, explore the countryside a bit."

Better to spend the weekend out of town and inside the suit instead of fretting over when I might get robbed, I reasoned. Reno held a different opinion, though, judging from the way his brow furrowed.

"What?" I wondered. "You don't like that?"

"That suit of yours ain't somethin' people 'round here see every day. It's gonna turn heads, get people talkin'."

It was my turn to frown.

"People in Cosmo Canyon got used to it. Besides, I might need the suit for more field work. You can't expect me to just hide forever."

"Yeah, but..." Reno brought his hands out of his pockets and planted them on his hips, staring out over the park lawn. "It might bring ya the wrong kinda attention. It could be dangerous."

I knew what he implied, what sort of attention he meant. Maybe it was a valid concern, but I felt my temper stir.

"If you try to tell me what I can and can't do, we're going to have a problem."
I kept my voice level, but he must have picked up on the irritation beneath.

"I just want ya safe, okay?" he protested, his frown deepening. "There's bad people out there."

"And I just want a normal job," I snapped. "A normal life! I'm so sick and tired of being the... the freak."

I nearly yelled the last word, and my hands had become trembling fists. I forced them open with a huff and looked away, taken aback by my outburst. The stress was getting to me. This damned life was getting to me.

"Shut up, Fitz, you ain't a freak," Reno scoffed. "Reeve and the other Turks don't think so either."

His lips curved in a cynical smile. "The Prez might, but that's 'cause he don't wanna be the only one, yo."

So, Rufus Shinra knew who and what I was, too? I shouldn't have been surprised. Reno and Reeve must have had a lot of explaining to do after Orca's attack on Shinra HQ. It made me uncomfortable. I knew nothing of the motivations of Reno's boss, and I knew Reno's loyalty to Shinra ran deep.

Reno took a step closer and touched my elbow. As he held my gaze, his face showed no sign of the mask, the smirk.

"Look, you gotta be careful, all right? You sure those guys that broke in were after lab stuff? What if they saw you in the suit last week and thought you keep it at work? Whaddya think they'll do if they catch ya alone with it out in the middle of nowhere?"

I felt the blood leave my face. I hadn't thought of that at all.

Something cold splashed on my cheek, and then another. Within seconds, rain was pouring from the clouds.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Reno groaned.

"Come on!"

I dashed down the path with the Turk hot on my heels, but by the time we reached my house, we were both drenched. I led us straight up to the bathroom. I crouched down to search the cupboard for towels, while Reno muttered curses and kicked off his boots. When I faced him again, he was unbuckling his belt. His shirt and jacket were already thrown onto the floor. My mouth went dry.

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

As if on cue, he dropped his trousers.

"Wet clothes suck, yo."

He shuddered and stepped out of the crumpled pile around his ankles. The second he took the towel off my hands I turned my back to him. It was far too tempting to let my gaze roam. That would only lead to other temptations, and I wasn't ready to deal with what would follow.

Reno wasn't staying, I reminded myself as I unbuttoned my shirt. He would come and go as he pleased; he had done so for as long as I had known him. No warnings, no promises. There was nothing to build on here. It would be better to go back to a simple friendship. It had been plenty enough for me before.
Yet I couldn't resist a peek in the mirror, couldn't resist watching his muscles dance as he towel-dried his hair. Then I glimpsed the pathetic longing written on my face. I averted my eyes.

I peeled off my soggy shirt and hung it on the towel rack. When I straightened, the second towel I had placed on top of the cupboard had vanished. Before I could look for it, Reno draped the towel over my shoulders and placed his hands on my arms, rubbing them dry.

It was as if I had been burned by ice. My body reacted on instinct, pulling out of his reach with such speed that I slammed my knee into the cupboard in front of me. I stood rigid as a statue, my heart pounding, wondering what the hell had just happened. Then I recalled the sickening whiff of disinfectant, and the fabric rubbing my skin raw, and it all fell into place.

"I'll… I'll get the coffee going," Reno mumbled.

As soon as the bathroom door clicked shut, I went limp. I sat down on the cupboard and slumped forward, my head heavy in my unsteady hands. His ministrations had been gentle, nothing like the rough treatment I got from Hojo's orderlies, and yet... The sensation of someone else moving terry cloth across my cold skin was enough to send me careening into the past.

Once the tremble in my hands had abated, I pulled off the rest of my wet clothes and put on loose drawstring shorts and a t-shirt. I didn't have anything in Reno's size, so I grabbed my bathrobe and hoped it might be big enough.

Downstairs I found him slouching against the kitchen wall. He glanced up when I entered, but flicked his gaze back to the coffee machine right away.

"I'll get outta your hair as soon as the rain clears."

He kept staring forward while I approached him. His jaw was tight, and his whole body was coiled like a cornered animal.

"It wasn't you," I said carefully, moving beside him. "Feeling someone else dry me off like that just reminded me of..." I sighed and tried again. "Hojo's... disinfection procedures."

Just saying those words, I felt the burn on my skin and the sting in my eyes.

Reno finally looked at me.

"Hell... I didn't mean to do that." As he examined my face, a frown appeared on his own. "You okay?"

"It's fine, you couldn't have known. I'll be fine, too. It spooked me... that's all."

"Anythin' I can do?"

I was still rattled. A hug would have been nice. I just didn't know how to ask for one without making it weird.

"Well, you could put this on," I said with a frail smile, offering the bathrobe I had brought. "I won't have you blame me if you catch a cold."

When he chuckled it seemed to melt away the tension in his shoulders.

"Aw, and here I was hopin' I'd get ya to play nurse for me."

It was pretty innocent for something that came out of his mouth, but I couldn't bear to play along.
Luckily, his new attire distracted us both. The robe barely covered his knees, and the sleeves were similarly abbreviated. It was difficult to hide my grin. He looked like an overgrown monk. Seeing my expression, he raised his eyebrows.

"That sexy, huh?"

A loud crack made me flinch, then the kitchen went dark.

"Stay here," Reno said under his breath, brushing my shoulder on his way past. "I'll take a look."

Despite the gray clouds covering the sky, the light from the window was enough to navigate by. He sidled up to it for a peek outside as the thunder rolled in, then slunk into the empty shadows of the living room. I remained still and strained my ears, yet heard nothing but the pattering of rain and the dying sputters of the coffee machine.

"Nothin' to worry 'bout, looks like," he called. "The whole street's gone dark."

"It's not the first time," I said, relieved and embarrassed to have gotten my pulse racing over nothing again. "I'll get the candles."

Reno must have checked upstairs too, for when I placed a pair of fat candles on the coffee table he was waiting with his lighter in hand. He made no comment about the pillow and the folded blanket Tyco had stacked at one end of the couch.

Once the candles were lit, he noticed the small bouquet of homegrown flowers on the table. He reached for a yellow one, tilting it toward himself for a better look. His expression softened into something almost wistful.

"Huh. I didn't know these grew here too."

"I have a bunch of them in the front yard, actually." I sent him a curious look. "You know flowers?"

"Nah," he said, straightening up. "Just saw these from time to time back in Midgar."

He followed me into the kitchen and leaned back against the countertop while I poured us coffee in the gloom.

"You got one in here, too? Huh, it's softer than it looks."

I looked up to see him poke a silvery leaf on my tenacious houseplant. Over the week, gangly tendrils had sprouted from the main branches to form a sparse dome of yellow flowers. I considered it my greatest triumph on Gaia so far.

"It's from Cosmo Canyon. It was just a bunch of dry twigs until a few days ago."

"Didn't know you're into flowers and such, Doc."

"I'm not. Not really," I replied as I handed him a mug, then turned back to rinse the pot. "If Elmyra from next door hadn't showed up to guide me through the planting, the yard would probably look like a war zone instead of a garden."

"Elmyra?" I heard him say, followed by a quiet scraping as he looted the bowl of sugar cubes. "I thought your neighbor was called something else?"

"Elmyra Gainsborough is Mrs. Cole's cousin. The Coles offered her a place to stay after
I glanced over my shoulder when he remained silent. The look on his face surprised me.

"Reno? What is it?"

He blinked a few times, then shook his head.

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"Didn't look like nothing to me," I said, frowning in puzzlement.

"Nothin' you need to worry 'bout, babe. Just thinkin' about some old history, yo."

"Uh huh?"

"Seriously, it's good. This is good."

Reno spoke with a thoughtful tone, staring down at the coffee in his hand. Was he convincing himself or his mug, I wondered with a flash of annoyance. I didn't appreciate being ignored.

"You approve of my gardening, then," I said dryly.

He looked up and shed his strange mood with a shrug.

"Gardenin', gettin' to know people, settlin' in... It's what you want, right?"

"I guess it is, yes."

I studied his face, still preoccupied with his reaction. It was pointless, though. Now that Reno had a hold of himself again, there was nothing there I could read.

"Cool," he said. "So, you got anythin' to eat in here? I'm starvin', yo."

The cupboards were as bare as they had been in the morning, but I found a bag of luchile nuts tucked away in my bag. Armed with coffee and nuts, we settled down on the sofa to wait out the rain. He sprawled out diagonally in one end with an arm over the back, while I sat cross-legged in the other, facing him. His outstretched leg almost touched my knee. I almost wanted it to.

I was still too anxious to keep up my part of the conversation, but Reno was happy to fill the silence. He told me bits and pieces about life in Cliff Resort, where the Turks had relocated. Rufus Shinra was touchy to the point of unbearable. Tseng was stressed. Elena was wound up because Tseng was stressed. Rude was moody, which made him even quieter. The only person Reno didn't talk about was himself.

The downpour thinned to a drizzle, then stopped altogether. I expected him to make his excuses then, but he didn't. When the lights flickered back on, he suggested watching something. We ended up catching a black-and-white monster movie on the local channel – or it could have been an old documentary on Gaian wildlife, for all I knew. I didn't make it even halfway through before my eyelids drooped shut.

I started awake, yanked out of sleep by an insistent clamor. My alarm clock wasn't on the bedside table, though. The bedside table wasn't there either. Confused, I opened my eyes to find myself curled up on the sofa. I couldn't remember falling asleep, much less bundled up in a blanket with a pillow under my head. I pushed myself up, yawning as I switched off the alarm clock that rattled
on the coffee table. I hadn't touched the clock since it had woken me up the previous morning, I knew that for sure.

Reno was gone – no surprise there – but the thought of him tucking me in before he left brought a smile to my face. Then the smile waned. Why did he have to be so sweet? I wouldn't miss a jerk.

At work, the morning was quiet. As I waited for the coffee to brew on my break, the new calendar picture on the kitchen wall caught my eye. August already. My first month in Kalm had gone by in a flash. Unbidden, my eyes wandered to the Fifth. I stared at it, wondering how to handle it this year. How to deal with it, more like.

Tyco suggested lunch at the tearoom. As we headed out, though, we found a man in a suit waiting by the back gate. Reno slouched against the brick wall, one hand in his pocket and a cigarette in the other.

"Hey, Fitz," he said, greeting the other man with a nod. "Got a sec?"

I glanced at Tyco. "Do you mind...?"

"I'll go ahead and get us a table," he offered.

"Thanks," I said with an apologetic smile, then turned to Reno. "What's up?"

He brought the smoke to his lips and inhaled, his gaze lingering on Tyco's back a while longer before he answered me.

"You'll prob'ly hear the news soon enough, but figured I'd drop by and tell ya myself. Just dragged a wannabe housebreaker to the cops. They oughta be roundin' up the rest today."

"You found them?"

"Yeah. Had a chat with the dude before takin' him in. He and his pals heard someone in Edge is interested in fancy tech like lab stuff, so they thought cleanin' this place out might get 'em outta that dump you've got outside."

The word "chat" made me uneasy. It wouldn't have been a friendly one.

"Did you... hurt him?"

Reno shook his head, sniggering.

"Nah. Poor kid nearly pissed his pants the second he saw me. All I had to do was snap my fingers and he told me everythin' and more besides."

"And he's under arrest now?"

"Yeah. Guess they'll send him and his lil' gang of wannabes to Junon, maybe even Corel. Ain't much of a jail they've got at the station here."

It sounded more and more like a bunch of kids making poor decisions. I thought of Chelsea's tirade about the squalor of the shantytown.

"Was it really necessary to take him to the police?"

He grinned. "Seriously? You callin' me out for followin' the law? That's gotta be a first."
"It doesn't sound like they were hardened criminals," I explained, feeling a bit sheepish. "If they just made a mistake because they were desperate..."

I trailed off when he shook his head again.

"If they're that desperate they're gonna try again, and that ain't gonna please the high and mighty townfolk of Kalm. There's enough bad blood between the inside and the outside already, and we don't want these yahoos doin' somethin' worse than run away the next time they're caught. And believe me, they're gonna get caught. Ain't exactly pros, yo."

"I suppose you're right," I sighed. "It doesn't feel right, though."

"That's life for ya." After one last drag, Reno dropped the cigarette stub and ground it out under his heel. "Anyway, the trail leads to Edge, so that's where I'm goin'."

"Now?"

"Aint no rest for the wicked, babe."

He winked, luring a chuckle out of me. I felt better, and it wasn't just because the crime was ostensibly solved. I felt at ease around him again. He seemed at ease around me. It was almost like old times, before all the complications.

"Thank you for looking into this," I said. "I'm sorry if I sounded ungrateful, I didn't mean to."

"No prob. Just doin' my job."

"I didn't know favors for Reeve were part of your job description," I teased.

"Eh, close enough. Feels like work, that's for sure." A smirk appeared on his face as he looked me over. "This one wasn't all bad, tho'. Got to see this hot chick in a wet t-shirt."

I rolled my eyes. "The highlight of the investigation, huh?"

"Nah, got to hang out with her all evening too. That part was even better, yo."

He flashed a smile, and my breath caught in my throat. Sometimes the man stumbled upon just the right thing to say.

An idea popped into my head. After a brief hesitation, I went for it.

"Um... Any chance you could come by next week? Tuesday?"

"What for?"

"Oh, just... more hanging out, I guess? We could have a bite to eat somewhere, or drinks, or..."

Hell, I didn't know what to tell him. I had asked on a whim. A lopsided smile spread on Reno's face as he listened to my rambling. I felt like an idiot, but he nodded.

"Yeah... I think I can swing an 'or'."

My smile was probably as silly as it was relieved, but I didn't care.
Fun fact time: In case you were wondering about the name, Cliff Resort is renamed Healen Lodge a little before Advent Children according to one of the "On the Way to a Smile" short stories.
The calendar on the wall showed August 5th, barely visible behind Grigori's bulk. When I was young, I liked to imagine Camille's birthday brought me luck. Apparently that wasn't the case on Gaia.

"I have decided to put it on hold for now," the professor said.

"Are there issues with the proposal?"

"The proposal is fine, but the soil survey is our main priority. Until it comes to a close, we need you in the lab."

I kept my face blank, but the muscles in my jaw grew tight.

"I was hired as a researcher, not a lab assistant."

"I'm aware of that, Doctor. Nonetheless, I have concluded that this division of responsibilities best serves our purpose here at Kalm station."

I barely stifled a snort. Responsibility? He hadn't given me any! I was stuck doing inventory and verifying the results of my suit's field analyses for a second time; results I already knew were valid. I hadn't spent all my Cosmo Canyon days in the library or gutting wrecks in the desert. I had collaborated with an enthusiastic Planet Life teacher on extensive environmental tests, compared results, calibrated, confirmed and confirmed again. I didn't need to redo all that work. If Grigori wanted to, he should have gotten me an assistant, but surprise surprise, he had refused that request, too.

"And what brought you to this conclusion?"

Grigori narrowed his eyes, giving me a long stare beneath his bushy eyebrows. He must have picked up on the bitter tone.

"May I be direct, Doctor?"

"Please."

"You've told us nothing of your prior work or your employers. What you do claim can't be verified. Rayleigh must know something I don't, because frankly I don't understand why she hired you. A secret Shinra past, is it?"

I froze, caught off guard by his last comment, until I realized how he must have meant it.

"Excuse me?" I sputtered. "I wasn't a Shinra scientist."

"So you say, yet Chelsea tells me you have the Turks at your beck and call."

I released a slow breath. Who would have thought that saving a man's life would come back to bite me?

"I asked for help from a friend. The Shinra Company had nothing to do with it."

"Then prove it," Grigori barked. "Give me the name of your previous employer."
"I signed an NDA. You know that. All I can say is that I did not work for Shinra."

"An NDA that even covers the name of your employer?" Grigori shook with a dry laugh. "I think we both know what that means."

I fixed him with a cool stare. "You're the one claiming I worked for Shinra. Where's your proof of that?"

"Even if I had access to former Shinra employee records, too much data was lost during Meteorfall." He spread his hands. "I can't obtain proof for my suspicions, any more than you seem willing to disprove them."

I leaned back in my chair, gritting my teeth to keep unfortunate comments inside until I could respond with dignity.

"I see. In that case, I think our meeting is at an end, Professor."

"Very well. Doctor."

I reigned in the petulant impulse to slam the door on my way out.

Two hours later, I was home and touching up my makeup in the bathroom mirror. I had changed into a nicer top, I had wrangled my hair under control, and I had second-guessed myself sick. Asking Reno to come over tonight had felt like a good idea at the time, but now my stomach was in knots. He would expect a fun carefree evening; my mood was going to drive him off.

The roar of an engine brought me out of my reverie. It was a rare sound in a town that banned most motorized vehicles within its walls. Stranger still, the noise appeared to be drawing closer. When it became clear the driver had turned onto my street, curiosity got the better of me. I peeked out of the window just in time to see a motorbike purr to a halt in front of my house. The long ponytail identified my visitor; it was the same lusty red color as his bike.

For once, Reno wasn't wearing his Turk uniform. It was just jeans and a leather jacket, but it felt like he had dressed up for me in formal black tie. I felt... special. This was him coming here for me, just me, not as an afterthought on the way to a mission. I had to blink away the moisture in my eyes. Then I cursed and dashed back to the mirror to check my mascara.

When I opened the front door, he had taken off the helmet and was pushing his goggles up to their usual perch on his forehead. I leaned against the door frame as I watched him get off his bike and unzip the jacket.

"Looking good, biker boy."

His face lit up in a grin. "Thanks, babe," he said, unstrapping a bag from the tail of the bike. "You're lookin' pretty damn fine yourself."

I smiled, stepping aside to let him in, and he surprised me by leaning down for a peck on the cheek on his way past. Glancing around, I spotted several faces in the windows on the opposite side of the street; some of them curious, some sour, a few belonging to excited kids. Reno sure knew how to make an entrance. In a few hours it would be common knowledge among the neighbors that I had a biker boyfriend, regardless of what I might claim.

Boyfriend. The word made my stomach flutter and I couldn't tell if it was a good feeling or not. I hurried inside before I could dwell on it.
Reno had removed the jacket, revealing a t-shirt with undecipherable text above a spooky tree, silhouetted against a full moon. Some kind of band t-shirt, I guessed.

"So, I finally get to meet the bike."

Meet the bike. Meet the parents. Today, every train of thought led back to family ties.

"Heh, yeah. I can give you a ride later, if ya want."

"I bet you can."

He winked, then looked down to take off his boots, which was why he didn't notice my smile fading. My mood was becoming a problem all right, but it wasn't the risk of driving him away that worried me now. I hadn't asked him here to seduce him. That would be a terrible idea. I just didn't want to be alone tonight.

Did Reno have family? Siblings? It occurred to me that I didn't know. Hell, I didn't even know his last name.

Well, that settled one thing. If I didn't know the man's surname, it was pretty damned obvious that I had no business worrying about words like "boyfriend".

_You could ask, dummy._

I cleared my throat.

"Want a drink? I've got ginger ale in the fridge."

I twitched at the fake cheer in my own voice. Reno must have noticed it too, as he gave me a strange look.

"Yeah, sure. Let's eat, too." He held up his bag. "I picked up dinner from this new Wutainese place in Edge. Damn good garuda noodles. Tseng's real picky about Wutainese, but even he likes the place."

Reno chattered on as we sat down in the living room with our take-out boxes and our drinks. He talked about how good it felt to take his bike out for a longer ride, and the repairs he had made over the past month once he had finally dug it out of the rubble under Shinra HQ. He spoke of new businesses that had opened their doors in Edge in the past week, making special mention of a couple of hole-in-the-wall restaurants he had taken a liking to.

I nodded and made appropriate noises at the right times, but my mind kept drifting. Reno's odd looks became more and more frequent, until I felt compelled to suggest a visit to the evening market at the square. It would provide a distraction for both of us.

When we arrived the market was in full swing. The square was filled with rows of tables, many of them sporting colorful canopies and parasols. A group of musicians occupied one corner, entertaining the milling crowds.

"Huh. Didn't think a hole in the ground like Kalm had this many people in it," Reno commented.

I noticed a couple of sour glances aimed in our direction by a pair of identically-dressed, identically peevish old women. Maybe they were sisters.

"Careful now. The locals might drive you out with pitchforks if you keep that up."
He sniggered.

"At least it'd liven things up, yo."

A young couple stood by the local goldsmith's table. She was trying on a ring on her left ring finger, while he watched her with an infatuated smile on his face. I wondered where my ring had gone. I hadn't seen it since I yanked it off my finger and threw it at the wall of my cell.

How could emptiness feel so heavy?

"Speaking of livening things up," I said, "they're talking about arranging some kind of Revival Festival here in Kalm."

"Yeah? Revival of what?"

"The Planet, I suppose."

A little girl held a man's hand, watching a woman select apples from a large box. A family, presumably.

Heavier and heavier, it felt. There was something thoroughly unscientific about it.

"Seems a bit early for that, if you ask me."

It took me a second to connect Reno's comment to our conversation.

"People need hope," I mumbled.

The redhead hummed. We walked in silence for a while, checking out the wares on display. My eyes lingered on another couple, smiling and holding hands as they ambled from table to table.

"Huh?" Reno glanced around, a crease forming between his eyebrows, then looked down at our hands. "Somethin' ya want?"

Our interlocked hands, I realized. I dropped his, feeling my cheeks heat up.

"No, no. It's nothing."

When his frown deepened into puzzlement, I averted my face and hid my hands by folding my arms across my chest.

"Somethin' wrong, babe?"

"No," I said. Too quickly.

"Oh, c'mon," he scoffed. "You've been in a funny mood all evenin'."

"It's... It's not that there's something wrong, it's just..."

Nothing is right.

We came up to one of the smaller streets leading out of the square and Reno took the chance to guide us into quieter territory.

"Somethin' on your mind, then?" he asked once we had put some distance between us and the bustling square.
I hesitated. If I couldn't talk to Reno, who could I talk to? Maybe he wouldn't be able to understand, but at least I didn't have to watch my every word around him.

"It's my sister's birthday."

His frown softened. "You miss her."

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"D'ya miss home, too?"

Home. What was home? It wasn't the house a few blocks away. It wasn't this quaint little town. What I had called my home was long gone, on a planet that was forever beyond my reach.

And whose fault is that?

"What does it matter?" I snapped. "What's done is done, I'm here now and I can never go back. There's nothing to go back to."

"It ain't that simple on the inside, tho', is it?"

"What would you know about it?" I muttered under my breath.

I hadn't meant for it to be heard, but Reno's ears were sharp. He had gone still.

"I can guess," he said in a quiet voice, "'cause everythin' you said sounds exactly like somethin' I might say."

He looked down at his feet, and then at somewhere far away. Maybe Midgar. Maybe his own home, the one he had left under the rubble of Meteorfall. Maybe his old life; gone, for all intents and purposes.

Ohh, I was such a self-centered bitch.

"I'm sorry," I sighed. "I know I've been a bit..."

"Touchy?"

Despite the wry twist of his lips, it was a more diplomatic suggestion than what I would have come up with. I offered him a weak smile.

"Yes. Touchy. I'm sorry. Let's just try to have a good time tonight, rather than dwell on everything that's gone, okay?"

The look he gave me was dubious, but he nodded.

"Sure. Wanna go back to the market?"

A door opened not far from us. A small boy and a girl came out and ran past us toward the square. A woman showed up in the doorway and called after them, mixing her cautions with encouragements to have fun. I kept my eyes straight ahead, but I couldn't block out their giggles and shouts so easily.

"Could we go somewhere?" I asked.

"Uh, sure. Where d'ya wanna go?"
"I don't know. Anywhere. I just want to get out of town for a bit."

Reno's eyes were thoughtful, studying me as if they could see right through my attempt at a brave face. Part of me hated it. Another felt a strange sort of relief.

"We could go for that bike ride, yo."

"Perfect."

We were only a few minutes from the house. I let Reno in to grab his gear, but when he joined me by the bike, he handed the helmet to me.

"Here, you wear this."

I took it from him, but left it in my hands instead of placing it on my head.

"What about you?" I asked as he straddled the bike.

"Eh, I don't bother with it most of the time," he said with a shrug, sliding the key into the ignition. "I brought it for you."

"But--"

"No buts." Reno knocked on the helmet. "Put it on or we're goin' nowhere, Doc."

I didn't have the energy to argue. Once the helmet was on, he showed me how to climb up behind him.

"Sit close and hold on tight, babe. Don't be shy."

I did as he instructed, my thighs touching his as I wrapped my arms around his waist. The physical contact I had craved all day set off something inside me, shaking the foundations of my brittle facade. As Reno revved up the engine and steered us out of my little front yard, I did my best to breathe through the tightness in my throat.

Once the hovel town outside the walls was behind us, he sped up. The machine roared eagerly, and the surge of power beneath us made my belly flutter, but it wasn't enough to fill the hunger that had gnawed in me all day. I leaned into Reno and turned my head, resting my cheek against his back, and watched the scenery. Low green hills rolled by, undulating up and down in a hypnotic rhythm. The view reminded me of Devon, of the fields behind our house, of childhood. Hers and mine. So close in my mind, yet so far in reality.

I closed my eyes and shut out the world around me. I blocked my thoughts, forcing my mind to stillness. There was nothing but the howl of the engine and the body I clung to. I focused on the feel of leather against my skin, the shape of his back and slim waist, his warmth contrasted with the cool air rushing over my arms. If I let go, I would be hurled into emptiness; or so it seemed, in that moment.

I lost track of time. When I opened my eyes, it was twilight. It reminded me of a tradition that had been broken last year, when I was imprisoned deep within Shinra HQ. If I wanted to bring it back, it would have to be here and now. Even a small town like Kalm had too many lights at night.

Did I want to, though? Everything was so different here. Would it feel the same at all?

A dark shape came into view, rising tall above the plains. It was a bird-watching tower that Chelsea
had pointed out during that ill-fated field trip, and I realized Reno must be heading back to town. A decision had to be made now or not at all.

I tapped him on the leg, then pointed at the tower.

Once we had dismounted, Reno propped up the goggles on his forehead and peered up at the tower.

"I ain't the biologist here, but I'm pretty sure you ain't gonna have much luck spottin' birds at this time of night."

"Not birds. Stars."

Something flickered across his face, but in the dim light I couldn't read his expression.

"Huh," he said. "All right."

The steps were steep, more like ladders than stairs. At the top I needed a minute to catch my breath. Reno was barely affected and strolled around the waist-high wooden wall that enclosed the top of the tower, looking out over the scenery.

I wasn't interested in our surroundings. I sat down on the floor, tilting my head back, but soon decided it more comfortable to just lie down and gaze at the sky. After a few minutes Reno joined me, using his jacket as a pillow. As the sky darkened, the stars appeared and grew brighter, one by one. Try as I might, I couldn't find anything familiar among them.

"Do you have constellations?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I never learned any of 'em."

"Not much for stargazing, huh?"

"Well, to be honest," Reno said with a low chuckle, "the sky used to freak me out. 'Specially the night sky."

I glanced at him in surprise. "Really? Why?"

"Never saw much of it as a kid, unless I climbed onto a roof or somethin'. It was just this thin strip between the ground and the plate."

"Oh. That hadn't even occurred to me."

His shoulder brushed against mine in what must have been a shrug.

"Most people don't think about it, unless they lived it."

I turned my head for a better look at his face. He didn't seem ill at ease, but the darkness made it hard to be sure.

"If this is making you uncomfortable–"

"Nah, it's fine. I'm a big bad Turk now." He flashed a smile. "What about you? Do much 'stargazin' back home?"

I didn't reply right away. I stared at the sky, remembering a different one.
"I used to talk to Camille like this, back on Earth. After she got the job, she'd call me a couple of
times a week after her shift, late at night. Seemed only natural to look up at the sky, trying to
pinpoint the station she was on."

It hadn't been a happier time, nor a simpler one, considering the constant barrage of depressing
news on the state of the Earth and the general air of desperation. Maybe that was why those
moments were etched so firmly in my memories, like little pinpricks of light in the dark.

"Your sister, right?"

"Yes. Even after the accident, when she... disappeared, I kept doing it. I'd look up into the sky,
watch the stars and just... talk."

Reno was silent for a while.

"What was she like?"

"She was funny. Brave, even foolhardy sometimes, and ever the optimist. Where I saw risks, she
saw possibilities. She jumped at the chance to work in space. She loved it up there. She told me she
wanted to stay and live among the stars. Ironic, huh?"

The moment I started talking about her, the flood gates cracked and began to swing open. Before I
knew it, my fears were pouring out in an anxious stream.

"The stars are different here. I just keep thinking, what if she's not up there? What if I've traveled
too far and now she's all alone?"

What if I'm all alone?

The night sky had become too vast, too empty. I couldn't look at it anymore. I rolled over on my
side and ran a hand over his chest, seeking comfort in the solid, undeniable presence of a warm
body next to mine.

"Reno..."

It came out so pathetic and desperate, so needy. I felt ashamed of myself, but he pulled me on top
of him and pressed his lips to my jaw.

"I'm here," he murmured between kisses. "I'll give ya whatever you want, baby doll. Whatever you
want."

He couldn't, of course, nobody could, but his words took away the shame and I, in turn, took what
Reno offered. I clung to him as if he was my lifeline, used him to fill up the void, and in the heat of
the moment, it was enough. Afterwards, when our breathing was approaching normal and the
breeze brought a chill to skin dampened by sweat; that's when the tears came. Silently, they rolled
down my cheeks and soaked into his rumpled t-shirt. Reno must have noticed, but he said nothing,
just kept an arm around me while he stroked the back of my head.

It wasn't until the tears had dried up and we lay side by side once more, clothes straightened out
and back in place, that he spoke up.

"I had a sister too, y'know."

I didn't know. I had no idea.
"She was a few years older than me. Think I'm good-lookin'? Well, you should've seen her, yo." There was something like familial pride in the smile he gave me. But then it faded, and a cloud passed over him in the silence. "She died when I was thirteen."

"What happened?"

"She got knocked up. Her pimp made her get rid of the baby, but the quack that did it fucked it up."

"Her pimp?"

"Yeah."

The single word was hissed with defiance, a hard edge that I could see in his eyes. It wasn't just anger at old wrongs, but armor against new ones. I heeded the warning and let it go.

"What was her name?"

"Ariel."

It was a sigh and a whisper, uttered with a longing that was all too familiar.

"Were you close?"

"Yeah. El took care of me, y'know? Looked after me when Ma couldn't."

Words were useless – mine would have been, at any rate. I fumbled in the darkness until my hand found his. Reno looked down with that same puzzled frown I had seen earlier and for a moment I feared he might pull away. Then his expression softened and he shifted the hold, weaving his fingers between mine.

"I can't visit her grave anymore," he said after a while. "It's buried somewhere in the rubble of Midgar. It's okay, tho'. As long as I can remember her, it's okay."

I closed my eyes and pictured a pair of eyes, dark brown like mine, but with a mischievous spark much like Reno's. I saw the petite oval of her face, framed by hair as wavy as mine, but longer and lighter like bronze. I saw the warm smile that had rarely left her. Camille was still there in my mind's eye, safe and sound.

With Reno's hand in mine, I turned my face back toward the sky and opened my eyes.
Once Burned

I was kneeling by my flowers, peeking between stems in search for weeds. There were too few to bother, really, but it was better than doing nothing. Reno wouldn't be showing up for at least another hour and I was too jittery to focus on anything besides manual labor.

It was only three days since his last visit, yet it had been his idea to come over this weekend. His idea, expressed days in advance. Hence the jitters.

I couldn't think of what had happened in the bird tower as a mistake. I hadn't planned it, and I hadn't meant for us to go that far again, but... it didn't feel like a mistake. Maybe it could be a new beginning. We just needed to talk about expectations.

Well, I needed to talk. It shouldn't be that hard. All I had to do was open my mouth and explain that I didn't want to share. If he agreed to that, we might have a chance at something. Something exciting. If he didn't...

Ohh, how my stomach churned.

"The rain lilies are coming along beautifully."

I looked over my shoulder to see Elmyra stepping around the low wall between our yards.

"They seem to be spreading, too," I said. "Can you believe it? I thought they'd be dead in a week."

The older woman smiled and sat down on the front door steps, reaching over to cup one of the yellow flowers in her hand.

"My daughter Aerith used to grow flowers just like these, you know. The yard was full of them, and it was a lot bigger than this one."

I looked at my modest collection of flowers, trying to imagine a whole field of them.

"Sounds amazing."

"It was. I'd look out of the kitchen window in the morning and see a sea of yellow. It was hard to believe we lived below plate."

"She grew them under the plate?" I wondered, recalling Reno's comments about the sky. "How was that even possible?"

Her smile grew fond but melancholy.

"It's incredible, isn't it? With the darkness and pollution, no one else could grow anything, not even weeds. My Aerith was the only one."

"Wow. A sea of flowers must have attracted a lot of attention."

I regretted my comment as soon as her wistful expression faltered.

"You're right about that," she said. "Unfortunately."

The past tense whenever Elmyra talked about her daughter told me enough, but I asked anyway.
"What happened?"

"The Turks took her."

My fist tightened, crushing the weeds in my hand.

"What?" I breathed.

Her eyes were downcast, aimed at the skirt of her dress.

"She was a special girl and Shinra knew it. The Turks watched her for years. I knew, we both knew, but there was nothing we could do about it." The woman arranged the skirt into even pleats over her knees as she spoke, smoothing out every wrinkle in the green fabric. "When Aerith was still a child, she actually thought the men and women in suits were looking out for her. Such a sweet, innocent girl."

"But they... kidnapped her?"

Elmyra nodded, unshed tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

"One of the devils just barged into the house and took her to Shinra. It was the day Sector Seven fell." I didn't know what to say. My mind was a blank roar.

"You know," she continued, her tone detached as she stared at my flowers, "the news said Sector Seven was AVALANCHE's doing, but I know better. The AVALANCHE people saved my Aerith. Sector Seven, that was the Turks too, they told me. Oh, so much misery in one day, all because of that damn Shinra!"

Did Elmyra know which Turk had dropped the plate? She could have seen Reno come and go, or having a cigarette outside the house. Had she recognized him?

Reno recognized her, I realized with a sinking feeling, remembering his odd reaction upon hearing her name. What did that mean? Had he been aware of the operation targeting her daughter, had he actually stalked the girl? Had he been the Turk who stole Aerith away?

He could have done it. Whether or not it had been him, I had no doubt he could have done it.

"I'm sorry, dear, I didn't mean to dredge up bad memories."

The woman was watching me now, her face scrunched up with concern.

"No, it's fine," I mumbled, feeling terrible. "Please, don't apologize."

"Let me get you some chamomile tea," she said, patting my hand. "I'll be right back."

"Oh, no, you don't need to–"

"It's no bother. I was going to make myself a cup anyway."

Elmyra was kind but firm. Motherly. Her fussing made it worse, made me feel guilty for something I hadn't done, but I let her. I told myself it was because it dimmed the ache in her eyes, but deep down I knew I wasn't so selfless. We both longed for broken bonds.
As expected for a Friday night, a fair number of patrons had already staked their claims on the tables of the Griffin. Reno's red mop of hair was nowhere to be seen, though. I got myself a drink, then picked a booth with a view of the door.

It was a last-minute change of plans. After my chat with Elmyra, I couldn't stop worrying about another dramatic arrival, heralded by the roar of an engine – or worse, having him show up on my doorstep in his Turk suit. When the redhead sauntered in, however, both the suit and the leather jacket were absent.

"Hey, Fitz," he greeted, flinging his backpack into the opposite seat. "Be right with ya."

I watched him as he strolled up to the bar. Reno may have left the Turk suit at home, but subtler signals of his profession remained. It was there in the way he angled himself and how he sized up every single person in the room while he waited for his drink. It wasn't wariness or bravado, but more like an ingrained habit. It spoke of confidence; genuine, fearless and so very sexy.

Or it would have been, had I not been so rattled by Elmyra's revelations. As it was, I didn't need the reminder that I was about to spend the evening with one of Shinra's black-ops bullies. On a whim, I spent a few moments trying to picture Reno as something other than a Turk. It was difficult.

"If you weren't a Turk, what would you do?" I asked him once he had sat down.

He quirked an eyebrow. "What, I don't even get a 'hi Reno' before the interrogation starts?"

Interrogation. There was another word I would rather not hear tonight.

"Hi, Reno," I said, mustering a smile. "Sorry. I was just thinking out loud."

He leaned back in his seat, tilting his head to one side as he watched me.

"Bein' a Turk is all I know. What else is a guy like me gonna do?"

"Well, what did you do before Shinra?"

He took a gulp of his beer before answering. His smirk grew wider, too.

"Nothin' legal, babe."

I rolled my eyes, but my curiosity had gotten too strong for me to just let it go.

"Okay, different angle. What would you want to do?"

Reno gave me an odd look, his brow creasing. I couldn't tell if he was confused or irritated.

"What's that got to do with anythin'?"

"It usually plays some part in your career choice, doesn't it?"

"Maybe where you come from, Doc."

I couldn't say I was much surprised. I knew little of his past, but enough to figure that his early days must have been vastly different from mine.

"But what if you had a choice now?"

"Shit, I dunno."
"Come on, I know you've got a wild imagination. Give it a go."

It was his turn to roll his eyes, but instead of protesting, he leaned back and studied the other patrons while he thought.

"Somethin' that'd lemme keep flyin', I guess. Or... Teacher, maybe."

I snorted at his joke, until the look on his face told me it hadn't been a joke at all.

"Really? Teacher?"

"Yeah," he said, frowning. "What's so weird 'bout that?"

First I poked and prodded, and when the man offered an honest reply, I laughed at him. At times I could be a special kind of idiot.

"There's nothing weird about it," I hurried to reassure him. "I just... have trouble imagining you with kids, I guess."

"Hey, I like kids. They're funny. No filters, y'know?"

"Kindred spirits, huh?"

Reno poked out his tongue at me and grinned when I giggled. When he continued speaking, it was with a more pensive tone.

"I used to look after the rookies. Show 'em the ropes, y'know? Even taught a few how to fly a chopper."

The mention of helicopters reminded me of the flight from Cosmo Canyon. Reno had been relentless in drilling my backstory into me, but his easy manner had kept it from growing tedious. It had been fun, actually. Maybe it wasn't so hard to picture him as a teacher after all.

"Well, there you have it. 'Reno's Helicopter Academy for Discerning Pilots-To-Be'. Best of both worlds."

"Bit of a mouthful, yo."

His tone was dry, but there was a smile on his face, not the smirk he had been wearing all evening. I smiled, too.

After our meal, I excused myself for a visit to the ladies' room. I was gone for just a few minutes, but when I approached our booth again, there was a woman standing beside Reno. I recognized her. It was Elena, his pixie-like coworker. She didn't look happy. From what little I could see of Reno's face, he looked indifferent. Trying to reign in the sudden, ominous feeling settling in my belly, I slowed to a halt and pricked up my ears.

"Does Tseng know about this?"

Elena's voice was shrill and likely louder than she realized. Reno's response was much more subdued.

"All Tseng cares is that the job gets done and he gets his reports. How I choose to do it ain't his problem."

"Oh, really? Even when it's the damn target you're 'doing'?"
I froze. The feeling turned hard and sharp, punching through my gut.

"Ooh, nice one, Laney," he mocked. "You're finally gettin' the hang of it, yo."

"I'm serious, Reno!"

"Tseng gets the intel he wants, mission accomplished. That's all that matters."

The air had become thick, stifling. I couldn't breathe. I had to get out.

I turned and stumbled for the nearest exit. In my rush to leave I knocked into someone and spilled their drink. I mumbled a quick "sorry" and dashed past, but the man's angry retort had already drawn attention. I heard Reno call my name. I ignored it.

He caught me just outside the pub's side entrance.

"Hey! Hey, what's wrong?"

He moved in front of me, blocking my way with his hands on my elbows, peering into my face with concern. It turned my stomach.

"I think we're done here," I stated, unable to keep my voice as steady as I would have liked. "You must have gotten more than enough for Tseng's report by now."

Reno's eyes widened.

"Fuck!" He grabbed the back of his neck, sending a dark glare toward the pub door. "Goddammit, Laney!"

The evening was warm and pleasant, the blue of the sky slowly settling into orange. Muffled laughter flowed out into the alley like an invitation back into the jolly atmosphere inside. It was all so very wrong. It should have been dark and drizzling with rain. Maybe that would have kept the Turk indoors with his colleague.

"Yes, I heard everything. Remind me to thank Elena for her timely intervention."

I stepped around him and made to leave, but Reno was standing in front of me again in the blink of an eye, holding out his arms to herd me in.

"Fitz, just hold up for a sec, will ya? It ain't what it sounds like!"

"Oh, you mean screwing me isn't part of the job? Are you just playing the 'target' for everything you can get, then? God, I don't know which is worse. You using me or whoring yourself out for a damn paycheck!"

A darkness fell across his face, twisting his concern into a glower.

"Hey, you're the one who came on to me, remember?"

I couldn't deny it. Maybe that's why it hurt so much.

"Right. It's my own damn fault, huh?"

"Shit, okay, that came out wrong." He placed his hands on my shoulders, leveling his face with mine. "Look, you ain't a job, and I ain't here for Tseng or the Prez, all right?"
"Then what are you here for?" I snapped, shrugging his paws off me.

"You!"

It sounded so convincing. Heartfelt, even. Five minutes ago I would have believed it.

"Why do you keep lying to me? I heard Elena just now, you know!"

"That don't change the fact that I'm here 'cause of you! I'm doin' it for you, all right? I'm just tryin' to keep ya safe!"

There was something like desperation in his voice now, a touch of panic in his eyes, but I knew what a good actor he was. What a good liar.

"Safe?" I repeated with a snort of hollow laughter. "What, making sure no one else gets their hands on me before you can deliver me to Shinra?"

"That ain't true, Fitz. We're just lookin' out for ya, is all!"

_We._ There it was. Confirmation. No other words mattered. That single "we" was all it took to shatter something inside of me. Reno had weaseled his way into my life under false pretenses and had gone behind my back on behalf of his damned president. And I, I had invited him in with open arms and open legs. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

"I never had any freedom, did I?" I whispered. "It's all just a bloody illusion. I'm still Shinra's prisoner. I'll never be free as long as I'm on Gaia."

"Fitz, baby, no one's tryin' to control your life!"

"I'm supposed to take your word for it? I thought I could trust you, but nothing's changed! You're still the jailkeeper who tries to distract me with a joke and a smile. Ohh, Nanaki was right to warn me about you."

The name made the Turk tense up, his eyes going narrow and hard.

"You're gonna pick some talkin' furball over me now? What, his 'last of his kind' bullshit makes you best buddies all of a sudden?"

A tidal wave of rage welled up in my chest, flooding out all other emotion. I bared my teeth.

"I'm done listening to you," I snarled, then spun on my heel and marched off.

The last of his kind. The last of _my_ kind. What _fucking_ right did Reno think he had to sneer at scars that reached deeper than he could ever comprehend?

"Hey. Hey!"

I didn't get far before he grabbed my arm and pulled, forcing me to a stop. I tried to jerk away, but the long fingers held on tight. I had to settle for meeting his fuming glare with a defiant one of my own.

"You still think everyone's just waitin' for a chance to stab ya in the back, dontcha?" he growled in a low voice. "Well, newsflash, baby. I. Ain't. _Him._"

Not Nanaki. _Him._
Tess, please!

The memories surged in, spilling over my broken defences. I couldn't stop them. They crushed my chest, stealing the air out of my lungs. I couldn't breathe here. I needed to leave. Why wouldn't he let me leave!

Like a cornered animal, I lashed out in a blind frenzy.

"Oh, really?" I hissed. "You think you're any different, scheming behind my back only to tell me it's for my own damn good? You know what James said, just before he died? He said he did it for me. For me! He ruined my fucking life, then had the nerve to claim it was to keep me safe!"

Reno flinched as if I had physically slapped him, but I was too far gone to stop.

"Different planet, different company, but you two are exactly the same! You even tell the same fucking lies! You can go fuck yourself for all I care!"

I yanked my arm free and fled. This time, he didn't try to stop me.
A gap in the curtains admitted a thin beam of sunlight. When I had opened my eyes, it was painting a golden line on the wall. As it traveled across the room, the strip of light had changed hue. Now, at bright white, it almost touched the coffee table.

I should probably have gotten up by now. I just couldn't muster up the will.

My muscles ached, stiff from a night spent on the couch. Even getting that far had been an effort. I had barely made it through the front door before the panic attack struck me in full force. I had been unable to fight it, unable to recall any of the breathing exercises or visualizations. I had just collapsed where I was, curling up against the door in a whimpering heap.

Pathetic. So fucking pathetic. No wonder Reno had been in such a good mood around me. I must have been one of his easiest jobs ever.

It was so easy to puzzle out the motives for his actions in this new, cruel light. As I thought back on our time together, every act of kindness withered, became just another underhanded trick to strengthen Shinra's grip on my life. In hindsight, it was all so plain.

How foolish could I be? I knew he was a professional liar, trained to deceive and use people. Had I really thought I would be an exception? That I was so fucking special that he would put me before Shinra and his fellow Turks?

An idiot, that's what I was. Too much of a bloody idiot to learn from my mistakes. It served me right to hurt this much. I had already known I wasn't special, hadn't I? Maybe this time it would be enough to drive the lesson into my thick skull.

How far back had Reno's betrayal started? Had he ever been sincere, or had something changed in the six months we had been apart? Had he been double-dealing ever since I was stuck in that ward at Shinra HQ, staring at walls?

I paused. Staring at walls; just how I had spent all of today. Oh, no. I was not going down that road again. I forced my protesting body off the couch, up the stairs and into the shower. Not that it seemed to do much good. It didn't matter how hot the water was, how much soap I used, or how pleasant the fresh scent of my laundered clothes. I couldn't seem to make myself clean.

On my way down, I noticed my phone on the floor by the front door. I had one new message.

it aint what u think. i got ur back

I deleted it. I would have deleted his number too, had the option not been hidden behind all those bloody buttons and menus of this bloody useless excuse of a phone people used here on goddamned bloody Gaia!

I hurled the phone at the opposite corner of the couch, where it bounced off the cushion and clattered onto the floor. Seconds later, the tears burst free.

Monday morning came. The WRO house was quiet: Tyco ran errands in town, Grigori sat in his
office, Chelsea was out in the field and Jonuel had gone back to Costa del Sol to recuperate at his family's insistence. I busied myself with the most tedious, mind-numbing task I could find. I prepared slide after slide of soil samples, so I could put them under the microscope and make meticulous notes on traits like grain size and microbe types.

It worked, at first. A couple of hours passed without a single errant thought. I couldn't keep it up forever, though. My mind began to stray, and before long, I was staring straight ahead with unseeing eyes.

This was how it would always be, wasn't it? I couldn't expect to be treated as a human being on this world. I was, and would always be, a target. I could never let my guard down, would never enjoy a carefree life. The best I could hope for was survival under the radar. Right now, I didn't even have that.

My nose had begun to discern the ethanol in the solvent, and it smell was growing more and more distracting. When my chest tightened, I realized something wasn't right. It was no longer the solvent I smelled. I could have sworn that what I had poured in the beakers was the disinfectant from Hojo's lab.

I shot to my feet, struggling out of the white coat as I fled from the lab. Once I got out into the back yard, I slumped back against the wall, feeling lightheaded. Pushing both hands through my hair, I forced myself to slow my breaths.

_Not here, not here, not here–_

"Hey there, Doctor! Working on the tan, eh?"

"No, I'm not working on my fucking tan!"

Tyco took a step back, raising his hands.

"Whoa, sorry I asked."

"I'm not in the mood for jokes, Tyco!"

"Clearly," he said dryly, raising an eyebrow. "What is it? Weekend not go according to plan?"

"Good guess," I bit out, pressing a palm over my eyes.

The breaths flowed at a more natural pace now. The flare of temper had derailed the oncoming panic attack. I sighed and rubbed my eyes, then offered him an apologetic smile, though it must have looked as unnatural as it felt.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you. That was uncalled for."

"Don't worry about it." He looked me over, frowning. "Are you all right?"

"The chemical smell in the lab was a bit much for me. I just need some fresh air. I'll be fine in a minute or two."

It was close enough to the truth to sound convincing. After another appraising look, he nodded.

"If you say so. I'll be in the lab if you need me."

Once Tyco had left into the building, I slid down until I was sitting with my back propped up against the wall. The sun caressed my face and the air carried the scent of warm grass. At any other
time, I would have enjoyed it. I plucked a blade of grass, sliding it through my fingers as I sank deeper and deeper into the mire of my thoughts.

What did I know about Reno, anyway? That he was a Turk, dangerous and violent. That he lived on booze, cigarettes and adrenaline. That he enjoyed playing games and winding people up, liked finding their buttons and pushing them. In other words, I knew nothing beyond the old HQ gossip.

If you wanted to know more, you could have asked.

Yet I had refused and kept my distance, only to have Reno open up on his own volition. I had learned that the open sky made him nervous. That like me, he'd had a sister; a sister he had loved, judging by his tone of voice when he spoke of her. I knew that he could be sweet and thoughtful, like he had been that night. I knew that he could make me smile, and laugh, and–

With a gasp I brought that train of thought to a screeching halt and buried my face in my hands. What a bloody mess I was. A mess he had made. No, I corrected myself, gritting my teeth. A mess I had let him make of me.

The sound of my ringtone made me jump. Reno, I thought, and my heart leapt into my mouth. Orin Faro, the caller ID informed me, and it sank right back down to the abyss, torn between relief and dejection. I cleared my throat and did my best to muster a lighthearted tone.

"Hello."

"Hi. Uh, it's Orin. From Edge."

"Yes, I guessed."

"Oh, right. So, um, I'm just calling to check if we're still on for Friday?"

My brain hadn't switched gears into professional mode and for a second or two I froze, terribly confused. Then I remembered the equipment demonstration at the Edge branch.

"Oh, yes. I don't have my ticket here, but if I remember right, I should arrive at about ten in the morning."

"By coach? I'll meet you at the station."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'll check the time and confirm this afternoon. See you on Friday."

"Oh, wait, one more thing. I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner after work?"

For the second time, my mind stumbled to a standstill. To buy time, I blurted out the first neutral word that came to mind.

"Oh?"

"I mean with everyone else, from work," Orin stammered. "Nothing fancy or anything, just thought it'd be nice to have a chance to get to know each other better. For us all, I mean."

See more of the world. Meet new people. That had been my plan when Orin first issued his invitation. Now it seemed pointless. Wasn't I just biding my time until Shinra decided to strike? The visit wasn't about me, though. I was representing the Kalm branch. I already had a hotel room for the night, too. I'd had plans for different company at the time of the booking, but now...
"Sure. Sounds good to me."

"Great! Until Friday, then!"

"Yes. Until Friday."

Bewildered, I stared at the phone, as if it could help me understand what that had been about. Nothing, probably. My current state must have made me read too much into Orin's words. I needed to let go and calm down, before the heartache made a fool out of me.

I had been here before. I knew better than to trust men and their promises, so I had only myself to blame for ending up here again. I had only myself to pull me out, too. I slipped the phone back into my pocket and picked myself off the ground, willing away the ache in my chest. Shinra's actions were beyond my control, but I could still decide my own. I would go to Edge, meet new people, and make damned sure not to make the same mistake a third time.

Not that Reno had made any promises. That didn't make it any better. It just made me a bigger idiot.

Upon returning to the laboratory, I found that Tyco had occupied the workbench next to mine. It struck me as odd, considering all he was doing was paperwork. The reason became clear a few minutes later, when he cleared his throat in an exaggerated fashion.

"So... The word around town is that the 'RO's newest researcher is seeing some guy from the big city, with bright red hair and tattoos on his face."

Oh, no. This was not a conversation I wanted to have.

"The 'word', huh?"

He had swiveled his chair around to face me, and I refused to encourage him by returning the favor.

"Uh huh. Then Chelsea tells me you called in a Shinra Turk to rescue Jon from the badlands. A Turk with bright red hair and tattoos on his face."

My jaw grew taut. I continued staring into the microscope.

"I hadn't pinned you as a gossip, Tyco."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it gossiping. I'm just honing my skills at information-gathering and deduction."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him grin. I didn't.

"Your gossip is out of date. I'm not seeing him anymore. End of story."

Tyco's smile faded, his expression shifting to a more thoughtful one.

"Yeah, thought that might be it. So, was that the problem? That he's a Turk?"

"Didn't I just say 'end of story'?"

"Seems to be more to it than that."

I gave up on the microscope and straightened up, folding my arms over my chest like a shield.
"You're awfully persistent, aren't you?"

The man shrugged and spread his arms, undeterred by my level stare.

"Just lending a friendly ear."

"Out of the goodness of your heart, huh?"

"And the fact that I'd rather you talk to someone about it than keep biting my head off."

The slight irritation in his voice made me swallow the retort on the tip of my tongue. I sat back in my chair and stared at the wall.

"He lied to me."

"Big surprise there. I mean, it's what Turks do, right? Hide the truth? Keep secrets?"

I scoffed. "Yeah. It's all my own damn fault for expecting some basic respect."

"Hey, that's not what I meant. I'm just saying they have to be different from the rest of us." He pushed his glasses higher on his nose, staring beyond my ear in thought. "Come to think of it, what can they talk about? It's not like they can tell you about their day at the dinner table. Maybe it's easier just to make something up."

The anger flared again. I fixed him with a glare.

"Are you defending him?"

"What?" Tyco snorted, jerking his head back. "No, I'm just thinking out loud. I mean, if you're with someone like that, you shouldn't pay attention to what they say or promise, should you? You'd have to look at what they actually do for you."

"Look, just drop it and leave me the hell alone, okay?" I snapped.

"Sheesh. Sorry for trying to help."

Tyco snatched up his files and stomped out of the lab. Whatever. If that was his idea of help, I didn't want it. Did the man not listen to himself?

And yet his remarks lingered, no matter how hard I tried to stay focused on my work. It was the last one, especially, that wouldn't leave me in peace; likely because Reno's actions didn't match up to the story I had pieced together and labeled as truth.

His actions weren't enough, though. His intention mattered, and that was the heart of all my doubts. Maybe he had come to my aid in the badlands because he cared, but he could just have come to keep Shinra's investment safe. Maybe he slept with me because he wanted me – or maybe it was an easy excuse to show up.

No, there was only one thing I knew for certain: this was just sending me round in circles. There was no resolution, no comfort to be found here. It was best to forget and move on.

My usual business outfit was packed in a suitcase I had borrowed from Tyco. I had my ticket, my notes, and enough gil to last me a couple of days. I had even thought to water my houseplant before leaving – only to find that its flowers had withered, lying brown and brittle on the kitchen table. How apt.
At the unholy hour of six thirty in the morning, the streets were already bustling – by Kalm standards. I would see activity on a whole different scale once I arrived at my destination. I would meet the WRO's technological R&D team, visit their department, see their latest projects. I would be thoroughly distracted, if only for a day or two.

Despite the name of the company – Best Eastern Chocobo Coaches – I hadn't expected to see a pair of actual chocobos at the stop outside town. I had seen such birds before, but never up close. They were similar to chickens in shape, but larger than ostriches. The birds twisted their long necks to watch the man checking their harnesses, cooing like overgrown pigeons in response to his muttering.

A woman showed up beside me, putting an end to my gawking.

"Ticket, please."

She took my bag and stowed it in the back of the coach. It was the same bright yellow as the giant birds strapped to it and shaped much like an old-fashioned school bus, with seats both inside and on the roof. I watched a pair of passengers climb on top, sending the whole carriage into a slow sway.

"Excuse me," I asked the woman on her way to the front. "Is it, uh, safe?"

"Oh, don't worry. Our coaches are well-equipped to deal with any trouble along the way."

She beamed and patted the automatic rifle slung over her shoulder.

"I should have suited up for this," I muttered to myself as I took a seat inside.

Had I given it some thought, the carriage birds wouldn't have come as a surprise. Motorized vehicles were far less common now than bikes, pedicabs and chocobos, and would remain so until the fuel problem was solved. The Turks with their Shinra-funded helicopters and bulletproof cars had given me a skewed idea of travel.

Well, no more of that. Unless the bastards decided to bring me in, of course.

The coach was hot and shook with every bump in the road, but the seats themselves were comfortable. To my relief, the route only skirted the badlands border, so the ride was uneventful. I spent it staring out over the plains, trying not to think.

As promised, Orin was waiting for me at the station. His hand was still clammy, but the handshake was firmer.

"I'm pleased to see you again, Tess. Welcome back to Edge."

"Thank you," I replied with a polite smile. "For the invitation, too."

"It's my pleasure. A-and everyone else's, too. At the department, I mean. They look forward to meeting you."

Shaking off the odd impression of going to meet the parents, I let him show me to the hotel. After a quick shower and change of clothes, I was ready to tackle the day's commitments.

Orin's team was much larger than mine and despite my best efforts, their names and faces all blended together. My concentration had been shot all week, likely from poor sleep, and my mind felt dull and listless. It was hardly the time for a dazzling first impression.
The tour of the tech labs went much the same. I was no stranger to technological projects, but it wasn't my field and Orin's descriptions were crammed full of impenetrable jargon. By lunch time, I wished I'd had enough sense to just postpone the meeting.

A couple of Orin's workmates joined us for lunch. The man's name still escaped me, but I remembered the young woman thanks to her robotic arm and remarkably short skirt. Shalua Rui worked as a lab assistant both to finance and supplement her engineering studies. Their conversation revealed that Orin's idea of "nothing fancy" was one of the swankiest places in town. I felt the urge to fake a case of food poisoning and flee to Kalm on the next coach.

"Is there a problem?" Orin wondered.

"I'm afraid I didn't bring anything appropriate to wear," I said with a bleak smile.

"Don't worry about it, Tess. What you have on now is just fine."

The way he looked at me made me suspect that I could show up in a garbage bag and still elicit some kind of compliment from him.

"There's time for shopping before dinner," Shalua interjected. "The shops on main street are worth checking out."

I shook my head, dismissing the suggestion without a second thought. I didn't feel like shopping. I didn't feel like anything at all.

"I'd probably just get lost. I don't know the city very well."

"I can show you around," she suggested brightly.

"Oh," I blurted out, caught off guard. "Thanks, but I don't want to be any trouble."

"It's no trouble. I need to pick up something for myself, anyway."

Unable to come up with a polite way to decline, I thanked her and agreed to meet up with her after work. Orin seemed disappointed. Maybe he had planned to show me around himself.

Fortunately, my scientific instincts kicked in when it was time to go through specifications for the new equipment. That I could handle – numbers and facts, not small talk or creative thought. A few of Orin's questions were ones I couldn't answer, involving esoteric details of the station's power supply and voltages. We decided on an additional meeting in Kalm so he could see our facilities for himself.

With the official part of the visit concluded, Shalua caught up with me again and I soon found myself trailing along to Edge's central plaza behind her. Her strawberry blonde hair swished back and forth in a ponytail, in time to the clicking of high heels on pavement. I didn't have high hopes for the excursion. If the woman's current outfit was any indication of the style of the places we would visit, I doubted I would find much to suit me.

Furthermore, as I saw more of Edge, the thought of splashing out on fancy clothes began to feel callous. The homeless situation was much worse than in Kalm. Every alley I peered into had men, women and children huddled up along the walls and sleeping in cardboard boxes, many of them with limbs and heads wrapped in dirty bandages. When I remarked on it, Shalua said it was minor compared to the outskirts of town.

"Thousands stayed under the plate after Meteorfall," she explained, "but now they say Midgar has
become unstable. People are too afraid to live there anymore and have nowhere else to go."

"Could Midgar really come crashing down?" I wondered.

"It's possible. Nobody has the resources for a proper investigation of the support structures."

So much fear and suffering on a short walk through town. No wonder the Edge team liked to party. Just like old times on Earth. Work hard, play harder, and earn that ticket out of here to an early grave.

No. Not like old times. In fact, this was the opposite of my old times. Maybe that was why it was getting to me. I had thought the grass would be greener on the other side of the cataclysm, but it would be a long time before any grass grew here. It would never end, would it? The work. The misery.

The fifteen-minute walk caught every facet of Edge's current situation, from the poverty of the homeless to the glitz of the main avenue. Shops meant jobs, and jobs were sorely needed, Shalua reasoned, but the dissonance was jarring. My meager appetite for shopping had dwindled to nothing. Yet, as Kalm station's only representative, I felt compelled to give my appearance some effort.

"Try it on," Shalua suggested.

It was all the enabling I needed. The dress hugged my upper body, flaring out a bit at the waist before ending just above my knees. Even in the unforgiving fluorescent light of the changing room, I felt pretty. Girly, even.

"You look great," she commented. "You should totally wear it tonight."

I pursed my lips, turning and twisting to look at myself from all angles. I rarely wore dresses. I wore jeans, shorts. Hazard suits. A sundress would make me feel completely out of my element. Did I have that kind of confidence right now?

With a sigh, I got out of the dress and set it aside. Declining the tube tops and miniskirts Shalua offered me, I picked out an outfit more in my style: slim dress pants and a cowl neck top, in a soft fabric that shimmered silver under the light. Flattering enough, though rather dull next to the other woman's risqué choices. It was fine by me. I wasn't looking for attention.

My route to the cashier took me past the rack of sundresses. After one last longing look, I grabbed the one I had tried on and added it to my purchases.

The visit to the shoe store continued in the same vein. Instead of one of the many pairs of stilettos she picked out, I chose ankle boots in grey suede, feminine in shape but with less lethal heels. Shalua didn't seem to mind our mismatched tastes, and viewed my refusals as my loss and her gain. By the end of our shopping run, she carried more bags than I did.

"Well, that was fun," she declared as we reached the plaza, "but I think it's time to get ready for tonight. See you at dinner!"
She skipped off before I could ask for directions to the hotel. With a sigh, I looked around and tried to get my bearings. I knew the hotel was a couple of blocks down one of the avenues, but which one? The street we had walked up wasn't familiar, but I couldn't see much of the other side of the plaza past the jumble of shipping containers and scaffolding that spiraled up from the center. Construction workers were swarming over it like ants.

As I scanned the scene for a landmark or a way through, a flash of red in the yellow sea of hard hats drew my eye. My stomach dropped as soon as I recognized the untidy thatch. Of all the rotten luck... I spun on my heel, intending to take the long way around, and almost knocked Orin over with one of my bags.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I didn't see you there."

"It's quite all right," he assured me. "Not, uh, not even a dent."

He punctuated the statement with a nervous laugh. I summoned the polite smile I had relied on all day.

"I didn't expect to see you until dinner. What brings you here?"

"Oh, I-I just had some, uh... Errands."

He licked his lips and looked a little pale. Always such a bundle of nerves, but more so around me than his coworkers, I had learned today. I suspected a crush.

"Well, I'm done with mine," I said, raising my bags, "but I'm afraid I'm a bit lost now. How do I get to the Emerald from here?"

Orin's face lit up. "I'll walk you there. It's not far."

"Thanks, but you don't have to--"

"It's fine, I'm happy to," he interrupted me. "I'm heading that way."

"Well, okay. Thanks."

As Orin led the way around the plaza, I glanced over to where I had spotted Reno, but the Turk was nowhere to be seen.

I sat on the bed, studying the outfit I had chosen. Black and gray. Simple, but elegant. Safe. Boring, really, against the fresh white and green of the hotel's bedspread. I wouldn't be turning any heads tonight.

Well, none except one. In his awkward way, Orin had insisted on not only walking me to the hotel elevator, but on picking me up for dinner. I had agreed, but as soon as I was alone, the regrets crept in. I didn't want to lead him on. It wasn't as if I was interested.

Was I?

As we made our way to the hotel, my mind had been more occupied with my glimpse of Reno than our conversation. I wondered if the Turk had seen us. Did he know I was in town? Probably, considering I was one of his targets. My hands balled into fists, the nails digging into my palms. Maybe he had seen us, followed us. Maybe he thought I was interested in Orin. The possibility gave me a dark sense of satisfaction. Come to think of it, maybe I should give Orin a chance.
least he didn't think of me as a job with benefits.

As soon as the idea popped into my head, I felt a nervous flutter in my stomach. When Orin looked at me, his eyes held a gleam, a hint of some intense emotion that unsettled me. I couldn't quite put a label on it. Not infatuation, or admiration. Reverence, perhaps, as pompous as that sounded. Ever since the incident in the badlands, I couldn't shake the feeling the man was trying to make a pedestal for me; or worse, had already put me on it and was determined to keep me there.

Then again, was it such a bad thing? Reno had never worshipped me, nor had James. Look how well those relationships had turned out.

Reno, younger than me, reckless and rebellious. James, older and protocol personified. And now Orin, just my age, presenting both passion and stability. Mr. Just Right. I smiled a cynical smile. Pity I couldn't remember what happened to Goldilocks at the end of the tale.

My gaze wandered to the dress hanging from a hook on the bathroom door. I wasn't looking for attention, but Orin seemed determined to give me plenty of it. He might value the extra effort. I imagined myself in the dress, dancing and flaunting, but when I tried to picture Orin's reaction, it wasn't his appreciative smile I saw. It was Reno's.

I got up and grabbed the pants.

The dinner was as I had feared. I hid behind a tight-lipped smile, deflecting questions while struggling to put names to faces. I had no idea what I ended up ordering, but what arrived on my plate was tentacle-free and easily the best meal I'd had on Gaia. Small mercies.

Speaking of mercies, the conversation revolved more or less around WRO business. My Edge colleagues were very curious about the recent break-in and the measures taken afterwards.

"Figures Grigori would skimp on security and leave it all up to some pencil pusher," snorted a round-faced man I didn't recognize.

"I'd have thought the lab raids in Midgar would make even him think twice, and do something about it." The speaker was a woman I couldn't see. "We talked about it during his visit, didn't we? Actually, I'm beginning to wonder why the 'RO decided to put a research station in Kalm at all. Why not keep the eco people here at our office, where security is up to scratch? The badlands are practically in our backyard."

"I think it's more about PR than practicality," said another woman. "The 'RO is new, we need visibility. We won't be getting donations from people who don't know we exist."

"But an environmental research station? That's hardly going to impress people who've been surrounded by a tent city for months."

"It'll impress the people in the tents even less," the first man pointed out. "If Tuesti wants visibility, he should think about image first. We won't get money with a bad reputation, no matter how many see us."

I ate in silence. I felt no kinship with these people and their concerns, any more than I could relate to the refugees or the citizens of Kalm. I couldn't even muster up the loyalty to defend my workplace, thanks to the inhospitable attitudes of Grigori and Chelsea. I may as well have been watching this world through a TV screen. Luckily I sat at the corner of the table, with a wall on one side and Orin on the other. I didn't have to worry about being the center of attention.
Well, attention from others than Orin, that is. Despite my efforts to keep an even distance, he seemed to inch closer and closer. When my thigh hit the wall, I knew it wasn't just my imagination. That was the limit of his advances, though. Orin encroached on my personal space, but didn't go as far as physical touch.

"So, Tess," he said once our meal was at an end, "ready to move onward?"

"Where to?" I hadn't heard anything about plans after dinner.

"Well, that depends on what you would like to do."

I glanced over his shoulder at the others. Some had already said their goodbyes, while those who remained were deep in conversation.

"Is anyone else going?"

"No, but that doesn't mean we have to call it a night so soon," Orin suggested, with a boldness no doubt acquired from all the glasses of wine. His stutter was gone.

What were my options? Go to the hotel room, to toss and turn in bed until I passed out from sheer exhaustion? Speed up the process with too much alcohol? Neither was an appealing prospect.

"I feel like dancing. Know any good clubs?"

His eyes went wide. Wine or not, chances were Orin was too shy for dancing, making this the end of the evening. Just as I was ready to ask for the shortest route to the hotel, an uncertain smile appeared on his face.

"I know a place. It's not far."

I smiled back.

"Lead the way."

Chapter End Notes

Shalua's party-girl side was inspired by the (frankly ridiculous) getup she wears in Dirge of Cerberus. My headcanon says that right before her introduction in the game, she was out partying. No one would wear that to work after all, unless their profession was something very very different from technological research. :P So, she's out having a good time when Deepground attacks Edge. She dashes to work to get her gun, and in the rush she forgets her coat at the club. It's chilly, though, so as she leaves her workplace, gun in hand, she grabs a lab coat instead. Seriously, it's the only explanation that makes sense. X)

Thanks for reading!
Moths to a Flame

The club was dark and loud, humming with the unfocused energy of intoxicated patrons. I felt at home right away. Unfortunately, that sense of belonging evaporated the moment Orin opened his mouth.

"So, were you born in Cosmo Canyon?"

I should have seen it coming. The man's infatuation was obvious and now that it was just the two of us left, he had sought out a quiet corner for us. It was only to be expected he would try to get to know me better. Still, some wishful part of me had hoped for a night off from half-truths and evasion.

"No. I just stayed there for a while after Meteorfall. Wanted to brush up on my Planet Life after everything that happened."

"Oh, I see. Where are you from, then?"

"I never know how to answer that question," I said with a laugh I hoped would ring true. "My parents moved around so much when I was young. What about you?"

To my relief, Orin was eager to tell me all about his childhood in Junon. I encouraged him with questions, all the while dreading the next time the conversation would turn to me. The alternative wasn't much better, though. I had to tiptoe around every question, afraid of betraying some telltale ignorance that would invite his suspicion. With every Gaian concept I had no context for, I felt more and more alienated. Soon, all I could think about was escaping back to the hotel to wallow in self-pity.

But then I might do something stupid, like call Reno.

No, that would be far worse. Forget and move on, that was what I needed to do. So, I chose the smarter option: stay and get drunk.

A couple of glasses of wine later, I had a pleasant buzz going. Orin's cheeks were rosy and his stares went on a little too long, suggesting he was just as inebriated himself. My gaze lingered as well, on his high cheekbones, his straight nose, his thin lips. There was nothing wrong with the man's looks. There was just no spark, none of that chemistry that would turn visual appreciation into lust.

Orin finished his beer and left to get another drink. When he returned from the bar, he was carrying a couple of Cosmo Candles.

"Here's to a fun night," he grinned and clinked his glass against mine.

I pinned on a smile and knocked back the orange liquid in one go. He laughed as the burn turned my smile into a grimace, and then he gushed about how the Cosmo Candle was the best shot this bar served. I didn't have the heart to tell him it was a pale imitation of the real thing.

The shot may not have delivered that searing peppery kick I knew by heart, but it went straight to my head nonetheless. Soon I was swaying to the beat, amusing myself with the slow pulsing patterns of the club's colored lights. I could have sworn the club swayed, too.

"Wanna dance?"
I turned back to Orin, ready to agree, and froze. There was a familiar face behind him. Leaning against the wall at the other end of the bar was Reno, dressed in faded jeans and a slim black t-shirt that hugged his wiry frame. He smirked and raised his drink in greeting. My breath caught in my lungs.

Orin looked over his shoulder, then back at me with an odd look on his face.

"Friend of yours?"

*Forget and move on.*

"Not anymore," I said flatly, then tore my eyes from the redhead. "I'd love to dance, but let's have another shot first."

I gulped down my second Candle even quicker than the first, then grabbed Orin's hand and led him to the dance floor. But try as I might to lose myself in the music, my gaze kept finding the Turk. He stayed in the same spot, sipping his beer, but the piercing stare he laid on us was at odds with his casual pose.

I closed my eyes. Soon I felt a pair of hands on my hips and a body pressing up against my back. Orin's boldness surprised me, but he had downed his fair share of liquid courage. I moved to the rhythm, trying to convince myself I was okay with this, but even with my eyes shut, I could feel Reno's gaze on me.

It didn't matter that I was furious with him. The lies and betrayal didn't stop the effect he had on my body, didn't stop my skin heating up with a desire that Orin's wandering hands could never hope to satisfy.

My buzz was evaporating at an alarming rate. The music was too loud, the crowd too hot, the man grinding against me too presumptuous.

The song changed, and the tempo slowed down to a hypnotic heartbeat. I freed myself from Orin's grasp with an urgency bordering on panic.

"I need to sit down," I offered as an excuse, raising my voice to be heard over the lyrics of some smarmy love song. "Why don't you find a table while I get us more shots?"

The disappointment was plain on his face, but he nodded. I bolted for the bar. While I leaned into the counter and waited for my turn, I tried to make my woozy brain cooperate long enough to figure out just what the hell I was doing. Bumping and grinding on the dance floor with someone I just wasn't into, while the guy who made my blood boil and my insides melt watched us from half a room away? So much was wrong with this situation that I didn't even know where to begin.

Two shots were placed in front of me. I debated what to do with them as I fumbled out enough gil. I should just bring them both to Orin, make my excuses and leave. Yes, that was for the best. My mind made up, I grabbed a glass in each hand and scanned the dimly-lit space, trying to locate him.

It wasn't Orin I spotted first – it was the bright red hair of the man he was talking to. Had my hands not been occupied, I would have buried my face in them. The night was just getting better and better.
As I got closer to the pair, it was plain to see that this was not a friendly chat. Orin's terrified smile. Shoulders so tense they practically touched his ears. Reno's predatory grin, and the cold gleam in his eyes as he stared down the other man. Oh, this was not good. I picked up the pace, but before I could reach them Orin scurried off, heading straight for the door.

I gaped after him as I closed the remaining distance, then turned my incredulous eyes to Reno. He faced me with a faint sneer, beer in one hand and the thumb of the other hooked through the belt-loop on his jeans. The redhead took a gulp of his drink and smacked his lips before answering my unspoken question.

"Hey, Doc," he greeted as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. "Your pal had to leave."

"Did you just scare him off?"

"Told him a few facts, s'all."

I wanted to smack the arrogance off his face, but my hands were full. I poured one shot down my throat, quickly followed by the other, then slammed the glasses down on the nearest table.

"You scared him off!"

"I did you a favor. The guy's bad news, yo."

"You're unbelievable, you know that?" I growled. "Fucking unbelievable."

"Oh, c'mon," he scoffed, unfazed by my anger. "You can do so much better than that waste of space."

"What, better like you?"

I spat it like an accusation. The knuckles around his glass whitened.

"No," he said, toneless and curt.

I didn't know what that was supposed to mean, but it hurt all the same. My heart felt heavy yet hollow, my head throbbed with too much noise and alcohol, and before I knew what was happening, all my frustrations were spilling out of me.

"Why the hell are you here anyway? Checking that the target is still around? Making sure she isn't cooking up some evil alien schemes? Hoping to get a quick fuck while you're at it, huh?"

"Hey!" Reno warned. "Keep your voice down."

"Don't you dare tell me what to do! I've had it with you! You can go to hell for all I care!"

I pushed past him and stumbled for the exit, ignoring the curses of the other clubbers as I crashed and elbowed my way to freedom. Despite the handful of patrons chatting and smoking around the door, the front of the club was a haven of quiet compared to the inside. I began making my unsteady way down the street, my ears still drumming with the club's pulsing beat. The crisp night air felt good on my flushed skin, although it did nothing to cool my outrage. Who did he think he was? What the hell made that insolent son of a bitch think he had the right to meddle in my affairs?

Before I had reached the end of the block, I became aware of someone beside me, matching my wobbly pace.

"Will you just leave me alone?" I snarled.
"No can do, babe. You're totally wasted, yo."

"The hell I am! I'm just a bit... tipsy. I can walk to the Emerald just fine!"

"Uh huh. So you're headin' the wrong way on purpose?"

I stopped in my tracks and looked around, blinking until my eyes decided to cooperate and focus on my surroundings.

"Fuck!"

I spun around, faster than my drunken legs could manage. Before I could plant my face on the sidewalk, I was caught in a pair of firm arms.

"Whoops," he chuckled. "Good thing I came along, huh?"

My head was spinning and I just wanted to get away from everything, but Reno showed no intention of releasing me. Embarrassment mingled with anger and frustrated longing, and I shoved him in the chest. Hard.

"Let me go!"

"Fitz."

The humor had vanished from his voice. The sudden change in his mood was enough to penetrate my drunken haze and make me go still.

"I know that guy," Reno said in a low voice. "He used to be on Hojo's team."

I sucked in a startled breath.

"I dunno if he knows who you are, but I know he did some real fucked-up shit at Shinra. I don't want someone like that anywhere near ya."

"No. That can't... He's so nice."

A sardonic smile flitted across his face.

"I can be nice too, babe."

The anger fizzled out, and I was overcome with a sudden tiredness that made my shoulders sag and my limbs tremble. I let my head slump against his chest. This close to his body, the cigarettes and cologne couldn't hide the heady scent that was him. I inhaled deeply, but it just filled my whole being with a wistful ache.

"You're still a shit," I mumbled against his t-shirt.

"I know." His voice was gentle, as was the palm stroking down the back of my head to my neck. "C'mon. Let's get ya to the hotel."

Yet his arms didn't move. After a few seconds I looked up in confusion, to find his eyes mere inches from my own. I forgot to breathe. His pupils were huge in the dim glow of the streetlights, with only a sliver of pale blue glimmering around the edges. I lost myself in their dark depths, falling willingly, deeper and deeper and closer...

Then he blinked and broke the spell, and touched his forehead to mine with a shuddering sigh.
Wisps of scarlet hair caressed my face like breaths of air.

"Shit," he murmured. "This is a bad idea."

"You love bad ideas," I whispered.

"You don't want this. Not with me."

"Stop telling me what I want," I groaned, giving him another half-hearted shove.

"Five minutes ago you told me to go to hell, remember?"

"Can't a girl change her mind?"

"Sure, but you're gonna change it again and hate me in the mornin'."

"I won't. It's just a bit of fun. You're good at fun."

"No, it's not just—"

He cut himself off. Only the distant rhythm of the club could be heard over our ragged breaths; its beat was slow and languorous against the pulse thrumming in my veins. I slid one hand higher, brushing my fingertips over his collarbone. He shivered, then gently pushed me away.

"You're drunk," Reno said in a hoarse whisper, "and I'll just fuck it up again. You don't want this."

"But—"

"You don't want this."

His lips touched my forehead in a fleeting caress. Then he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and guided me in the direction of my hotel.
My head was a pounding orb of agony, made worse by the fact that I was burning up. I dragged a listless arm high enough to reach the top of the covers and pulled them down. Brightness assaulted me, even through tightly shut eyelids, and amplified the throbbing in my skull tenfold. I groaned and yanked the covers back over my head.

...Covers? I was in a bed? When had I ended up in a bed? It wasn't my bed. The smell was wrong. Beneath the odor of stale alcohol and sweat, I detected a faint floral scent. My sheets never smelled of flowers.

I tugged down the covers again, just enough to let me crack an eye open. Green sheets. Definitely not my bed. The lamp on the bedside table was a matching shade, as was the cushion thrown onto the floor. It took me a while to make the connection between the color-coded decor and the Emerald Edge Hotel.

That's right. I was in Edge. Aided with that bit of information, pieces of the evening began crawling back into my awareness. Orin and his advances. My terrible decision to fix it with drink. Reno being a controlling asshole and me being a drunken fool, throwing myself at him as usual. I groaned again, louder, and curled up into a ball under the covers.

The sensation of soft sheets caressing my feverish skin alerted me to another fact. It seemed I was nude from the waist down. I rolled over on my back and lifted the covers for a peek. Yep, that was a definite lack of pants. A sinking feeling uncurled in my gut as I lowered my hands. I wouldn't bother stripping that far when falling into bed, drunk as a skunk, in the wee hours of the morning. Pants, sure, but not underwear, unless...

I hazarded a glance to the right, at the other half of the king-sized bed. A pair of legs were resting on top of the covers. Bare, male legs. Pale and sinewy – an awful lot like Reno's.

Oh shit. Shit, shit, shit.

My hesitant gaze wandered up him, and with some measure of relief I found that he, at least, was in his underwear. He still wore the t-shirt, too. I hadn't noticed the menacing cartoon chocobo printed on it the night before.

"Mornin'," I finally looked up at Reno's face. His head was tilted my way, giving me a full view of his fully unreadable expression as he watched me.

"Why are you here?" I croaked.

My tongue stuck to top of my mouth and some bastard must have poured sand down my throat. No doubt I looked even worse than I felt, all panda eyes and ridiculous bed head. No wonder he was looking so awkward.

"You don't remember, huh?"

Oh boy. That was not the line I wanted to hear. Filled with trepidation, I licked my lips and posed
the obligatory question.

"Remember what?"

"I took ya back to the hotel. You wanted me to stay, so I did."

His ponytail flowed in a silky red stream over the pillow under his head. I stared in fascination at it for several seconds while my hungover brain processed the information.

"Okay... And I'm half-naked, because...?"

He hesitated. The familiar half-smile made an appearance, but it didn't reach his wary eyes.

"I went down on ya."

"What?"

My startled shriek stabbed through my ears and straight into my brain. I slumped down and clutched my head with a drawn-out moan. I was dying, that much I knew; I just wasn't sure if it was from the hangover or the shame.

"Yeah, you wanted me to do that too," Reno said while I tried to recover. "Didn't think you'd forget that part. Sounded like you came pretty hard, yo."

Had the shock not overwhelmed me, I might have paid more attention to the odd pitch of his small chuckle and the absence of smugness in his voice. As it was, I ransacked my patchy memory, straining my brain for more details. In disjointed flashes, some of them returned. The chilly night air nipping at my bare arms as we made our way to the Emerald, a sharp contrast to the heat emanating from Reno's body next to mine. Giggling like a halfwit as I stumbled up the stairs of the hotel entrance with his arm firmly around my waist.

*It doesn't have to mean anything. No strings.* My words, slurred as I slung my arms around his neck. His hot breath and mouth on my stomach, kissing a sloppy trail downward, until... Oh.

*What have I done?* That was the question running through my head, but the wrong one tumbled out of my mouth.

"What else did you do to me?" I whispered, staring at him with eyes like saucers.

He went completely still.

"Nothin'. You passed out."

"Of course I passed out! I was dead drunk!"

The budding panic made my voice shrill and brittle. What the hell was wrong with me? Why did I keep making one *stupid* mistake after another, with Reno of all people? God, what must he think of me?

Something flashed in his eyes, too quickly for me to identify in my sluggish state.

"Yeah, and that's why I stayed. I didn't want ya to freak out in case you couldn't remember much, okay?"

"How could I not freak out? It's... It's *you!* Christ, I'm such an idiot!"
My words seemed to echo in the stillness that followed. Every last drop of emotion drained from Reno's face.

"Guess that's my cue."

He flung himself off the bed, snatching his jeans from the floor as he headed for the door. A different kind of panic came over me.

"That's it? You're just going to leave?" I blurted out like an accusation, not exactly sure what I was accusing him of.

"No strings attached," he said in a cold voice, pausing in the doorway without looking back. "That was the deal. Don't mean nothin', right?"

He was gone. Moments later, I heard the suite door slam shut.

A hollow ache spread in my chest, terrible enough to overpower the pounding in my head. Of course it meant something. That was the whole damned problem! Just sex? That was simple. This was anything but.

What a freaking mess. I was a freaking mess. The past twenty-four hours were a parade of cringing idiocy, of one moronic decision after another. Why didn't I just let it go the first time?

A rhetorical question: it was the alcohol, of course. I had been drunk enough to make another ill-advised pass, and he had been drunk enough to give in. Some laws of nature were no different on Gaia than on Earth.

I was such an ass. I would never drink again.

I collapsed back onto the bed and pulled a pillow over my head, muffling a pathetic whimper. I squeezed my eyes shut, too, but while the darkness was welcome, it did nothing to mute the conversation that replayed in my head. Bit by bit, it dawned on me how ill-chosen my words had been. I had all but accused him of taking advantage of me.

It was murky and Reno was no saint, but he had more scruples than I gave him credit for. He had only meant to see me back to the hotel safely, I was sure of that. I was the one who hadn't taken no for an answer the first time. He didn't deserve to get chewed out for my mistakes, especially when he could have just left like always and avoided the whole humiliating confrontation.

Then it hit me. Reno had stayed. For the first time, Reno had stayed until morning, because he had been worried about me. And I had rewarded him by exploding in his face.

God, such an ass. A real dumbass. The dumbest of asses.

I may have been acting like a clueless idiot lately, but I could at least show some grace and offer the man an apology. Maybe... Maybe we could somehow...

My head hurt too much to think, but there was a longing that seemed etched into my bones, that throbbed in time with my heartbeat. It whispered of the comfort of his touch, and instilled a yearning for it into my fevered skin.

I scrambled out of bed. It took me several minutes to locate my purse, flung into a corner without care, and one more to pull out my phone and bring up Reno's number. Biting back a nausea that may not have been entirely from the hangover, I paced in a halting circle with the phone pressed to my ear, tangling my other hand in my hair.
The line went dead. Disconnected. I yanked the device from my ear and stared at it as if it had bitten me, feeling a twist in the pit of my stomach. I tried again, but the call wouldn't connect. Reno had switched off his phone.

A couple of painkillers managed to tone down my hangover, but it had an unfortunate side effect. Now that I wasn't distracted by the dull pounding anymore, the hotel room was too empty and quiet. I needed to get out before the remorseful what-ifs drove me crazy.

The sun bore down from a cloudless sky, turning this city of asphalt and steel into a furnace. What a day for a hangover. I squinted and shielded my eyes with one hand, trying to stop the bright rays from searing into my brain.

Near the plaza, at the end of the main avenue, I finally found a stall that offered sunglasses for sale. I couldn't help a wry smile as I tried on a pair. Six months under the blistering sun of Cosmo Canyon, yet this was what it took to make me buy some shades.

Just a few steps beyond, I passed by an alley. Hidden behind my dark lenses, I glanced over at the man slumped against the wall some way in, his clothes as filthy as the gauze around his head. Bile rose in my throat. Here I was, treated to fancy dinners, throwing away money on clothes, living alone in a house that had been offered to me on a plate; yet I wallowed in self-pity while so many others suffered in the streets. I didn't even dare approach the poor man for fear of contagion. I was a farce of everything I had meant to be.

I marched onward, until I arrived at a small café that was set up in the middle of the main avenue. I slumped down at one of the tables and asked for a coffee. In spite of the crowds wandering along the avenue, only one other table was occupied. Maybe it was the rickety furniture, I mused, scraping my chair sideways in the hopes of putting an end to its wobble.

"Are you new in town?" the waiter asked when he returned with my order. When I nodded, his face brightened. "In that case, there's a place you really should try out while you're here. It's called Seventh Heaven, just a few blocks from here. They serve drinks, food, snacks, you name it. The service is great, too, the owner is..."

The man's overflowing praise for the other establishment went on for minutes. I nodded at the right places, until the guy seemed to pick up that my mind was elsewhere and left me alone. Well, the empty tables were less of a mystery now. I wondered whether the name "Johnny's Heaven" was a tribute or just meant the café was part of the same franchise.

I fished out my phone from my bag. I wasn't looking forward to this, especially after Reno's warning, but I felt compelled to undo some of the damage he may have done. As Orin was my contact at the Edge branch of the WRO, I still had to work with the man.

If only I had considered that before heading out to a club with him.

After a few rings, I received a hesitant greeting.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Orin. I just called to apologize for the other night. I don't know what my friend said to you, to be honest, but I'm guessing he was out of line."

"It's fine. You're not responsible for your... 'friend'."

Only Orin's pointed distaste for the word made me realize what I had called Reno.
"I still feel bad about it. I hope this won't affect our work."

"I appreciate it. Um, look, maybe we could, you know, discuss it over lunch or something? Today?"

The thought of dissecting the previous night's disaster in detail was enough to make me want to crawl under the covers again.

"Sorry, I already have other plans."

"Dinner, then?"

"I'm heading back to Kalm in a few hours."

"How about a coffee?"

What little patience I had today was disappearing quickly. It was already an effort to keep my tone polite.

"Sorry, but no."

"It's just a cup of coffee. It won't take long."

"I told you, I have other plans!"

It came out harsher than I had intended. Too harsh. The line went silent for a while.

"I see," Orin finally said. "I'll... I'll see you some other time, then. Have a good trip back to Kalm."

He hung up. I stared at the phone in my hand, torn between guilt and anger. This was not a good day for dealing with men.

In Orin's case, anger was definitely the stronger emotion. I set the phone down and stirred my coffee, wondering why. Reno could be pushy. He tested my patience, sometimes past its limits, but even if my temper flared it was never for long. Orin provoked a much more potent ire.

Maybe it was all in how they each reacted to my anger. If I felt guilty about snapping at Reno, it was because I realized it for myself. He didn't guilt-trip me, like Orin did. It linked up to my earlier thoughts about worship. Orin's brand of it seemed to come with expectations of reward, as if the sacrifice of his time and attention should bind me to conform to his wishes. The more I thought about it, the creepier it felt.

Reno was not one for worship. He treated me as a person. Respected me – or he had, at least. I was afraid to guess what he might think of me now.

I recalled the stunned joy on Reno's face when he saw me for the first time after I returned to Gaia. The look in his eyes when we said our last goodbyes – or so we had thought at the time. It was hard to believe all that had been an act. Going back even farther, what would he have gained by smuggling me out of the ward in Shinra HQ?

Could I have misconstrued Elena's words? What if it was all some awful misunderstanding?

No. Reno himself had said "we". We are looking out for you, that's what he had said. We, as in the Turks, and the Turks meant Shinra.

It ain't what you think. I've got your back.
What if there was more to it, though? Shouldn't I give him a chance to explain?

I picked up the phone and thumbed out a message.

*I'm in Edge this afternoon. Maybe we could meet up and talk? Please.*

I selected Reno's number, but my thumb hovered over the send button. I went back and deleted the last word before pressing the button.

I don't know how long I sat at the wobbly table, stirring my coffee. I stared out at the avenue, but I didn't see it. The things I saw were in my mind's eye, bittersweet memories, played over and over. Tears welled up in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks, as silent as the phone on the table. Some of the passers-by may have noticed, but it didn't matter. I didn't know them and they didn't know me. They didn't matter. I didn't matter.

The phone stayed dark and soundless, in silent confirmation.

Maybe I should just get away for a while. I could go back to Cosmo Canyon, see everyone again. Travel was expensive these days, and the Canyon was on the opposite side of the world, but I had a few thousand stashed away. I could at least inquire.

The more I thought about the idea, the better it seemed. My mind made up, I got up and joined the stream of people flowing by. 

**Chapter End Notes**

FYI, Johnny is a minor canon character who shows up in both the original game and in one of the spinoff novellas. Inspired by Tifa's tenacity and example, he starts up a bar in Edge after Meteorfall and his happy to tell his customers all about her Seventh Heaven bar – to the point that it loses him customers to her. Poor Johnny could do with a few business classes. X)
My savings were nowhere near enough for a flight to Cosmo Canyon. I couldn't even afford to fly to Junon, much less from one continent to another.

"A cruise to Costa del Sol is just within your price range," the travel agent chirped. "Economy class, of course, and the cabin is below deck, but the view from the observation deck is lovely."

And what exactly was I supposed to do from there? Pull on Sparky and trek across the whole goddamned continent?

"Costa del Sol is lovely this time of year," she continued, nabbing a brochure from a stand on her desk. "Sunny beaches, fresh seafood in the local restaurants, fantastic nightlife..."

She splayed the brochure open with French-manicured fingers. No, wait, not French. It wouldn't be called that here. I wondered if there was some nook on this planet that spoke the Gaian version of French, or if that was another aspect of my former life that was lost for good.

They didn't speak it in Costa del Sol, I knew that much.

"No, thanks. I'm not interested in a beach holiday."

"Are you sure? It's a lovely place to visit--"

"I want to go to Cosmo Canyon, not Costa del Sol."

The woman faltered for a moment, but soon adopted an ingratiating smile.

"You know, I'm not supposed to do this, but let me sweeten the deal for you. If you book a Costan cruise today, I'll throw in a free breakfast voucher!"

"Look, I don't--" I cut myself short and took a deep breath before I could lose what little self-control I had left. "I'll think about it. For now, I'd like a one-way ticket for the Kalm coach."

She insisted I take one of their brochures on Costa del Sol, in case I changed my mind. On some level I could understand her desperation. I had been the only customer at the agency, and considering fuel prices and the current state of Edge, business had to be slow. That didn't mean I felt any obligation to take her ever-so-tempting breakfast voucher.

As I made my way along one of Edge's main avenues toward the coach service, someone fell into step beside me. I nearly stumbled to a halt when I saw who it was.

"What do you want?"

Tseng glanced at the brochure in my hand, ignoring my question.

"You intend to travel? To leave the Midgar area?"

"It's none of your business."

I picked up my pace, but the taller man had no trouble keeping up.

"I cannot recommend it."
"You have some nerve, telling me what to do."

"Asking for cooperation is a courtesy," he replied coolly. "You are well aware of our alternative approaches, Doctor."

I whipped my head around to glare at him. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm merely making a suggestion. For valid reasons, I might add."

The Wutaian's face was impassive, unbothered by my outrage. My anger climbed a notch higher. Reno, Orin, and now this guy. What made the men of Gaia think they could dictate my goddamned life as they pleased?

"You have reasons?" I snapped. "How about you share them with me and let me draw my own conclusions? I need to be able to evaluate your 'suggestion', after all."

The Turk was silent for a while, but he didn't leave my side.

"The Turks have been checking up on former Shinra employees. It's become clear many of them have disappeared without a trace. No known addresses or employment. No bodies. Nothing."

I needed a few moments for the surprise to abate. I hadn't expected him to go along with my demand.

"A lot of people disappeared in Meteorfall," I pointed out, wondering where this was going.

"True, but most of these went missing in the two months after Meteorfall. A disproportionate number of them were former researchers from the Weapons and Science Departments."

"You think they've been killed?"

"Not exactly. Disappearances are complicated. Accidents are easier to arrange."

His matter-of-fact tone gave me chills. I was taking an afternoon stroll with a man who no doubt knew exactly how to arrange such "accidents".

"Kidnapped?" I guessed.

"Tends to get messy, especially in large numbers. Bribery and coercion are more likely."

"So... you think they've been recruited," I concluded, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. "By whom?"

"I cannot reveal details of an ongoing investigation."

The response was automatic, a rehearsed deflection. I huffed in frustration.

"Then where are you going with this?"

"I think we both know the answer to that question."

"I'm not sure I do," I insisted, determined to get a straight answer out of the man. "Am I considered a target or a possible recruit?"

Tseng went quiet again. I thought I saw his forehead crease, but it passed so quickly I couldn't be sure.
"Does the name Kerrigan mean anything to you?"

This time, I went cold all over. Hojo’s assistant. The one who had traded company secrets for a chance to get his hands on me, even though it meant risking everything he had, including his life. I slowed to a halt so I could study the Turk’s face, but his blank expression gave nothing away.

"Yes. Yes, it does."

"He is one of the missing scientists." Tseng let the news sink in before he continued. "While I cannot speak for Reno’s reasons to volunteer for the assignment, I guarantee that the decision to place you under surveillance was a professional one. I suggest you reconsider your travel plans, Doctor. Our range has its limits these days."

He turned around, and became the dark silhouette of his Turk uniform and his curtain of black hair. I watched him glide through the crowd like a shadow, so smooth and quiet compared to the chaos that had erupted in my head. When he turned a corner and disappeared from view, I found myself scanning the faces of passers-by. It was one thing to be cautious on principle. It was quite another to be told the danger was real and knew your face and your name.

Was this why Reno had wanted me to change my name? No, that couldn’t be; he had suggested it before I left for Cosmo Canyon. It must have been just a precaution, one born from years of experience hunting down the enemies of the Shinra Company. Maybe he had anticipated a situation like this, whatever "this" was.

Tseng had made it sound as if the Turks were protecting me, but an unpleasant possibility reared its head. They were all too aware of how much I feared a threat like Kerrigan. They were low on manpower and resources; Tseng had said so himself. What if they were manipulating me, using my fears to keep me under their sway now that Reno had been exposed? Would they really go that far? It was possible, perhaps even probable. I had heard the whispers back at Shinra HQ: the Turks would do anything and everything to reach their objective.

Had Reno volunteered for the mission to keep the other Turks at bay? Maybe it was just because he knew he had the best chances of getting close to me. Would Reno do that to me? I didn’t want to believe it, but I had misjudged people before. I just couldn’t be sure.

Speculating was pointless, anyway. Even if he’d had my best interests at heart at first, the situation had changed now. I was on my own.

The coach ride was filled with endless second-guessing. Shielded by my new sunglasses, I watched my fellow passengers, wondering if they were all as normal as they seemed. I certainly wasn’t the Banora-born, Midgar-educated scientist I pretended to be. Maybe the overweight guy in the tight suit was a member of some shadow organization. The middle-aged woman with her hair in a bun could have been plotting my kidnapping.

By the time I reached Kalm, I was jumping at shadows. The house had never felt so empty. I stood by the front door, suitcase in one hand and my keys in the other, and listened. If I strained my ears, I could make out the faint sound of chattering and laughter. Likely one of the neighbors having people over. It only made my home seem emptier.

The bed was unmade. It hadn’t been a priority the past week. I hoisted the bag onto it and began unpacking. As I returned my toiletries to their places in the bathroom, I noticed a hairbrush on the glass shelf beneath the mirror. Red strands of hair stood out like bright warning lights against the white bristles. I put it away in a drawer under the sink. In the bedroom, I yanked the sheets off the bed before I could spot more on the pillows.
There was an empty wine bottle on the kitchen counter, along with two wine glasses. The kitchen hadn't been a priority either. I added the glasses to the pile of unwashed dishes in the sink and took the bottle to the garbage bin outside, as I should have done a week ago. The glass shattered as it hit the bottom of the empty container.

The sun was already low enough to hide behind the town wall. As I walked back to the house, I couldn't keep myself from peering into every long shadow. At first I searched for a glimpse of dark Turk suits, but as I looked, my thoughts returned to Tseng's warning. What if it wasn't just a ploy to keep me within easy reach? What if others were out there, watching me? I hurried my steps, and for the first time since I had moved to Kalm, I made use of the door chain.

When I entered the living room, I noticed a haphazard ball of fabric wedged into a corner of the couch. Gingerly, I sat down and fished it out. It was the band t-shirt, the moon now pink from spilled wine. I had told him to leave it. I had planned to wash it before our next time.

*I'm here 'cause of you! I'm doin' it for you, all right?*

A pain pierced the heaviness around my heart, sharp enough to feel physical. As if by their own volition, my eyes sought out the Paraiso bottle. It was still on top of the cupboard where I had set it down that first night. We had made a sizable dent in it, but more than two thirds remained. I watched the bottle, considering it, then thought better of it. I would not drink alone anymore. I had promised Camille.

With the t-shirt clutched in one hand, I fetched my phone instead. Whether from old habit or some subconscious instinct, my fingers brought up his number. My thumb already hovered over the call button, but at the last second I scrolled up to Reeve. Again, I hesitated. For all I knew, he was in on this too. Giving me a job in his organization was the perfect way to keep tabs on me, not to mention placing me within convenient reach of the Turks. Reno and Reeve had been friends long before I met them. If I couldn't trust one, how could I trust the other?

The number I settled on was Pub Starlet in Cosmo Canyon. As a public place with one of the more reliable phone connections in the village, it had become the unofficial hub for long-distance calls. I had added the number some time ago, but had never used it. I regretted that now.

After a few rings, the voice of the owner greeted me.

"Hi, it's Tess. Tess FitzEvan."

"Tess? By the Elders, this is a surprise! How are you?"

"I'm fine," I lied. "The Cosmo Candles here are terrible, though."

As soon as the words left my lips, I cringed at the memories that followed. The bartender laughed.

"Nothing like the real deal, huh? So, what can I do for you?"

"I was hoping to talk to Nanaki."

"Nanaki isn't here anymore. He left a few days after you, heading west."

I swallowed hard.

"I see. Do you know where he is now?"

"No, I don't know how to reach him. Don't know when he'll be back either. Sorry."
"Okay. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No bother at all, Tess. When he does come back, I'll tell him you called."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Come visit some time, all right?"

The lump in my throat returned, larger than before.

"I will, as soon as I can. Bye."

I hadn't known it was possible to be homesick for more than one place at a time. I wanted to be back in Cosmo Canyon, talking to Nanaki by the Candle that had lent the drink its name. I missed the workshop, helping Reeve and Reno tinker with their projects. I longed to be with Camille back on Earth twenty years ago, when our greatest concern in life was whether or not we would get ice cream for dessert. I missed my parents. I missed Victor, the Gateway team, my old friends and colleagues.

How had I ended up losing so many?

What could I do here, alone? Work? If only. I wanted – needed – to make myself useful to this world. I had hoped I could make a difference, to do for Gaia what I hadn't been able to do for Earth. Instead I was stuck preparing buffers and double-checking results Sparky had already provided. Any undergraduate could do a menial routine like that. Stuck being useless, stuck looking over my shoulder. Stuck on an alien planet. Were these people even human like me? Was I human here, like them?

I caught myself staring at the bottle of rum again. Startled, I shot up to search for my music player. The house was too quiet, that was all. I just needed something to distract me from the silence.

A melancholy melody issued from the speakers, as a whiskey-voiced man sang about the travails of his life. I skipped ahead after the first verse.

The second song was a gentle symphonic piece, which had always reminded me of the rolling hills around my hometown. I skipped that one too.

Next was an uptempo bossa nova number with an irresistible beat. Reno had loved it. We had danced to it once in Reeve's workshop at Shinra HQ. I hit the stop button with an unsteady finger.

I looked over at the Paraiso bottle, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. I squeezed the fabric of his shirt in my fist, tighter and tighter, until I picked up the phone again.

I stared at his number on the screen, sliding a nail back and forth over the call button. What would I say to him? Would he still be too angry to listen, or would he hide behind his nonchalance and pretend nothing was wrong? What if he tried to slip back into his mission with fake apologies and soothing lies?

I squeezed my eyes shut and let the phone fall. When I opened them again, the brown bottle still sat there on the table, waiting.

What was the harm in just one drink? It would take the edge off. Calm my nerves a bit, put a stop to the tremble in my fingers, that was all. Camille was gone, just like everyone else. She would never know I had broken my promise.
I stood up and fetched a tumbler from the kitchen.
My head was an anvil, pounded by sledgehammers in a steady rhythm. I called Tyco, croaked out some excuse about a stomach bug, then dropped the phone on the floor and buried myself under the covers. With any luck, the hangover would kill me before the remorse could strike in full force.

The second time I woke, it was for a mad dash to the bathroom. I spent the next hour beside the toilet bowl, retching until there was nothing left but bile.

I knew I should have felt more than a hazy regret, but the emotions just weren't there. I was as numb inside as my knees after an hour on cold bathroom tiles.

The phone rang. I ignored it.

Some time later, the doorbell rang a couple of times. I ignored that, too.

I tried ignoring my phone the second time it rang, but after minute I gave up. It was Tyco.

"Hi, are you okay? I tried your doorbell, but everything's dark."

"Fine," I squawked, then coughed. "Just tired."

"I've got food and tea. Want me to bring you some? I can let myself in, I have a spare key."

Spare key? Oh, fan-freaking-tastic. The whole upstairs reeked of stale booze and vomit. No way in hell was I going to let Tyco set foot in here.

"No need. I'll come down."

"Are you sure? It's no trouble for me."

"Yeah. Just give me a minute."

It ended up being more than five, which turned out to be plenty of time to regret most of the life choices I had made in the past two months. I washed my face, brushed my teeth and pulled on a robe, then made my way down the stairs on unsteady legs, clinging to the rail for dear life while cold sweat poured down my back. I hoped Tyco would have given up on me and left by the time I reached the front door, but when I opened, he was waiting outside with a friendly smile and a big bowl in his hands.

"Oh, dear," he said, looking me over with a raised eyebrow. "You look terrible."

"Thanks," I rasped, my throat too raw to add anything else.

"May I come in?"

The bowl looked too heavy for my trembling hands. I nodded and took a reluctant step back to allow him in.

"Jonuel is back," he said on his way into the living room. "He brought lunch for everyone and wanted you to have some too. His mother made it."
I peeked into the bowl Tyco held up for me. Inside was yellow rice mixed with beans and colorful chopped vegetables. My mouth watered, but my stomach roiled.

"Um, I don't know if..." I trailed off with a grimace, pressing a hand to my midsection.

"When you feel up for it, of course. I'll put it in the fridge."

While Tyco was in the kitchen, my gaze fell on the open Paraiso bottle on the coffee table. There was less than a quarter left. This time, the unpleasant twist in my gut had nothing to do with the hangover. I corked the bottle and placed it on the side table before Tyco could return and notice the evidence.

At some point I became aware that my colleague was taking an awful long time in the kitchen. It also registered that the clattering and clanging I had been hearing did not fit the simple task of placing something in the fridge.

I found Tyco by the countertop, with an apron over his short-sleeved shirt and tied around his slim waist. He was stirring a cup, which he offered to me when I had shambled close enough.

"Here, have some of this. It soothes the stomach."

My hand shook so badly I almost spilled some. If only the wave of shame that crashed over me had been enough to drown me. I took a tentative sip and rolled the warm liquid over my tongue. I recognized lemon, ginger and cinnamon among the flavors.

"It's good. Thank you."

"Secret recipe from up north," he said with a wink and a grin. "Cures all that ails you, or so my grandmother would say."

By now, Tyco knew my ailment was self-inflicted. I was sure of it. That was why his next suggestion caught me completely off guard.

"Why don't you sit down on the couch and check if there's anything on tv? I'll take care of the dishes."

"What? No, no, you really don't need to--"

"It's no trouble," he insisted, ushering me out of the kitchen. "Who wants to get better when there's a mountain of chores waiting for them, anyway? You go rest up, and I'll take care everything."

I was not in any shape to argue. Stunned and bewildered, I sat on the couch, sipping Tyco's grandmother's tea while some action movie played on the screen. I could hear him humming in the kitchen, the clink of dishes and occasional splashes of water. It was comforting; so much so that I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was dark outside. Tyco was gone, and so was the Paraiso bottle. In the kitchen, I found a note.

Take tomorrow off too. I left the tea.
Add boiling water, steep for 3 mins.
See you Wednesday!
Tyco

Now that my head had cleared, the weight of the remorse was crushing, and it only grew heavier as
I wandered around my spotless kitchen. I slumped into a chair by the window. Tyco had even picked up all the dead leaves dropped by the little shrub from Cosmo Canyon. Why? Why would anyone be so nice to me?

I would make it up to him. I had to, if I ever wanted to look him in the eye again. Letting myself down was one thing. Letting others down was unacceptable. I peered out the window at the sliver of the night sky visible between the buildings.

"I'm so sorry, sis. I'll do better, I swear."

The ring of the doorbell woke me up. This time it only took me a couple of minutes to get downstairs. It wasn't Tyco who was waiting behind the door, however. It was my next door neighbor.

"Elmyra, hi," I said, trying to be subtle about smoothing down my hair. "I'm afraid you've caught me at a bad time."

The woman nodded, a sympathetic frown on her face.

"Yes, I know. A man knocked on the door last night and said you were feeling poorly. He said he works with you."

"Tyco?" I winced.

"That's the one! Such a nice young man, isn't he?" She pushed her way past me and surveyed the living room with narrowed eyes, her hands on her hips. "Right. You go upstairs and rest. I'll tidy up down here."

"W-what?" I stuttered. "Wait, did Tyco tell you to do this?"

"He asked me check in on you. Consider yourself checked, dear. Now shoo! I've got work to do."

"But—"

"Shoo!"

Elmyra waved her hands at me, herding me toward the stairs. I obeyed, but only because of a sudden urge to make the upper floor presentable. Tyco knowing about my misstep was bad enough. I was not about to give the neighborhood more fodder for gossip.

I opened the windows at both ends of the house, inviting the lazy summer breeze to sweep through the upper floor. That was as far as the burst of shame-fueled energy got me. I sat down on the unmade bed, staring at my bare feet as I listened to the noise of the vacuum cleaner downstairs. So, now I had not one, but two people cleaning up my pitiful mess. This had gotten so far out of hand and I couldn't even tell when or how I had lost my grip.

God, what a weekend from hell. The booze, the partying, the desperate need for physical contact — it was almost as if I was trying to repeat all my old mistakes. Hadn't I learned by now those would only make it worse?

No. There was no "almost", "as if" or "trying" about it. I was repeating them.

I went still, feeling a chill sink in along with that thought, all the way down to my bones. This was the same slow path of self-destruction I had stumbled down after the disaster that killed my
parents, and more familiar faces than I had ever dared to count. I knew what was coming next, and I did not want to go down there again. I had to make changes before it could get worse. I needed routines, goals. Friends.

Friends... I scoffed, but the sound that came out was awfully close to a sob. What friendships did I have left? Tyco and Elmyra were sweet, but they didn't know who I was. They didn't know that I was alien to this world, that I had... had killed people. How could they be my friends when all they knew was the wall of lies I hid behind?

A knock on the doorframe made me flinch.

"Tess, I thought we could--" Elmyra cut herself off, then hurried over to me and bent down to peer at my face. "What's the matter? You're shivering!"

"It's..."

My throat was too thick, my voice too fickle. I couldn't finish my sentence.

Elmyra waited for a few seconds, then sighed and sat down next to me on the bed.

"This isn't a stomach flu, is it?"

"No," I admitted, my face hot and my shoulders sagging with misery.

"Matters of the heart, is it?" The lump in my throat made it impossible to answer, but Elmyra nodded and gave me a knowing look. "That young man with the motorbike, I presume."

"Does the whole town know?" I groaned, burying my face in my hands.

"No, don't worry. The news around here travel fast, but not that fast," she assured me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, I... I don't know."

"It helps, you know, letting it out." She gave my leg an encouraging pat. "Go on, Tess. What happened?"

"One stupid mistake after another, that's what happened," I mumbled, picking at the sleeve of my bathrobe. "I can't trust him anymore. He won't talk to me. Everything's gone wrong and I don't see how we can fix it. Maybe we can't. I... I can't fix anything."

Now that one dam had burst, the flood of emotions brought the rest down as well, breaking free in an unstoppable cascade of tears.

"Oh, Tess, honey," Elmyra cooed, rubbing up and down my back. "No man is worth this much heartbreak."

"It's not just him," I sobbed. "I miss everyone. My family, my friends... They're gone. Everything's gone!"

"Oh. I see now." Her voice had changed, infused with a weary note of sorrow. "Tess... Have you heard of the Meteorfall memorial in Mythril Park? People bring flowers, candles, pictures of their loved ones... Maybe it would be worth a visit."

It took a while before the sobs had ebbed enough for me to reply.
"I... I can't do that."

"You have to let yourself grieve. Moving on with your own life doesn't mean giving up the memories of those who have passed on."

I swatted the wetness from my cheeks with angry swipes.

"I don't deserve to grieve."

Elmyra drew back a little, as if she had guessed what I had done and withdrew in disgust; or so I thought, until I heard the sadness in her voice.

"Why in the world would you say that?"

"I failed them. All of them. I couldn't fix it. I... I just made it worse!"

"Oh, honey, come here." Elmyra wrapped her arms around me in a firm flower-scented hug. "I don't know your family, or what happened to them, but I do know none of them would want you to blame yourself. I'm sure of it."

That friendly touch was my undoing. I kept my face hidden by my hands, feeling so ashamed, but I couldn't stop the flow of tears or the quaking of my shoulders. Elmyra held me close, slowly swaying back and forth as if she was rocking a child.

"Now, about this young man of yours...," she continued when the worst had passed. "Give it some time. Maybe things will look different once you've had a chance to calm down. If not... Well, they say everything happens for a reason."

I straightened up, pulling away from the hug with a broken laugh.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"You wouldn't," she chided gently. "Not yet. Give it time."

"Not much else I can do, is there?" I wiped my eyes, then gave her a bleak smile. "Thank you. I'm sorry you had to see that."

"It's all right. We all need a good cry sometimes." She patted my knee, then pushed herself off the bed. "I'll go make us some tea. Come down when you're ready."

I washed my face and brushed my hair. I got dressed, made the bed. At the end of it, I felt a bit more human.

Does he, after everything you spat at him?

I paused, mulling over the sudden thought. If he had taken it to heart, I must have made him feel like a creep. Did he have an Elmyra to tell him it would be okay? My gaze fell on my phone on the bedside table. Give it time, she had said, but... maybe he would feel better if I knew I was thinking about him.

I snatched it up and sent a message.

I hope you're ok. Let me know how you're doing, will you?

As soon as the deed was done, the remorse crept in. It was like some kind of addiction – so easy to talk myself into it with arguments that made little sense afterwards. Reno didn't need my clinging messages to feel better. I was the one who would feel less guilty if I knew he was all right.
It was too late to take it back, though. With a sigh, I set down the phone and headed downstairs.

My obliging neighbor ended up staying for most of the afternoon. Along with a pot of tea, Elmyra and I shared the rice dish made by Jonuel's mother. She even lured me outside for a while to water the flowers. Every minute spent in her company made the next one a fraction easier.

After she had left, I went upstairs to check my phone. There was no reply to the text I had sent earlier. No surprise there.

I sat down on the bed, toying with the phone in my hands, and thought back on my epiphany earlier in the day. I had already seen the similarities to how I reacted when my parents died. That, too, had been the end of the life I knew. I just hadn't realized how far I had slid down the same spiral.

Back then, Camille had been the one to help me break the cycle. Although she had been the younger of us, I had relied on her through the roughest patches. Maybe that was what led me to repeat my mistakes. Tyco and Elmyra had been invaluable, but it wasn't right to make them my crutches. I needed to earn my own trust.

I needed to earn the trust of the people around me, too. Screwups like this weren't going to win me any points with the likes of Grigori. Life on Gaia was a new beginning for me, a priceless second chance. I needed to start treating it like one.

The next morning I went back to work. My first order of business was both to thank Tyco and apologize for the past few days. He gave me an absence form to fill out and insisted it had been no trouble. I called him a poor liar, which he found very amusing.

Next, I needed to catch up on two days of missed work – three, counting the Friday I had spent in Edge. There was quite a pile of unprocessed sample tubes waiting for me in the lab. The work was as tedious as ever, but it kept me occupied and anchored in the present.

Once I had finished for the day, I stopped by the break room for coffee. I was in no hurry to head home. My luck seemed to be improving, because I found the company I had hoped for.

"I'm starving," Tyco said, stretching his arms over his head as he tilted his chair back. "How about some dinner?"

"That's the question I planned to ask you," I said as I poured myself a cup. "My treat, as thanks for everything. Where do you want to go?"

"Actually, I thought we could stay in and cook. Grigori gives me free reign of the break room off the clock."

My eyebrows shot up.

"Uh... I'm not great in the kitchen."

On this planet, I added silently with a sigh. I may not have been a fantastic cook back on Earth, but here I couldn't even get boiled eggs right. I would get distracted and wander off to do other things, always forgetting that stoves on Gaia didn't turn themselves off and call out when the food was ready to eat.

"That's fine, because I'm not half bad, if I may say so myself. I'll show you all my special tricks."

I folded my arms and gave him an amused look.
"First you do my dishes, and now the cooking? You do know I can't give you a raise, right?"

"I'm not trying to butter you up, I promise," Tyco said, laughing. "Come on, what do you say? It'll be fun."

"Fun, huh? You *like* cooking, then?"

"To be honest, I only learned to cook because I thought it would impress my dates," he admitted with a grin, "but yeah, turned out I like it."

I chuckled and gave the idea some thought as I swallowed a mouthful of coffee. Maybe this was just his way of making sure I wouldn't slip up again... but why not, really? I would have company and might even learn a thing or two. It certainly beat another evening alone.

"Okay. Sure. Just tell me what to do, I guess."

"Great! Let's see what we've got in the fridge."

Very little, it turned out. We dashed to the local store, just in time for a quick shop before closing time. Tyco picked up what we needed, I brought the wallet. I was content with that division of labor, but once we got back to the WRO building he put me to real work, peeling and chopping while he explained the plan. When I was done with the chopping board, Tyco took care of the frying, while I kept a nervous eye on the bits that needed boiling. The end result was the first proper – and edible – meal I had helped make on this planet.

He was right. It *was* fun.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Tess. At least she finally got that hug she needed.

I'm so glad and relieved to have reached this point in the story. The nice thing about rock bottom is that the only way to go from there is up.
Wolves in the Night

I woke in a cold sweat. Closing my eyes again, I pressed a hand to my forehead and counted each breath until my heart's frantic pace had slowed to normal. When I moved to Kalm I thought I had left the nightmares behind for good, but the confrontation with Reno at the pub had stirred old fears. I hadn't been able to sleep through the night since, and my run-in with Tseng had only made it worse.

A drink would have knocked me out, of course, but no thanks. I scoffed and shoved a hand through my limp, damp hair. I had slipped up, but I'd be damned if I let one weekend of missteps dictate the rest of my life. I had made new resolutions. I was making changes. I could do this. Camille had pulled me out of the mud once, and so had Reno back at Shinra HQ, but I didn't need them. I could do this.

I padded up to the window and pulled the curtain aside. A full moon hung low in the sky, touched by dark tendrils of wispy cloud. I couldn't make out many stars, though. I would need to get a bit out of town, away from the street lights.

Maybe Reno could see them. He lived far from the big lights of Edge, along with the other Turks – too far, if you asked his opinion. If he wished, he could watch the stars every night, like we had that one time. As if on their own accord, my eyes sought out my phone, glinting dully in the moonlight on the side table.

No. No more. The impulsive text I sent after my breakdown had been a week ago. I hadn't tried again since. One missed reply I could blame on the ailing communication networks, but when every single attempt at contact failed, it was a pattern. I got the message.

Sleep would elude me for a while, though. The bed felt too empty. The whole house felt too empty. Tseng's warning nagged at the back of my head, but I was sick of looking over my shoulder and cowering indoors. I took another peek through the window. Combined with the golden glow of the street lights, the moon provided more than enough illumination to navigate the streets.

Five minutes later I shut the front door behind me. The air carried the smell of wet leaves and a chill that nipped at my face. Without the direct aid of the sun, the summer of Kalm came nowhere near the temperatures I had gotten used to in Cosmo Canyon.

In the distance I could hear loud voices and inebriated chanting. I drifted toward the sound, drawn to the presence of other human beings. I had no desire to join the group once I discovered them outside a cozy-looking pub; I just watched and listened as I wandered past. I found some comfort in their celebration. It didn't matter that I wasn't included. If anything, that seemed only right. I hadn't earned it yet.

I reached the town wall and turned left to continue alongside it, letting my fingers run over the cold, damp stones. A nail snagged on some sharp edge and sent a shot of pain through my finger. I couldn't help a wry smile at the thought of the town walls themselves rejecting my presence. That, too, seemed right. I hadn't earned my place here either.

The thought didn't sink my spirits anymore. If anything, it filled me with resolve. I hadn't earned my place here, yet.

I slowed to a halt as I arrived at an arch in the wall. It was one of the old narrow passages for pedestrians, blocked off by a metal gate. I walked up close and peered through the intricate
ironwork, out onto the gentle hills of the Kalm grasslands. A low fog had settled in the shallow valleys, soft and ethereal in the moonlight. I shivered and wrapped my cardigan tighter around me, glancing over my shoulder in the direction of the pub I had passed earlier. The revelers must have gone back inside. It was quiet now.

Looking back out over the landscape, I noticed a swirl in the mist. Not wind; it was too localized. Movement. One by one, lithe shapes glided out of the white blanket, dark and silent as the night sky itself, their eyes gleaming like red stars. I watched them, holding my breath until they slunk over a hill and out of sight, melting into the fog like ghosts.

Wolves, I recognized. Memories of snarls and snapping jaws returned to me, amplified in the darkness. Suddenly, the old gate seemed about as sturdy as a lace curtain.

"Kalm fangs."

I jumped with a yelp and whirled around, slipping on the wet cobbles, only to find myself faced with a pair of bespectacled blue eyes.

"Christ! Are you trying to kill me?" I hissed, clutching my chest. I could feel the wild thrum of my heartbeat beneath my fingertips.

"Sorry, Doctor. Didn't mean to startle you."

Tyco was dwarfed by the dark blue windbreaker he wore, his hands pushed deep into its pockets. He looked like a boy in his father's borrowed coat, especially with that sheepish look on his youthful face. He was hardly what I would call intimidating.

"It's all right," I sighed, feeling rather embarrassed. "Just don't creep up on me like that."

"Oh, right. Sorry." After a few moments of silence, Tyco cleared his throat and nodded out toward the misty landscape. "Kalm fangs," he said again. "The local wolf species. They keep away from settlements, but I wouldn't go out into the grasslands unarmed if I were you."

"They attack people?"

"Not normally, no, but this close to Midgar you never know when you'll run into a pack that's been exposed to Mako. And there's worse things than wolves out there."

"Oh, now I see. You're not trying to kill me after all. You're just making sure I have nightmares."

"Sorry," he chuckled. "Just thought I'd give fair warning. It's not like I know why you're out here at this time of night. For all I know, you were planning to head out there next."

"No thanks," I said with a shudder and stepped away from the gate to head back into town. "I've had enough wolf attacks for one lifetime."

Tyco had fallen in beside me, and at that he turned his head to give me an appraising look.

"Back in Cosmo Canyon, right? You never told me the details, you know."

"I'll tell you some other time," I promised with a nervous chuckle. "You know, when we're not outside on the creepiest full-moon night I've ever seen."

"Not a fan of the dark? Now I'm even more curious about why you're out here all by yourself."

"The dark is fine, I'm just not a fan of what lurks in it," I muttered, gingerly peeking into each
shadow-covered alley as we made our way down one of Kalm's larger streets. "I couldn't sleep and thought a nice walk might calm me down, but that was before I knew there were 'Kalm fangs' skulking about so close to town. Which makes me wonder why you decided to come out here, since you knew about them."

"Oh, I often go for walks at night. It's peaceful here." He laughed at the dubious look I sent him. "I lived in Midgar for a while, remember? Trust me, a few wolves are nothing compared to the nightlife of Sector Eight."

"Oh? You had your share of wild big-city adventures as a student, then?"

I couldn't keep the grin off my face. With his oversized coats and argyle vests, it was difficult to imagine the assistant as a party animal.

"You'd be surprised," he smiled.

There was a chuckle in his voice, but I got the distinct impression we weren't sharing the same joke. I shot him a curious glance out of the corner of my eye, and only now did I notice a subtle change in him. He held his head a little higher, his back straighter. He strolled along the street with a comfortable ease, as if the darkness was where he belonged. It made me think of the shadows I had seen prowling in the night.

"You know, I've been wondering," he said. "What's that funny word you keep using? 'Christ', or something like that? Is it a Mideel thing?"

I could only hope the darkness hid my expression. Had I really used it that much?

"I don't think so. It's something my dad used to say. I guess it rubbed off."

He was so damned perceptive. I felt a tingle of unease as I remembered Tseng's warning. How well could I know Tyco? Why would he be wandering the streets at night? He seemed like a nice guy, but I hadn't proven myself a good judge of character, had I?

"Well, this is your stop."

I snapped out of my thoughts to see the stone bird that guarded my door, its polished white stone almost glowing in the lamplight. I blinked in surprise. I hadn't realized we were this close to my house. We had taken a different route back from the wall.

"Unless you'd like to come over to the station for a cup of tea or something?" Tyco added.

"Thanks, but I really need to get some sleep," I declined quickly. "I have to make a good impression tomorrow."

He just shrugged, his friendly smile remaining in place, and I felt a twinge of guilt for doubting him.

"All right," he said. "Good night, then."

Tyco waited outside the house until I had locked the door behind me. He was being a gentleman, I suppose, but it made me wonder how many unseen pairs of eyes might be out there, watching me.

Sleep eluded me for a long while that night.

Never before had I found so much relief in the simple click of a bathroom door lock. I placed my
hands on the sides of the sink and drew a long breath. It was about time I got a few moments to myself.

Today's break from my ho-hum routine of lackluster lab work had been every bit as stressful as I had feared. My poor night's sleep only made matters worse. I had woken up late, and in my rush I had burnt my toast. Skipping breakfast, I had raced to the coach stop only to learn that the coach I came to meet was half an hour late.

No, today was not my day, and it was far from over. I still had several hours left of playing host to Orin Faro.

Oh, my Edge colleague had been very gracious, deeming our laboratory setup "prudent" and "resourceful", while our town was "cosy" and "romantic". To be honest, the professional side of the visit had been fine, until I had made the mistake of telling the truth when Orin asked if I was seeing "that friend". After that he had tried to steer us into our muddy personal territory at every turn.

Had it been a purely private matter, I might have told him to get bent by now. As it was, a burdensome combination of professionalism and guilt had kept the polite smile on my face. My patience was wearing thin, but now that his inspection of our facilities was out of the way, all that was left was lunch and finalizing the list of acquisitions. I could do this, I told myself, and gave my harried reflection in the mirror a firm nod. A few more hours, that was all.

I smoothed out my hair and adjusted the neckline of my top. I had made reservations at a restaurant that was a step above our usual pub lunches, and so I had picked a nice pair of dress pants and a sleeveless blouse instead of my usual combo of t-shirt and jeans. Only now did it occur to me that Orin might read something into it. Fan-fricking-tastic.

If he did, that was his problem, not mine. I was already making enough allowances for one day. I'd be damned if I let him affect what I chose to wear, too.

As I passed my office on my way downstairs, I saw a man bent over my desk.

"Orin?"

At the sound of his name, he jumped and spun around. The momentum flicked a good amount of his sandy hair into his eyes.

"Oh!" he exclaimed when he saw me in the doorway. "Yes. Yes, it's just me."

I crossed my arms over my chest, glancing down to check his hands. They were both empty.

"Are you looking for something?"

"I'm sorry, the door was unlocked. I just needed to borrow a pen."

His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he finger-combed his disobedient hair into place. Before the disastrous night in Edge, I might have given him the benefit of the doubt. Now, Reno's warning nagged in the back of my mind, making me second-guess every word and action.

Even if Orin's motives were innocent, one thing was clear. I didn't want the man sneaking around my office.

"There are pens in the break room."
"Oh, right."

"It's downstairs," I added when he made no attempt to leave. "The last door on the right."

"Oh. Okay. Well... Sorry to have bothered you."

I stepped aside to let him pass and watched him hurry down the corridor. Once he reached the stairs, I took a quick look around. Nothing seemed out of place, but the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach persisted. When I left, I locked the door behind me.

The wind had picked up, tossing my hair this way and that during the walk to the restaurant. Once we arrived I slipped away for a quick grooming session, only to find my comb wasn't in my purse. I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose.

Three more hours. That was all. Three more, and then this shitty day was over.

During lunch, I said as little as possible. Tyco gave me a few curious looks, but Grigori was more than happy to dominate the conversation with his thundering voice. To think that the professor would be the one to make the meal less uncomfortable. For me, at least; poor Orin had to ward him off with stammered acquiescences. When he mentioned the recent break-in, though, the discussion began to veer off its polite course.

"I knew who was responsible the second I got the call," Grigori huffed. "Rabble from the shantytown, of course."

"Rabble?" Chelsea snapped. "They're people, desperate people who resort to desperate measures. You make them sound like a bunch of hooligans."

I recalled Reno's version of the events. I wondered if the "kid" he arrested had already been sent to Junon, or Corel. Maybe he and his accomplices had family, left behind to fend for themselves.

"Look at the effect they've had on this town," Grigori countered. "The squatters have been trouble since day one. They don't belong here."

A pang of something shot through my chest.

"No, she's right," I blurted. "The ones who broke in weren't bad people. They just wanted a chance for something better."

Everyone looked at me. Grigori wore his usual scowl, but Chelsea's eyes were wide with surprise.

"We're making sure it won't happen again, though," Tyco piped up. "We had an alarm system installed last week."

He and the others fell into a debate on security measures, which gave me the chance to retreat back into silence. It was contemplative this time. The Midgar refugees had been Gaigans to me, along with the Kalm townsfolk and the rest of this world. I had never thought of them as outsiders. Outsiders, like me.

The one-on-one meeting with Orin after lunch was an awkward affair. Toward the end, his efforts to steer the conversation toward personal topics became more and more insistent. I had been dodging such questions for months, though, and managed to keep the talk professional and civil. Once our business was concluded, I even offered to walk him to the door. In retrospect, it was a mistake.
"So, um...," Orin mumbled as we reached the lobby. "Do you have dinner plans?"

"I'll just have a quiet night at home. It's been a tiring week." I gestured to the front door. "Head down the street toward the square. The inn will be on your right, you can't miss it."

"Are you sure? I understand the food at the inn is some of the best in town."

"I'm sure. Enjoy your dinner."

"Tess..." Orin wet his lips. "I know our first date didn't go so well, but maybe we can try again? I would really like to get to know you better."

I gave him a blank stare. Was he talking about our ill-fated foray into Edge's nightlife?

"...I think it's best to keep our relationship professional."

"Please. I-I think we have a connection here. A real connection."

Forget hints; this guy couldn't even parse a direct answer. I kept my gaze steady and my face firm, hoping my body language would hammer it home.

"I don't feel that way about you, Orin."

"But I--" He interrupted himself and looked past my shoulder, frowning in irritation.

"Doctor, I'm glad I caught you," I heard Tyco's lilt behind me. "I have a question about the report you handed in yesterday. Could you take a quick look before you go?"

"Of course," I replied with a smile, which grew stiff as I looked at the man behind me. "Orin was just leaving."

He opened his mouth, looked over at Tyco again, then closed it and swallowed.

"Yes... Yes, I was."

With that, Orin was out the door. As I collected myself with a deep breath, Tyco walked up beside me.

"So, what's the problem?" I asked, shifting my attention to him.

The young man's grin was decidedly smug.

"Didn't have one, actually, but looked like you had something of a human barnacle problem."

I snorted. "You could say that. That guy needs to learn a thing or two. Like how to listen."

He looked to the door, his eyes narrowed.

"Think he's trouble? I can walk you home, if you like."

The idea of bookish Tyco as my bodyguard amused me, until I remembered the change in him during the night's walk. It felt more like a figment of my imagination now that I was beside him in the daylight. And yet...

"Thanks, but I'll be fine. Orin is just... socially awkward, that's all."

"Are you sure about that?"
I thought of Reno's warning, and Tseng's, and then of all my misgivings about their own motives.

"It's not like I'm taking a stroll through the badlands. It's a short walk home in broad daylight with people in the streets. It's fine."

Doubt crossed Tyco's face as he looked again toward the front door, but then he nodded and his sunny disposition returned.

"All right. See you tomorrow, then."

I couldn't keep my hands still as I watched him head back to the break room. This was too much workplace drama for one day.

I left by the back door, taking the scenic route through the park. It occurred to me to wonder if Orin knew my home address. If not, this would be the perfect opportunity for him to find out. In spite of my reassurances to Tyco, I couldn't help peeking over my shoulder now and then.

That's why I noticed the man on my tail: tall, bald, and dressed in a dark suit.

The sunshine couldn't keep the sudden chill at bay as Rude picked up his pace, heading straight for me. I hurried my steps too, but he caught up with me by the gates of the park.

"Doctor," he rumbled in greeting.

"Here to keep tabs on me, are you?"

"Yes."

I scoffed and turned away. I was sick of overly persistent men. I was sick of the Turks, and so bloody sick of Shinra. If I hopped on a flight to the Northern Continent, would they follow? Maybe if I holed up in the goddamned Northern Crater and lived the rest of my life as a crazy hermit, they would finally leave me–

"I also wish to talk."

I blinked and took a second look at the man, this time with wary curiosity. I could only think of one reason Rude would want to talk to me.

"About?"

"Reno."

"What else," I sighed.

I paced on, then stopped and waited for Rude to follow. He adjusted his sunglasses. He straightened his tie and checked his leather gloves. Finally, he cleared his throat.

"He, ah, worries about you."

"He has a funny way of showing it."

"He cares about you."

The simple statement quickened my pulse. He cares. Present tense.

I wondered how much Rude knew. I wondered how much Reno revealed in his reports. A hollow
ache stirred in my chest as I considered it. Even Tseng had implied a personal motive in Reno's volunteering. For all I knew, the Turks knew every sordid detail.

"So. Is that why he spies on me for your beloved president?" I bit off the words, feeling heat rise to my cheeks.

"Surveillance means protection."

"Protection from what?" I snapped. "Hojo and Scarlet and the rest of the board are gone. The only danger I see is Rufus Shinra himself!"

"The President wants to stay informed. That's all."

His deep voice was neutral to the point of indifference. Rude didn't cajole or excuse. He simply stated.

"Informed, huh?" I laughed without a trace of mirth. "Sure, until he decides I'd be of better use locked up in a lab somewhere."

"Reno won't allow it."

"Does Reno have a say in it?"

"The President values Reno's abilities."

"Do I get a say in it?"

The silence stretched on. I huffed, running a hand through my hair.

"Look, you're wasting your time here. He doesn't return my calls or answer my messages. He won't talk to me."

When Rude finally spoke again, his voice was quiet.

"He won't talk to me, either."

With that, the Turk left my side and ducked off into an alley.
Once home and alone, I found no peace. The strange encounter with Rude replayed again and again in my head. He had made it sound like Reno missed me, but it didn't make sense. Reno was the one avoiding me.

Why would Reno even want to come back? According to the gossip at HQ, he would love them and leave them. After all the drama he must have been eager to return to his old ways. He probably already had. From what I had seen, Edge was full of beautiful women looking for a good time. Kalm too, I recalled with a bitter lurch in my gut. Fun, normal, hassle-free women with no baggage. Maybe Reno was with one of them right now. Maybe he was happier.

_Then why did Rude come to you?_

The question spun around in my mind like a brightly lit marquee, refusing to be ignored, until finally I picked up my phone. One more message, that was all. One more try, and if nothing came of it, I would move on. I would let us both move on.

Once the phone was in my hand, though, I stared at the blank screen while the minutes ticked by. Every sentence I came up with seemed too needy, too clingy. Too revealing.

Then again, what was the point in trying to play it cool? Reno had seen me at all kinds of worst. One cleverly worded text wouldn't make him see me in a whole new light. As depressing as that was, there was also something liberating about it. There was no need for pretense, no need to hold back. Within a few seconds, the message was typed and sent.

_I miss you. Can we talk? Please?_

Honest and to the point; two qualities I had prided myself on. When had they begun to slip away from me?

Not that it would matter. He wouldn't reply. He never did.

The day after Orin Faro's visit, I felt like a lunch free of company and headed into town on my own. It wasn't a conscious decision to venture out to the gate district. Maybe it was on my mind from the discussion the previous day; or rather, from the soul-searching I had been doing since Chelsea and Grigori started fighting over the refugees. Once I realized my feet were taking me toward the main gates, I decided to let them.

The nearest restaurant had a rooftop terrace with a view straight through the gates to the shantytown outside. Despite the lovely weather, I was the only one who chose to have my meal up there.

Eating became a mechanical task as I watched the gates. The long snaking queue just outside held my attention: people stood with an eclectic array of containers in their hands, waiting for their turn to use a tap right by the town wall. The line never grew shorter, only changed over at a sluggish rate. I didn't see all that many bandages, which surprised me; Stigma sufferers seemed to be the minority. Then again, perhaps they couldn't queue in the heat of the sun. Sweat was trickling down my spine after just a few minutes on the terrace.

The shantytown had been out there since Meteorfall. Had no one thought to add more water points?
A handful of people milled among the queuers, wearing yellow vests with the letters ARK printed on the back. It stood for Assistance and Relief in Kalm, and I mused that it was aptly chosen – the acronym was a complete coincidence, of course, as I was the only one who would read it that way on this planet. After lunch, I sought out the nearest volunteer. The ARK people cursed the water problem but could do nothing about it; after a major outbreak of Geostigma among the refugees, Kalm's town council had washed their hands of everything outside the walls. Too few resources, the volunteers sighed. Too little gil, too few people.

Once I got back to the office, I called Reeve. On Wednesday, I heard that a civil engineering team had arrived from Edge. Over lunch on Thursday, I watched them at work near the tap, wrangling pipes and valves beneath a large WRO sign. From what I could see, they had more help than they knew what to do with: the shantytown's inhabitants were more than eager to pitch in.

I felt conflicted. On the one hand, I had set the wheels in motion for a project that might improve many lives. On the other, it was the first piece of solid good I had accomplished on this world. I could have done it months ago, if I had cared to pay attention to the world around me.

My world now, I reminded myself. The thought still tasted odd.

I squeezed my eyes shut and placed my elbows on the desk, letting my head rest in my hands. My thoughts waded through the molasses that was my mind, dull and reluctant. It was disheartening. A weekly analysis report shouldn't have caused me this much trouble.

It was the fitful sleep, of course, amounting to a few pathetic hours a night. After several months' reprieve, the nightmares were back with a vengeance. Images from my new life bled into memories from Hojo's chambers, creating a hell I returned to in flashes every time I set foot in the labs downstairs. Orin Faro had been in one of the nightmares, a scalpel in his twitchy fingers. I hadn't heard from the man since his exit a couple of days ago, though. It was a relief. The way he had acted that evening, I had half-expected him to pop up on my doorstep.

I jerked upright and reached for the keyboard. A search for my name in the employee database brought up a thin bio. My name, professional title and responsibilities. My shoulders loosened when I saw that my only listed address was the office at Kalm station. That was it. Not even a picture.

I repeated the search in the general databases. The process took minutes, and yielded only an official document on the WRO's projects in the environmental sciences. I typed in TU-021. Nothing. I sank back in my millionaire's chair and released a slow breath. At least I wouldn't need to worry about cyber-stalking on Gaia.

I wondered what the man could have done to earn Reno's ire. Was he really one of Hojo's former lackeys? Orin hadn't mentioned it, but then he wouldn't, would he? That kind of connection wasn't exactly a feather in one's cap at the WRO.

The employee database held a similar profile for Orin, with only the barest details of his current position. The expanded search offered several hits, but included other people with the same name. I scanned a couple of result pages, but saw nothing connected to Hojo or biological research.

I glanced at the clock and swore under my breath. Thanks to the glacial response time of Gaian computer systems, I had ended up wasting half an hour on this little detour. At this rate, I would be wrestling with my report well past official hours. With a sigh, I brought up the text editor.
I started into consciousness, lost for where I was. A figure was standing over me, bright blue eyes staring back at me. I flinched in fright.

"Whoa, easy there, Doctor. It's just me. Tyco."

I hid my face in my hands, squeezing my eyes shut. My heart thrummed in my chest.

"Shit," I mumbled.

"Why are you still here? It's almost midnight."

Tyco leaned forward a bit to take a peek at the computer screen. Blond locks fell about his face, long enough to reach his shoulders. It must have been the first time I had seen him without the ponytail.

"Sleeping, apparently. Which, for the record, was not part of the plan." I noticed his striped pajama bottoms. "Is it really midnight?"

"Ten to, yes. I was making my usual bedtime rounds of the place when I noticed a light in here."

I glanced at the window. The sky was dark except for the glow of a gibbous moon.

"Damn it," I sighed and tried to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

Tyco's concern had been replaced by amusement, judging by the lopsided smile on his face.

"Come on," he said, waving me up with one hand as he stepped back. "The report will still be there tomorrow."

"Thanks for that thought," I grumbled as I shut the computer down.

"Think of your comfy bed at home, then."

Sure, it was comfortable. It was also far too empty, as was the whole house. Too much room for nightmares, and for self-pity.

"Not so tempting, huh?" Tyco guessed. "You know, there's a spare bed in the empty office next to my room. It's better than having to walk home when your body's half asleep, eh?"

My instinct was to say no, but I hesitated. Maybe it would help to know that someone else was right next door. It was worth a shot. Otherwise, at the rate I was going, I would be unable to function before the week was out.

"As long as it's no trouble..."

"Nah, no trouble. Come on. I'll help you set it up."

He lent me a t-shirt, too. As I drifted off, I could hear Tyco move around on the other side of the wall. A quiet thump. Footsteps. A door creaking. In spite of the folding bed and unfamiliar surroundings, it was the best sleep I'd had in weeks.

In the morning, Tyco woke me before the others showed up for work. I dashed to my house and returned an hour later, leaving Grigori none the wiser. The secrecy felt a bit silly, really, but the fewer questions asked, the better.

After a proper night's rest, I tackled the piles of paperwork with gusto. I was still eager to continue
after an extra hour at work, but didn't want to risk making a habit of spending my nights at the place. I decided to catch up on my duties at home.

It was dark outside when the melodic trill of the doorbell sounded over the soft jazz in the background, interrupting my review of one of Chelsea's field reports. I dropped the document onto the pile on the coffee table as I got up from the couch, wondering who could be at my door at this time of the evening. Someone from the WRO, maybe. Perhaps Elmyra in need of a cup of sugar, or a cup of tea with company.

It was Reno.

My brain sputtered to a standstill. Every feeling I had repressed was roaring through my mind, flooding me until I felt lightheaded. I wanted to laugh, to pull him inside, to kiss him; but I just stood there and gaped at him like the Kalm village idiot.

"Hey," he said.

I snapped my mouth shut, then forced out a greeting.

"Hey."

I moved aside. He sauntered past me in a gust of whiskey and cigarettes, and kicked off his boots as I closed the door. When I turned around he was slouching in my hallway with hooded eyes and thumbs hooked in the pockets of his slacks, that damnable distant look still on his face. I wanted to slap a reaction out of him. I wanted to jump his bones. Both at once, or in no particular order.

"Want some coffee?" I asked instead.

"Sure."

He followed me into the kitchen and leaned back against the wall, watching as I set up the coffeemaker. His silence was unnerving, doubly so with his eyes burning in the back of my head. Once the machine began its gentle sputtering I faced him, placing my hands on the counter behind me to keep them still.

In the bright light of my kitchen, I got a better look at him. On the surface he was the same as ever: the scantily buttoned shirt hanging free under the open jacket, the goggles fighting a losing battle with his hair, the arrogance oozing out of every pore. His jaw was clenched, though, and despite the alcohol, his eyes were sharp. He was strung tight as a wire.

I was used to him doing the talking, but he just stood there, watching. Examining me, as if he could strip me bare with his gaze alone – but not as a lover. This was the cold scrutiny of an investigator. The memories it brought back to me were not pleasant ones.

"I..." I had no idea what to say, but I couldn't bear the silence. Not with Reno staring at me like that. "I didn't think you'd come back."

"I wasn't gonna come back."

My heart sank. My nails began digging into the countertop.

"Then why did you?"

"Guess I'm as dumb as I look, yo."
He wore a mockery of a smile. I opened my mouth, but no response came out. I shut it again and looked down at my feet. I couldn't meet that stare of his anymore.

I heard the rustle of his suit. Such a soft sound, yet it dominated the silence. I remembered how it felt under my fingers. Pressed against my skin. So cool to the touch, compared to his fingers and his lips.

His *Turk* suit. Was he on his way to a job? From a job?

Was he *on* a job?

He could have mentioned my texts. He could have said something about our last meeting. The fact that he wouldn't sent a tingle of fear through me.

"Why are you here?" I whispered.

No reply. Not even the swish of fabric. The air was still, growing thicker with old fears and awkward memories. We may as well have been separated by a solid wall.

My grip on the counter tightened to prevent the tremble in my limbs.

"Shit. I should've just stayed the hell away."

I heard him push himself off the wall and I looked up in alarm. He was heading for the door. I panicked.

"Reno! Just... *talk* to me. Please!"

He stopped in the doorway and looked back at me.

"Talk, huh? *Now* you wanna talk? We could've talked at the pub. We could've talked at the fuckin' hotel!"

His voice grew louder, but still he kept that unnatural calm. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't read him like this.

"Please," I whispered.

"Please what," he spat. "What the hell d'ya want from me now!"

"Nothing! I just..." It didn't matter how hard I clutched the countertop. The tremble had found its way to my voice. "Don't go. Not like this. Please."

The facade cracked for just a moment. His lip curled back into a grimace.

"I can't fuckin' do this, okay? I can't be with ya like this!"

His words stung like a slap to the face. Losing him as a lover was hard enough, but to lose our friendship... Miserable regret welled up in me and I made a last desperate attempt to save whatever was left.

"Look... It was a mistake, I know that now. We started something we both regret. It's fine, let's just forget it and... we can still try to go back to how things used to be, can't we? Pretend none of it ever happened?"

As soon as I said it, I knew I had made it worse. It was written all over his face.
"For fuck's sake, it wasn't a mistake! Ifrit's balls, Fitz, don't you get it? I don't wanna forget. I don't wanna fuckin' pretend! I can't stand here in your kitchen, drinkin' your goddamn coffee, and act like it don't mean nothin' to me!"

I could only stare; stare at him in suffocating silence as his words rang in my ears. Then his eyes went wide, and I realized he had said more than he had meant to.

"Fuck!" he snarled and bolted out of the room.

I rushed after him and caught up with him by the front door.

"I told ya I'd fuck it up," he growled as he shoved his feet into his boots. "I fuckin' told ya."

"Reno."

He ignored me and reached for the door, but I put a hand on his arm before his fingers found the handle. It was a light touch, but he froze instantly. The smooth fabric of the Turk suit couldn't hide that the muscles beneath were locked as tight as his jaw. My heart was hammering against my ribs and I struggled to find the right words, but I had to try. I knew that if he left this time, he wouldn't come back. I wet my lips, and took a moment to gather my courage.

"It meant something to me too."

Reno's eyes were fixed on my hand. His nostrils flared with every breath and his jaw worked in a steady rhythm. When he spoke, he bit off the words.

"Don't play games with me. Don't."

Shinra, the Turks, the surveillance – none of it mattered. None of it even crossed my mind. All I cared about at that moment was the man in front of me, and how the thought of him leaving made my eyelids burn and my throat raw.

"I'm not! I'm so sorry about what I said. All of it. Everything came out wrong. I'm the one who screwed this up, not you." I raised my other hand to run my palm over his shoulder in a slow circle. "I missed you. Stay. Please."

He didn't move. The silence stretched on, so heavy I didn't dare breathe. In a wordless plea, my fingers tightened their grip on his arm.

"If I stay... I'll want more than just coffee."

His quiet words made me go weak at the knees; first from relief, then from the promise they held. I took half a step closer, brushing myself against his arm.

"I don't have a problem with that."

Reno released the tension in his body with a long sigh, then lifted his eyes to mine. My breath caught in my throat. Had they always been so beautiful? He placed his hand on the side of my neck, stroking his thumb over my cheek, and my skin lit up with joy.

"And I ain't gonna pretend nothin' happened in the morning."

"I... I never wanted you to. I shouldn't have said that." My lips twitched, almost far enough to count as a smile, and I moved my hands to caress his chest. "I just assumed you had second thoughts about the whole thing. Let's face it, I'm kind of more trouble than I'm worth."
His gaze was guarded at first, his eyes searching for something in mine. Then a smile broke through, faint but with the power to steal my breath away.

"Yeah," he murmured. "You're too smart to buy my bullshit. That gets real annoyin', yo."

I chuckled. "Shut up and kiss me already."

Reno smiled wider, enough to crease the red crescents under his eyes, and tilted my face up to his.

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled as he leaned in.

I closed my eyes as his lips touched mine once, twice; gentle and tentative, as if he expected me to change my mind. The third time, the carefulness gave way to playful teasing. Every brush of his lips, every flick of his tongue sent another lick of heat across my skin; each touch a little spark building up to a raging wildfire.

I arched into him with a moan that came from deep in my throat, and weaved my hands through his hair. The wild spikes were silk in my fingers, as soft as his mouth on mine. Maybe it had just been too damned long, but Reno's kisses thrilled me in ways I couldn't remember experiencing quite like this before.

I hadn't experienced this before, not with him. Not with anyone. His tender kisses teased and cherished at the same time, filled with promises I might never hear in words.

My whole being hummed with barely contained anticipation. I wanted more. I needed more: more of his touch, of his hot breath on my skin, of his whiskey-tinged taste and scent.

As the kiss deepened, his hands began to roam and pressed my body tighter to him, his mouth now greedy and demanding. I responded by slipping my hands in under his untucked shirt and up along his back, relishing the feel of taut muscle rippling under my exploratory fingertips. I let my nails dig into his skin as I ran them back down, and he rewarded me with a shudder and an approving growl that sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my core.

"Fitz, baby." The words were a throaty chuckle, uttered so close that his lips brushed against mine. "Fuck, I've missed ya so bad."

He pulled back just enough to devour me with hungry eyes, then pushed me backwards, his hands firm on my hips and a wolfish smile on his lips. I grinned back at him as he ushered me toward the stairs. I didn't need to tell him the feeling was mutual. He would get the message, loud and clear. I would see to that.
I was blessed with a solid night's sleep. No tossing and turning, no nightmares, not even any dreams; just deep, deep rest. When I awoke, my skin still hummed with the memory of his touch and I was tucked into sheets that carried his scent... but the other side of the bed was cold.

Just as I had been falling asleep, I had asked him to stay. Reno hadn't given a reply, or maybe I had drifted off before I could hear one, but still. I had hoped for a change.

*Can we talk*, I had asked in my last message. So much for that, then. We had done it all backwards again. Sex first, relationship later, if at all. I sighed and rolled over on my front, hugging the pillow under me. This wasn't the end I'd had in mind for our reunion.

Downstairs, a floorboard creaked. I went still, senses on high alert, and picked up the sound of light footsteps. My pulse quickened. I pushed myself up on one elbow, leaning back on my side so I could watch the door. Soon, I heard steps on the stairs, drawing closer and closer until the bedroom door nudged open and Reno wandered in, holding a cup in each hand. He frowned.

"Oh, damn, you're up already. Was hopin' to surprise ya."

The urge to jump out of bed and kiss him silly was almost irresistible.

"With nudity?" I teased instead. "I've seen it all before, you know."

"You say it as if you're sick of seein' my sexy self already, and I ain't buyin' that for one second."

Even the goggles were absent. His hair hung free, much of it in his face, and he tilted his head back to look at me from under the bangs. It made him look every bit as cocky as he sounded. I felt a throb between my thighs.

As he handed me one of the mugs, he took the chance to steal a kiss. On the lips, not the cheek or forehead. The throbbing was joined by a flutter in my stomach.

"Mornin', babe. Sleep well?"

"I did, thanks. And you? Wherever you ended up sleeping."

"Ya noticed, huh?" he asked with a sheepish chuckle as he rounded the bed. "The couch, yo."

The fluttering stopped.

"Something wrong with the bed?" I wondered, hiding the shift in my expression by bringing the coffee to my lips.

"Nah, the bed's fine," he said, stretching himself out on the other half of it with a yawn, followed by a contented sigh. "So's the company. I get a bit twitchy, s'all. Y'know, bad dreams, old reflexes, that sorta thing."

"What, you'd punch me in the face if I tried to snuggle up in the morning?"

"Nah, it ain't usually that bad. Might grab or push ya, tho', before I wake up. Didn't wanna scare ya."

Reno rolled the coffee around his cup, staring into the dark swirl. Despite the dry chuckle and
breezy tone, I couldn't shake the feeling he avoided eye contact on purpose. I mimicked his actions as I thought back on the previous time he had used the word "twitchy" in the same context. He had slept on a couch that time, too. I recalled Rude's careful wakeup call and Reno's wild-eyed reaction. He was right, I supposed. That would have startled me.

That invisible wall was rising between us again. Anxious to keep it at bay, I blurted out the first question that popped into my head.

"What made you come back?"

His lips curved into a strange sort of smile, fond and self-deprecating all at once.

"Rude told me to grow a pair. So did Laney, believe it or not. Seems the rookie ain't gonna stay a rookie for much longer, yo."

I raised an eyebrow. Rude's intervention came as no surprise after his talk with me, but I hadn't expected Elena to take an interest in our relationship. Whatever her intentions, though, one fact was clear.

"They all know, then."

"I didn't tell 'em, but they're Turks. They're s'posed to pick up on that sorta thing, y'know." He lifted his head, enough to give me a searching look. "That a problem?"

I took a few moments to deliberate. It wasn't the fact that they knew, I decided. It was the worry that Reno had spilled all our intimate details in some impersonal work report. A concern that was no longer an issue, if I chose to believe him. And if I didn't believe him, well, what the hell was I doing in bed with the man?

"No, it's not a problem. Well, not until Grigori hears about it, I guess. He isn't too keen on people with Shinra ties."

"At least Big and Beardy can't fire ya."

"No," I said with a sigh, "but he can keep shooting down my projects."

"Reeve could have a word with him, y'know."

I was sure Reeve could. On some level I was tempted, but I was equally sure that the intervention wouldn't lead anywhere pleasant in the long run. Besides, hadn't I firmly decided to fight my own battles just weeks ago?

"No, I'll deal with Grigori. I've dealt with worse."

"Suit yourself, babe."

We fell into silence. As before, it wasn't entirely comfortable. I sipped my coffee, mulling over his admission. They all know. I didn't tell them. It wasn't the admission itself that bothered me, but the touchy issue it skirted. As much as I wanted to know the truth about Shinra's plans for me, I was too much of a coward to ask him outright. I didn't dare bring it up now, when everything between us was still raw and fragile. I didn't want to risk hearing something I didn't want to know, when I finally had a moment of happiness to enjoy.

The irony wasn't lost on me. To think that mere minutes ago I'd been blaming the lack of communication on him. But... Was it so wrong of me to want just one day with the man, not the
Turk? Maybe even a whole weekend, without worries and fears?

"What about that Faro guy?"

Reno's sudden question made me go cold all over. It occurred to me that the last time we had met I had been dancing with another man. Flirting. Letting that man put his hands on me.

"What about him?" I mumbled, feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment.

"He been givin' ya trouble?"

I had expected something harsh, some derisive remark about my drunken idiocy. My face burned hotter.

"Nothing I can't handle." My hands shifted their grip on the mug, again and again, until I took a deep breath. "Look... I'm sorry about that night, and the morning. I made such a mess of things."

"We all make a mess now and then. Don't worry 'bout it."

He was so laid-back about it, so forgiving. I just felt worse.

"I didn't think you'd come back. You had every right to be angry with me."

"Eh, it was my bad too. You may have been fallin'-down drunk, but I wasn't. I should've just let ya sleep it off. It's just so hard sayin' no to ya."

Reno sent me a glance, a brittle smile on his lips. I responded in kind, shyly. My eyes met his and I looked quickly away, a different kind of warmth rising to my cheeks.

"I was angry at you, y'know, for tellin' me to go fuck myself," he continued after a while. "It's easier, gettin' angry."

His tone was thoughtful, not accusing. When I looked over, I found him staring into nothing.

"Easier?" I prompted.

"Yeah, it's... It's like when El died, I was angry at her for gettin' herself knocked up and dead. I was angry at Ma, for never steppin' in and puttin' an end to El's whorin'. I couldn't yell at El, so I yelled at Ma, and she'd just... stare with these empty eyes, like a fuckin' zombie or somethin'. Like..." He shot me a quick look out of the corner of his eye, then went silent for a moment. "A year later she killed herself, and I just got angrier at her."

The air froze in my lungs. I didn't know what to say, so I reached over and placed my hand on his. His voice was flat, but his fingers squeezed the sheets in a fist so tight it trembled.

"Ah fuck, I dunno where that came from," he said with a sheepish laugh. "Sorry, that got heavy real quick."

"Oh, come on. Of course you can talk about your family."

Reno looked down when I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. He loosened the hold on the sheets, then curled his fingers over mine.

"Point is, I was a huge fuckin' idiot. El did what she had to do to pay our rent and keep us fed, 'cause Ma was gettin' too old and worn out to bring in enough gil. And Ma just..." He trailed off, his jaw working as he stared up at the ceiling. "I ain't angry at 'em anymore." He turned his head to
"I ain't angry at you."

I could tell Reno meant it; but the way he said it made me think the anger hadn't gone away either, just found a different target.

We were quiet for a while. I slowly stroked my thumb over the back of his hand while we sipped our coffees. While we kept our thoughts private, the silence felt like a shared moment of contemplation.

Born on such different planets, into such different circumstances, that neither of us could hope to walk in the other's shoes; yet something connected us in our loss and grief. Not sympathy, but empathy, and understanding.

Perhaps that's what drew us to each other, I mused. From understanding came acceptance, and lately acceptance had seemed in such short supply.

"I noticed the Costa del Sol brochure downstairs. You plannin' a beach holiday?"

Reno's voice pulled me out of my thoughts and made my shoulders grow tense. It was a casual question, but it reminded me of the day I had run into Tseng and spent the evening with half a bottle of rum.

"No, not really," I replied, staring into my coffee cup. "I thought about visiting Cosmo Canyon, but the travel agent was more interested in selling me a Costan cruise."

"You oughta give Costa a go some time, it's a fun place to party. Full of booze and hot people wearin' next to nothin'."

After Tseng's discouragement of my travel plans, Reno's comment was not at all what I had expected to hear. I felt a shadow lift from my heart. It was probably a foolish and ultimately false sentiment, but at that moment it felt like he was choosing me over his fellow Turks.

One day. I would let myself have one day. No questions, no doubts. Just one day with the man.

"Are you trying to talk me into a whirlwind holiday romance with some Costan stud?" I teased.

He quirked an eyebrow, but there was a small grin on his lips.

"That the first thing you think of, even tho' you're naked in bed with the sexiest of the Turks? I was just talkin' about the scenery, ya greedy lil' minx."

"Well, I have to admit you're doing a better job of selling it to me than the travel agent."

"Guess I know what the ladies like, yo."

I snorted softly and and drained the last of my coffee. As I twisted around to set the cup down on the bedside table, the movement shifted pressure onto tender parts of my anatomy. I supposed that was testimony in favor of Reno's last statement; he certainly knew what I liked. The filth he whispered never failed to leave me wet with desire. His hands and mouth stripped me of all shame and pride, until I could do nothing but writhe and beg. Last night, when he had finally taken me, it was with a primal, relentless lust that rammed me straight to the thin delicious line between pleasure and pain, until–

"Thinkin' about me, aintcha?"
I became aware that I was staring into nothing, gently chewing my lower lip. I closed my mouth, but couldn't stop from breaking into a satisfied smile.

"You're one cocky bastard, you know that?"

"Guilty as charged, baby," he grinned, devoid of shame. "C'mon, gimme all the juicy details."

I let my gaze roam languidly over his nude form stretched out beside me. His wasn't a body you would see on a pretty boy model in a glossy magazine or a bronzed hunk prowling the beach. Every part of his anatomy spoke of harsh use, from the crisscrossing scars to the calluses on his hands. Reno was pale and lithe, tough and dangerous. Just looking at him sent my hormones into overdrive.

I finally settled on those aquamarine eyes, gleaming with wicked intent. A devious smile played on my lips. It was time to wipe that smirk off his gorgeous face.

"We-ell," I said, drawing out the word as I moved to straddle him, planting my palms on either side of his head. "I was thinking it's your turn to say pretty please."

His eyes widened a fraction, but the drawl was as confident as ever.

"Think you can make a Turk beg, do ya?"

I leaned down to run the tip of my tongue along the curve of his ear and gave the pierced lobe a lazy flick, enjoying the quiet gasp almost as much as the tightening of his abs beneath me. My lips ghosted over his moistened skin as I purred my reply.

"Let's find out."
It was past noon when we made it downstairs, our bodies showered, dressed and pleasantly indolent.

"Damn, your fridge is emptier than mine and it ain't the first time, neither. Good thing you're better in bed than in the kitchen, would've sucked to come all this way for nothin'."

Reno shut the fridge door, just in time to catch the bag of luchile nuts I had aimed at his head. Smirking, he pulled out a handful of the roasted treats.

"That your way of tellin' me to get my ass down to the grocery store, babe?"

"It's my way of saying you are an ass," I said dryly, "but I suppose you're right about a shopping trip." I ran my fingers through my hair, finding it damp to the touch. "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

"Nah, you stay here and chill. I'll do it."

"Hm. From jackass to gentleman in five seconds. Impressive."

"Well, y'know. They say girls really dig the gentleman thing, so figured it might get me laid again, yo."

I gave him a withering look and held out my hand.

"Give me that bag. I need to throw it at your head again."

"Yeah, definitely gonna hit the shop now." He popped a few nuts into his grinning mouth as he sauntered out of the kitchen. "I'll be back in a few."

When I followed him into the living room, Reno had wrangled his red thatch into a ponytail and was pulling on his boots, unbothered by the wet hair sticking to his t-shirt. It was the band shirt he had left behind, now making an ensemble with his rumpled uniform pants. The man hadn't planned on an extended visit, that much was clear.

"Um, one thing," I said as he grabbed my keys from the dresser.

"Yeah?"

I wet my lips and nudged my hair behind my ear, finding it hard to meet his inquisitive gaze.

"Don't pick up any beers for me, please. I'm... trying to cut down."

I expected a joke, maybe some more teasing. Instead I got a brief pause and a searching look.

"Sure... no prob. You like ginger ale, right? That okay for ya?"

"That'll be great."

Reno slipped the keys into his pocket and headed out. By the front door he paused, staring at his hand on the handle. After a few more seconds he sighed and turned back to face me, looking every bit as uncomfortable as I had been, and I braced myself for the inevitable.
"Look, I gotta ask. All this about no booze, changin' your mind and takin' me back... I haven't knocked ya up, have I?"

I gave him a blank stare. Then I snorted, mostly in relief.

"No. I'm not pregnant."

"Thank fuck," he breathed, and shot me a grin. It was short-lived, though. A wariness remained, a hint of something simmering behind his eyes.

"You'd tell me, tho', wouldn't ya? If ya were, I mean. You wouldn't just... You'd tell me, right?"

"Yes," I said, caught off guard by such a question. "Of course I'd tell you."

With a nod and a half-hearted smile, he was out the door.

That had been close. I could only hope Reno wouldn't begin to wonder about the real reason I wasn't drinking. The last thing I wanted was my mortifying mistakes reported back to Tseng and Rufus Shinra.

I pushed that thought out of my head before I could dwell on it. No Turks, and no Shinra. Today, they didn't exist.

Then my thoughts drifted to Reno's worry. I wondered what to make of it. Was he anxious because of what happened to his sister, or did he just not want kids? Both? He claimed he liked kids, though. Maybe--

With a sigh, I stopped that train of thought too. It was way, way too early to speculate about such things.

The doorbell rang much sooner than I had expected. Only once I opened the door to find my neighbor on my doorstep did I remember that Reno had taken the keys. Beside Elmyra was a little girl in a white dress, maybe five years of age or so. Her dark brown hair was gathered into a short braid and decorated with a pink ribbon. In her arms was a rather scruffy-looking toy chocobo, clutched tightly to her chest.

"Elmyra, hi," I greeted the older woman, then smiled at the girl. "And who's this?"

"This is Marlene," Elmyra replied and patted the girl's shoulder. "She's visiting from Edge."

"Hi, Marlene."

The girl squeezed her yellow bird tighter.

"Say hi to Tess, sweetie," Elmyra urged.

After a reluctant "hi" from Marlene, my neighbor offered me an apologetic smile.

"She's supposed to spend the afternoon with me, but something's come up and everyone else is out. Could you watch her for a little bit? It won't be more than an hour, I promise."

"Um..." My glance flickered between the timid girl and Elmyra's hopeful face. The timing was terrible, but I couldn't let her down, not after everything she had done for me. "...Sure. I can do that."

"Thank you, Tess. So sorry to spring this on you without warning."
"It's fine," I said with a dismissive wave. "Fine. Happy to help."

Elmyra bent down a little, bringing her face closer to the girl's.

"Marlene? Auntie Myra has to go into town for a bit. I'll be back soon, okay?"

"Can't I come with you?"

"Not this time, sweetie, but this nice lady will look after you until I'm back. I won't be long."

Marlene responded with a resigned nod. The stuffed bird's scrawny legs dangled back and forth as the girl shuffled into my house, eyes downcast. I had a pretty good idea of how she felt.

"I'll be back soon," Elmyra said, likely trying to reassure us both. "Have fun, girls!"

I stepped into the living room to find the girl standing with her back against the armrest of the couch, strangling her poor bird in a tight embrace. Her eyes slowly explored the room, lingering on every detail.

"So, Marlene... What would you like to do?"

The girl turned her huge brown eyes on me, but said nothing. My smile felt unnatural and my hands were trying their damnedest to fidget with anything in their reach. I made a brave second attempt.

"Are you thirsty?"

The girl nodded.

"I'll get you something to drink. I'll be right back, okay?"

She nodded again and I fled to the kitchen. As I fetched a glass from the cupboard and the apple juice from the fridge, my brain went on a frantic quest for any helpful tidbits on dealing with children. It was all second-hand information or theoretical childrearing techniques. Kids had been a rare sight during my last few years on Earth. None in my closest circle of friends had had any. Memories of relatives' children were too hazy, back from a time when I had been a teenager myself.

Oh god. Why had I said yes?

When I returned to the living room, glass in hand, the girl was staring at the hazard suit propped up on its stand under the stairs.

"Is it yours?"

The breathless question made me smile.

"Yes. It's my protective suit."

Marlene gazed up at me, her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide with awe.

"You're a knight?"

Marlene was right in the middle of a drama of dragons, knights and princesses in need of rescue, when we heard the sound of a key rattling in the front door lock. The girl interrupted her story and jumped off the couch with an excited squeal, dragging her poor chocobo behind her by the neck,
and arrived at the door just as it opened. When Reno stepped inside, however, she froze and stared up at him with much the same expression she'd had when meeting me. He stopped dead in his tracks, looking equally stunned.

"Marlene, this is my friend Reno," I called out as I pushed myself off the couch.

The staring contest continued while I walked up to the two and took the shopping bag off his hands.

"Uh, Fitz?" he squeaked. "Somethin' you wanna tell me?"

They were both so adorable in their confusion. I could barely keep a straight face.

"Elmyra from next door needed a babysitter for an hour. I told her I'd help out."

Reno flicked his incredulous gaze to me, but before he could voice his opinion, Marlene piped up.

"Do you want to play? You can be the princess!"

"What the--"

I elbowed him in the ribs.

"--fudge balls?" he finished with an irritated glance, then nodded in my direction. "How come she don't get to be the princess?"

"Tess is the knight. Look!"

Marlene took his hand and pulled him along to my suit, a big grin on her face as she looked up, pointing at it. Reno adopted a thoughtful expression, rubbing his chin. After looking over the suit he squatted down, resting his elbows on his thighs.

"Guess ya got a point there, missy," he said. "You could be the princess, tho'."

"Don't be silly," she giggled. "Everyone knows princesses have long hair."

There was a definite tug at Reno's lips, but he kept himself in check.

"Your hair ain't that short, y'know."

"I can't be the princess. I'm the wizard!"

"Wizard, huh? I could be the wizard, yo."

"No, your hair is the longest. And it's pretty."

She stared at his ponytail with the same look of wonder she kept giving my armored suit. Reno's poker face failed him, and he snorted out a laugh that nearly toppled him over.

"Flattery, huh? Fine, fine, I'll be the pretty-haired princess. So, what's the story?"

"You've been captured by the Evil Dragon King!" Marlene shoved the stuffed bird into his chest with what was presumably meant to be a fearsome growl. "Now the wizard and the knight have to save you!"

Reno rolled onto his back on the floor, wrestling the toy.
"Oh, no, the dragon's got me!" he squealed in a ridiculous falsetto. "Somebody help me!"

Marlene's eyes lit up with glee and she dashed to my side.

"Sir Tess! The princess has been kidnapped!"

It took me a few seconds to get my fit of giggles under control.

"Then we must save, uh, him! But how shall we defeat the Dragon King? Don't I need a sword?"

"No, you have a gun arm!"

"A gun arm?"

Marlene nodded eagerly. "When the Evil Dragon King burned down the castle with his dragon's breath, you drew your sword and fought him, but he bit off your hand and stole the princess. Now you have a gun arm instead. It's much awesomer than a sword!"

The girl had an impressive imagination, I had to give her that. I held up one hand and wriggled my fingers.

"Okay. A gun arm it is. Whisk us away to the princess with your magic, O mighty wizard!"

Accompanied by the girl's whooshing sound effects, I was dragged bodily forward to where Reno was lounging on the floor, his hands clasped behind his head and the stuffed chocobo perched on his stomach. Upon our arrival, he pressed the back of one hand daintily to his forehead.

"Oh, brave knight and mighty wizard," he chirped. "You've showed up in just the nick of time. I think this dragon dude's gettin' hungry here, yo."

He flexed his abs, making the toy wobble back and forth.

"I cast Time Stop!" Marlene yelled and sputtered out a sound like the crackle of electricity.

Reno grabbed the chocobo and shimmied out from under it whilst holding it still in place.

"I'm clear! Time to kick some dragon butt, ladies!"

Marlene pressed her hand over her mouth to stifle a delighted giggle and tugged on my hand.

"Shoot him, Sir Tess!"

I made a gun with my fingers and pointed it at the toy, trying my best to sound like a burst of cannon fire. Reno squawked out an exaggerated death cry and flung the bird backward through the air. Marlene jumped up and down, cheering.

"We did it!" she squealed. "We saved the princess!"

"Yep, ya sure did," Reno drawled, leaning back on his elbows with a wide grin on his face. "Thanks a million, Sir Knight and Mighty Wizard."

I blew imaginary smoke from the barrel of my hand gun. "I guess a gun arm comes in pretty handy."

"Uh huh. Daddy's got one too!"
I was ready to dismiss it as another one of her flights of fancy, but then I recalled seeing a man with a gun arm myself, once. Anything was possible on Gaia.

"He does, huh?"

"He got it because he wants to fight the real Dragon King who took mommy away. That's why he's gone so much. He's looking for her."

I paused, unsure of what to say. I couldn't tell how much of her story was fiction.

The doorbell rang, saving me from my predicament and signaling the end of our adventure. This time Marlene followed me to the door; when she saw it was Elmyra, she dashed past me and flung herself at the older woman.

"Auntie Myra, Tess is a knight! Did you know that?"

"Is she now?" Elmyra gasped. "Good heavens. Not everyone has a real live knight living next door."

"I suppose you're right about that," I chuckled.

"Thanks so much, Tess," she said, petting Marlene's hair. "I hope it wasn't too much trouble."

"None at all. We had fun, didn't we, Marlene?"

I smiled at the girl and she nodded, grinning.

"We fought the Evil Dragon King and won!" she told Elmyra.

"Oh, my. You can tell me all about it at home, all right?"

"Hey, kiddo," Reno called. "Don't forget your birdie, yo."

We turned our heads to see him sitting on the floor, holding up the stuffed toy. As Marlene ran over to fetch her chocobo, Elmyra gave me a knowing look. I offered her a faint smile, hovering somewhere between relief and guilt. It seemed she didn't recognize Reno as a Turk.

After an exchange of goodbyes, the two were off, Marlene already prattling on about our thrilling adventure as I closed the door. Reno had picked himself up from the floor and was leaning on the sofa's armrest, staring after our visitors through the window with a contemplative look on his face.

"Nice kid. Shame she's had such a messed up life. But, hey, haven't we all."

"What do you mean?"

He studied me out of the corner of his eye. "D'ya know who she is?"

I gave him a frown as I joined him by the window.

"Your question tells me the answer is 'no'."

"She's Barret Wallace's lil' girl. Wallace, as in the leader of AVALANCHE."

I looked out through the window, my eyebrows high in surprise.

"Oh."
"Yeah. If her daddy finds out her playmate was a pretty princess called Reno with long red hair, even Wallace might put two and two together. And if he does, he's gonna be real pissed off." He gave me a humorless smile. "Sorry, babe. I might've just fucked up your neighborly relations."

"Midgar is gone and the old Mako reactors are being run down," I protested, ill at ease with that thought. "Why would AVALANCHE still cause trouble now?"

"It ain't just about the Planet. The man's got a grudge against Shinra. Couldn't say I blame him for it."

Marlene's tale about her daddy's gun arm returned to me. I was beginning to suspect it was more fact than fiction.

"Why do you say that?"

Reno sighed, taking a few moments to form his answer.

"Wallace used to be a miner. Lived and worked in the same town as lil' Marlene's parents, a place called Corel. Shinra wanted to build a reactor there, but the deal went to shit. Town got torched, Wallace lost his wife and his arm, the girl lost her parents." He shot me a pointed look, the grim smile still faint on his lips. "Any of this ring a bell?"

I just stared. Banora's demise had been Shinra's doing too, Reno had once told me. Two entire towns razed, possibly – probably – more. The company's list of crimes was longer than the street I lived on.

"So Barret Wallace replaced his arm with a gun and went on a crusade against Shinra?"

Reno hummed.

"Were you involved?"

I didn't want to believe he could just laugh and play with a little girl he had orphaned, but considering what he had been prepared to do to me in that interrogation room... I had to wonder. Reno looked at me, frowning, then looked away.

"Nah, that was Scarlet's idea of negotiation. The Turks had nothin' to do with it. Try tellin' that to big daddy, tho'. But eh, guess he's got other reasons to hate my guts."

"Scarlet burned down an entire town?"

"Yeah. Superbitch even showed up in person for the party. Shot up the townsfolk, too."

My jaw dropped.

"That's insane!"

"Tell me 'bout it," he muttered, staring down at his feet. "She was one helluva Dragon King, yo."

I was about to launch into a tirade on the sins of Shinra, but a look at Reno made the words die on my tongue. A shadow had fallen across his features, and his long fingers dug deep into the armrest.

"Say what you will about the Turks, but at least we try to take down the real threats and nothin' else. Precision strikes, y'know? When civilians get killed, that's sloppy. Bad plannin'. Shit like burnin' down towns was Scarlet's MO, and Heidegger's." He scoffed. "Shame Fatso liked to insist on doin' the plannin' for us. 'Here's a bunch of terrorists, go drop a plate on 'em.' Fucker."
I reached for his shoulder, but he shot to his feet.

"I dunno 'bout you, but I could use a damn drink."

He stalked into the kitchen while I stared after him with a vague sense of rejection. When I followed, I found him with a bottle in his hand, a smirk on his lips, and a witty remark ready on his tongue. His game face. His Turk face. I wore a smile and played along, but I could feel the change. The wall was up again. He had shut me out.
I faced Monday with mixed feelings – so much so that the end result was just a daze. I had no idea what I was even supposed to be feeling. Reno had left in the night without a goodbye, leaving me to while away the Sunday alone. He had left no messages, made no calls. I wasn't brave enough to risk having mine go unanswered again.

Besides, he was the one who had clammed up. I already knew what he had done, and I had been right there, waiting for him to drop the smirk and the smartass remarks and let me in again. Waiting in vain, as it turned out.

He had said it meant something. Apparently it didn't mean enough respect to give me a goodbye, much less a weekend together, with the man instead of the Turk. If all he wanted was some chitchat and a fuck, and he kept leaving without so much as a note, how was what we had any different from a string of one-night stands?

Three hours into my workday I sat back, rubbing my eyes with a sigh. The pile of slides beside me was smaller, but not as small as I would have hoped. With Chelsea and Jonuel making constant forays into the field, there would be no end to these samples. Until the survey was done, I would have no time to plan future projects, much less undertake them. And after the initial survey, there would be a follow-up round of samples, and then another...

Tyco poked his blond head through the door, interrupting my brooding.

"Hey, Doctor. I don't suppose I could talk you into filling out a form or two?"

I gave him a blank stare. "Excuse me?"

"I'm just a bit idle at the moment," he said with a lopsided grin. "I've filed all the forms and reports I could get my hands on."

"Is that really all you do here?" I asked, frowning. "Push Grigori's papers around?"

Tyco shrugged and stepped inside, his hands in his pockets.

"Pretty much."

"And you're happy with that?"

"Well, you know," he said with an awkward laugh, "it pays the bills."

A smile crept onto my face as an idea began to take shape.

"Tyco... How would you feel about doing lab work?"

"Come in!"

Grigori barely glanced up from the sheaf of papers in his hands when I entered the room.

"If this is about your overtime last week, bring it up with Tyco. He files the hours."

It was exactly the reaction I had expected. Undeterred, I took a seat in the chair in front of him.
"Actually, it's Tyco I'd like to talk about."

Grigori set down the report and leaned back in his chair, waiting. While we didn't often see eye to eye, the man had never refused to hear me out. It was one of his better traits.

"Gaia needs more researchers, not more secretaries," I began my pitch. "Tyco had almost completed a science degree before Meteorfall. If you give him hours for lab work, I can teach him the practical side of research."

"More researchers, you say? Sounds to me like you're just looking for an assistant of your own again."

"I need one. Yours has both the time to spare and the desire to learn. He won't be content juggling forms for much longer. Do you want him to quit the 'RO before he has a chance to show what he can do? If you let him work for me, I'll have time for other projects, and once Tyco has learned what I can teach him, you'll have another researcher on the team. Everybody wins."

The professor was silent for a while, watching me with narrowed eyes.

"What exactly are you proposing?"

"We officially split his hours between lab work and administration. Fifty-fifty."

"Fifty?" he boomed.

"A starting point we can adjust if necessary."

A calculating look appeared in Grigori's eyes.

"And while he's under your supervision, you train him."

I nodded. "That's the idea."

The professor leaned forward over the desk and clasped his hands together, resting his bulk on his elbows as he sized me up.

"Do you have any teaching experience?"

I had expected more counter-arguments. Maybe my calm demeanor impressed the man, or maybe he had already entertained similar ideas about Tyco's future.

"Yes. I mentored several junior team members in my previous organization."

"This would be the mystery organization you won't name."

I smiled, refusing to let him ruffle my feathers. "That's the one."

Grigori responded with a noncommittal grunt, then took a few more moments to consider.

"This would need Tyco's approval, of course."

"Of course."

"And half his hours is too much. You get three afternoons a week, and only if it doesn't interfere with his work as administrative assistant."
I stifled the sigh of relief.

"I can work with that. As a starting point, that is."

"All right, Doctor," the professor said, spreading his hands as he sank back in his seat. "We have an agreement."

There was a spring in my step as I trotted to Tyco's office to deliver the news. He was eager to begin, so we met up in the lab the following afternoon. I had expected a student close to graduation to have some familiarity with lab work already, but the curriculum must have been different on Gaia. I had to start from the basics with Tyco. I didn't mind, though. I would have to put in extra hours for a while, and wait a bit longer before I would get the research time I wanted, but my instruction was both needed and appreciated. I felt needed and appreciated.

Besides, more work meant less listening to the silence of my phone.

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Friday snuck up on me, focused as I was on snatching Tyco as my student and part-time dogsbody. Before I knew it, my work for the week was done. I stalled in the break room for a while, but Tyco had gone out. I took a scenic route home. I popped into a store along the way for groceries.

As it turned out, there was more than just an empty house waiting for me. A red-haired man stood in my front yard, leaning against his motorcycle with a cigarette between his fingers. His head bobbed up and down, following a rhythm only he was privy to through his earbuds.

What would Reno have done if I'd had other plans, I wondered. What if Tyco and I had met up after work for another cooking lesson, or I had decided on an evening at the pub? Would he have called me, or just hit the nearest bar in search of another hook-up?

He greeted me with a grin and a kiss on the cheek. No mention of the previous weekend, no explanations for the lack of contact. It had been a week, with no effort to earn my trust or ease my fears about the Turks' surveillance. Not even a single bloody text to ask how I was doing. Probably too busy working Edge's women to think of me during a weekday.

The dark thought startled me. I tried to dismiss it, push it out of my head. For all I knew, though, it could be true. Out of sight, out of mind: that was his attitude to life, wasn't it?

"So, what's there to do 'round here in the evenings?" he asked once I had begun putting away the groceries in the kitchen.

"Are you bored of takeout dinners and sex already?"

I heard the unintended sharpness in my tone, but Reno missed it – or just ignored it.

"Never gonna happen," he chuckled, "but thought it might be fun to go out. Y'know, spend a night on the town."

It wasn't a bad idea. Getting out of the house might get me out of my gloomy head. I had trouble coming up with activities he would like, though. The local idea of fun was rather lacking in the thrills-and-explosives department.

"Well, I hear there's folk dancing at the square later on."

His groan sounded just how I had imagined it.
"Remind me why I come to fuckin' Kalm of all places again?"

Funny how that was the very question I wanted to ask him.

"Takeout dinners and sex," I said instead, shoving a bag of tomatoes into the vegetable drawer.

"Yeah, that'd be it."

I could hear the smile in his drawl, but it still stung.

"Well, frickin' folk dancin' ain't exactly my scene," he continued, "but maybe we can start our own dance party."

The sudden burst of static made me jump and look over my shoulder. Reno had found the old radio on the window sill and was fiddling with the dials.

"That thing's been broken since I moved in here, but there's a set of speakers in the living room. My player or yours, take your pick."

"Huh, okay."

As I was folding away the grocery bag, a wailing guitar heralded the start of a song Tyco had played during one of our cooking sessions. It gave me an idea.

"You know, if that's the music you're in the mood for tonight, there's a bar near the wall we could try," I called out to him. "Haven't been there myself, but Tyco goes there for pool."

"Pool, huh? Sure, I'm up for that. Haven't had a decent game since Midgar got all fucked."

Once I had changed into shorts and a top, we headed out. Reno ambled beside me at a leisurely pace, his gaze hooded and his thumbs hooked into the pockets of his jeans. I was less at ease. As we made our way along Kalm's cobbled streets, questions kept jostling in my head. I wondered who Reno used to play pool with in Midgar. I wondered what else he once did in the fallen city, about his friends, his family. My thoughts brushed up against the uncomfortable questions: what motivated him, what was he loyal to now. I didn't dare to delve deeper into those, and I didn't ask him any of the others either. What was the point?

A day with the man, not the Turk. I had gotten my wish last weekend and it had been a delight – until the Turk had returned and slammed the door shut. What could I possibly hope for here, really? Reno the Turk wouldn't just go away, and neither would the rest of Shinra. Rufus Shinra already had me under surveillance. If he decided he wanted a closer look and ordered me locked up in a lab, whose side would his Turk take? It scared me that I didn't have an answer to that question.

It occurred to me that the situation was not so very different from my years on a doomed Earth. Thoughts of a future were shadowed by the ugly end that loomed on the horizon – even if the end I feared here was just my own, and not that of a whole world. So much for the salvation of a second chance.

A low whistle made me follow Reno's gaze to the display window of one of Kalm's edgier clothing stores.

"Bet that'd look real hot on ya, babe."

It was a knee-length black dress, with a low neckline both front and back. Tight, expensive, and sexy. Camille would have loved it.
"Hm, no thanks. That's more my sister's style."

"That so?" He gave me a lingering look out of the corner of his eye. "Did you two look much alike?"

"I guess we did, yes," I said with a shrug. "We both got our mother's eyes and her wavy hair, but Camille kept hers long. It was a lighter brown, too."

"Huh."

As Reno eyed the display, a small grin appeared on his face. I recognized that look.

"Oh, god," I groaned. "Please don't tell me you're fantasizing about my sister."

"Um," he said, looking a bit sheepish.

"Reno!" I hissed, though it was a half-hearted reproach. Had it been about anyone else, I might have been offended. When it was Camille, there was just resigned acceptance. She had been the one who drew all the attention, especially in dresses like that. I had always been the tomboy. Someone to have fun with, not someone to admire from afar. Second best to the unattainable.

"It's not like you would've had any luck with her, anyway," I added, shaking my head. "You're not exactly her type."

"What, too pretty for her?"

Suddenly I recalled a different woman in a different dress – red, but just as tight – tittering and fluttering her eyelashes as Reno caressed her backside. My faint amusement vanished. Reno wasn't one to admire anything from afar. He wouldn't settle for second best.

"More like not pretty enough," I mumbled and turned my back to the display, heading down the street.

Reno only needed a few long strides to catch up with me. Fortunately – or not – he was still too preoccupied with my sister to notice that anything was off.

"Oh, she was into girls, huh?"

"Mm. The prettier, the better."

"Guess I can't disagree with that, yo."

I made a brave attempt to match his grin. He frowned a bit, then reached up to rub his neck with an awkward chuckle.

"Aw shit, I'm bein' an ass, ain't I?"

"You say that as if it's something new," I joked weakly.

Reno placed a hand on my arm and slowed me to a halt, then moved in front of me for a better look at my face. His frown deepened.

"Damn, didn't mean to make ya feel bad, baby. My mouth just runs faster than my brain, y'know?"

I squirmed, avoiding his concerned gaze.
"That doesn't seem like a desirable trait for a Turk," I scoffed, desperate for a change of topic.

"Yeah, well, once I'm off the clock all the dumb shit starts pourin' out, or so Tseng says."

I glanced at him, raising my eyebrows.

"Tseng used the words 'dumb shit'?"

"'Inane babble', actually," he corrected, mimicking Tseng's dry diction flawlessly. "Same thing ain't it?"

I snorted softly. "Pretty much."

And then, once again, my amusement was gone. "Does Tseng know about this?" Elena had asked on that awful night. Did Tseng know about this, I wondered. Was that why Reno had shown up?

"Well, just forget all that dumb shit," he said. "It don't mean nothin'. You know I'd pick ya over your sister in a hot dress any day."

"I would hope so, since she's dead," I muttered, folding my arms over my chest.

"Oh, c'mon, Fitz," he groaned, "now you're makin' it weird."

"Says the guy who just admitted to fantasizing about my sister."

"Okay, okay," he sighed, holding up his hands. "My bad, won't do it again. Let's just restart the weekend, yeah?"

"Wouldn't you rather go find someone in a hot dress?"

He threw his head back, groaning again.

"For fuck's sake, Fitz, just let it go, will ya? I'm here, ain't I? In freakin' Kalm? Don't that tell ya somethin'?"

*It tells me Tseng needs another report.*

What had I expected, really? That everything would magically be fine the moment he came back? That he would suddenly change his elusive ways, that all my doubts would be erased? That I could trust him, just like that?

Reno took a step closer, stroking his hands up along my arms. "Look, I get it. I was an ass. That don't mean the whole night's gotta go down the drain. C'mon, babe. Fresh start?"

Back on Earth I had learned to take comfort where I could find it, so I could bear the end on the horizon a little longer. I could do that here, too, couldn't I? Tseng could have his reports. I didn't need to worry about the future if I chose to live in the present.

"Sure," I said, mustering a faint smile, though my gaze rose no higher than his crescent tattoos. "Fresh start."

At the bar, I excused myself and dashed to the bathroom. I splashed my face with cool water, took a few deep breaths, then gave myself a stern look in the mirror. *Get a hold of yourself. Leave your emotions out of this.*

Forget the dumb shit, he said. That was exactly what I needed to do: forget this was supposed to
mean anything. I already had what I had wished for, didn't I? Reno was back. So what if all he wanted was a weekend lover? It was simpler that way. Easier. So what if he had ulterior motives? I didn't need trust to get physical gratification. I didn't need strings. I didn't want strings. One failed engagement had been plenty enough wreckage for one lifetime.

My mirror self sneered at me. The fact that James haunted me at a time like this was proof that I was still untangling myself from his own damned *strings*. No, I didn't need any more of those, thanks. What mattered right now was that I had a sexy redhead waiting for me at the bar. It was time to seize the moment and bloody well enjoy it.

I gave myself one last hard stare in the mirror, put on a fresh layer of lipstick, and stepped out with my head held high.

We played pool. He drank beer, I stuck to fizzy water. It wasn't hard. My problem had never been the alcohol itself. We joked around over a shoddy dinner of chips and nuts at the bar counter. We played more pool, teamed up against some boozy but friendly regulars. He drank some more. We danced between the tables at some point, soon joined by our new friends. Upon arriving at my house in the wee hours of the morning, we stumbled into bed together.

Simple. Easy.

Just what I had wished for.
Ghosts of Future Lost

My eyes drifted open to find another pair watching me. For a few moments, I just let myself admire the unusual shade of blue, too sleep-addled to wonder about the hows and whys.

Reno smiled.

"Mornin', sleepyhead."

"You're still here," I mumbled, letting my heavy eyelids sink down again.

"Yeah. That a problem?"

"Of course not," I said, reaching up to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

I felt his hand touch my hair, pushing it out of my face with unhurried caresses. A pleasant tingle danced down my spine.

"Mm, that's better," he murmured once my face was exposed.

"I need to have it cut soon." I cracked my eyes open to glance at the tousled mess crowning his head. "It's getting longer than yours."

"That's your benchmark, eh?" he chuckled.

"Something like that."

We just watched each other. Reno's eyes were a little bloodshot, a little tired. No wonder, really, considering the number of beers he had downed. There was something in them, some emotion lurking near the surface, but I was too drowsy to figure it out.

"Brought coffee. It's behind ya."

As I pushed myself up on my elbows, I noticed he was lying on top of the covers in jeans and the angry chocobo t-shirt.

"You're dressed?"

"Outta coffee. Went out and got some."

"Shit, that's right. Thanks."

"No prob, yo."

He stayed still while I picked up my coffee. Only his eyes moved, watching the cup as I brought it to my lips and down into my lap. Then they returned to my face.

"Any chance you're gonna tell me what's on your mind?"

I felt a strange sort of lurch in my stomach.

"What do you mean?" I asked, taking another sip to hide my wilting expression.

"Last night. Other nights. Now and then you stop lookin' me in the eye. Somethin' sets ya off."

"What do you mean?" I asked, taking another sip to hide my wilting expression.

"Last night. Other nights. Now and then you stop lookin' me in the eye. Somethin' sets ya off."
I was doing it that very moment, too. I tried to break the habit, but all I could manage was to glance in his direction.

"It's not important."

Silence for a few breaths, then a sigh.

"Suit yourself, yo."

He shifted around on the bed to grab his cup from the bedside table, but grimaced and rolled his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" I wondered, looking up.

"Just a bit stiff, s'all."

I reached out for his shoulder, stroking a few slow circles with my palm before kneading the muscles through the t-shirt with my fingers. Stiff was the word, all right.

"Couch again?"

"Yeah."

"As far as I know, I don't snore much. The bed's a lot more comfortable, too."

In response, Reno mumbled a half-hearted "I bet". There was a slight curve to his parted lips, just a hint of a smile. His eyelids drooped and some of the knotted tension was already dissipating, and normally I would have relished the way his body responded to my touch. Now it just made me wonder if all we had left was a physical connection. The man wouldn't even sleep in the same bed with me, for heaven's sake.

I let my hand fall and clutched my mug tighter. His sigh held a touch of disappointment, but he picked up his coffee and lay down again, in a mirror of my pose. Neither of us said anything as we sipped our coffee. I could feel the silence, growing and pressing down on me as his question echoed in my mind.

This was stupid. I was stupid. Maybe things couldn't change, but how would I ever find out if I kept my mouth shut? There were so many questions, though, so many doubts. Where was I supposed to start?

"Reno..." I had no idea what I wanted to say, but to stay quiet was unbearable. "What are we doing?" I finally asked.

"Uh, havin' coffee?"

His grin made it clear that he wasn't serious, but it wasn't enough to lighten the mood.

"You know what I mean," I sighed. "This..." I waved a hand between us. "Us. What is this?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Lookin' for strings, babe?"

"No!"

It was a kneejerk response, triggered before I had thought it through. The grin on his face faltered.

"No, I... I mean--"
"Nah, it's cool," he said, interrupting my stammering. "I get it."

I was pretty sure he didn't.

"I didn't mean it like that. I--"

"It's fine." He flashed me a new smile. "Ain't like I was serious about it, anyhow."

As I racked my sleepy brain for some way to undo my hasty reply, he emptied his cup in one swig and rolled out of bed.

"It's been fun, babe, but I gotta get goin'. Gotta be back at the Cliff this afternoon, yo."

"Reno--"

"No need to get up. Stay here with your coffee," he said, coming up to my side of the bed to plant a kiss on my forehead. "I'll see myself out."

"Just wait a sec and listen, will you?"

He didn't. I tried to go after him, but by the time I had disentangled myself from the sheets, the slam of the front door was echoing through the empty house. Seconds later I heard the roar of his bike. I stared at the bedroom door, filled with a bewildered remorse.

Sunday morning found me lonely and restless. I reflected on Reno's visit over my morning coffee, staring out the kitchen window. On Friday night, it had been so easy to convince myself that strings only bring pain. When I tried to repeat those assurances now, all I saw was the look on Reno's face.

I didn't know what to think. If he wanted more, wouldn't he make it known in other ways? Come clean about Shinra's intent? Call me from time to time? Text me just to say good night? For all I knew, he didn't spare me a single thought unless he wanted a bit of fun for the weekend – or needed a report.

Still, I tried to fix things. I sent him a message soon after his hasty departure. 
I didn't mean it that way. Let's talk about it? Call me?

The reply was short.
its cool dont worry bout it

So much for that. I couldn't fix anything.

Frustrated, I let myself drift back in time, into older memories. Reno's tactless remarks about Camille made my thoughts shift to my sister, then to my parents. Earth. Victor. James. My heartbeat echoed in the empty space within, slow and hollow.

Elmyra's suggestion came back to me, as it often had during low moments over the past weeks. It was the last of the changes I had resolved to make, the one I kept saving for a better time.

An excuse, nothing more. If I kept waiting for a "good" time, I would be waiting forever.

My garden had grown well. A little harvest wouldn't make much of a dent. One by one, I picked and named the flowers for a bouquet. White lilies for my parents and for Camille. Yellow rainflowers for old friends. One red poppy for the world I would never see again. Flowers in hand, I set off toward the Meteorfall memorial.
Mythril Park was a shining example of horticultural diligence. The fresh green lawns were neatly mowed and the shrubs fastidiously clipped. I made my way to the center along its tidy paths, wondering if my fellow pilgrims felt a similar sense of growing inadequacy. For every graceful floral arrangement I passed, the bouquet in my hand seemed a touch shabbier.

As soon as I reached my destination, the discomfort vanished. The statue in the middle of the small open square drowned in the sea of flowers and candles around it. As saddening as it was to see such a vast array of grief, I also found encouragement in the riot of clashing colors and shapes. In such motley company, it was easier to feel welcome.

The statue portrayed a woman, a man and a child. It was decades old, I had been told, but had acquired new meaning for people after Meteorfall. The marble family wouldn't mind if I were to bestow a meaning of my own upon them. I placed my bouquet at the edge of the floral sea.

"Hi, Tess."

I sucked in a quick breath, more out of surprise than alarm. Chelsea had appeared beside me, carrying a handful of pretty flowers. I had seen ones like them in the meadows near the base camp she used, though I could only remember the name of the cornflowers. Despite her greeting, she wasn't looking at me. She was studying my flowers.

"I haven't seen you here before," she remarked.

"It's my first visit."

She hummed, then remained by my side while we stood in silence. I found it hard to concentrate on the reason I had come. I didn't think she would be so crass as to make snide comments under circumstances like these, but the memory of our previous spats was making me tense.

"I talked to a friend in ARK the other day," Chelsea finally said. "She says someone at our office sorted out the new water supply outside. I know it wasn't Grigori, which leaves only one person with that kind of pull among the higher-ups."

I hadn't advertised my involvement, but I should have known that news traveled fast in a small town like Kalm.

"All I did was make a call. Reeve was happy to help once I explained how bad it was out there."

She nodded, gazing at the statue, then set down her bouquet next to mine. She touched one of my lilies, tilting the flower her way. The white petals contrasted with her tan, which had deepened to a tawny hue, like the honey Elmyra used to sweeten her tea. Chelsea had spent her summer toiling in the sun, but as far as I knew, she and Jonuel hadn't been back to the badlands since–

"I need to apologize," Chelsea said as she straightened up, her voice subdued. "For my behavior."

I blinked several times, caught off guard again.

"It's fine," I blurted out when I realized she was waiting. "What happened in the badlands was... rough, on all of us."

I was happy to leave it at that if it meant an end to her hostility, but she shook her head.

"It was more than that. I recognized your friend, and lumped you in with them. I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."
I remembered the glares she and Reno had exchanged. A nervousness jittered in the pit of my stomach.

"You recognized the suit?" I asked, trying to get a feel for their connection.

"Not just the suit. Him. Reno."

"Oh."

I wasn't sure what sort of conclusion to draw from that. We stood in silence for a while, but in the end my curiosity grew too great.

"He recognized you, too."

"I see." She paused, and the silence swelled uncomfortably before she spoke again. "What did he say about me?"

Her voice wavered. It could have been hope. It could have been apprehension.

"I asked how you knew each other. He said it was ancient history and left it at that."

"I suppose that's one thing he's right about," Chelsea said with a strange little smile.

I waited, but she seemed content to end the discussion there. I wasn't, not anymore.

"I accept your apology, but I'd like to hear the whole story."

She hesitated. I wasn't particularly keen on the idea of discussing Reno with her either, but he told me so little of himself. Here, at last, was a chance to find out more.

You could ask him, dummy.

He wasn't here, though. He had left. Again.

You made him leave, moron.

"I've been getting the cold shoulder from you for months, when all I did was call for help," I pointed out. "I think I deserve to know the reason why. Don't you?"

The edge in my voice had nothing to do with her, but maybe it helped goad her all the same. She breathed out in a huff and glanced around at the other memorial visitors.

"Okay, but can we go somewhere quiet first? It's not a pleasant memory."

"Sure."

Chelsea took us down a side path to a more secluded section of the park. We strolled along the edge of a large pond, until she came to a halt and looked out over the still water. The lawns on the other side seemed to be a popular choice for Sunday picnics, but they were distant enough that the sounds of chatter and laughter were muted. Behind us was a thicket of tall bushes, whose pink flowers tinged the air with a scent like jasmine. In other circumstances, it would have been a pleasant spot for contemplation.

"It's years ago now," Chelsea said. "Six or seven. I'd just come back to Midgar after months of traveling around the Planet, when I met a charming man in a sharp suit."
"Reno," I concluded, but she shook her head.

"No, not him. His partner, Rude."

"Rude?" I echoed, turning my head to stare at her.

"Yes, Rude. We dated for a while."

"You dated Rude?"

"Is it that hard to believe?" she asked, giving me a sour look. "He's a bit shy, sure, but he was sweet. Thoughtful and attentive."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be... well, rude." I gave her a sheepish smile, and to my relief a small smile appeared on her face, too. "He's just so quiet and stony compared to you."

"Not all of us go for the motormouths," she dryly remarked. "Yes, I dated Rude. Fell for him rather hard, in fact. It would have been perfect..." She hesitated, then took a deep breath. "Except AVALANCHE had sent me to spy on the Turks."

If the previous revelation had taken me by surprise, this one left me dumbstruck.

"You... were an agent?"

"Hardly," she scoffed. "Just a foolish student, who was far too idealistic for her own good. Little did I know at the time that AVALANCHE would turn out more monstrous than Shinra."

"What do you mean?"

She folded her arms across her chest and slowly shook her head as she watched the water lapping at the pond's edge.

"Human experimentation. Murder. Civilian casualties. AVALANCHE wasn't picky about their methods."

"Hang on," I protested, "I know someone who fought with AVALANCHE. It wasn't like that."

"Oh, this was long before that Midgar crew started bombing reactors last year," she said with a dismissive wave. "The old AVALANCHE had the same name and the same enemy, but that's all they had in common."

Reno had mentioned something along those lines, I recalled, but he had never gone into details.

"So, what happened?"

Chelsea pursed her lips, and for a moment her expression made her look an awful lot like Mrs. Cole from next door.

"I was discovered. By Reno as it happens. He'd been spying on me for a while, gathering proof, or so I heard later. I never knew at the time of course. I was a kitten preying on wolves." Her laughter rang hollow.

I thought back on how they had both reacted in the badlands, face to face again.

"That does make a little more sense now," I mumbled. "What did he do?"
"I made the first move, actually," she was quick to correct me. "I was already getting cold feet, and I told AVALANCHE to stuff it before Reno blew my cover. It wasn't easy, but in the end I walked away. Left the whole mess behind me."

"They let you leave?" I wasn't sure which "they" I meant, but Chelsea heard it her way.

"Well... AVALANCHE weren't happy about it. Maybe all the times they tried to kill me convinced the Turks they didn't need to bother." Her lips twitched.

Or one of the Turks convinced them himself, I mused, recalling how oddly Reno and Rude had both behaved on our return trip to Kalm. Neither had forgotten, that much was clear; but it seemed only one of them refused to forgive.

"What about Rude?"

She was silent for a few moments.

"I joined AVALANCHE because I was convinced Shinra was destroying the Planet and had to be stopped. That belief never changed. There was no future for us."

"That was then. What about now? Shinra's reactors are down. The company has no power anymore."

My words sounded desperate in my own ears. Which of us was I trying to convince?

"As long as the scars they left on the Planet remain, my decision stands."

Chelsea's voice was firm and her face hard. It seemed harsh, sacrificing love and a possible future for high-minded ideals, but who was I to argue? I didn't trust Shinra any more now than I had back when I was their prisoner, and here I was sleeping with the enemy. What did that say about my ideals? Maybe she had the right idea, and maybe I was just a clingy fool.

"Once a Turk, always a Turk. We should both remember that."

With that final warning, Chelsea turned and left. I watched her walk up the path, her shoulders hunched and her arms tight over her chest, while my mind processed our conversation. If it hadn't been the woman herself revealing her past to me, I wouldn't have believed a word of it. From what I had seen during our fight with the grashtrikes, Chelsea had guts and could handle herself, but she was so forthright with her opinions. Imagining her as an undercover agent for some terrorist group was on par with the idea of Tyco as a Turk.

I paused.

Sweet, boyish Tyco... as a Turk.
On Monday I watched Tyco like a hawk in the lab, scrutinizing his every move. At lunch I plied him with questions about his past. Nothing struck me as out of the ordinary. If anything, he seemed happy to talk about himself.

He dodged, though, now and then. I wouldn't have thought twice about it before the weekend, but I was paying attention now. That didn't mean there was anything to my hunch, of course. Everyone had topics they preferred to avoid.

Tuesday continued in the same vein. By the day's end, I was so tightly wound that I refused Tyco's offer for another cooking lesson. In the lab or the office, I could blame my mood on some snag with our work. After hours, he would catch on quick. Instead I brought home a pile of work to distract me and holed up in the bedroom.

At nearly midnight, the doorbell chimed. I looked up from my report, frowning. I had half a mind to ignore it, but the second ring, followed by a strident thumping at the door, drove me out of bed.

"Hold on a sec," I yelled at the third ring, yanking the belt of my robe around my waist. "I'm coming!"

I stomped down the stairs, but when I peeked through the curtains, my irritation gave way to a cold rush of anxiety. Two men in suits stood on my doorstep, one leaning heavily on the other. I dashed to the door and unlocked it in record time.

"Rude? What--" I cut myself off as a cloud of whisky fumes made my eyes water. Narrowing my eyes, I took a closer look at the redhead propped up against Rude's shoulder. "Reno?"

The man stirred at the sound of his name and raised his head enough to gaze blearily in my direction.

"Ya bald piece o' shit," Reno slurred, slumping his head back down. "Told ya, not here."

"May we?" Rude asked.

I realized I had been staring.

"Uh... Sure."

I stepped aside and the taller Turk dragged his partner inside, ignoring the swearing and and the feeble flailing of his limbs.

"I fuckin' told ya, I don't want her--hey!"

Reno's protests were cut short as Rude dumped him onto my sofa.

"The fuck, man?" he groaned while his jacket was removed. "I thought we're par'ners!"

"We are."

With growing unease, I watched Rude strip him of his most uncomfortable possessions, stoic and efficient despite the stream of slurred profanities aimed at him. Reno's wallet, mag rod, shoulder holster, and goggles clattered to the floor. Rude finished his task by pulling off the man's boots. While he took them to the shoe rack by the front door, I placed a hand on Reno's forehead. His skin
felt cooler than usual.

"Reno?"

"'m fine. Jus' fine..."

His head had lolled back against the sofa, his eyes closed. His breath reeked of alcohol, but at least it flowed at a steady pace.

"I'll get him a blanket," I told Rude.

I grabbed a bucket, too. When I returned to the living room, Reno was lying down on his side, his knees folded up to fit his legs inside the couch and his back propped up against the cushions.

"'mma go sleep now," he mumbled when I draped the blanket over him. "Sleep... Yeah..."

"You do that, Re."

I kneeled beside him, listening to his breathing as he drifted off, and touched his cheek to check his temperature again. I had heard enough lectures on the dangers of excessive drinking to have some idea of what to watch out for.

This is what you put Camille through.

I got up and hurried to the kitchen, as if I could run from the rush of old guilt. I heard Rude collect his partner's belongings from the floor. When he joined me in the kitchen, he set them down on the table.

"I'll stay a while," Rude rumbled. "Keep an eye on him."

He stood in my kitchen like a bodyguard, his back straight and his hands clasped in front, shades covering his eyes. I wasn't afraid of him, but I wasn't exactly comfortable with him standing there.

"Um, okay. Feel free to stay the night, but I'm afraid it won't be very comfy. The couch is taken and I don't have a spare bed."

"It's fine. We won't get much sleep tonight."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"What do you mean?"

"He's drunk. He'll get restless."

"Twitchy?" I guessed, recalling the word Reno liked to use.

"Worse."

Oh, I liked that even less. I glanced warily into the living room, but everything was quiet.

"What kind of worse?"

"You'll see."

I rolled my eyes in exasperation. Rude just watched my huff, as stone-faced as ever, and refused to elaborate.
This was going to be a fun night.

I wasn't sorry he had stayed, though. By the sounds of it, a "restless" Reno was more trouble than I might be able to handle.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Water. Thank you."

"I've never seen him like this," I muttered as I picked up a glass from the cupboard. "What set him off?"

"Had to talk to some kids. Sector Seven orphans."

My heart missed a beat, then grew heavy.

"Oh, Reno..."

A shout – no, a scream pierced the night. I froze in shock. I had never heard Reno make a sound like that. Another yell came from the living room. I ran to the door, but Rude was already there, holding up an arm to block me. I tried to push my way past, but I may as well have tried to move a steel bar bolted to the wall.

"Don't."

Reno was sitting up, staring into nothing, his eyes and mouth wide open in terror, his fingers clawing at the upholstery. There were words in his yelling, but it was just gibberish to me. I stopped struggling and gave Rude a pleading look.

"Rude, please! He's–"

"Don't touch him," the bald man said firmly, then addressed his partner. "Reno, it's all right. Go back to sleep."

His voice was calm as he repeated a few variations of the sentences, until without warning, Reno shut his eyes and lay down, slipping back into sleep as if nothing had happened. I gaped at him in bewilderment, heart hammering in my throat, while Rude picked up the blanket and placed it over the redhead's sleeping form.

"He's fine," he said once we had returned to the kitchen. "He won't remember it."

"This is what you mean by 'restless'?" I asked in a breathless whisper.

Rude nodded.

"He never mentioned anything like this."

"Thought so."

"Is that why you brought him here? To show me... this?"

"You should know what to do."

I took several deep breaths to calm myself down, looking over at Reno on the couch. His face was slack, his breathing even. If Rude hadn't been there, I would have thought I was the one who'd had the bad dream.
"Okay... So, I talk to him?"

He nodded again. "Don't touch him. Just talk."

"What happens if I touch him?"

He was quiet a while.

"He'll defend himself."

I shot Rude an incredulous look, then squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my temples. I was too tired to deal with this.

"Oh, great. This is just great."

"Don't worry. Just talk to him and you'll both be fine."

Rude was right. Reno suffered several more attacks, but by the time his partner announced he was leaving, we were all still unscathed. On the inside, though, I was drained. I dragged myself up to bed, thinking I would crash the moment my head met the pillow, but found myself too jacked up on adrenaline to sleep. I tossed and turned, cursing the universe.

Another shout jolted me awake. I scrambled out of bed and down the stairs. This time there was something different about Reno. He twisted this way and that, moaning and yelping, but he was lying down and his eyes were closed.

"Reno, it's okay. It's just a bad dream."

The mewling stopped. He shot upright and looked around, frowning as the fright gave way to confusion.

"Reno? Are you awake?"

He turned his face toward me as soon as he heard me speak. His eyes grew wide and all I could see in them was grief and remorse. I moved closer and took a tentative seat on the edge of the couch, careful not to touch him. I was about to ask him if he was all right, when his words came bubbling out in a desperate flood.

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. I'm so fuckin' sorry. I didn't want to, I swear. I didn't--"

His voice broke and he lunged for me, knocking the breath out of my lungs as he locked his arms around my waist in a tight embrace. Stunned, I stared down at his head in my lap, pressed up against my stomach. I couldn't see his face under the mess of scarlet hair, but when I ran the back of my fingers over his neck, I could feel his pulse racing beneath the clammy skin.

"Shh, it's okay. Go back to sleep. It's okay."

I weaved my fingers through his hair, again and again, until his breathing calmed and the death grip on my midsection loosened. Reno didn't open his eyes or make a sound as I carefully untangled myself. He didn't wake me up again that night, either.

I was less successful in my own attempt to sleep. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, mulling over his words. His horrified apology hadn't been at merely waking me up, that much was clear. Had he still been in the throes of the nightmare, or was it something real he had done that desolated him, like the interrogations? What if it was something more recent, something I didn't know about?
That was the thought that kept me awake.

The first time the alarm clock rang, I was exhausted. I could barely keep my eyes open long enough to send Tyco a message, telling him I would be in at noon. Hooray for flexible hours.

The second time it rang I emerged tired and cranky, but able to face the day. Downstairs, Reno was sprawled over the sofa on his stomach, one foot sticking straight up by the armrest and an arm hanging limp down the side. Somehow, the blanket had landed near the kitchen door. He was still asleep, judging from the snoring.

I fetched a glass of apple juice and a couple of painkillers from the kitchen, then returned to my sleeping guest. When I opened the curtains, admitting the bright light of another beautiful summer day, Reno moaned and clutched his head.

"Fuck off, will ya? I'm dyin' here!"

"Good morning to you too, sunshine."

He raised a hand to shield his blinking and squinting eyes.

"Fitz...? What the..." He covered his face with a muffled groan. "That fuckin' Rude."

"He brought you here, yes."

"I figured you might need these."

"Fuck yes."

I wasn't in any shape to attempt miracles in the kitchen. Coffee was the priority. After a shower, I felt brave enough to tackle eggs and toast, too. As I was waiting for the water to come to a boil, I heard footsteps padding up the creaky stairs, followed by the sound of running water. A few minutes later Reno appeared, a towel around his waist and hair dripping wet.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, setting down a couple of plates on the table.

"Like I might live through this shit after all. Any chance of coffee?"

"Alcohol and coffee are both diuretics. They dehydrate your body, and dehydration is why you feel like death in the first place." As I spoke, I got the apple juice from the fridge and offered it to him. "Drink more of this first."

He took it, but only so he could put it down straight away and sneak up behind me when I turned to check the kitchen timer.

"Mm, you're hot when you talk science," he murmured, wrapping his arms around my waist.

Water dripped down the back of my neck as he nuzzled my ear. I squealed and slinked out of his embrace.

"Do you know what else dehydrates you? Vigorous exercise."

I picked up the bottle of juice, waving it in the air. Reno just smirked.

"If you're that worried about it, I could just let you do all the work, yo."
"I'm already doing all the work!"

My tone was more teasing than annoyed, but in an instant, his gaze dropped to the floor.

"Sorry, Fitz," he mumbled, kneading the back of his neck. "Comin' here wasn't my idea."

He looked ashamed, much to my surprise. I was still cranky, sure, but I hadn't meant to make him feel bad about showing up.

"I know," I said with a lighthearted tone. "You were swearing at Rude nonstop last night."

"Hah. I bet." He grinned, but only for a second. "I, uh... I didn't do anythin' stupid, did I? Y'know, besides the whole showin'-up-on-your-doorstep-dead-drunk bit."

"No. You just got a bit... 'restless', that's all."

"Ah, fuck," he muttered, staring down at his feet.

"It's okay. Rude showed me what to do."

He nodded, but kept his gaze averted. I fiddled with the cork of the bottle, tugged at the plastic ring around the neck of it. I had so many questions I wasn't sure how to ask. Nothing new there.

"So... does it happen often?"

"Nah. Just when I've had way too much to drink, really."

The reasons for his binge hung in the air between us, unspoken but heavy. The guilt on his face was so familiar, but I couldn't think of a single thing to say. Regret was not a war story to share, or a hobby to bond over. It just dredged up memories I would rather forget.

I set the juice down, then took his hand in mine, hoping it would make my next question feel less like an accusation.

"Why did you stay?"

He frowned, tilting his head. "Huh? Here?"

"With Shinra," I clarified. "You were so angry before, because of what they made you do."

Reno stayed quiet for a while, staring at our hands. It was his left I held, his dominant hand marked by countless scuffles and scrapes. I traced the scarred knuckles and slim fingers, wondering what he saw in his mind's eye.

"That hasn't changed," he finally said, his tone flat.

"Then why stay? You could have gone with Reeve, got a job with the 'RO. You don't owe Shinra anything."

He drew a deep breath, then released it in a long, slow sigh.

"I didn't stay with Shinra. I stayed with the Turks."

The perky chime of the timer sounded behind me. We flinched, and the moment was shattered.

"Guess I oughta put on some clothes before breakfast," Reno said, withdrawing his hand.
"I washed the things you left here last time," I called after him as he hurried out of the kitchen. "Check the third shelf on the left."

"Thanks, babe!"

I finished setting the table, feeling amusement creep in as I brought out glasses and cutlery for two. What a charming scene of domestic bliss, this – so long as you didn't mind the heap of weapons in the middle of the table.

The last cup I placed nudged something, sending the mag rod on a roll toward the edge. I caught it just before it could fall off. I hadn't touched anything in the pile, but now that the weapon was in my hand, my curiosity took hold. The handle was smooth and cool to the touch. It felt too big for my fingers, but it was no doubt perfect for Reno. I moved it from hand to hand, feeling the weight, adjusting my grip a few times. I wondered how to extend it.

"Y'know, if you're that keen on fondlin' my rod, I've got another one you could play with too, yo."

Reno, now dressed in his uniform pants and the t-shirt he had left behind, was standing in the doorway. He was leaning against the frame with one shoulder, looking more like himself with the trademark smirk on his face.

"Let me guess," I said, holding out the weapon for its owner. "It's just as long and hard, and when you use it right, it'll make me see stars."

"Nah, the other one's just a backup. It ain't as cool as this one." He grinned and took the mag rod off my hands. "It's back at the Cliff lodge, anyway."

I chuckled and picked up the pot to pour us coffee while Reno pocketed his things. The shoulder holster came last, but as he shrugged into it, he frowned and craned his neck to look behind the plates and cups, still searching for something.

"Seen my knife?" he wondered.

I froze for just the briefest moment.

"No," I said, keeping my voice neutral. "I didn't even know you had it on you."

"Rude," he mumbled, shaking his head.

Fifteen minutes before noon, we were finally making our way toward my workplace. Reno claimed it was on his way, though I had my doubts about that. I kept mulling over possible reasons for the Turks' enquiries in Kalm, trying to connect these dots with other ones I had noticed lately.

"So, back to work, huh?"

"Yeah. Ain't no rest for the wicked, y'know."

"So you keep saying. You have business in Kalm, then?"

He shot me a sideways glance. "We got business all over, yo."

The man could dodge questions all day, and we were already at the back gates of the WRO house. If I wanted direct answers, I would have to ask direct questions.

"Were you looking for Kerrigan?"
Reno stopped dead in his tracks. He finally looked straight at me, and narrowed his eyes.

"Who told ya that?"

"Tseng. He told me former Shinra people have gone missing, including Kerrigan."

His glare could have started fires. Fortunately, I only caught a second of it before he looked to the side.

"Son of a bitch," he bit out.

"What's going on?" I wondered, my voice a bit unsteady.

"Don't worry 'bout it. Just... Just leave it to me, 'kay?"

"Reno! If this is about me, I have a right to know."

"There's nothin' to tell!"

I flinched and clamped my mouth shut, crossing my arms in a huff, but when Reno's gaze returned to my face, his expression had softened to rueful concern. He reached up to trace the side of my face with his fingertips.

"I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to yell. Look, it's just rumors, suspicions. I'm bein' careful, is all. I ain't gonna lose you again."

He meant my return to Earth, I realized, as memories of that almost-final goodbye came flooding back. It was the same gesture, the same tone of voice, the same intensity in his eyes. The same emotion, I recognized with mild shock, conveyed without words.

Reno blinked a few times and let his hand fall, a faint flush coloring his face.

"Hey, uh, I gotta go," he said, then leaned in for a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, for breakfast and everythin'."

"Reno--"

He was already passing through the garden gate and threw his hand up in a wave.

"Sorry, Doc," he called without looking back. "Duty calls, yo."
Just as Reno disappeared around the corner, I was startled by a greeting behind me.

"Good morning, Doctor. The boyfriend's back, I see."

I cast a sideways glance at Tyco, finding him as sunny as the sky above as he came down the garden path from the WRO house.

"Something like that," I mumbled and yanked down my hand to wrap both my arms around my waist. I had just realized I had been ghosting my fingertips across my cheek, tracing Reno's touch on my skin.

Tyco's smile faded.

"Something wrong?"

"No," I said, then let out a stunted, high-pitched laugh. "Maybe. I don't know."

He frowned and looked over in the direction Reno had gone.

"That sounds like a yes to me."

"What do you know about them? The Turks, I mean."

It had been a whim to ask him outright, stemming from my preoccupation with Reno's behavior. My suspicions about Tyco returned to me as I faced him, though, in time for me to gauge his reaction. His eyebrows rose a fraction, and his frown softened into something more pensive.

"I've heard the same rumors as everyone else, I suppose."

"Everyone? Do they scare children with tales of the Turks back in Bone Village? 'Be good or the dark suits will get you'?"

"No," he laughed, "but in Midgar everyone knew someone who worked for Shinra, and if you worked for Shinra, you'd hear the rumors sooner or later. Maybe see the suits around, too."

Tyco stood with his hands in the pockets of his beige cotton pants, his shoulders loose. In the bright light of day, he radiated tameness.

"Look," he said, "I was just popping out for office supplies, but I'll be back in half an hour. Does lunch at The Griffin tickle your fancy?"

"Thanks, Tyco. I might take you up on that."

"You know, I'm free tonight, if you're in the mood for cooking. Could do fried steaks. The first part involves a lot of tenderizing. With a mallet."

He gave me a knowing look and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Therapeutic, is it?"

"Uh huh."
He flashed a grin. An easy, friendly smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes; the kind he always gave me. I was so quick to think the worst of people these days.

"Sure," I said and returned his smile. "I'm game."

"Great. See you soon!"

He continued along the path toward the gate, while I headed up to the office. It wasn't until I had reached the back door that I realized Tyco hadn't actually answered my first question.

A couple of days after Reno's abrupt departure, my phone beeped right in the middle of a meeting with Grigori, Chelsea and Jonuel. I made the mistake of glancing at the screen.

**roses are red**
**violets are blue**
**wanna come to edge this weekend**
**coz i really wanna screw u**

I covered my snort of surprise with a coughing fit. I reread the message several times, hovering between disbelief and delight. The man had interesting ideas on how to clear the air, but I couldn't say they were ineffective. Biting down hard on my lip to keep a straight face, I sent off a quick reply.

*Keep wooing me with poetry and I might just do that.*

A few minutes later, the phone beeped again.

**cactuars are green**
**my balls are blue**
**rhymin is hard**
**like i am for u**

This time I was unable to keep my giggles in check.

"Am I wrong in presuming you're dealing with work-related matters?" Grigori rumbled, bestowing one of his glares of displeasure upon me.

"Just some enquiries about a future event in Edge," I said, trying to ignore the warmth of a blush on my cheeks. "Apologies for the interruption. Please, carry on."

As the professor continued his speech, I surreptitiously thumbed out a reply.

*You've convinced me, you charmer. See you this weekend.*

I turned the sound off, too, so Grigori was none the wiser when the screen lit up a third time.

**cherries are red**
**lemons are sour**
**the second u get here**
**im gonna bend u over**

I straightened in my chair and rolled my shoulders. I idly glanced at the window, but all I could see was a reflection of myself, bathed in the fluorescent light of the lab. It had been dark outside for
hours, but I wanted to finish my little project before bed.

As I had shown Tyco the process for sample analysis over the past week, an idea had been taking form. If I demonstrated my suit's capabilities to Grigori while Tyco ran the equivalent lab tests on the same sample, the professor might be convinced to let me use the suit's test suite as the primary method in the field. We could still bring samples back so that Tyco could confirm the results in the lab, but working from the suit's results would save us so much time. If that didn't satisfy Grigori's requirements, I didn't know what would.

On the table before me lay the left forearm guard of my suit, the one that housed both the manual control unit and the test suite. I had spent the evening trying to come up with a way to hook it up to an external power source. Reeve hadn't answered my calls, so I had experimented on my own from what I could remember of his and of James's setups for powering single pieces. The batteries I had tested got me nowhere, so I had just finished hooking the bracer up to the mains.

With a deep breath, I pressed the control unit's power button. The green ring around it flashed, and I grinned as the small screen lit up. Then it went dark. Everything went dark. I groaned and slumped back in my chair, and waited for the backup generator.

It didn't come on. I got up and made my way to the door in the faint light filtering in through the windows.

"Tyco," I called from the doorway. "Are you in here?"

As I peered at the stairs on the other side of the darkened lobby, it dawned on me that the streetlights were still on. Through the window by the front door, I saw several lit windows on the opposite side of the street. I felt a trickle of unease. This wasn't the usual kind of power failure. Had I messed something up with my test?

A muffled crack echoed in the dark, followed by a tinkling sound. I froze to the spot, pricking my ears. I heard a faint thud, then footsteps. More than one set, approaching the library door by the foot of the stairs. I ducked into the lab just as the library door swung open. A bright cone of light flashed past the open doorway, then returned and stayed aimed at the lab, bobbing up and down in time with quiet footfalls on the floor. They were coming my way.

The second door out of the lab was on the other side of the beam of light. I scanned the windows, but I wouldn't have enough time to climb out through one of them. In a panic, I dropped to the floor and crawled under the nearest workbench, curling up against the wall. My panting was too fast and shallow, too loud. I clamped a hand over my mouth, forcing my breaths through my nose, and stayed absolutely still as the intruders entered the lab.

One of them moved straight to the windows and began closing the blinds, one by one. The other stayed in the doorway and made a slow sweep of the room with the flashlight. The moment that beam reached me, I would be caught. Even a glance in my direction might be enough. I had to get out, now.

The intruder by the door took a step in, then another. I slowly removed my squeaky lab shoes, my eyes darting from one man to the other. The one who was closing the blinds moved on to the last window. Once he was done and turned around... Move, I screamed in my head at the flashlight guy. Move already!

He moved. He took two steps deeper into the room and bent down to look at the tabletop centrifuge. It was the best chance I would get. My only chance. I rolled onto all fours and slipped out from under the workbench, then padded off in a crouching run. The moment I was outside I
pressed myself up against the wall by the door and held my breath, trying to hear anything over the pounding of my heart.

A second passed. Two, four. I could hear quiet scraping and rustling inside, but none of the sounds were heading my way.

I did it. I was clear.

Now what?

My phone was in my lab coat pocket, and my lab coat was hanging from my chair in the lab. The front door was on my right and the back door to my left, but Tyco was still in the house. If he hadn't heard me calling his name, he wouldn't have heard the break-in. I had to warn him.

I took a few deep breaths to collect myself, then crept toward the stairs.

I made my way up slowly, careful to avoid the creaky steps, but a third from the top I heard what sounded like a muffled yelp. I hastened up the rest of the stairs as fast as I dared, urged on by the sounds of shuffling feet and muted grunts. Once upstairs, though, the house had gone quiet again. Halfway down the corridor on the right, I saw a thin ray of light spilling out from one of the rooms. The door to Grigori's office was open just a smidge.

The light flickered. Someone was inside, moving.

I crept toward it, swallowing repeatedly to wet my dry throat as I fought the impulse to run. I had to find Tyco, but I didn't know who was moving in there. I had to be careful.

A few steps from the door I heard the rustle of fabric. As I tiptoed the last stretch, I heard a creak and a soft thud. I gathered up my courage, then hazarded a peek through the crack.

A figure was lying on the floor in front of Grigori's desk. Another was hunched down by his feet, winding something around them. Relief washed over me when I spotted the colorful vest he wore.

"Tyco?" I whispered.

He tensed and whipped his head up, but as soon as he saw my face, he waved me in.

"Get in here, quick. I could use a hand with this guy."

I stepped inside, staring at the scene as I shut the door behind me. The beam of a fallen flashlight lit up a man lying still on the floor, dressed in a drab green hoodie. The hood was pulled up over his head, but I could see that his eyes were closed and his face slack. His hands were already cuffed behind his back and Tyco was tying his ankles together with what appeared to be a shoelace.

"You... have handcuffs?" I blurted out, feeling as stunned as the intruder on the floor.

To my amazement, Tyco chuckled.

"I had a wild date once," he said, flashing me a crooked grin. "She left a memento."

I just stared. Sweet, sunny Tyco was tying up someone he had rendered unconscious... and he cracked jokes about it?

A groan from the man on the floor made us both look down. While Tyco stripped him of his other shoelace, I dashed to Grigori's desk and checked the drawers. In one of them I found a roll of wide, clear tape. I tore off a strip and stuck it over the man's mouth just as his eyes sluggishly blinked
open. Tyco, who had just finished tying his hands and feet together, looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"There's more of them," I whispered. "Two in the lab."

Tyco narrowed his eyes and looked over our captive.

"Just the two? Both in the lab?"

"Two that I saw. I think they broke a window in the library, but I didn't look in there." I clasped my hands together, trying to stop the trembling. Tyco didn't tremble, I noticed.

"You didn't hear anything else?" When I shook my head, he frowned. "No talking? The two downstairs just headed straight for the lab?"

"None of them said a word. They rushed in and split up right away."

Tyco stared at the bound intruder, his brow creased in thought.

"Okay," he said after a few moments, "we have to get out of here. Let's sneak out the back and through the yard. If we stick to the wall on the right, we'll be out of sight of the lab windows until we can make a run for it."

"They pulled down the blinds in the lab."

The man at our feet moaned something unintelligible and squirmed, pulling at his binds.

"Well, wasn't that nice of them," Tyco said with a chuckle, then bent down and yanked the hood down over the guy's eyes. "So, same plan, only easier. We sneak out, put a safe distance between us and them, then call for help. Ready?"

I swallowed hard at the thought of heading downstairs – toward the rest of the intruders – but nodded. Tyco turned off the flashlight and slipped it into his pocket. I blinked several times in a vain attempt to clear the spots from my eyes as he cracked the door open and peeked into the hallway. Grigori's office faced the yard, so the streetlights were of little help here.

As before, the stairs slowed us down. As we descended, I picked up on a hushed conversation from the lab.

"What do you think?"

"Jackpot."

"Shinra tech? Something from their Weapons R&D?"

My breath caught in my throat. There was only one piece of equipment in there that someone might mistake for Shinra tech.

"We'll worry about that later. Finish your sweep."

A panic swelled in my chest, growing with each slow step down. Once we reached the bottom floor, I grabbed Tyco's arm and pulled him along into a storage closet.

"What are you doing?" he demanded as soon as the door closed.

"My suit," I panted between shallow breaths. "They've got a piece of my suit!"
"They're going to get us unless we leave right now. Come on!"

I latched onto his arm again before he could open the door.

"No, no, you don't understand! It's the control unit. The suit won't work without it!"

"Then Reeve Tuesti will just have to get you another one," he hissed, and for the first time, I heard genuine anger in his voice. "Let's go!"

"No, he can't! The suit's memory is in there, it's got--" All my music. All my old test results from Earth. Notes, observations. Memories, in digital form. Reminders. "It's got years’ worth of results. I can't lose all that!"

"That guy upstairs was looking for me," Tyco countered, low and vehement. "He went straight to my room, then my office. They've planned this, they're prepared. These aren't some desperate kids we can scare off!"

"Please, listen to me! The suit, it's unique. It's... the most advanced thing Reeve's worked on, it's priceless! Whoever these guys are, they can't be allowed to steal that kind of tech!"

For several seconds, all I heard were my ragged breaths.

"Shit," Tyco finally sighed. "Okay. Fine. I'll sneak in there and grab it."

My knees nearly buckled with relief, but I didn't let go of him yet.

"There's not a lot of room to hide," I pointed out. "Wouldn't it be better to get those guys out of there first?"

"A diversion, huh?"

"Some kind of noise, maybe? In the library?"

"Okay, yeah. I'll go wait by the lab. The library door's still open, so you can just throw something in there, then get the hell out through the back door and find a phone."

My hold on his arm tightened.

"What, just leave you with them?"

"It's bad enough if they catch one of us," he said, gently lifting my hand off him. "We don't want to give them the chance to get us both. Now let's do this before it's too late."

I wanted to protest, but I knew he had a point. With a frustrated huff, I grabbed a box of disposable gloves from a shelf.

"Let's go."

While he snuck toward the door to the lab and took cover behind a small cabinet, I crept to the foot of the stairs. The light coming in from the window by the front door was too dim to reach the inside of the library, but all I had to do was get the box through the door. A glance over my shoulder confirmed that Tyco was in place and waiting. I took aim and threw.

I was already scurrying toward the back door when it landed with a heart-stopping clap. I snuck into the storage closet and left the door open enough for me to peek through. I couldn't see Tyco or the lab door from here, but I could tell that the flashlights in the lab were turned off now. I waited,
Someone skulked into view, moving toward the library with silent, measured steps. It was one of the hooded men. By the stairwell, just before he would disappear from my view, he paused and turned to look upstairs. The light from the window glimmered off a smooth surface by his side and drew my eye to the bag he had slung over his shoulder. With a sinking feeling, I recognized my suit's bracer, poking out of the top.

The burglar stalked out of view. I cracked the door open a bit wider, hoping to see Tyco on his tail, but no such luck. I snuck out and padded along the side of the stairs until I could peek around the corner on the right. Tyco was gone. He must have slipped into the lab already.

My heart hammered in my throat as I crouched by the stairs, pressed up against the wooden panel behind me. What was I supposed to do now? I had to alert Tyco, but how?

A faint thump sounded from upstairs. I froze, holding my breath. Two seconds later, it sounded again; then I heard footsteps, light and rapid, coming from the library. Before I could move, the intruder I had lured darted back into the lobby. I tensed and prepared for a desperate flight to the back door, but to my relief I heard the stairs creak under his weight. It was short-lived, though, once I realized he would soon find his buddy, thumping in Grigori's office upstairs. I had to do something.

We had left the office unlocked behind us. I hadn't seen Tyco take the keys, so maybe they were still in the lock. If they weren't... I might still be able to block the door with something. Either way, I might be able to trap two burglars in there.

Near the top of the stairs, I stretched up on my toes for a peek at floor level. It was darker up here, but I could just make out the guy in the main corridor, padding slowly toward Grigori's office. His attention was fully on the door. I squinted at it, too, straining my eyes in the hopes of spotting Tyco's keychain in the lock. It was too dark to tell from here, though.

A shorter hallway stretched along the side of the stairs and formed a T with the main corridor. I hurried up the last few steps and took cover behind the corner. I waited a few seconds, then peeked around it.

Someone grabbed me from behind and pressed a hand over my mouth.

"It's me," Tyco breathed in my ear, stilling my struggle before it had begun in earnest. "I'll take him down."

He let me go and dashed around the corner like a cat. I stood there in a daze, until a muffled grunt from the hallway jolted me back into action. I poked my head around the corner. It was hard to make out what was going on in the dim light, but as far as I could tell the intruder was bent backwards at an awkward angle with Tyco's arm squeezed tight around his throat. As I watched, the guy stumbled down to one knee. His bag swung violently and I caught another glimpse of my bracer in the moonlight.

I took off toward them. When I reached them, the burglar's struggle had weakened to a feeble pawing at Tyco's arm. I dropped down to one knee and snatched up the bag, feeling around what must have been other stolen items from my lab. A few seconds later the comforting weight of my bracer was in my hand.

A bright light flooded the corridor, stabbing into my eyes.
"Sleep!"

I lurched as an invisible weight pushed down on my legs, my shoulders, my eyelids. Materia, I recognized, and blinked furiously to shake off the effects. Beside me Tyco collapsed to the floor, out cold, pulling the burglar down with him.

In the moment I froze, in blind panic. Tyco was down. I didn't know how wake him. I didn't know how to help him!

Immune. Surprise.

I was moving before the thought had fully formed. I couldn't see beyond the blinding glare, but I heard a gasp as I shot to my feet, followed by a yelp as I hurled the bracer toward the flashlight. The bright beam spun wildly as the man raised his arms and stumbled back, but I didn't wait to see if he fell.

Run. Get help. Run!

The bracer landed with a clang, and was still clattering along the floorboards when I scooped it up on my way past. I sprinted down the corridor, guided more by memory than my dazzled sight. At the stairs, the spots in my eyes had faded enough to make out the window down by the front door, but the steps before me blurred together in the dark.

I had to move, though, and I had to move fast. The burglar's flashlight was flinging my shadow in a crazy dance across the walls as he came at me, lighting up the top of the stairs in staccato flashes.

Lighting up the guard rail.

With the bracer clutched tight in my hand, I jumped up on the railing and slid into the darkness below.

All I saw was the faint square of the window rushing up at me at break-neck speed. I had three precious seconds to judge the landing, and I failed. I touched down feet first, but in the disorienting dark I pitched headlong forward. A sharp pain shot up my arm as it caught my fall, then I stumbled to my feet and into the door.

I fumbled with the handle, working blind. Every twist of my wrist caused a flash of grinding pain, but I gritted my teeth and forced my hand to move, spurred on by the burglar's curses as he stomped down the stairs.

My fingers found the bolt of the lock. The next second I shoved myself through the open door and out into the crisp night air, and sprinted across the street to the nearest house, blinking against the brightness of the street lights.

"Help!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Help me! Police!"

I kept yelling as I banged on the door. Afraid of staying still too long, I dashed over to the next house, and then the next, shouting and beating on doors, until a second-story window opened. I spun around in time to see a man poke his head out.

"What the hell's going on?" he barked.

"Police!" I hollered. "Call the police!"

As he disappeared from view, I stared back at the WRO house. The door still hung open, and the
street was empty. As I squinted up and down the street, scanning for dark-clad burglars, the first
door I had banged on cracked open and a woman peeked out. Moments later her neighbor did the
same.

The adrenaline rush ebbed away, and with it went the strength of my legs. As the WRO's neighbors
came out of their houses and hurried toward me, I crumpled against the nearest wall in a panting
heap.
Unseen Wounds

A couple of hours after the attack, Tyco and I sat in my kitchen, nursing two mugs of his grandmother's restorative tea. The WRO house had still been full of police when I was allowed to leave, so I had offered him the couch again.

"How's the hand?" he asked.

I looked down at my right arm, resting on the table. A white bandage covered my wrist, keeping it steady. The joint was hot and swollen, but the paramedic who had wrapped it had given me enough painkillers to numb it to a distant prickling.

"It's just a sprain. I'm supposed to see a doctor if the swelling hasn't gone away in a couple of days, but otherwise it'll heal on its own."

"You know, I think we can do better than that. Do you have a first aid kit?"

"Cupboard by the door," I said, gesturing toward it with my cup. "Middle shelf."

I watched him as he fetched it. His blond locks hung free, long enough to brush his shoulders. His hair had come loose during the scuffle at the WRO house.

Once the neighbors I had roused had heard that Tyco was still inside the building, unconscious and at the mercy of burglars, several of them formed a posse and headed in before the police arrived. They found him still asleep, and all three intruders long gone. He had slept through the police sirens and the hubbub that followed, until the effects of the magic had worn off an hour later. He had been rather sheepish when he woke up, but physically he had been fine.

Tyco sat down again and opened the white plastic box he had brought with him. He took out a set of three color-coded vials: the trio of hi-potion, hyper and remedy that was standard issue for first aid kits on Gaia. He removed the green hi-potion from the protective casing and gave it a quick inspection.

"Give me your hand," he said.

"What exactly are you going to do?"

"I'll show you a neat little trick you can do with this." He gave the vial a gentle shake, then tucked it halfway into its groove in the casing, leaving it within easy reach. "Trust me, you'll thank me in the morning."

"Um, okay."

I held out my hand. Tyco scooted his chair around the corner of the table and began to unwrap the bandage around it.

"I didn't know you could use hi-potion on a sprain." It was a safe enough comment, I hoped; the paramedic ought to have mentioned it as an option if it was common practice.

"Usually people don't bother healing something like this," he said as he worked. "Too localized for a potion, too minor for a Cure. End up with enough minor things at once, though, and you'll start looking for other options."
"What, people fall over a lot up north?"

"Lots of slippery streets in winter, you know."

Tyco gave me a grin and released my hand, now free from its wrappings. My wrist was as red as when it had been bandaged up, though the skin looked even tighter than before.

"Okay, it's simple," he said, uncorking the green vial. "I pour on some of this, and you rub it all over your wrist."

"Really? That's your special trick?"

"Patience, Doctor. It's just the first part. Ready?"

When I nodded, he let several drops of the viscous liquid fall onto my skin. Both my fingertips and my skin beneath them tingled as I smeared the potion around my wrist, though all I felt of the pain was a slight throbbing in time with my pulse. The smell was worse, as faint as it was; cloyingly sweet compared to the tang of lemon and ginger wafting up from our mugs.

"Now we get to the trick." He picked up the bandage and beckoned for my hand. "Normally, hi-potion dries on the skin before it can heal more than cuts and scrapes," he explained as he began wrapping my wrist again. "Cover it up tight, though, and the effect lasts long enough to reach deeper injuries, like sprains."

Tyco worked with a speed that would have made the paramedic proud. The result was better than what I could have accomplished, too: even and firm, but not too firm. When he was done, he took my bandaged hand in both of his and gave it a gentle pat.

"There. Should be good as new in the morning." He released me with a small chuckle. "Well, good enough to use at least," he amended.

"That's more than the paramedic promised me," I said as I turned my hand to check his handiwork, taking care not to aggravate my wrist. "Thanks. You're good at this."

"Any time."

As I placed the vials back in the first aid kit, Tyco picked up his mug and took a sip. He closed his eyes and exhaled in a long sigh, letting go of the tension in his shoulders and his face. A memory flashed before my eyes, of him going slack and falling at the burglar's single word, and I felt a sudden swell of anger. Anger at the intruders, but also at myself. I was the one who had insisted on retrieving the bracer. What if Tyco had gotten hurt because of me? Had gotten killed, because of me?

He was still leaning back in his chair with his eyes shut, his mug cradled loosely in his lap, as if he was just relaxing after a long day at work. Just like after the first break-in. My anger cooled as I mulled things over. The odd gaps in his education. The careful efforts to involve himself in my life, and the careful lack of interest in Reno... and what I had seen him do tonight.

Who are you? It was a simple question, yet I hesitated to ask it. First Chelsea, now Tyco – it seemed like pieces were being revealed, one by one, but I didn't yet know how they fit together, or if they fit at all. How many were still hidden? Could I risk a blunt question, or would it reveal too much about what I knew and what I feared?

"Something on my face?"
I realized I was staring. Tyco was smiling, though, his eyes now open a fraction.

"No," I said, mustering a smile of my own. "I was just wondering where you learned all this. Binding wounds, putting people in chokeholds... It's been a while since my student days, but I'm pretty sure that's not on the Biology curriculum."

"Well, you need a versatile set of skills to survive up north. Plenty there that can get you killed. Cold winters... hungry bears."

"I didn't realize choking out bears is a viable wilderness survival tactic."

"Only if you get the drop on them." Tyco grinned, then pushed himself upright again. "Seriously though, I took a few of those self-defense classes they had at uni. The Shinra ones, you know? Guess I still remember a thing or two."

I just hummed and raised my mug for a sip. I had no way of judging whether it could be true or not. Either way, it was clear Tyco was no ordinary student or administrative assistant. He was far better at choking people than he was at lab work.

*If Tyco was a Turk, wouldn't he have let you know? Wouldn't Reno have let you know?*

He could be something other than a Turk, of course. He could have been placed here by Reeve, as protection. But again, wouldn't he just tell me if he was here for my sake? That would imply that he *didn't* have my best interests—

"Hey," Tyco said softly, snapping me back to the present. "How are you doing?"

He peered at me with a concerned frown, and suddenly my ruminations felt like paranoia. If I stepped out of my mistrustful head for a moment and just focused on the facts, it was a lot simpler: tonight, the burglars were the bad guys and Tyco had been the good guy. He had even agreed not to mention the bracer to the police – I didn't want to draw attention to my suit – after little more than a smile and a "please".

"A bit keyed up," I admitted with a half a smile. "I'm expecting someone to burst through the door any minute."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." He glanced toward the living room. "You know, they're usually showing old horror movies at this time of night. Want to check what's on?"

"Seriously? You want to watch *horror* movies?"

"Eh, the only horror in these movies is the terrible acting," he said with a grin. "Laughing does you good after something like this, right? We can make fun of cheesy costumes and cheesier lines."

I gave a soft snort, shaking my head. Why not, really? It wasn't as if I would be able to sleep any time soon and Grigori had given us the morning off.

"Sure. Let's do it."

In the morning, after a few hours of restless sleep, I found that Tyco's trick had worked. I had to be careful about bending my wrist, but I could leave it unwrapped. Tyco and I headed in to work after lunch. I felt antsy the moment the WRO house came within view, and my body coiled tight as soon as I stepped through the front door. I could hear movement in the library; Grigori told us it was off limits until the police were finished with it, as was the whole upper floor.
Grigori assigned me to compose a list of stolen items. I noted half a dozen missing pieces of equipment as I toured the lab. Everything on the list was small, electronic and pricey. These guys knew what they were doing; they had taken my favorite electronic pipette, for example, but left all the mechanical ones. Nothing was broken or even knocked over, but even in broad daylight I caught myself glancing up at the lamps and toward the library, more than once.

All five of us gathered in the break room for an emergency meeting. I sat far from the door, with my back against the wall, as Grigori relayed the latest news. The police suspected we had been hit by professionals from Edge, and our HQ would send someone to do a security assessment of the entire premises on Monday. After that, I was to contact Orin Faro in Edge about replacements for the equipment we had lost. Not something I looked forward to.

Grigori gave us the rest of the afternoon off, too. I rushed out of the house and headed straight home to pack for my dirty weekend in Edge.

I was so glad it was Friday.

The chocobo-drawn coach was large enough to carry eight passengers inside, but I was one of only five. This was fortunate, for the warm air that wafted in through the open windows was stifling enough as it was. I was also grateful that we had just crossed the city border into Edge, and the ride would soon be at an end. The seat had started out comfortable enough, but had felt harder and harder with every bump in the road, and on the main road from Kalm, the potholes were as plentiful as the cornflowers that grew along it.

A weekend in Edge, on Reno's suggestion. Something planned and anticipated, not just a last-minute whim. Part of me was jittery about that, wondering what it might mean for our wounded courtship. Another part of me was happy. Excited, even. What that might imply made me even more nervous.

The coach rolled to a halt. A man in a suit was waiting for me at the station, only not the one I was expecting. I felt a chill as soon as I saw Rude's broad-shouldered form, standing stiff and impassive. Something was wrong.

As with Tseng, the crowd gave him a wide berth, making it easy for me to approach him.

"Hello, Rude. This is a surprise."

"Doctor," he greeted with a nod. "Reno asked me to escort you to the apartment."

Under the bleak fluorescent light, I could make out a couple of dark stains on the man's suit and his black glasses sat at a crooked angle. In response to my scrutiny he reached up and nudged them, but they remained askew.

"What's going on?" I wondered, feeling my pulse quicken. "Is he okay?"

"He will be fine. He'll come over as soon as he can."

My anxiety shot up by several notches.

"He'll be fine? What's happened?"

Rude adjusted his tie, then made another vain attempt to correct his shades.

"He will explain."
He turned on his heel, leaving me with no choice but to follow. He brought me to a black car, then drove me to the Shinra-owned flat that Reno had reserved for our use over the weekend. If the coach seat had been uncomfortable, this one felt like pins and needles. I spent the whole car ride twisting my hands, unable to stay still. Despite several attempts to dig for more information, my tight-lipped driver revealed nothing else.

At the apartment, Rude enquired if there was anything I needed. When I said no, he excused himself and left. It didn't take me long to regret my answer. I tried calling Reno, but the call went straight to voicemail. I didn't know what else to do. After twenty minutes, I took my bag to the bedroom to unpack. I hung up my clothes. I put my toiletries in the bathroom. I adjusted the bedspread, straightened a landscape painting on the bedroom wall. Once that was done, I inspected the kitchenette. The fridge contained a couple of eggs, an onion and a six-pack of beer. I wasn't particularly hungry, but made a tiny omelet anyway. I ate it, but didn't register the taste.

When I finally heard a key scraping in the lock of the front door, I jumped up from my seat. A weary-looking Reno hung in the doorway.

"Hey, Doc. Sorry to keep ya waitin'."

My eyes roamed his body, watching his movements as he stepped inside and closed the door. At first glance, nothing seemed amiss, but it wasn't enough to unknit the tight ball in the pit of my stomach.

"What happened?"

"Bar fight," he grunted, kicking off his boots.

My concern took a nosedive. I folded my arms and fixed him with a withering stare.

"Seriously?"

"Hey, it wasn't our fault!" he protested. "Me and Rude were just havin' a quiet drink after work and these assholes showed up, thinkin' beatin' on a couple of Turks would make 'em look like badasses."

I stepped aside, letting his explanation sink in as I watched him walk up to the counter between the kitchenette and the living room.

"They were specifically targeting Turks?"

"Yeah," he said, taking a glass from the cupboard. "Joke's on them, tho', 'cause they're the ones who ran away cryin' for their moms." He smirked. "The ones that could still run, that is."

I ran a palm along my upper arm, smoothing out the sudden goosebumps. I didn't like what flickered in his eyes.

"Did anyone die?"

"Nah. Shinra gets enough bad PR as it is."

It wasn't a joke. At a loss for how to respond, I just stared at the glass as he set it down in the sink and filled it with water. When Reno lifted it to his lips, I realized he was studying my face. He swallowed his mouthful, then sighed.

"It ain't like I go lookin' for trouble, all right? But if trouble finds me while I'm wearin' the suit, you
can be damn sure it ain't me they're gunnin' for. It's Shinra, and I gotta do my part to keep the company rep."

"You got into a fight because of some pissing contest with bar thugs, that's what you did," I snapped, my unease feeding my temper. "Do I even have to say what I think about this?"

"It don't matter what you think about it. It don't matter what I think about it. Fact is, it makes our job a helluva lot easier in the long run."

The glass clinked sharply as he set it down on the counter.

"At least it used to," he added with bitterness. "A year ago, no one would've been stupid enough to try it on like these dumbshits tonight. These days, wearin' the suit is like stickin' a goddamn target on your back. Seems there's always some dumb punk who thinks 'cause Shinra's gone belly-up, it's gotta mean us Turks have gone soft, too."

As he spoke, he produced his wallet and slapped it down next to the glass, with more force than necessary. A set of keys came next, followed by his mag rod.

"You mean it's happened before?" I asked, looking up from the growing pile. "Why don't you call the police?"

Reno stared at me as if I had grown a second head.

"You gotta be kiddin' me, Fitz."

"But what if they come back and attack you again?"

"Fuck it, let 'em come," he scoffed. "Sooner or later, even these shitheels gotta get the message."

"And if this macho bullshit gets you killed first?"

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile that was a hair's breadth from mocking.

"Aw, worried about me, babe?"

"Of course I am!"

My exclamation wiped the smirk off his face. Reno blinked, momentarily at a loss for words. Then, with a sheepish chuckle, he shook his head.

"C'mon, don't worry 'bout somethin' like that. I mean, look at me. I'm too good-lookin' to die, yo."

Having expected something more confrontational, all I could manage was an incredulous snort. It transformed into a giggle and, embarrassed, I hid my face in my palm. Then I felt Reno's arms around me, pulling me into a careful hug.

"You better not be laughin' at the idea of me bein' good-lookin', 'cause that's really gonna hurt my feelings."

The giggles worsened until there was no hope of stopping them on my own. I slung my arms around his waist, holding him tight until all my pent-up anxiety had hiccupsed out of me as laughter.

"Look, I think I gotta head straight to bed," he mumbled once I had calmed down. "I know I promised ya a good time, but I'm real worn out."
"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're okay."

He let me go and began to remove his jacket, but grimaced when he tried to move his right shoulder. In a flash, I realized that as he had fetched his glass and emptied his pockets, he had only used his left hand.

"Hang on," I added, placing a hand on his arm. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Got all fixed up."

I stared into his face, trying to see beneath the nonchalance.

"Fixed up from what?"

He glanced at me with half a grin.

"Uh, got a bit... y'know. Stabbed."

"What?"

"I'm fine, okay? Got all Cured up at the hospital."

"Now you tell me?"

Instead of answering, he shrugged off his suit jacket, baring his teeth with a sound somewhere between a snort and a hiss. I hurried to help him.

"Thanks, babe."

The hole in the shirt's shoulder was tiny compared to the rusty-red stain that had seeped into the white fabric. I clamped my teeth together as I removed the shirt, trying to keep my hands from trembling too much. Reno took the garment from my hands, scrunched it up into a little ball and tossed it into the corner.

"C'mon, don't think about it too much. The doc did a good job. See?" He tapped on his shoulder. "Ain't even a scratch left."

I stared at the spot, frowning. The skin was smooth and unbroken, albeit a bit red, but his gingerly movements told a different story.

"But you're in pain," I protested.

"Just sore, is all. It'll be gone in the morning, yo."

He stayed still as I reached out, allowing me to brush my fingers over the reddened area. It felt hotter than usual under my fingertips.

"I'm still not used to it," I mumbled, half to myself. "Healing wounds in seconds, instead of days and weeks."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

I glanced at his face. "You do?"

"Sure I do. How d'ya think I ended up with all these?" He gestured at several scars scattered across his torso. "I got pretty much all of 'em before I signed up with Shinra. Gettin' patched up quick is
one of the perks of the job."

"That hadn't occurred to me." I touched a thin line of thickened skin, which followed the curve of his lower ribs. "So all these healed naturally?"

"Yeah. Didn't have no Cures or potions below the plate. Your best bet was to get your hands on a bottle of the strongest booze you could find, pour some on the fucked-up bits and drink the rest. If ya woke up in the mornin', you'd usually make it."

Judging by the look on his face, he was only half-joking.

"Sheesh. I guess you really are hard to kill."

"That's right, so quit worryin', all right?"

He planted a quick kiss on my forehead, then grabbed the mag rod and strolled into the bedroom, yawning. I stood by the kitchenette and tried to come to grips with the last crazy couple of days, but I was running on too little sleep for ordered thought. I could think about it tomorrow, with a fresh mind.

By the time I joined him in the bedroom, Reno was already stretched out on the bed with the covers bunched up around his waist. I sat down on my half and just let my gaze rest on him for a moment; first on his closed eyes, then his nose, the slightly parted lips. The shoulder, its skin still flushed.

The uneasy feeling returned, shivering in my stomach. I lay down, and scooted over until I was close enough to wrap an arm around his waist and set my head down on his chest. Reno tensed.

"What is it?" I asked after a while, raising my head to look up at his face.

"Hey, uh..." He cleared his throat. "I don't think I'm good for anythin' right now."

"You don't have to do anything," I said, smiling. "Just be. Be you."

"C'mon, Fitz. Nobody wants me for that."

He tried to play it off as a joke, but the small laugh was forced and he didn't meet my eyes. Little warning bells chimed in my head, telling me it was time to tread carefully. I lifted myself up on one elbow, both to give him more space and to get a better look at him.

"I hope you're not trying to say I'm 'nobody'," I teased.

His lips twitched.

"Course not."

Reno remained on edge, his eyes averted. In fact, there was something shamefaced in his expression. I studied his face, frowning. What was this? His comments bothered me more and more each time I replayed them in my head. Did he think sex was all I wanted from him? Did he think that turning me down was a deal-breaker? I didn't like either of those possibilities. Not one bit.

I thought back on our time together. We didn't touch each other all that much, unless we were getting hot and heavy. There had been moments, though, like when he had hugged me just now, and when he had clung to me after his nightmare, and when he had kept me upright on that awful
drunken night. He had held me as he comforted me after my return, and there were his
ministrations after that encounter with Scarlet so long ago...

Then it dawned on me. Each time, he had been the one touching me. Whenever I started touching
him, well... Lately that had been with one specific thing in mind. The weekend before, I had
practically told him it was the only thing I was after.

I brushed the hair out of his face, feeling my cheeks flush hot with self-reproach. I traced a tattooed
crescent and continued along his hairline, until I threaded my fingers through the thatch of red. A
sigh passed over his lips.

"Do you like that?" I asked.

He was quiet for a while, his chest rising and falling at a labored pace. I ran my fingers through his
hair again and again, pausing now and then to give the scalp a gentle massage.

"Yeah."

He forced the word out hoarsely, making it sound like an admission of defeat, as if he had
succumbed under interrogation. I couldn't shake the feeling that he expected me to stop as soon as
he had said it.

"Then close your eyes and relax. Just be."

He followed the first part of my instructions, at least. I continued to caress his hair and face,
occasionally trailing my fingertips along an eyebrow or the angular outline of his jaw. Ever so
slowly, I felt the tension seep out of his body.

I was reminded of a similar moment long ago, up high on the balcony of a building that was no
more than a ruin now. That time, he had been cold and angry, consumed by guilt. This time was
something different, but what it could be, I didn't know. There was so much I didn't know about
him.

You could ask, dummy.

I didn't, but the thought no longer made me freeze in panic. I could ask, and I would, at a better
time.

Once his shoulders rested limp against the bed and his fists had unfurled, I let my hand travel down
over his neck and collarbone. My fingers wandered to his waist, following the ragged map of scars
across his chest. With my arm around him, I laid my head down over his heart, adopting the same
position as before. This time, he stayed quiet and at ease.

A few minutes later, Reno shifted under me and freed his arm, then wrapped it over my
midsection. He moved tentatively, uncertain in a way that was both uncharacteristic and sweet. I
gave him a light squeeze in encouragement. A few seconds later, I received one in return. I smiled
and closed my eyes.
Twice Shy

When I awoke, Reno was still dead to the world. I got dressed and explored the kitchenette, but found nothing fit for breakfast. A quick peek into the bedroom confirmed that the redhead was sprawled out on the bed as I had left him, so I decided to see if the diner on the corner did take away.

The welcome scent of fresh coffee blotted out Edge's rusty air as soon as I stepped inside, and the murmur of half a dozen conversations drowned out the melody of some inoffensive background tune. I wondered if Reno came here often; he was the one who had recommended the place on my first visit, after all. I could picture him and Rude taking their lunch at one of the window tables, their eyes peeled on the sun-baked streets outside.

A couple was placing their order with the only staff member in sight, so I took a look at the newspaper on the counter while I waited. A large photo of some kind of medical facility took up most of the front page, accompanied by an article on a specialized Geostigma research unit at the local hospital, recently established thanks to a large, anonymous donation. What would it take for some millionaire to take notice of the WRO's little branch of environmental sciences, I wondered as I idly skimmed the article. Or the whole WRO itself, for that matter. The organization was hurting for a bigger budget.

I turned the page, enjoying the soft rustle of paper. Maybe I should look into getting a subscription for the local paper in Kalm. Sitting down to leaf through a printed version of the day's news was still an oddly quaint experience; like nostalgia, but for a time I had only known through old movies back on Earth. A small smile played on my lips as I pondered that stray thought a bit more. Come to think of it, life here on Gaia was much like living in some surreal adventure movie.

As if to drive the point home, at the bottom of the page was a report of a freaking dragon attack on Corel; squeezed in between the opening of a shopping center in Edge and a job ad seeking construction workers. Second-page news, not even worthy of a picture. I snorted and shook my head. Only on Gaia.

The apartment was still dark when I returned. I took care to set the bags down without a sound so that I could close the front door, but when I turned back around, I saw Reno peering in through the bedroom doorway, his mussed-up hair poking this way and that.

"Fitz? You're back?"

"Morning, sleepyhead," I said with a smile. "I come bearing gifts."

Reno blinked a few times, squinting at the paper bags I held up. It was adorable, the way his sleepy face scrunch up in confusion.

"Huh?"

"Breakfast!" I set the bags down on the kitchenette counter, then produced a cup of coffee from one of them and handed it to him. "Here. Looks like you need it."

He stared at the paper cup in his hand.

"You went out to get breakfast."

"Wow, those are some sharp deductive skills. You must be a Turk or something."
Reno huffed and gave me a half-hearted pout.

"Gimme a break, Fitz. I just crawled outta bed." He took a loud slurp of his coffee, then yawned and rubbed his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. "Man, Cures always knock me out big time. I'm gonna go make friends with this coffee in bed, yo."

I sipped my own as I unpacked the sandwiches with no particular hurry. I even searched the cupboards until I found a couple of plates. It wasn't much of a table setting, but it was a little more respectable for a Saturday brunch than standing around eating sandwiches straight out of the wrapper.

I peeked into the bedroom. Reno was lying on top of the covers, his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling at a steady pace. Despite the empty coffee cup on the bedside table, he was fast asleep.

Well, the sandwiches could wait. I set my own cup down on the other table, then lay down on my half of the bed, careful not to wake him. I closed my eyes and listened to his steady breathing for a while. Resting next to the warm body of another – it had been a comfort I had come to take for granted back on Earth, with James, before my life was turned upside down. A daily moment of peace and contentment. It would be nice to have that again. To wake up every morning with–

No. I winced as I realized where my thoughts had been drifting. Too soon.

I rolled over to reach for my coffee, then nearly spilled it when my bedfellow bumped into me and slung an arm around my waist.

"Reno?"

The response I got was unintelligible, mumbled against the back my neck as he pulled me closer to his chest. Seconds later, I heard a soft snore.

I tried moving his arm, but it only made his hold tighter. For a man who had been stabbed in the shoulder the night before, he sure had an iron grip. I could have woken him, of course, but that just felt rude. The poor man obviously needed rest. Besides, I could think of worse fates than being Reno's little spoon for a while.

I was quite comfortable, in fact. Edge had warmer weather than Kalm, and the heat of his body would be stifling before long, but right now it soothed me. I closed my eyes and breathed in deep. The sensation of being wrapped in his body and his scent like this was pleasant. Intimate. Intoxicating. I leaned back, pressing myself flush against him, and entertained myself with scenarios of what we might get up to once he woke up.

I couldn't say how much time had passed when Reno stirred. I felt his hot breath on my neck as he yawned, while his fingers slid down along my ribs to burrow in between my side and the mattress, tightening his hold on me.

"Reno?"

"Mwuh?"

I felt his head lift from the pillow we shared. Then, he stiffened.

"Uh," he said. "Fitz?"

"Were you expecting someone else?" I teased, turning my head so I could glance at him from the
corner of my eye.

His laugh was forced, but I felt his muscles loosen up a little.

"'Course not. Just wasn't expectin' to wake up and find that I'd kidnapped ya in my sleep."

"It came as a surprise for me too."

"I... didn't freak ya out, did I?"

"No," I said, smiling, "although to be honest, I couldn't wait for you to wake up--"

"Aw shit, I'm--"

Reno began to pull away, but I grabbed his wrist before he could get too far, ending his premature apology.

"--because sleeping together in the literal sense wasn't what I had in mind."

It only took a second before I heard a low chuckle and felt him relax. I guided his hand in under my top and he was quick to take the hint. Reno settled in behind me again, while his fingers explored the soft skin of my stomach on a slow, sure path upward.

"That's more like it," I cooed, a smile forming on my face as I arched back into him.

"Sorry to keep ya waitin'. Guess I gotta come up with somethin' to make up for it, huh?"

"Mm, I think you do."

A shiver of pleasure traveled my whole body as his lips trailed kisses down my shoulder and along my neck.

"Well, you're in luck, babe," he murmured in my ear. "I got plenty of ideas already."

After our shower, I left Reno to his shaving. The bathrobe I found in one of the bedroom closets was too warm for the season, but it was better than wrapping myself in a towel. On my way out, I grabbed my cup from the bedside table and took a hopeful sip, then grimaced. The coffee had gone cold a long while ago. Following old instincts, I finished it anyway.

Reno wandered in, his hair damp and his lean body clad only in a pair of boxers. He raised his arms above his head and clasped his hands together, stretching with a satisfied groan. The show was mostly for my benefit, I suspected. I had no complaints about that.

"That's more like it," he said, his drawl as languid as his moves. "Finally beginnin' to feel human again, yo."

"Mm, you were really out of it. I don't think I've ever been the first one up before, and I couldn't believe I snuck out without waking you. You seemed pretty confused when I came back, too." I dropped the paper cup in the trash, chuckling at the memory of his sleep-addled expression.

"Heh, yeah." He looked down and mussed up the hair in the back. "I guess I figured you'd gone back to Kalm when I woke up alone."

I had grasped the back of a chair, about to pull it out and take a seat, but that made me stop and look up.
"Why would you think that?"

Reno shrugged, staring at his feet.

"Eh, y'know. Thought you might've had second thoughts about the whole thing. Didn't exactly show ya a good time last night."

"Oh, please. You think I'd miss out on the chance to finally play nurse?"

My response had the desired effect. He glanced up and the embarrassed look on his face was replaced by something decidedly mischievous.

"Now that you mention it, I've got a few places you could kiss better."

"Pretty sure I already did that," I said, smiling.

"Well, y'know..." He sauntered up to me. "Doesn't hurt to make sure, yo."

I laughed and planted a soft kiss on his shoulder.

"There. Now, breakfast."

"Aw, that's it?"

"Breakfast!"

I gave him a playful shove in the direction of the other chair and he threw up his hands in mock surrender.

"All right, all right. I'm starvin' anyway."

Reno tore the wrapper off his first sandwich and had stuffed half of it into his mouth before I sat down. As I unwrapped my egg salad sandwich, I remembered the newspaper in the diner.

"Today's paper mentioned a dragon attack."

All I got in response was a hum of acknowledgement. He didn't even look up from his sandwich.

"Are dragon attacks really that common here?" I added, curious and amused. Maybe I should have been worried, too, but my brain just wasn't able to treat it as reality.

He took another bite, shaking his head as he chewed.

"Eh, wouldn't call 'em common, really. There's the occasional attack 'round Nibelheim, but dragons usually stay outta sight."

I paused, then lowered my sandwich untouched.

"Nibelheim? The paper said Corel had been attacked."

"Really? Huh." He stared at the table for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, sucks to be them."

Nibelheim again. With all the drama of the past weeks, I had forgotten about the strange occurrences that had piqued my curiosity.

"So... dragons are native to the Nibel area?"
"Yeah, they roost in the mountains."

"Is there anything going on around there? Mining, construction, anything like that?"

"Not that I've heard," he said, picking up sandwich number two. "Laney's gone over there a couple of times in the past month and she said everything's as borin' as ever."

"If it's that boring, why send a Turk all that way twice?"

"Heh, you're beginnin' to think like one." There was a touch of satisfaction in Reno's grin. "She's just stockin' up on supplies. Nibel bear tails."

"Bear tails?"

It sounded like one of his jokes, but he was nodding as he swallowed a large mouthful.

"Uh huh. Needed for the Stigma medicine."

I took a few moments to deliberate, finally biting into my sandwich. Glands in the tail, maybe, with useful hormones or other secretions. Or maybe not. For all I knew, Gaian bears had tails that sizzled with healing magic. In any case, the Geostigma connection would make them valuable these days.

"I guess it's been open season on Nibel bears for a while, then?"

"Yup. Easy money for the hunters."

I considered this as I finished my breakfast. Hunters descending on the region, unsettling the wildlife, driving them out of their usual habitats – it was one explanation, for the wolves at least. Swarming insects and marauding dragons were far beyond my area of expertise, though. I would have to ask Chelsea. Hopefully I could catch her on Monday morning, before she headed out with Jonuel.

As my thoughts drifted to the WRO house and the break-in, I studied Reno, chomping down his second sandwich. How quickly did news spread through his spy network? Reeve might have found out on Friday... if he wasn't too busy for calls again. Tyco could have told Reno the same evening, if they were working together. Maybe he didn't even need to hear about it from anyone. Maybe he had bugged my office. My lab. My home. Maybe he was just waiting for me to bring it up first, to avoid suspicion.

"You haven't asked me about the break-in."

I tried to say it lightly, but I could hear the sour note in my remark. Reno glanced up, frowning as he swallowed his last bite.

"The what now?"

"The break-in. Thursday night."

It was his turn to examine me with narrowed eyes. Whether because of the topic itself or the way I had chosen to broach it, I couldn't tell.

"Start at the beginnin', will ya? Pretty sure I'm missin' somethin' here."

A perky melody rang out from the pile of Reno's belongings on the counter. With a groan, he pushed himself to his feet.
"Sorry, babe. Hold that thought."

He turned toward the pile. I frowned at his back, trying to rein in the swell of irritation. As much as it irked me to get dropped at the first trill of a phone, it wouldn't help anything to let my temper get the better of me.

The ringing stopped as Reno straightened up and brought his phone to his ear.

"Yeah?" A few seconds passed. "It's my weekend off. Get someone else."

I huffed. It seemed I would be holding that thought for a while. While Reno fell silent a second time, listening to the other person on the line, I snatched up the crumpled wrappers and plates.

"What?"

I had been about to get up, but that single word made me pause and glance up at him. Reno stood as still as a statue, his free hand balled up into a fist. Apprehension spilled into my gut.

"Yeah," he said, his voice lifeless. "I hear ya."

He let his arm fall, phone in hand, and stared at the floor. The muscles in his jaw worked, but he said nothing. I eyed him warily, my brow creasing in concern.

"What is it?"

He stayed silent, to the point where I wondered if he had heard me at all. Just as I was about to repeat my question, he spoke.

"The Prez wants to see ya. Today. Now."

My heart thumped hard. The news was bad enough, but it was Reno's reaction to it that sharpened my fear.

"Tell him I've got other plans."

He finally lifted his eyes to meet mine, but I couldn't read his expression.

"He ain't askin'."

Reno may as well have reached into my chest, grabbed my heart and squeezed. I stared at him, my nostrils flaring as I tried damned hard to keep my breathing under control and my voice even.

"You're bringing me in?"

"It's just a meeting, babe."

I was shaking my head long before he had finished his sentence.

"No. No way."

"Fitz, baby... Don't make this harder than it has to be."

"Why?" I shot to my feet, glaring at him. "Why should I make this easy on you? You know how I feel about Shinra!"

"The Prez just wants to talk to ya. That's all."
"I have nothing to say to him."

His eyes followed me as I moved around the table, placing it between us, yet he didn't move a muscle. Hell, why would he? It wasn't like a piece of furniture would stop him when push eventually came to shove.

"I know," he said. "The thing is, he's got somethin' to say to you."

"And if I refuse?"

His mask fell, just enough to expose a distress that both encouraged and unnerved me.

"I've got orders, babe."

"So you'll just drag me along no matter what I say? Then you'd best give me a good shock with the mag rod first, so I don't make it harder than it has to be!" I pushed the hair out of my face, clawing at the back of my head with a frustrated groan. "I should've known it would end like this!"

"This ain't the end of anythin'! C'mon, Fitz, just... trust me on this one, all right?"

"Trust you?" My laughter was shrill and mocking. "Like I trust you not to go behind my back? Like I trust you not to lie to me?"

Reno's eyes widened, and I knew that my words had stung. Then all the emotion drained from his face.

"The Prez is waitin' for us," he said tonelessly. "We leave in ten."

I slammed the bedroom door hard enough to knock the painting off the wall.
Cliff Resort was renowned for its scenery, but the beauty was lost on me. I stared out the window and registered none of what passed before my eyes, my arms tight across my chest and my whole body pressed as far up to the car door as possible. I hadn't uttered a single word during the past hour. At first it had been out of anger and spite. Now it was out of trepidation, which had first made itself known when I saw the silhouette of the cliffs on the horizon, and had since grown with every minute that passed. By now, it was strong enough to make me sick to my stomach.

A cluster of buildings swung into view as we rounded a hill. Each was shaped like a squat cylinder stuck onto a cube, and the vents and pipes crawling over their filthy white walls made them look like remnants of some long forgotten space colony, completely at odds with the rough cliffs and lush greenery they nestled among. They made me think of my first glimpse of Midgar's strict geometry, and then of the gray corridors of Hojo's laboratory, flashing by. My chest grew tighter.

With a sinking feeling, it dawned on me that these buildings could very well house labs for biomedical research. I knew Cliff Resort was a medical facility of some kind. How much of it was under Rufus Shinra's control? Was it now the reincarnation of the company's science division?

I should never have let Reno take me here.

A few minutes later, the Turk pulled up and parked the car at the foot of a tall wooden ramp. It led up to a building that looked much like all the others we had passed, but I guessed this had to be the place Shinra and the Turks had adopted as their new nerve center. Unlike the others I had seen on the way up, this building was perched right on the brink of a steep cliff. I wondered if it was possible to survive the jump into the river far below.

Once I had exited the car, Reno gestured toward the ramp and waited for me to go first. I refused to meet his eyes as I passed him.

"Nothin's gonna happen to ya while I'm around."

My heart quickened its beat at his quiet promise. I couldn't help it. No matter how much it mortified me, the part of me that wanted to lash at him for choosing his employer over me, I longed to reach out to him for comfort.

I did no such thing, of course. Giving in to my desire for comfort was what had landed me here in the first place.

The Turk didn't take me into the building, but instead brought me around its cylindrical half to a balcony that spanned the full length of the building. There, two men waited for us. One was dressed all in a white, his hands resting on the wooden railing as he leaned out over the shimmering waterfall below. The other, who stood stiff as he watched me approach, wore the sharp black suit of a Turk. Tseng I had met before. The younger man I recognized from news reports.

The man in white straightened up and faced me. After so many glimpses on TV, it was strange to see the president of the Shinra Company standing before me. The combed-back hair reminded me of Orin Faro, but that was as far as the resemblance went. Rufus Shinra's hair was shorter and blonder, and the stray strands that framed his face seemed deliberate. Calculated, even. Rufus carried himself with a poise Orin could only dream of.
I came to a halt several paces from them. I needed the distance.

Rufus Shinra looked me over. He was a handsome man both on and off camera, though I didn't much care for his haughty smile. Where Reno's smug smirks intimated that he knew something you didn't, the young president exuded the certainty that he was... *better*.

"You must be Therèse FitzEvan. How good of you to see me on such short notice."

In a different context, I might have thought his greeting civil. As it was, it struck me more like a jibe. I welcomed the irritation, latched onto it.

"Mr. Shinra. Your summons came as quite a surprise."

I managed to keep my voice even. My face had gone cold, as had my arms, but I stifled the urge to rub away the goosebumps. It was bad enough to be dragged in front of one of Gaia's most powerful men in the worn shorts and sleeveless top I had meant for a lazy day out in Edge. The last thing I wanted was to show weakness in front of him and his pets.

I glanced at Reno. He had taken up a position near the wall, about halfway between me and the others. With half-lidded eyes and thumbs hooked into his trouser pockets, he seemed simply bored, but I knew better by now. The man was in full-on Turk mode.

So why wasn't he watching *me*?

"I hope you weren't inconvenienced by the sudden invitation," Rufus said, with no trace of concern. "With my condition, I have little time for pleasantries."

He lowered his eyes to the hand that remained on the railing, shifting his grip. I followed his gaze, and drew a quick breath in surprise. The skin on the back of his hand was marred by a dark, uneven stain.

Rufus Shinra had Geostigma.

At a loss for words, I examined the man. His hand wasn't resting on the railing, I realized; he was holding on to it for support. While I could see no other Stigma bruises on his hands or face, the rest of his pale skin was covered by the many-layered suit. Even his throat was swaddled in the black collar of a turtleneck.

Rufus indulged my scrutiny for a few moments, then offered a cavalier smile.

"Don't worry. My doctors assure me I won't infect anyone else by merely speaking with them."

*Merely.* What did "merely" mean? That the infection spread through physical contact or through the dark ooze discharged by the damaged tissues, as some speculated? Or was he saying that a chat would do no harm, but the risk grew with extended proximity, like the kind he exposed his Turks to while they looked after their employer? The tightness returned, stronger than before.

I moved over to the railing, so that when I turned to face Rufus, both Turks were in view as well. I had hoped to get an idea of Reno's reaction, but his face was devoid of emotion.

Why hadn't he said anything? On the way here, or before? He never told me anything!

"Our current Geostigma medication eases the symptoms," Rufus explained, "but does nothing to halt the progress of the disease. I won't settle for that. I'm gathering a team of researchers, dedicated to advancing the formula."
As I listened, I noticed a curious detail. The president was the only one paying attention to me. Tseng aimed a sharp look my way occasionally, but he was otherwise focused on his subordinate. Reno, in turn, let his watchful gaze glide between his two bosses. I was no expert on bodyguards, but I would have expected them to keep an eye the visitor, not each other.

Unless they were protecting different people.

Hope warred with disbelief at such a crazy, wonderful thought, but I labored to keep it from showing on my face. If I was reading the situation right then Tseng already had his doubts about Reno's priorities, but I knew nothing about Rufus' suspicions or designs. The man was a sphinx, hiding behind a thin smile that hovered between politeness and contempt, never quite committing to either. I was certain, though, that drawing attention to Reno's divided loyalties would help neither of us.

"Which brings me to the reason you are here now," Rufus said, concluding his little speech. "I want you to join the team."

I just stared. When I opened my mouth, the only sound that came out was a strangled snort.

"You would work with a team of experienced professionals," he continued, unfazed, "and have access to a fully equipped laboratory with all the resources you need. There would be no constraints or limits, only the expectation of wholehearted commitment to the project."

I blinked repeatedly, trying to parse the information. My thought processes had ground to a complete stop and had trouble starting up again.

"You must be joking." I finally managed.

Rufus Shinra's smile grew a fraction wider, a fraction thinner.

"I believe it's a generous offer, Doctor."

This was the role he had in mind for me? Not a research specimen for Shinra's scientists, but one of them, to further Hojo's sordid work myself? Now that my fear had begun to fade, the anger over old wrongs was simmering beneath, growing hotter by the minute.

"What on– Gaia makes you think I would want anything to do with Shinra's researchers?"

The silence stretched on while he looked at me from side to side, studying me like a bird of prey. I stood firm, refusing to shrink under his appraising eyes. I would not cower.

"Allow me to be frank," he said. "I know who you are. I know where you come from."

"I expected as much."

I didn't bother to hide my resentment. If the man knew that much, he no doubt also knew what I thought of the Turks' surveillance.

"I also know that you're familiar with Jenova," he continued, unperturbed by my tone. "You worked with Jenova-infected cells on your 'Earth'. You developed a serum that halted the infection."

The surprises just kept coming. This was not a direction I had expected the conversation to take.

"Yes... but the effect was temporary," I said warily, feeling a new kind of apprehension creep in.
"Why do you bring this up?"

"One of my researchers tells me that cells infected with the Stigma behave very similarly to those infected by Jenova."

My brain had already jumped to that conclusion and was racing to apply this new information to what I knew of the illness. It would take a while to tease out the full consequences, but already I knew that my perspective had shifted. The Geostigma was no longer something I could leave to doctors and medical researchers.

As I thought back over the work I had done for James during our last desperate weeks on Earth, I realized so many of the tools I had relied on didn't even exist yet on Gaia. The technology level here was some fifty, sixty years behind what I was used to. In medicine, the consequences of that gap would be far different from those I had grappled with in environmental research at the WRO.

Suddenly, I felt ill.

"Your team," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady, "they have to test their possible cures. They're bound to get it wrong before they get it right."

"Obviously, yes."

"You don't have simulations for it, do you? Your tech isn't advanced enough to keep the testing to lab-grown cells and tissues."

"This is correct."

Rufus Shinra's face remained impassive. I stared at him, unable to comprehend how he could be so damned indifferent about this.

"You expect me to work on people?"

"I expect you to work on a cure. A cure that will benefit all of mankind."

The queasy feeling in my gut pushed upwards until I tasted bile in the back of my throat.

"No. No way in hell."

"Come now, Doctor, be reasonable. Think of the threat we're up against."

"You know who I am," I growled. "You know that you held me prisoner for a year, put me through your interrogations and your sick experiments! And now you expect me to forget all that and come and work for you?"

Rufus shook his head.

"You mistake me for my father, who, I might add, held me prisoner, and for much longer than a year at that. I didn't even know of your existence until a few months ago."

I didn't miss the cold glare he gave Reno, and was surprised to see the Turk avert his eyes. I wasn't interested in speculating about Shinra's internal politics any more, though. I just wanted to get out of there, so I could sit down somewhere and think.

"No thank you. I already have a job."

"Ah, yes. The W. R. O." The sphinx-like smile returned. "How is Reeve these days? The last time I
saw him, he was in need of a hefty amount of gil. Something to do with the power grid he was trying to build in Edge. I took care of that little problem for him, of course. For old times' sake."

I'd had enough of this supercilious asshole. His conceit rubbed me the wrong way in every imaginable direction.

"Find another scientist," I spat. "As I recall, your Science Department was well-staffed."

"At Shinra, you could make a difference. Your work could save lives." He paused, and cocked his head. "You wouldn't want more deaths on your conscience, would you?"

My stomach lurched as if he had punched me. More deaths. He knew? I shot a shocked glance at Reno, but he wouldn't look at me.

"This isn't about me or my company, Doctor," Rufus continued. "This is about hundreds of thousands of suffering lives. Millions, soon, considering the number of new cases every day. The Stigma infects rich and poor alike. Anyone could be next."

Every day the news reported ever-increasing numbers, while the mechanisms of infection continued to elude the doctors and scientists. He was right. Anyone could be next. Anyone... and those in regular contact with it had to be at greater risk. My gaze flitted to Reno's unreadable face again. When I looked back at Rufus, I caught a fleeting glimmer of self-satisfaction.

"Think about it," he cooed, his voice dripping with benevolence. "Take your time."
The air conditioning blew a breeze of cool, filtered air across my face, but the atmosphere in the car was suffocating. The silence was as thick heading down from Cliff Resort as it had been on the way up. Now, though, the whys were different.

"Did you know?" I demanded as the cliffs gave way to featureless desert. "What Rufus Shinra wanted?"

"I knew he was up to somethin." Reno smiled, but there was no amusement in it. "The Prez is always up to somethin'. Wasn't expectin' him to offer a job, but it makes sense."

"Sense? This makes sense to you?"

He sighed and gave a shrug.

"Diamond Weapon blew the top off HQ and Meteor finished the job. Shinra's outta scientists. Findin' someone who wants to work for Shinra and knows at thing or two 'bout Jenova... well, it ain't easy."

"Gee, I wonder why," I muttered.

"It wasn't just the job offer, tho'," Reno continued after a few moments. "If he'd really wanted you onboard, he wouldn't have been so quick to take no for an answer. Nah, it was about showin' who's in charge."

I pulled my arms tighter across my chest, as if that could contain the simmering fury within.

"What, he thought having his Turks spy on me didn't send enough of a message?"

"This show wasn't for you. It was for me. He's been on a power trip since the company went bust. Gotta have someone to boss 'round, I guess."

Now Reno was the one who sounded bitter. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, noting the sour twist of his smirk.

"Why do you put up with it?"

He turned his face away from me and looked out on the desolation of the Midgar badlands.

"Eh, it's complicated. He saved our asses once. Us Turks, we owe him, big time." He took a measured breath through his nose. "Trouble is, he knows it and ain't afraid to use it. 'Specially if one of his Turks has been takin' a few too many liberties with company assets."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The seconds ticked by while Reno watched the desert.

"He wasn't exactly happy 'bout me borrowin' the chopper to get your pal Jon outta the badlands," he said at last. "Tseng chewed me out about it already, and I thought that'd be the end of it, but I guess the Prez wanted to make a point."

It hadn't even occurred to me that Reno could get into trouble for helping me. A sudden guilt welled up, but it only fed my ire.
"Seriously? He dragged me all the way out here so he could make a point to you?"

A sardonic smile appeared on his lips.

"The Prez likes a good show. Ain't a show without an audience."

I scoffed and lapsed back into my fuming silence, scowling out of the window as the broken land rolled by. That spoiled little shit was beyond belief, lording over people as if he ruled the whole damned world. How dare he pretend his selfish desires had anything to do with atonement or with helping Gaia's people?

Reno cleared his throat.

"Y'know... A lot of things would be easier if you did work for Shinra."

"What?"

"Yeah," he said, undeterred by my icy tone. "All the problems you're havin' with Big and Beardy, stuck with pointless shit and gettin' your proposals rejected, all that'd be gone. You'd be in charge of your projects, with ten times the budget of your planet science department at the 'RO."

I swivelled my head to glare at him.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Well, yeah. Your protection would be easier, too. Much less hassle with an employee, since we can--"

"You're fucking unbelievable," I spat before he could voice his inane arguments.

"What?" he asked, shooting me a quick frown.

"First you force me here against my will, just so your sneering brat of a boss can have his ego trip, and now you're taking his side? Didn't you hear what he said to me?"

"Hey, I ain't takin' sides here. I'm just thinkin' about your safety, all right?"

"Safety? You keep talking about my 'safety', and then you pull stunts like this, scaring me half to death!"

My voice was rising fast. Reno raised his own, his frustration sharpening against my anger.

"Nothin' happened to ya! Why can't you just trust me?"

"Trust you? Is that what you told Aerith? Was all that 'protection' for her own good, too?"

He had opened his mouth, but his response never came. Instead he whipped around to stare at me. Then he shut his mouth, and aimed his gaze at the road ahead.

"So. The Gainsborough woman told ya, huh."

The irritation in his voice had given way to resignation. The instant shift brought down my volume, too.
"Yes. She told me."

Reno was quiet for a while, then took a deep breath. The slow exhalation seemed to deflate his whole being. He pulled over, quite literally in the middle of nowhere. Once the engine was silent, he slumped back in his seat and stared out of the window.

"No. I never told the girl to trust me. In fact, I told her not to trust me, once. She laughed it off and I let her think it'd been a joke." His voice was low, as subdued as his demeanor. "When I joined, the Turks had been watchin' her for years. Tseng pretty much watched her grow up. Got real protective of her, can ya believe it? Mister Ice himself, goin' soft for a target."

"You still brought her in."

He faced me, meeting my eyes full on for the first time since we had gotten into the car in Edge.

"Tseng did, yeah, but I ain't him and you ain't her. I won't let that happen to ya."

"You said that once before," I pointed out, still too wary, still too hurt. "I'll never know what hit me, huh?"

His gaze didn't falter. "It's different now. It doesn't have to come to that."

I didn't have a reply to that. Instead I got out of the car and slammed the door shut, then leaned back against it. I folded my arms and stared out into the wasteland, trying to bring some order to the hurricane of thoughts raging in my head.

After a while, Reno showed up beside me. We stood in silence, side by side, listening to the quiet ticks of the engine as it cooled.

"Is it true, whatcha said? Were ya really that scared?"

I scoffed – or that was what I meant to do, but the sound that came out was more like a sniffle. Embarrassed, I averted my face.

"Hey. C'mere."

I felt him reach around my shoulders, felt him gently guide me into his arms. I bristled, trying to stay distant and unyielding, but my walls were weak. His breath flowed in a steady, hypnotic rhythm, keeping time with his fingers as he drew slow circles on my shoulder blades. My body responded first and melted against him without my permission. With a sigh, I gave in. I unfurled my arms to place my hands on his chest, and accepted his comfort.

"If the Prez wants ya, he's gonna have to come through me," Reno murmured. "He knows it, and that's why he's so goddamn pissy 'bout it. He doesn't wanna share his toys."

It was what I had longed to hear for so long, yet not even the heat of Reno's body could keep the sudden shiver at bay. Rufus Shinra struck me as the sort of person who would rather break his toys than share.

"If he knows, what does that mean for you?"

"It just means I gotta be on my best behavior. Y'know, like bein' all 'sir yes sir' when he wants you over for a chat."

I could hear the smile in his voice, but I could also hear the sharp edge.
"What about the other Turks? Tseng didn't look very happy."

"Eh, the boss man never looks happy."

"Reno..."

He sighed.

"Look, don't worry 'bout it too much. The Prez may be an asshole but he ain't stupid, and right now, the Turks are his best asset. He ain't gonna push too far just to stroke his own ego."

As much as I wanted to argue, I knew it would lead nowhere. Above all, Reno was a Turk. It would take more than a few hastily articulated arguments to change that.

That didn't mean I had to accept everything he did as one, though.

"I wish you'd told me," I said quietly. "About the surveillance."

"Eh, you wouldn't have seen it my way."

I pushed back far enough to give him an incredulous look.

"You knew I'd say no so you just did it anyway? Are you serious?"

"When you say it like that, it sounds like a bad thing," he joked with a sheepish chuckle.

I shrugged off his arms and took a step back, glaring.

"It is a bad thing! You can't just ignore my opinions and waltz off doing what you like, because you think you know best!"

"Why the hell not? It's what you did!"

There were a few seconds of confusion while I tried to make sense of his accusation. Then another piece of the puzzle that was Reno clicked into place. His expression followed a similar journey, travelling from irritation to surprise and ending up at embarrassment.

"Ah fuck, forget I said that," he groaned, raking a hand through his hair. "I dunno where that came from."

"I think I do," I said, watching him carefully. "This is about me going back to Earth. Isn't it?"

Reno turned his face away with a sharp huff, pursing his lips as he scowled at the desert.

"I had to do it," I added.

"I know that! I'm a Turk, for fuck's sake, 'course I know that. It shouldn't be a big deal."

"Clearly it is, though."

"It's just..." His eyes darted back and forth over the landscape, burning holes in everything that wasn't me. "If I gotta send another Turk into a bad situation, at least I know I can go after 'em if shit hits the fan. How the fuck do I go to another world? I couldn't help ya, and I couldn't stop ya either. I couldn't do a goddamn thing!"

"But now, you could," I said slowly, attempting to follow his thought process. "By taking me on as
a mission."

Reno huffed again.

"Guess you could spin it that way, if you gotta be a damn shrink about it." His gaze dropped to the ground. "Look, it didn't seem like such a bad thing. I figured that since Tseng was gonna have someone keep an eye on ya anyway, it'd be best if it was me."

I took a few moments to bring some order to my thoughts, while I examined the man before me. He still stared at his shoes, but it wasn't in shame. Frustration, maybe, or angry embarrassment.

"You should have told me."

"Yeah, maybe I shoulda," he sighed after a while. "You wanted a normal life, right? I tried to keep it that way, that's all. We do this all the time on protection detail. Unless we're playin' it up for the crowd, we're s'posed to be discreet, y'know? We don't bother the Prez with every lil' damn thing."

"That's not what your mission is though, is it? Protection?"

He lifted his face, his eyes bright and steady as they locked with mine.

"It's what it is to me. I got your back, all right?"

Trust. That's what it boiled down to, just like he had said. I didn't trust either of his two bosses, but in spite of everything I had yelled at him, I found I could believe that Reno was looking out for me. Now that I had heard his side of the story, I couldn't think of a single time when he hadn't.

With measured steps, I returned to his side and leaned back against the car.

"Okay. Let's call it protection," I said. "If that's really the case, I want a say in it. We look at the options and make the decisions together. If there's something I don't want, you don't do it behind my back. We find a compromise."

Reno was shaking his head.

"I ain't gonna let somethin' slide if it puts you in danger, Fitz."

I fixed him with an even look, raising an eyebrow.

"I've got a perfectly good brain of my own, you know. If it's that vital, I'll get it."

He gave it a few seconds' thought, then slowly shook his head again. This time it didn't seem to be at me, though. When he looked back at me, it was with a twitch of a smile.

"Yeah, 'course ya do. I didn't mean it like that."

"Good. Then we have a deal?"

"Deal."

We exchanged tentative smiles, then looked out over the desert. A silence fell again, but it was a companionable one at last.

"I know one way you could get back at the Prez, yo." A gleam had appeared in Reno's eye, accompanied by a crooked grin.
"I'm afraid to ask."

"You could make one of his best Turks go down on ya in his favorite car."

I snorted. "Your libido never sleeps, does it?"

"Hey, I just wanna do somethin' to make it up to ya. Ain't like I can do much else in the middle of the fuckin' badlands, now can I?" He threw up an arm in a wide arc, gesturing to the emptiness around us. "'C'mon, babe. I just wanna make ya feel good. 'Sides, it'd gimme somethin' to smile bout every time I gotta drive the bastard somewhere."

"I bet it would," I chuckled, shaking my head. "To be honest, though..." I hesitated and gave him a timid glance. "I think I just want another hug."

His eyes softened and the air of mischief receded, giving way to a genuine smile.

"You got it."

Reno took my hand and led me to the front of the car, then half-sat, half-leaned on the bonnet. He turned me around and drew me back into his arms, holding me close against his chest. His suit was already rumpled, despite being one of the fresh spares from the apartment's wardrobe, but the fabric was smooth and pleasant on my bare arms. So was the gentle weight of his cheek in my hair.

In the distance, Edge was silhouetted against the red and orange wash of the evening sky. Further beyond, I glimpsed a few of the tallest ruins of Midgar. Placing my hands on top of his, I let my mind go blank and soaked in the moment.

"Just for the record," he mumbled by my ear, "this was so not what I had in mind for the weekend."

"That's a relief."

"Y'know, the night's still young. I'm thinkin' we could both do with some fun for a change."

He was right about that. With everything that had happened, I had just about forgotten the reason I had come to Edge in the first place.

"What do you have in mind?" I wondered, idly caressing his wrist with my fingertips.

"Well, there's a place on the main avenue that does stand-up on Saturdays. We could check out the show and get a bite to eat while we're at it. Maybe hit a club after and go crazy on the dance floor. Whaddya think?"

I smiled. "I think that sounds like a plan."

"Cool. Ready when you are, babe."

The desert road stretched on in front of us, leading back to Edge. As my gaze followed the long, straight path to the horizon, an idea took shape.

"You know, there's one thing you can do to make it up to me."

"Yeah?"

"Let me drive back to Edge."

With a chuckle, Reno fished out the keys and dangled them in front of my face. I snatched them
with eager fingers, then toyed with them in my hands.

"Any speed limits I should worry about?"

"Not with a Turk on board, yo."

My smile widened to a grin.

"Excellent."
An insistent ringing dragged me up out of sleep. I fumbled for my phone, but it only showed me the time: noon on the dot. When I looked over to the other side of the bed, Reno had lifted his phone to his ear.

"What?" he barked, rubbing his eyes. "What, like now? Oh, for fuck's sake... Yeah. Yeah. Gimme half an hour."

The call couldn't have lasted more than a minute, but by the time Reno dropped the phone on the floor with a long moan, I was wide awake. When he looked over at me, his grimace turned into something like a smile.

"Chill, Fitz. Boss man just wants a chat with me this time."

"What about?"

"Fuck knows," he groaned, crawling out of bed. "Gonna have to meet him in town."

"No rest for the wicked," I mumbled, hugging the pillow under me. It didn't do much to lessen the sting of disappointment.

"You can say that again," he scoffed. "This was s'posed to be my weekend off, first proper one since fuckin' Meteorfall. Wait here while I sort this out. It won't be long if I can help it."

"If you're going out anyway, why don't we just meet up in town once Tseng is done with you?"

"Nah," he said, shaking out the contents of his backpack on the bed. "Don't want ya wanderin' out there on your own while I'm busy."

The embers of my resentment were still quick to flare up. I pushed myself up on my elbows and fixed him with narrowed eyes.

"I've come here all the way from Kalm and you expect me to just hole up in some apartment and twiddle my thumbs? I hope you have a reason for me that's more convincing than some vague goddamn hunch."

Reno frowned and looked on the verge of protesting. Finally he sighed, and nodded.

"Yeah, fair 'nuff. Just... do me a favor and stick to the crowds, all right? Main streets and busy shops, that sorta thing."

I had expected more of a squabble. I relaxed and smiled.

"Fair enough."

We headed into town together. Reno wore jeans and a t-shirt, which I hoped meant that his meeting with Tseng would be brief and unofficial. At the plaza, he gave me a kiss on the cheek, then left me to my own devices. The center of town was not what I would have called bustling, but enough people milled along the avenues leading out from the square that I could follow his advice.
The past few days had taken a toll on me; I found myself peering down every alleyway, looking for threats. Instead I saw figures huddled in the shadows or stumbling around, leaning heavily on walls. Stigma. I counted them at first, but lost track near fifty. I mulled over Rufus Shinra's claim about the Jenova connection, trying to reconcile the sight before my eyes with my memories of James' erratic behavior and his inhuman physical changes. I shivered.

These were likely the same people who would end up as lab rats for Rufus Shinra's Geostigma team, I realized: homeless and vulnerable, with nothing left to lose. Legally, it could all be above board; there had to be dozens, maybe hundreds who would sign any waiver that was put in front of them in exchange for the mere hope of a cure. For all I knew, it was a tried and true tactic for Shinra. How many of Hojo's victims had just been desperate to get out of the back alleys of Midgar?

By now, my footsteps had quickened and my heart was thumping like a galley drum. I knew the signs, knew that senseless instinct to flee all too well. I needed a distraction, a chance to get off these streets and calm myself down before it could get worse.

In my aimless rush, I had ended up on one of the side streets of an avenue I hadn't explored before. I scanned the signs and window displays in search of a peaceful spot to sit down and compose myself. One of the names seemed familiar. My brow creased in thought as I gazed up at the sign of "7th Heaven". Then I remembered the café with the rickety furniture in the main avenue, and the waiter's odd enthusiasm for this place. Now that I stood before its iron girders and lumpish concrete facade, it didn't look terribly inviting, but that could be said for most of Edge. May as well find out if the gushing praise had been deserved.

Inside I had to remove my sunglasses to see anything in the dimness. Once I did, I realized the place was empty. The door was unlocked and I could hear soft music tinkling in the background, but I seemed to be the only customer.

"Can I help you?" the woman behind the bar called to me.

"Are you open?"

She straightened up, smiling.

"We are. It's always quiet on a Sunday afternoon. Are you in the mood for food or drink?"

"Coffee, please." The coffee itself might not calm me down, but the scent of it always brought memories of Reeve's workshop – and lately, of lazy mornings with Reno.

"Sure thing." After handing me the change from a twenty-gil bill, she nodded toward the empty tables. "I'll make a fresh pot, so take a seat. Plenty to choose from."

I sat down at a table in a corner, next to a window. As I waited, I glanced over at the woman. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn't get a good look while she was working behind the counter. I turned my attention to my phone instead and noticed Reno had tried to call.

"Hey, babe," he said when I called him back. "All done with Tseng now. Where you at?"

I couldn't hear anything odd in his voice. I could only hope it meant the meeting had been free of unwelcome surprises.

"Having coffee at a bar near one of the avenues. It's called 7th Heaven, do you know it?"

The line went silent. Just when I was about to call his name, I heard a chuckle.
"Yeah, I know the place. Be there in a bit, yo."

The woman appeared at my table just as I slipped the phone back in my purse.

"Enjoy," she said, placing the tray she carried on the table.

She flashed a smile when I thanked her, then headed back to the bar. The nagging feeling only grew stronger. She was a tad taller than me and far more endowed in the bust department, but what really caught my eye was her thick dark hair, long enough to reach her thighs. I was sure a head of hair like that had caught my eye before.

"Sir Tess!"

The shrill exclamation flung me out of my thoughts. I stared dumbly as little Marlene came bounding across the room, pigtails bouncing. By the time she stood beaming up at me from the table's edge, I had recovered enough to offer a greeting.

"Hi, Marlene. This is a surprise."

"Why?" she wondered with a giggle. "I live here!"

"Is that right?" I asked, trying to keep my voice breezy in spite of the alarm bells going off in my head.

"Uh huh, with Tifa and Cloud."

I froze. I had heard those names before, from Nanaki's tales about his time with AVALANCHE. Before I had a chance to consider this new turn, the barkeep showed up.

"You know Marlene?" she wondered with equal parts curiosity and caution.

Ohh, I so needed to call Reno.

"Um, yes," I stammered, unsure how to explain myself without going into detail. "Elmyra Gainsborough is my neighbor in Kalm."

Her face brightened. "Oh, I see."

"Tess is a knight!" Marlene piped up. "We fought the Evil Dragon King together!"

Despite the awkward situation I found myself in, I couldn't help but smile at the girl's enthusiasm.

"That's right. Marlene is quite the expert on dragon slaying."

"I'll say," the woman said with a fond smile at the girl. "I'll bet she told you all about that play in Gold Saucer, right? Ever since she heard of it, she's been obsessed with knights and dragons."

The front door swung open and she paused and looked around. I glanced over, too, and my stomach did a flip as Reno strolled in. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the woman's hands ball into fists, but before either of us could say anything, Marlene ran up to him.

"Reno!" she exclaimed, tugging on the leg of his jeans. "Hi!"

With a happy grin he obliged, sinking down on his haunches.

"Well, whaddya know? The mighty wizard herself. Zap any dragons lately, kiddo?"
She giggled and shook her head.

"Guess that means ya got the last one good, huh?"

"Uh huh!" Marlene took his hand and pulled. "Come upstairs, I wanna show you something."

His eyebrows shot up to his goggles.

"Uh, I don't--"

The bartender sprung into action. In a heartbeat, she had reached the pair and blocked the way.

"Marlene, honey," she said, drawing her back by the shoulder with a tight-lipped smile, "remember what we agreed? No customers upstairs."

"Aw." The girl's face fell, but only for a second. "Wait here," she told Reno. "I'll be back!"

She ran off through a doorway in the back and soon I heard her stomping up the stairs. The woman rounded on Reno and loomed over him with her hands firmly on her hips.

"What the hell are you up to?"

Reno held up his hands as he straightened up, and the grin on his face shifted into the usual smirk.

"Easy, Lockhart, I'm off the clock. Just a guy who wants a drink, yo."

"How does Marlene know you? Were you the one who kidnapped her?"

I blanched, staring at the two. There was way more bad blood between the Turks and AVALANCHE than I knew of, that much was clear.

With a dramatic sigh, Reno shook his head and spread his arms.

"Always so ready to think the worst of me, eh?"

"How does she know you?"

The woman bit out her question word for word, brimming with anger. Instead of answering, Reno just let his head loll to the side and sent me a toothy grin and a wink. Her eyes grew wide as they flickered between us. She opened her mouth, but Marlene chose that moment to return. As the girl ran over to me, the bartender pressed her lips into a line and grilled the Turk with a hot glare.

Marlene climbed into the seat next to me and set down a sheet of paper, then waved to Reno, beckoning him over.

"Come here, Reno!"

"The man was just leaving, Marlene," the bartender said, fake pep in her tone.

"Aw, please?" the girl pleaded, her shoulders sagging. "I wanna show him the picture."

"Don't worry, kiddo. I've got time for a quick look."

Reno cocked an eyebrow at the bartender, lifting his hands with a shrug, then sauntered past her to our table. She followed, looking just about ready to drag him out by the ponytail, but Marlene's excitement must have reined her in.
"So, whatcha got here?" Reno asked, planting himself in a chair opposite us.

"It's us! All of us."

She beamed at us with pride as he turned the drawing sideways and twisted in his seat for a better look. I craned my neck, taking a peek myself. The red creature with its legs in the air and two black Xs for eyes must have been the dragon. Above it stood three people, raising their arms to cheer.

"That's me, isn't it?" I asked, pointing to the one in red and black with a gray swirl rising from one hand.

"Uh huh, and that's me."

The girl indicated the figure with a white dress and brown hair in the middle. The pink squiggle above her head must have been the ribbon she wore in her braid that day.

"What the– Is that me?"

I bit my lip as Reno pointed to the leftmost one. The long red hair made the answer obvious, but I could understand his hesitation. His likeness wore a pink, puffy princess dress.

Marlene nodded vigorously.

"Am I wearin' a dress?"

"Uh huh."

"Why am I wearin' a dress?"

"Because you're the princess!"

I managed to stifle the first snort, but it was a losing battle. The look on Reno's face was priceless. While I tried to get a grip on myself, his gaping turned into a goofy grin, then a snigger.

"Oh, man," he chortled. "Burned by a five-year-old!"

"Do you like it?" Marlene asked.

"It's awesome, kiddo. Keep it up, yo."

The girl couldn't have grinned any wider if she had tried.

"Okay, Marlene... Time to give our customers some peace," the bartender said. "Take the picture back to your room."

"Okaaay."

As the girl scurried off again, the door opened to admit a couple of new patrons. After a long appraising look at us both, the woman left to serve the other customers.

"Hey, Lockhart," Reno called after her. "Any chance of coffee?"

She paused to give him another simmering look and pursed her lips.

"Fine."

Once she was occupied at the other table, Reno let out a slow breath.
"Well, that went better than I thought. Good thing, too. That woman kicks harder than a crazed
chocobo."

I offered him an apologetic smile, squeezing the cup in my hands.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know who owned this place."

"I did, so don't worry 'bout it."

I glanced at her. She was tending to the new arrivals, her back turned to us.

"Maybe we should just go...?"

"Nah, it's cool. Might be good for her to see that us Turks are people too. 'Sides, I just asked for
coffee. It'd be rude to leave now."

Even in the dim light of the bar, I could see the mischief glittering in his eyes. I narrowed mine.

"Didn't you claim you don't go looking for trouble?"

He smirked. "I ain't lookin' for trouble here. Just curious."

"You do know that killed the cat, don't you?"

"Don't worry, babe. Ol' Reno's got way more lives than any regular cat, yo."

The bartender showed up, placing a cup of coffee on our table with a little more force than
necessary. Reno grinned at her and pulled out a rumpled bill from his jeans pocket.

"Thanks, Lockhart. Don't need the change."

Without a word, she opened the pouch hanging from her waist, counted out a handful of coins and
slapped them on the table next to the coffee. Once she had left, Reno blew the hair out of his eyes
with exaggerated relief and shot me a conspiratorial grin.

"How did the meeting go?" I asked as he pocketed the gil.

"Fine. The boss man just wanted to go over a few things."

It was a casual remark. I watched him as he nabbed several sugars from the bowl on my tray and
dropped them into his coffee. I couldn't read anything off about his body language.

"Anything I should know?"

"Nah."

He leaned back in his chair, folding one arm over the back, then gazed out of the window and lifted
the cup to his lips. That was the end of that line of conversation. I tried a different one.

"Is it true what Rufus said about the Geostigma?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

His eyes met mine, then darted over to the woman by the bar counter.

"Far as I know, yeah. Some of it was news to me, tho'."

"Even the part about--"
"Sorry, Doc, gonna have to cut ya off there. Ain't the time and place."

There was no sign of the usual undercurrent of amusement in his voice or in his eyes. So much for that attempt, then. So much for compromise. It was my turn to stare out the window.

"So, this is how it's going to be, is it?"

"I ain't forgettin' our deal, Fitz."

"Funny how it doesn't look that way from here."

He didn't reply straight away. I heard him swallow another swig, then heard the soft clink of the cup touching the table surface.

"Right back atcha. I thought you were gonna try trustin' me for a change."

"You can't just demand trust and expect to get it. You have to earn it."

I kept my eyes aimed at the window. After a while, Reno sighed.

"Wanna know what Tseng wanted? To change the duty roster. After yesterday, he figured it might be a good idea to keep me away from the Prez for a week or two. Nothin' to do with you, 'kay?"

"He could have done that over the phone," I muttered, dropping my gaze to my cup of coffee.

"Yeah, he could've. Guess he wanted to check on me. If I could tell the Prez was puttin' me in line, you can bet your pretty lil' ass the boss man saw it clear as day."

Images from the day before flashed through my head. The stress, the fear, the shock – here, in the now, it all seemed so distant. Distant, but no less real.

"You never said anything," I said quietly. "About him having the Stigma."

"The Prez wants it kept hush."

Snippets I had read about the Geostigma in the papers surfaced one by one, alongside the memories of what I had seen in the newscasts and in the streets. Try as I might to avoid the thought, my mind conjured up images of dark bruises spreading across Reno's pale skin.

"What if you...?"

I trailed off, unwilling to say it out loud.

"Relax, babe. The guy's had it for months. I've been 'round him most of that time, we all have. None of us have caught anythin', not even Tseng."

I swirled the coffee around my cup, thinking it over. The disease had spread at an explosive rate in the days following Meteor's destruction. An incubation period of months didn't fit what little I knew of the disease. That was the problem, though: how little I knew. There was always the risk that it might evolve into something far more virulent, too.

Something struck my hair, then landed in my coffee with a splash. The next second Reno erupted in giggles. I looked up at him, noted the sugar cube in his fingers, and glanced down at my cup. I looked up at him again.

"You put sugar in my coffee!"
That only set off another peal of laughter.

"Y-you... Put sugar in my--" He snorted again, which degenerated into more snickering. "Ifrit's balls," he choked out, clutching his stomach. "Oh, Fitz, you should've seen you face."

His laughter was infectious, it always was. Soon I found myself hunched over with my head resting in my hand, shoulders shaking with my own giggles. It was utterly ridiculous, but it felt good to let go, if only for a minute.

"Oh, man," he said, wiping his eyes. "I needed that. Hey, uh, speakin' of needin' or whatever, when's your ride back to borin'-as-fuck town?"

"At four, from the station."

Reno sobered up and checked his watch.

"'Kay, we gotta get back to the apartment, then."

"Why? There's no rush yet."

"This weekend got all kinds of screwed up, but there's one promise I'm gonna keep, baby." He glanced around, and when he looked back at me, there was a hunger in his smile. "I ain't lettin' ya go back 'til I bend ya over somethin'."

It was abrupt and unexpected, but my muscles below clenched in instant response. The thought of that physical connection, of letting go on a whole other level and feeling the proof that he was alive and well – it made my skin hum with sudden want.

"Planning to send me off with a smile on my face, are you?"

He lowered his half-lidded gaze to my lips, then let it roam down my neck to my chest. Had it been anyone else I would have felt like punching them. When it was Reno, it was jet fuel for my desire.

"Sure am," he drawled as his gaze slowly returned to my face. "I got a rep to keep, y'know. Can't have all those Kalm hicks thinkin' us big city bad boys don't know how to show a girl a good time."

"Just a matter of masculine pride, is it?" I asked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh huh," he said with an unabashed grin. "Well, that and the fact that I wanna make damn sure you keep comin' back for more, 'specially if we gotta wait a whole friggin' week 'til next time."

"We. Next time. Oh, I liked hearing him say those words."

"Think you have enough time blow my mind, loverboy?"

He had watched my fingertips trace the rim of my cup as I spoke, but he raised his eyes to mine as he answered.

"You betcha," he said without missing a beat, his voice now a low purr, "unless you plan to sit here and sip that damn coffee all day."

"Well, in that case..."

I emptied my cup in one swig. With a crooked smile, I got up and sauntered toward the door, letting my fingers trail along his shoulder on the way. I heard the slight hiss as he sucked in a breath, then the scrape of a chair pushed back with haste. My smile grew wide.
You know that bit in Advent Children where Tifa answers the phone and says "I remember you" and seems all happy about it? When I realized who she was talking to, my reaction was whoa, wait, what happened here? When did Tifa start being friendly to the guy who dropped a plate on her home? So, here in the "Tessverse" this is the first spark that will eventually have those two end up on speaking terms.
Resolutions

It was easier to enter the WRO building on Monday morning, probably because my mind was stuffed full with everything else that had happened since the break-in. A reminder of it was waiting on my computer, though, in the form of an email from Orin Faro.

Hi Tess,
I heard about the break-in. I assume you need to replace what was stolen. Why don't you come to Edge this week so we can discuss what you need?

I emailed him the list I had drawn up for the police and declined his invitation.

The break-in meant the lab routine was broken, too, until we had replaced our missing equipment. It would have been the perfect opportunity to plan out those projects I wanted to do, but I found it difficult to focus on them. Instead I launched a series of database searches related to Geostigma. The few results told me nothing new; the WRO wasn't involved in medical research, and Shinra had fallen apart before the Stigma struck, so their old records held nothing on it. I would have to find my information elsewhere.

After lunch, I stayed in the break room to leaf through Grigori's stack of the Kalm Herald. The issues went back almost two months, but reports on the Geostigma were sparse and focused on numbers. I asked Grigori himself about it, but he could only mutter more statistics. The biology of it was a medical issue, he thought, thus outside his field of expertise. He did confirm that while cases had been reported all over Gaia, the most severe outbreaks had been here, in the Midgar basin. In Cosmo Canyon, they had called it "the Midgar disease".

Once I got home I tried to call Reno, but I couldn't get through. The WRO was rebuilding the cell towers in the Midgar area, but with so much in need of reconstruction, progress was slow. Would we have had any at all without Shinra's gil, I wondered. How much of my own paycheck already came out of Rufus Shinra's pockets?

Somewhere in the back of my head, I could hear Rufus Shinra's smug chuckle.

I called again, after a quick dinner of the soup I had been too distracted to finish at lunch.

"Fitz, baby," Reno answered after two dial tones. "Whassup?"

Funny how just a few words in his lazy drawl could produce a pleasant flutter in my belly.

"Not much, I just wanted to talk. Is this a good time?"

"Sure. Rude's off on a job, so it's just me havin' a quiet night at the Cliff."

"You, having a quiet night? You're not sick, are you?" I teased.

"Believe it or not, it does happen. I'm just hangin' out on the couch, havin' a beer and watchin' a movie..." His voice dropped to a purr. "Wanna know what I'm wearin', too?"

In a heartbeat, the pleasant flutter flitted down lower.

"Maybe later," I chuckled. "I have something to ask you first. It's... about Rufus's offer."

"Shoot."

"He claimed that Jenova was involved somehow," I began, relieved that Reno wasn't making a big
deal out of it. "Is that really true?"

The line was silent for a few beats.

"That's what the guy in charge of the science team says."

"Does he have any proof?"

"...'Fraid I can't give ya details like that 'til you're on the team. I can tell ya the Prez is pretty sure
he's on to somethin', tho'."

Was this grounded in science and reason, or was this the desperate hope of a terminally ill man? I
had begun to suspect the latter. He was willing to hire me based on little more than my word, after
all.

"To be honest, tho'," Reno added with a sigh, "the reason I wanna see you on the team is 'cause I
don't trust this Kilmister guy one bit. Not sure his science ethics are where they oughta be, yo."

"Why? Was he one of Hojo's underlings?"

"Nah, it ain't that."

"What, then?" My voice was pitched too high. How little it took to knock me off balance.

Reno sighed again.

"Look, nothin' dangerous, 'kay? The guy likes to get hyped up, s'all. Trouble is, he's been usin' for
so long it just puts him to sleep. Dude ain't gonna do much sciencin' if he keeps takin' naps,
y'know?"

I blinked, unable to tell which part of his revelation was more baffling.

"Hyped up?" I finally asked. "As in Hyper?"

"Uh huh."

"As in the Hyper that's in my suit?"

"That's the stuff."

"Seriously? Reeve put an addictive drug in my suit?" And Reno acted as if this was no big deal?

"Relax, babe. Once or twice ain't gonna get ya hooked."

"Once or twice? What if I'd shot up all six ampoules at once?"

"Then Sparky would've warned ya 'bout heart attacks or somethin'. Look, it takes a while to form a
habit with this stuff, 'kay? Mostly you see it in veterans from the Wutai War, and those guys were
usin' way too often and way too long."

"So this Kilmister has been using too often and too long, too? And Rufus Shinra listens to him?"

"Ain't like the Prez has much of a choice. It's real hard findin' people who know anythin' about
Hojo's work."
I paused. Knowing Shinra's penchant for secrecy, there was only one way a scientist would know what Hojo had been doing.

"Hang on. Are you saying Kilmister worked under Hojo after all? You actually have Hojo's people? And you want me to work with them?"

"Hojo's former people, 'kay? They all quit workin' for him for one reason or another. Just so ya know, ain't no one left of Hojo's last crew. They all got blown up by Diamond Weapon or disappeared soon after."

"And if you do find one of them? Someone who worked on me?"

"If we find someone who touched ya, they ain't got long to regret it. Count on it."

Just like that, Reno's voice had gone cold. The change was so sudden, so complete, that it always caught me unprepared.

"Don't joke about that," I mumbled, not knowing what else to say.

"Who says I'm jokin'?"

"What's wrong with handing them over to the authorities?"

"Hand 'em over for what, exactly? Crimes against humanity?" He wheezed out a dry laugh. "These guys worked for Shinra. Ya think the Prez wants PR like that?"

"That's all that matters? PR?"

"I ain't sayin' it's right, 'kay? I'm sayin' that's the way things are. Gotta work with what you got, y'know?"

My fingers tightened around the phone. Maybe that was how things were. It was time things changed.

"Look, no one on Kilmister's team knows ya," Reno continued. "I checked. You'd be safe workin' for the Prez."

I couldn't help a hollow laugh.

"Right. All I'd have to worry about is human experimentation, a junkie boss and a manipulative asshole of a CEO. What a dream job."

"Yeah, well... Do your job right, and the hypo ain't gonna be your boss for long. The Prez is itchin' to be rid of him. Might give ya a shot at runnin' the show, y'know. Your show, your rules, yo."

That gave me pause. My show meant I could decide the research team's policies, but... this Kilmister would only be on the payroll as long as he was useful. What would happen to me, when my scientific skills ceased to be of use to Rufus Shinra? Would he decide to dig deeper into my alien cells in search of salvation?

The irony was that there was nothing wrong with that option in theory, as long as I had a say in the process. As long as I could trust it was just a matter of blood and cell samples, taken with my consent. Rufus Shinra hadn't earned that trust. Far from it. Nothing I had seen during our meeting, or heard from Reno, indicated that his Dear Leader would let ethics get in the way of his goals.

"You still there, babe?"
As Reno’s question roused me from my thoughts, I realized my shoulders had gotten tense enough to ache. I needed to calm down or there would be no hope of sleeping tonight.

"I'm here... So, what's this movie you're watching?"

"Huh?"

"You said you were watching a movie."

"Oh, yeah. It's some old cop movie about these two buddies who get set up by the bad guys, and they gotta..."

I lay down on the couch, closed my eyes, and focused on his voice. He may not have been telling one of his own stories, but the effect was the same. After a while I turned on my TV and we watched the rest of it “together”, stretched out on our couches, chatting and laughing over the phone. By the time we said goodnight, the smile had returned to my face.

In the morning, one thing was clear. All I had that pointed to the Jenova connection were Rufus Shinra’s claims, and I refused to make decisions based on the word of a professional manipulator. My first goal was to verify if his claims were actually true – from a source that wasn't on his payroll. I had no tangible reason to doubt what Reno had told me so far, but fact-checking was Research 101.

I called the local clinic. They were quick to foist my questions off to Edge Central – which had just set up a research unit with the aid of that large donation I had read about in the Edge newspaper. I had my suspicions of who their nameless benefactor could be.

Next was Reeve, for whom I had many questions: about the Geostigma, about the dangling carrot of Rufus Shinra's funding, about loading up my suit with a cocktail of addictive drugs without warning me. When I called, though, I got Cait Sith again. Reeve was in a meeting, and would be off on a business trip straight after. I told Cait I would call again next week.

"Oh, one more thing before ya go." Cait Sith cleared its throat. "'Keep a watchful eye on the horizon. Coming events may cast their shadows long before.'"

"Cait," I said, stifling my laughter. "That's not a prophecy. That's just common sense dressed up in fancy words."

"Aye, but the fancy words are half the work!"

"Well, in that case, here's one for you: an empty box in pretty wrapping is still an empty box."

"Er... Of course it is. What's yer point?"

The toy cat sounded genuinely perplexed. I shook my head and smiled.

"Think on it."

That afternoon, I hurried downstairs as soon as I heard the rumble of the quad bike in the yard. I found Chelsea alone in the shed that served as our garage. We hadn't talked in private since our chance meeting by the Meteorfall memorial, and I couldn't help but be wary around her still. Her greeting was friendly, though, and thus encouraged, I asked her about the Geostigma.
"Dunno much, I'm afraid," she said as she lifted her things out of the quad bike's new trailer. "I only moved here after the worst outbreaks, when they'd already begun shipping patients off to Edge."

I had expected an answer like that; my real goal wasn't to pick her brains, but someone else's.

"You said you had a friend in ARK, right? Would they know anything about it?"

"Well, Jules sure knows more than me. She runs the triage tent at the camp."

"She's a doctor?" My eagerness was making me talk too fast.

"Not exactly," she said, handing me a lidded box of hard plastic, containing the day's samples. "She's ex-military, served as a medic in the Wutai War."

I gave her a curious look.

"You mean she fought for Shinra? And you're friends?"

She snorted, or maybe scoffed, as she slung a backpack over her shoulder.

"I did say ex-military."

I sensed a story there, but I could ask some other time. Right now I had other things on my mind.

"Do you think she'd mind if I asked her about the Stigma?"

Chelsea was heading out of the shed, but she stopped to give me an enquiring look.

"What's with this sudden interest?"

"Oh, it's... nothing, really. Just. Curious?" My blathering was making me cringe. "Sorry," I added with a laugh. "I'm sounding weird, aren't I?"

"A bit, yes." The corners of her mouth twitched.

"Sorry," I said, smiling weakly. "I've been wound up since the break-in. I haven't been able to do much in the lab, so I've been thinking about possible projects for the future."

"So you want to study the Stigma?"

"I'm just gathering data at this stage," I said with what I hoped was a casual shrug. "Trying to figure out if it's something the 'RO could tackle."

"Well, I'm sure Jules won't mind a few questions." Chelsea stepped out of the shed and rolled the double doors shut once I had followed her outside. "You know, we're both helping out at dinner on Friday," she added as she locked up. "How about you come along?"

"Where?"

"Outside. ARK's field kitchen."

It took me a second to understand what she meant. It took a few more to realize she was serious about it. My stomach did a little flip.

"At the camp? But what about the Stigma?"
Chelsea gave me a wry smile.

"Don't believe all the rumors you hear within the walls. Jules says she hasn't seen a single new case in the past two months."

"And the old ones?"

"You'll have to ask her about that, but I've been volunteering all summer and I haven't caught so much as a cold. Believe me, the camp isn't the festering sore the locals make it out to be."

I suspected Chelsea's immune system was on a different level from my own, but if I wanted to talk to this friend of hers, I would have to put my money where my mouth was. Besides, I only needed to ask some questions. It would be no different from talking to Rufus Shinra. I had survived that, hadn't I?

"All right," I said. "Let's do it."

Tyco had the week off for a road trip to Junon, so with no cooking lessons to occupy my evenings, I spent a couple of them tending my garden. It was easier to organize my thoughts out in the yard; the task felt less frightening while I was surrounded by healthy, growing things.

On Wednesday, I was kneeling by the flowerbed when Elmyra came back from shopping. As we chit-chatted about gardening, a memory came back to me. I'd had my hands full with a plywood box that time, not weeds, and the woman on the other side of the brick wall had been my less congenial neighbor.

"Mrs. Cole once mentioned the people who lived here before me," I said. "Did you know them?"

Elmyra looked up at my house with a slight frown.

"No, not really. I talked to the Odells a few times, but they moved away before I got to know them."

"She told me they moved because their son died of the Geostigma."

"That's right," Elmyra said, nodding with a sad sigh. "Terrible, it was. It was before we had any medicine for it, so I gave them some tea with ginger and gysahl greens. They said it helped him sleep better."

"He was allowed to stay at home?"

"Well, this was before the council decided to send all the Stigma patients to Edge. The Odells took Gilliam there when he got worse, though, hoping to find better doctors."

"The doctors here couldn't do anything for him?"

"There was one who took on Stigma cases back then. The Odells called him to the house when Gilliam first fell ill. Pleasant-looking fellow, he was. He moved away, though. To work in Edge, I guess."

I dropped the weeds and sat back on my heels to give Elmyra my full attention, feeling a flicker of excitement.

"Do you know his name?"
"No, sorry. Lizzie might know more about it. She knew the family well. I'll check if she's home yet."

She scurried off before I could come up with a polite way to decline. I wasn't opposed to talking with Mrs. Cole, but I would have preferred to exhaust all the more pleasant sources of information first. Too late now, though. I turned back to the weeds, yanking them out of the soil as I planned the smallest possible set of questions in my head.

A few minutes later Elmyra showed up again. Instead of Mrs. Cole, she brought two steaming cups with her. I let out a small sigh of relief.

"Lizzie's not home," she said and raised the mugs, "but I took the chance to brew us a little something. Time for a nice break, don't you think?"

I welcomed the respite from the turmoil in my head, too. I took the mug she offered me and peeked at the liquid inside. It was bright yellow, its scent sweet and rich.

"Chamomile?"

"That's right. You could grow some yourself, you know, along there." Elmyra pointed at the brick wall between our gardens. "They would fit the white and yellow you already have, too."

A few weeks ago she had showed me a basketful of chamomile she had gotten from a friend. White petals that circled a rounded yellow bump, with a tangle of bright green, frond-like leaves. I tried picturing their fresh colors against the burnt orange of the bricks.

"Not a bad idea," I said, smiling, as I sat down on the front door steps. "That can be my spring project."

"So... How are things with your red-haired friend?" Elmyra asked once we sat side by side, soaking up the last rays of the evening sun. "I saw him waiting for you by his bike one evening, but that was some time ago."

"I think we're getting somewhere," I said with a wry chuckle. "It hasn't been easy, though."

"Is it the distance? He lives in Edge, doesn't he?"

I fell silent for a while, pondering what to say. I could hardly explain my involvement with Shinra and the Turks to her, after all her family had been through. It occurred to me that all my friends and acquaintances would be biased one way or another. A neutral opinion of Shinra was hard to find.

Elmyra was watching me, I realized.

"I was engaged," I blurted out. "Before Meteorfall. He died."

I had no idea where that came from. The words just tumbled out in a rush to come up with something I could tell her.

Elmyra sucked in her breath.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"So am I." My lip curled. "Four years of working for a future together. And it all came to nothing."

Her face fell, and too late I remembered. Her own husband had died in the Shinra-Wutai war, barely two years into their marriage.
"Oh, Tess, you mustn't think of it as time wasted. It didn't go as you'd hoped, but that doesn't mean your time together had no meaning." She rubbed my shoulder. "He'll always be a part of you, even if you find new happiness."

He would be, wouldn't he? That was the problem.

"Cherish the good times," she continued. "You'll always have those. Cherish them, but don't let them keep you from being happy again. He may be gone, but you're not."

I was close to snapping that there had been no good times, only lies, when the memory of a red rose flashed in my mind. It had been a gift to celebrate our second anniversary. I had never figured out how James had managed to find a real live rose.

That memory was soon joined by others. Sweet ones. Fond ones.

This was the real problem, I realized with a start. It had been good, before everything went so wrong. James had shown me that even on a dying world, there could be more to life than working to survive and partying to forget. He had been there for me when I lost Camille. That James hadn't been a bad person.

Had that been the real him, though? It surprised me how much I wanted it to be true. It could have been true. Sometimes, good people just made bad choices.

"He surprised me with a rose once. One red rose."

I spoke hesitantly. Tentatively. How long had it been since I had spoken of James without anger and spite?

"Just the one?" Elmyra asked. "Not one for grand gestures, was he?"

"Oh, he definitely was. Just not much of a hearts-and-flowers man."

"Well, you know what they say. One red rose for love. Mind you, that might depend on where you're from. My Dorian brought me a bouquet of yellow roses once. Couldn't for the life of him understand why I got upset, until I told him yellow roses meant an apology for something really bad. Turned out they meant joy and happiness back in his hometown."

She laughed, and I smiled. It felt strange, smiling while thinking of James, but as we shared more memories of our old loves, the smiles came easier.

The following evening, I picked a single poppy from my garden and headed to Mythril Park.

"I'm not ready to forgive you, you son of a bitch," I murmured, gazing at the marble family, "but we had four years together. They were hard years, desperate years, and what we had gave me something to believe in. You gave me hope. I loved you." I ran my fingertips over the red petals. "And you loved me. You weren't lying about that, were you? For that... Thank you."

I studied the flower in my hands, allowing myself a moment to long for old dreams, bitter and broken. Then I placed it at the edge of the floral sea and walked away.
Chelsea and I agreed to meet at six. As the hour approached, the knot in my stomach grew tighter. I couldn't help but worry that I was making a big mistake.

Thanks to the vaccinations I had gotten in Cosmo Canyon – and likely my improved diet here on Gaia – my body seemed to have caught up with the change of planets. I hadn't been ill all summer. Still, it was one thing to make it through daily life without catching a cold every week, and quite another to knowingly risk exposure to an incurable pathogen.

Chelsea was a biologist, though. Her friend was a medic. Surely they would be the first to act if there was real danger?

On the way out I paused in front of my armored suit. Sparky wasn't designed for biological threats, but it was fully sealed and its filters would catch any airborne bacteria. It was tempting, but Reno's warning about drawing attention was fresh in my mind, and I remembered the frightened reactions it got during our crazy rescue effort as Midgar crumbled. With a sigh, I decided to leave the suit at home.

I traced the scratches on the breastplate, carved by that unfortunate grashtriike. I should have been relieved that I didn't need Sparky much anymore, but I found I missed the damned thing. I missed the way it hugged my body, missed the surge of strength, missed its monotone voice rattling off status updates, I missed the smell of dry filtered air, tinged with the cleaning spray I used on the undersuit. Hell, I even missed the process of suiting up and down. It used to be the most tedious part, yet in my memories it had grown into something almost zen.

Maybe I could join Chelsea on another excursion to the outskirts of the badlands. Or I could take the suit to Edge, where the former Midgar residents would have been used to the sight of Shinra's fancy robots. Come to think of it, we could use samples from ground zero for comparison.

The idea triggered a small tingle of excitement, and I patted Sparky on the chest. *Soon.*

I met up with Chelsea at the town square. She had changed into a short-sleeved blouse and a thin sweater tied around her waist. In her arms she carried several days' worth of newspapers.

"I've had a subscription for The Cutting Edge since the first issue," she said as we walked. "The volunteers who take people to job interviews in Edge bring other local papers back with them. More job ads and world news in those than our Herald."

"You're not trying to get the refugees into Kalm?"

"With the attitude around here?" She snorted. "What we're trying to do is get these people out of tents and vans as soon as possible. It's already getting colder at night."

"What are the winters like here?"

"Colder than anything you've seen in Banora or Cosmo Canyon. Even Midgar, for that matter. Not the sort that allows for camping, that's for sure." Chelsea sighed. "ARK's been talking to other groups in Edge about co-run shelters, but they have more than they can handle as it is."
I recalled the mad dash from Northern Crater to Midgar right after my second arrival. It had been the middle of January, but with Meteor burning up the sky at the time, I didn't see a single flake of snow during my brief stop in Kalm.

"Last winter was pretty messed up. Any chance there'll be a repeat of that?"

"Who knows? Meteor made the weather go haywire, but no one knows what the long-term effects might be. Best to prepare for the worst."

Her remark reminded me that it wasn't just the weather that had been acting up. I took the chance to ask her about the migratory habits of insects and dragons.

"It's unusual, I'll give you that," she said once I had gone through the strange sightings that had caught my eye. "If Nibel wasn't so far away, I'd be keen to do a field trip and take a look around."

"Could it be a Mako leak from the old reactor?"

She pursed her lips, giving it some thought.

"It's possible. Could also be some remnant of Hojo's work."

Hearing the name without warning made me flinch.

"Hojo worked in Nibelheim?" I hurried to ask, and hoped she hadn't noticed.

"Yeah, for several years. The labs are locked up now, but who knows what could've gotten out before that."

Chelsea shuddered. Maybe she was thinking of genetically engineered monsters. I was thinking of people like me and Nanaki, and felt a different sort of chill.

"How long ago was this?"

"I heard of it a few years back. I don't know the details, though. It was after..." She glanced around, then gave me a half-hearted smile. "Well, you know."

"Maybe we could make it an official investigation?" An investigation of what, I didn't know, but the thought of escaped survivors was enough to make me want to get to the bottom of it.

"Halfway across the globe?" Chelsea scoffed and shook her head, sending her long ponytail into a sway. "Fat chance of that, unless you catch the eye of someone with far too much gil to throw around."

In my head, Rufus Shinra smiled like a sphinx.

"What about Nibelheim itself?" I wondered. "Any 'RO presence there, or someone we could collaborate with?"

Chelsea frowned. "No, there's nothing there. Nibelheim isn't even a real town."

"No bigger cities nearby, I guess?"

"Not the sort that could help us, no. The closest would be Cosmo Canyon."

Had I still lived in the Canyon, I might have been able to coax a road trip out of my old rustbucket of a buggy. To set out from Kalm I would need a huge wad of gil to pay for a boat and a plane.
Or a private helicopter.

Imaginary Rufus smiled wider.

Kalm's main gate was fully open and several guards in green uniforms stood on either side. It was the usual procedure during market days, Chelsea told me.

"Just so you know, they'll check you for Stigma symptoms on the way back," she warned as we approached. "Nothing too bad, though. They'll want to see your arms and legs, and take your temperature."

"Really? They've never done that before."

"They used to do it to everyone, but it takes a hell of a lot of time and that makes both the market vendors and the shoppers unhappy. These days they only do a full check on the ones who come straight from the camp, or someone who looks ill."

The guards gave Chelsea long looks as we passed them. They eyed me, too; more so than on my previous departures.

The last time I had taken a good look at the shantytown would have been when I first arrived. It was smaller now. The trampled ground reached far beyond the huddle of tents and shacks, and weeds had crept into the outer rim. The rows of beggars that used to line the main road had shrunk to less than a dozen. Some of them greeted us with waves or nods.

Chelsea led the way past the new WRO plumbing. A group of people scurried back and forth between the taps and a large tent, striped in white and red, on the opposite side of camp. The field kitchen, judging by the pots they were filling up and the growing crowd around it. A sweet, tomato-like aroma mingled with the smoke and dry dust; it must have come from their cooking.

At a smaller blue tent, Chelsea poked her head in and spoke in a voice too low for me to hear over the hustle and bustle of the camp. Moments later a woman ducked out, dressed in a beige tank top and a pair of faded green cargo pants. Once she had straightened up, she stood half a head taller than me. Her skin was several shades darker than Chelsea's tan, and her jet black hair was cut short in a pixie style like my own.

"Juliet Otiwa," she said with a bright smile, holding out her hand. "Jules, for short."

"Tess FitzEvan with the WRO. I'd like to ask you some questions about the Geostigma, if that's all right?"

"No prob, long as you can wait a couple hours. We've got a lot of hungry people waiting for dinner."

I nodded with a tight smile, swallowing my impatience.

Food had been less of a problem over summer, Jules told me as we strolled over to the field kitchen, mostly because the camp was much smaller than it used to be. Some of its inhabitants had taken up hunting, and ARK had negotiated deals with a couple of local farmers. Berries, apples and other fruits were too expensive since Meteor's weather effects had messed up their yields, but everything sown in spring had grown well.

"It's not much, but it's better than it was," Jules said. "The 'RO had set up deals to ship all the surplus from around here straight into that black hole called Edge, and the town council didn't
account for us when they were calculating Kalm's quota." She scoffed, shaking her head. "We had to go to Edge and beg on our knees before they'd send a little of it back to our camp."

As we approached the field kitchen, it became clear that dinner was already underway. Several families sat on the ground next to the tent, eating from mismatched plates and bowls. Many more had queued up by the serving table.

"Right, we can chat after dinner. Talk to Dom, he'll give you something to do." Jules nodded to a burly man with a do-rag tied over his hair, who stood stirring one of the pots.

Dom gave Chelsea command of a couple of the pots, while Jules joined the servers. He asked me if I knew what they were cooking. I peeked into a pot of bubbling red sauce and breathed in a lungful of the sweet, pungent smell.

"Um... Tomato soup?"

Unimpressed, Dom informed me that the correct answer was karaka sauce with beans and gave me the job of churning out pot after pot of coffee instead. One of the volunteers had just returned from Edge with several kilos of it, and had brought their own coffee maker for the brewing. It was just a regular household appliance, not one built to serve hundreds; fortunately the coffee drinkers trickled in as they finished their meals.

I chatted with the queuers whenever we had to wait for another pot to brew. Most gushed about what a rare treat it was to have coffee; I could whole-heartedly relate. I heard many stories of former lives in Midgar, and many complaints about the scarcity of jobs. Several told me they were staying at the camp with their children while the other parent worked in Edge, waiting until they had saved up enough to afford a place for the whole family. Better to be homeless in Kalm's shantytown than on the streets of Edge, they figured.

None of the coffee-craving refugees showed symptoms of Geostigma. Everyone I talked to knew someone who had fallen ill, but they had all either died or gone to Edge.

By the time Dom rang the bell for last orders, I felt as if I had gone through a day's worth of work in a couple of hours. I couldn't remember the last time I had spoken to so many people in one evening. Still, I had one more conversation to get done before I could crawl into bed. Once Jules and I had sat down behind the striped tent with our coffees, I asked her about the Geostigma.

"So, the first thing you need to know is that the rumors inside the walls are mostly bullshit," she said. "We've had very few Stigma cases out here over summer, and none that I know of right now. Most who fall ill want to go to Edge. Better chance of getting treatment there. The med shipments we get are unreliable at best."

Her Midgar accent was strong, though she cut her vowels short in a way I hadn't heard before. I had never met anyone who gesticulated so energetically as they talked, either. She must have been used to long days of work, surrounded by people.

"What do you know about the Stigma itself?"

"Well, everyone knows the dark stains on the skin. At first I thought it was gangrene, but the tissue never dies. It's stays hot and painful to the touch, like you'd see with a bacterial infection, but I've never heard of one that would produce black pus like this. My guess is that it's a product of the infective agent, and not the white blood cells of the host."

"Does that mean the pus is contagious?"
"That's what we've heard and we've treated it as such, but honestly..." She huffed and tilted her head back to stare up into nothing. "I don't know for sure. I know too many people who cleaned sick family members for months and never got it themselves. Maybe they got lucky... or maybe there's something else to it."

"You haven't run tests on it?"

"Here?" Jules laughed. "Best I can do is pester the local clinic for basic blood tests. No, you'll have to go to Edge for that."

"Figures," I sighed.

"I'm pretty sure it's waterborne, though," she added. "We used to have these big containers that we'd fill up from a nearby spring. I suspect one of them got contaminated and caused the last outbreak."

"You don't know for sure?"

"The water we had left was clean, but we couldn't find a way to test the empty containers. There haven't been any more outbreaks like that since we switched to tap water, though."

I considered her information. James' ailment hadn't spread and it had showed wildly different symptoms from the Geostigma; yet Rufus Shinra's research team presumed the same infective agent was responsible. What could possibly have made them think Jenova was involved? And why did Rufus himself believe them?

I needed more data. Information on the molecular level, starting with an analysis of the black Stigma ooze.

"I heard there used to be a doctor in Kalm who worked with Stigma patients," I said. "Did he come here, too?"

"Yeah, but that was months ago." Jules sighed and shook her head. "Shame, that. All he asked in return was some help with his research."

"Do you have any idea where I could find him?"

"Nope, sorry. Dr. Kilmister closed his clinic when he left."

"Dr. Kilmister?"

"You know him?" she asked, her face brightening.

"I've heard of him." Twice, and both times involving Geostigma. This couldn't be a coincidence.

"Well, if I were you, I'd try looking for him in Edge," Jules said. "He was very determined to get to the bottom of the Stigma. I bet he'd have a lot to tell you."

_____________________

Reno was supposed to show up on Saturday. He didn't.

"Duty calls," he said when he called. "Better luck tomorrow, eh?"

Duty calls. Those two words tied my stomach in knots. These days the mental images of tight red dresses were mixed with rusty stains on white shirts. I didn't know which was worse.
It wasn't the best of Saturdays.

We met up the next day. I found him slouching at the edge of the square, a thumb hooked in the pocket of his jeans and a backpack hanging from his shoulder. The smile that broke through his nonchalance set off a delicious flutter in my stomach, and the moment I was within reach he snatched me up for a kiss that would make Mrs. Cole scowl for weeks. As my body melted against his, my worries melted away.

"Sheesh. Let her breathe some time, will you?"

I broke off our kiss to look around. With a groan, Reno let me go.

"Tyco!" I grinned at the blond man that had come up beside us. "You're back!"

"Yeah," he said, setting down his suitcase. "Hopped off the coach a few minutes ago, just heading back through town to the office."

Apparently Junon hadn't been the sunniest of places; if anything Tyco looked even paler than he had been before his holiday, and he wore a smile as wan as his complexion. The long coach ride north couldn't have been fun.

"How was the trip?"

He made a face. "Not exactly what I expected or hoped for."

"Yeah, speaking of..."

Reno said it under his breath, but if I heard it then so could Tyco. I frowned at him, but he had turned away to light a cigarette.

"I... I'll tell you about it later," Tyco said, glancing at the Turk. "I don't want to interrupt your day."

"Too late," Reno muttered before taking a deep drag.

Tyco's smile was growing stiff.

"Reno just arrived, too," I offered in the way of an explanation. "Our weekend got a bit derailed."

"Well, I won't keep you then. Have fun, kids." Tyco gave a playful salute, then paused and cocked his head at Reno. "Make sure you treat her right, mister."

"The hell's that s'posed to mean?"

Tyco had already picked up his suitcase and taken a step to leave, but at that he turned back and gave Reno a searching look. The redhead met his gaze and blew out a slow lungful of smoke through his nostrils.

"I thought it was pretty clear," Tyco said.

"How 'bout you spell it out for me?"

Worry flooded the pit of my stomach as I looked from one to the other. They were both smiling, but not with their eyes.

"Okay," I tried, "I think we--"
"How about you chill the hell out?"

I stared at Tyco incredulously. He kept his eyes on the redhead, back straight and head held high.

"You tryin' to start somethin' here?" Reno threw down his cigarette and took a step toward Tyco, staring him down. "What, you think you can take me? That what you want, huh?"

"Reno!" I dashed in between the two and placed a hand on his chest. "What's gotten into you?"

His eyes met mine and his fuming glare made my mouth go dry. A second later he swore and stomped off. He stopped in the shadow of a shop awning with his back to us and raked a hand through his hair.

"I'm so sorry," I murmured to Tyco. "I don't know what's up with him."

He stepped forward and ground out Reno's stub as it smoldered on the cobbles, watching the man himself with narrowed eyes.

"Just a bad week at work, I'm sure. If he gets to be more than you can handle, though..." He turned to look at me, his mouth a thin line that didn't suit him at all. "Tell me."

"It's not like that," I hurried to say. "He's just..."

Just what? I didn't have an excuse for him, much less an explanation. I huffed and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Look, wait here for a sec while I talk to him, okay?"

Reno had stayed put and as I stalked over he turned my way. He kept staring down at the toes of his boots and only glanced up when I came to a halt in front of him.

"Guess I didn't make a great impression, huh?"

"That's one way to put it," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "Any particular reason you decided to pick a fight with my coworker?"

He grimaced. "Wasn't thinkin' straight. Sorry, Fitz."

"It's not me you should be apologizing to." I hitched a thumb back the way I came.

Reno sighed and turned away, staring into his reflection in the shop window. His jaw worked in a steady rhythm, as if he was struggling to get the words out, or keep them in. Finally he nodded, and looked back over my shoulder.

"Well, shit. That was quick."

I turned to look. Tyco had vanished without a goodbye.

Reno huffed and strode off toward my house. I had to hurry to catch up with him, and at first we walked in a tense silence. His willingness to apologize had taken the edge off my irritation, but I still didn't know what to say to him. Reno wouldn't stop twitching and checking his pockets.

"Look, know where I can get more smokes?" he finally asked. "That was my last one back there."

"I thought you were trying to cut down."
"What's the big deal?" he snapped. "I just need a goddamn smoke! Need a goddamn drink, too."

I didn't reply. Instead I looked him over. His eyes were constantly on the move, darting this way and that, and his fingers were curling into fists and uncurling without pause. This wasn't just nicotine withdrawal, that much was clear.

When we passed an alley a few moments later, I took his hand and dragged him into it.

"Hey, what're ya–"

I placed my hands on the sides of his face and pulled him down to me, silencing his question with my lips. The smell of smoke was strong so soon after a cigarette, but I deepened the kiss, guiding him backwards until his back hit the nearest brick wall. It wasn't long before he slipped a hand under my top to caress the small of my back, pressing my body closer as the tension bled from his.

"You know what I think?" I murmured against his lips. "I think you need to get laid more."

"That your professional opinion, Doc?"

Though we were too close for me to see it, I heard the smile in his voice.

"I don't need to be that kind of doctor to tell you're wound up beyond belief." As I spoke, I let one of my hands slide down over his chest and stomach. I felt his breathing quicken under my fingers, and heard his sharp intake of air when they reached his crotch. "Lucky for you, I happen to know a great way to relieve stress."

"Y'know, you might be on to somethin'," he mumbled, rolling his hips to meet my hand as I stroked the front of his jeans. "It's been too damn long since last time, that's for sure."

"It's been a week."

He grinned. "That's what I said, ain't it?"

I smiled and got up on my toes, and captured his mouth in another slow, ravenous kiss. The first one had been a foolproof way to get his attention, but into this I poured a week's worth of longing. I expressed myself with hungry lips and tongue, and Reno was only too eager to return that longing in kind. A heady rush surged through me as I felt the growing proof of his desire press against my palm.

"Guess we'd best get to my place right away," I whispered as I drew back and released him.

"Aw, c'mon, Fitz," he whined, "you gonna make me walk through town like this?"

"You're a big boy. I'm sure you can handle it."

"Bein' a big boy is kinda the problem here," he said with a snicker, adjusting his jeans.

"Well..." I let my gaze roam a slow trail over his body, then up again until I met his eyes. "Be a good boy too, and I'll kiss it better."

"Not helping," he groaned, trying to pull his t-shirt further down.

I giggled as he grabbed my hand and hurried me out of the alley.

It worked; so well, in fact, that Reno fell asleep soon after, sprawled on the couch with his head in
my lap. His long red hair spilled across my thighs and I ran my hand through the strands of it, again and again, watching his face. Now that he was still, I noticed the shadows that had formed under his eyes since I last saw him. They stood out against his pale skin, too pale for the end of summer. It reminded me of how worn out he had been through Meteorfall.

The muted clang of a trashcan lid rang out from the backyard.

He moved too fast for me to see. One moment I was weaving my fingers through his hair; the next my wrist was crushed in an iron grip. Before I could utter more than a startled gasp, he let me go and brought the hand up to rub his eyes.

"Shit," he mumbled.

I took a measured breath to calm my racing heart and resumed caressing his hair.

"That seems to be your word of the day."

"Heh. Guess it's that kinda day. Well, weekend." He let his hand fall and made a face. "That kinda fuckin' week. Sorry, Fitz. All we got was one day and I'm just sleepin' it away."

"And 'Sorry Fitz' seems to be your phrase of the day," I said with a wry smile. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You're exhausted."

"I guess," he mumbled, yawning.

"Did you get any sleep at all last night?" My fingers massaged his scalp on their way through his hair.

"Couple hours. Nap in the car on the way over." His eyelids drooped shut again. "Mm, that feels real nice."

There's more than one way to tire yourself out at night.

It was hard to shake that distrustful little voice in the back of my head. I wanted to ask him, but I didn't want it to sound like some kind of accusation. I just wanted to be sure.

"Not much of a day off, huh?"

"Mm. Tseng got a tip on somethin' we've been lookin' into lately. Trail led to the shadier parts of Edge, and shady means I'm the one he sends in." He cracked an eye open and grinned. "Y'know, 'bos of a feather and all that."

I frowned, letting my hand go still.

"Something dangerous?"

"Aww, you worried about me again? Y'know, I'm beginnin' to kinda like it." He chuckled and nudged my hand back into motion. "But nah, nothin' real risky. Had to stay on my toes, s'all. Just wish it hadn't taken most of the goddamn night."

Relieved as I was, my irritation was mounting. Irritation at myself; it annoyed me how ready my mistrust was to flare up at the slightest excuse. Reminiscing with Elmyra about my old life on Earth had reminded me that I hadn't always been like this. I didn't want to be like this. I knew I needed to talk to him – about us, about strings and the lack thereof – but he was tired and out of sorts. It wasn't a good time.
Or did I need to? We were both sagging under the weight of expectations. Wouldn't it be better to leave those out of our relationship? To enjoy what we had, without the labels and the liabilities?

Well... To enjoy what we got, no matter how few the moments.

"I'm sorry the weekend didn't turn out like you'd hoped."

"Yeah," he sighed. "I wanted to tell Tseng to go fuck himself so bad."

"Why didn't you? It was your day off, after all."

He opened his eyes to look at me, but I couldn't read his expression. His lips parted, but instead of speaking, he just sighed and turned his gaze to the ceiling.

"What?" I wondered.

"Nothin' you need to worry 'bout."

"That look you gave me just now says otherwise."

Several emotions flickered across Reno's face, ranging from doubtfulness to hope. He wasn't trying to hide them this time. I found some comfort in that.

"All right," he finally said, settling on hope. "So. There's this guy who used to sell guns below plate, but suddenly he's real into robotics. Like, buys and sells the stuff now. Even tries to fix it, tho' he's pretty shit at it."

"So... You think he has something to do with the break-in at work?"

"Yeah... Well, possibly, kinda. Then there's this lady who used to be real bad news in Wall Market. She used to work with the Turks, but now she spouts anti-Shinra bullshit every time she sees one of us."

He paused again to watch me. His eyes were bright with expectation, but I had no idea what sort of reaction he was waiting for.

"Is that so surprising?" I wondered. "I mean, who doesn't have bad things to say about Shinra these days?"

"Yeah, but this woman, she's--" He cut himself off, frowning. His lips moved slightly, but no words came, until he huffed in frustration. "'Kay, so, there's also a dude who used to run a materia shop below plate. He claims all his stock got stolen in Meteorfall, yet he bought a nice lil' penthouse in the center of Edge a few months ago."

"Okay, I can see how that's suspicious. So, what's the link?"

Reno frowned, deep in thought.

"It ain't somethin' I can point at," he said after a while. "It's like... a pattern? Like, all these different bits don't mean much on their own, but put together, they have this... shape... D'ya see it?"

An arms dealer who turned engineer. A stoolpigeon who changed her tune after a Shinra-triggered catastrophe wiped out her old life. A merchant who made a great deal and was now living off the spoils. I tried to connect the dots, but aside from "life-changing event changed some lives", I was getting nowhere. I looked back at him and shrugged.
"Yeah, I get that look a lot," he sighed.

His spark of hope faded. I decided to give it another try.

"Had any of them done business together?"

"Nah, not that I could find."

"Do they know each other at all, then?"

"Not all of 'em."

"Okay... Is there someone else--"

"Look, enough with the questions, 'kay?" Reno groaned, covering his eyes with his palm.

"Hey, I'm just asking because I'm trying to understand," I said gently, still caressing his hair. "I'm analytical, analysis is what we science doctors do."

"Yeah, well, I sure ain't a science doctor." He let his hand fall and gazed up at me, still wearing that frown. "You said ya want more than hunches, right? Well, that's all this is. Just a hunch. If that changes, I'll let ya know. 'Til then..." He shrugged. "Don't worry 'bout it."

*If you worked for Shinra, maybe he wouldn't have to worry either.*

As the though sank in, I stilled once more. Was that what it was? Was he running himself into the ground for hunches, because his concern for me made him see ghosts everywhere? How much was my decision affecting him too?

Reno nudged my hand again, making puppy eyes at me. Mustering a smile, I resumed the slow stroking.

"If you say so."

He was tired. Out of sorts. He didn't need me questioning him. I suspected there was no point in explaining it was *him* I was more concerned about, now. He would just have told me I worried about nothing.

Reno's eyes fell shut, but nothing I did or said that day could unknit the tightness in his shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact time! Kilmister (gotta love that name) is yet another one of the minor canon characters I'm so fond of using in my stories. He shows up in one of the "On The Way To A Smile" novellas.
Five to nine on Monday morning Reno and I reached the garden gate of the WRO station. As we walked up the garden path, Tyco left the house and came down toward us.

"Hey, guys," he called as he approached. "Good weekend?"

"Eh, too short as always," Reno said with a shrug.

Tyco smiled, but when he met my eyes, I saw an uncharacteristic edge in him. I tried to reassure him with a smile.

"It was short but sweet."

"Glad to hear it."

"Hey, Tyco," Reno said, then cleared his throat. "I, uh... I was kind of an ass yesterday. Sorry 'bout that. No hard feelings, yeah?"

He wiped his hand on his jacket and held it out. Tyco looked at his hand, then up at his face, appraising him for a few moments. He flashed a smile, and in the blink of an eye the sharpness was gone.

"Sure," he said and shook Reno's hand. "We're good."

Tyco continued past us down to the mailbox by the gate, while we ambled on toward the house. The hint of something lurking behind his friendly smile had given me an idea. In one go, I could test my suspicion about his true colors and test whether Reno was serious about keeping me in the loop.

"You looked up Orin Faro's history, right?" I began.

Reno turned his head to give me a curious look.

"Yeah?"

"Have you looked up the people I work with here?"

"Yeah, no red flags. Why?"

"Really? Not even for Chelsea Dunn, former AVALANCHE spy?"

Now that I had his full attention, he slowed to a halt. His eyes narrowed as he studied my face.

"You been snoopin' around, Fitz?"

"Not exactly. Chelsea apologized for giving me the cold shoulder after running into you, and explained why."

Reno huffed and planted his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

"Wasn't my call, and for the record, I don't like it one bit. Reeve thought the whole AVALANCHE thing was a point in her favor. Rude agreed. The sorry bastard."
"You think there's a problem?"

"My problem with her is personal. I know it, and they know it."

"Personal? Wasn't Rude the one she--"

"Yeah," he snapped, "and maybe Rude can forgive her, but that don't mean I gotta do the same. I was there. Before and after. I saw what she did to him. I don't think the poor son of a bitch has had another woman since."

I looked up at the house, scanning the windows, even though I knew Chelsea should be out in the field by now.

"She says she loved him."

"Yeah?" he asked, stepping into my personal space. "That's what Rude thinks too, but if she'd really loved him she wouldn't have left him hangin' like that. She didn't even have the guts to tell him it was over! She just left a message with one of the other Turks before she ran off, to tell him some fuckin' bullshit about second chances in another life. That ain't fuckin' love. It would've been better if she'd just pissed off without a word. Quick and clean. Make it easy for 'em to move on, that's what ya gotta do!"

I had accidentally poked a beehive. His eyes burned with sudden fury, and while he kept his voice hushed, he spat out the words through clenched teeth. I took half a step back, raising my hands.

"Whoa, hey, don't blow up at me. I'm not defending anyone."

Reno stared at me for another long second, then with a sharp huff he backed away.

"Shit," he muttered, rubbing his eyes. "Bit of a touchy subject, yo."

"Clearly," I said with a wary look at him. "It wasn't Chelsea I wanted to talk about, anyway."

"Then who?"

I glanced over Reno's shoulder toward the mailbox. Tyco was on his way back, a bundle of letters in one hand. He noticed me looking and acknowledged me with a sunny smile.

"It's Tyco," I said, lowering my voice. "There's something odd about him. There are gaps in his education that make no sense and he can get incredibly evasive at times. I keep running into him at the strangest times, too, like he's keeping tabs on me."

Surprise flashed across Reno's face before he turned toward the other man. He watched Tyco walk past us up the garden path, his eyes narrowed to slits. My idea no longer seemed like such a good one, but it was too late. Just as Tyco reached the back door, Reno called out to him.

"Yo, Tyco! C'mere for a second, will ya?"

"What are you doing?" I mumbled under my breath, feeling my heartbeat speed up as Tyco retraced his steps.

"Easy, Fitz. I got this."

The blond had come close enough to hear the last part. He wavered mid-step for a second, and gave Reno a curious look as he closed the final distance.
"Got what, exactly?"

"You tell me, Mister Wannabe-Scientist. What's this I hear about you stalkin' the doc here?"

Tyco's mouth fell open. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't say that!" I hissed, my cheeks burning.

"Sure ya did," Reno drawled, keeping his eyes on the other man. "You said this guy keeps sneakin' up on ya at weird times like he's up to no good. Sure sounds like a stalker to me."

"Reno, please, just shut up right now and..." I had grabbed his arm and was about to drag him bodily aside when a glance at Tyco made me pause. His manner had changed as he stared back at the Turk. I couldn't decipher it, but it wasn't the outrage or hostility I expected.

I looked up at Reno. He was still glaring at Tyco.

Then his lips twitched.

"So. The jig is up, yes?"

I rounded on Tyco in surprise. His lilting northern brogue was gone, and something refined and almost haughty had taken its place. As Reno erupted in a burst of sniggers behind me, Tyco scoffed and shook his head.

"You are such an asshole, Red."

I looked from one man to the other in increasing disbelief, watching the grins spread across their faces. Even Tyco's posture was different now.

"A Turk, huh?" I asked Tyco.

"Not officially, anymore, but you know what they say. Once a Turk, always a Turk."

I covered my eyes, feeling my fingers tremble against my skin now that the tension was abating. Reno was still snickering.

"You're so right about him," I groaned. "He really is an asshole."

"Oh, c'mon. I thought you guys had a sense of humor, yo!"

"We do, certainly," Tyco said. "I'm not sure what you have."

So, I had been right. The certainty brought mixed feelings. On one hand, Reno was keeping his promise, revealing more than he ever had before. One the other hand, he'd had my so-called friend spy on me for weeks – no, months, which included my lowest point in recent history. That was not a happy thought.

"Is Tyco even your real name?"

"It's the name I go by these days," he said with a small shrug.

"Does Reeve know about this?" I asked Reno.

"Course he does. Needed his help to get Tyco hired."
My heart sank. That was one suspicion I hadn't wanted him to confirm.

"Reeve helped you spy on me?"

"C'mon, Fitz, we've been through this," Reno said, frowning. "It ain't about spyin'. Tyco's just makin' sure nothin' happens to ya, as a favor to me."

"That's right," the blond confirmed. "I let flyboy here know when you leave town, and that is about all I tell him."

Reno rolled his eyes. "'Flyboy'? Seriously? C'mon, you're still jealous?"

"Jealous? Why would I be jealous of you?"

"Cause you ain't allowed to fly, four-eyes," Reno said, flicking the other man's glasses. "All you got are a couple of silly sticks to swing 'round."

Tyco adjusted his glasses and narrowed his eyes.

"Two are better than one."

"Yeah? Well, mine shoots lightnin'. That's like an insta-win, yo."

"It does not 'shoot' lightning," Tyco corrected dryly, "and as I recall, I made you cry with my 'silly sticks'."

"I didn't fuckin' cry! I roared like a pissed-off chimera 'cause you broke my goddamn fingers! You're the one who squealed like a baby when I zapped your ass!"

"What the hell are you two on about?"

Both of them turned their heads to stare at me, eyebrows raised in identical expressions of surprise.

"Uh, long story," Reno said.

"Reno and I had a bit of a rough start," Tyco explained with half a smile. "He thought I was a... 'stuck-up rich bitch'."

"Yeah, and Lil' Miss Moneybags here thought I was a boozy slum rat with a chip on my shoulder. Guess we were both right, yo."

The grins they exchanged were disturbingly similar.

"So," I said, looking from one to the other, "the gist of this is that you cooked up an elaborate undercover story just to bring in a former Turk to keep watch over me?"

"It wasn't that elaborate," Reno protested.

"Yes, it was fairly easy actually," Tyco added, "now that so many official records have gone up in smoke."

With a disbelieving snort, I shook my head.

"I'm surprised you left me alone in Cosmo Canyon for six months."

Reno smiled awkwardly as he scratched the back of his head.
"Yeah, well, now that you mention it... Reeve asked the furball to keep an eye on ya."

Nanaki, too? Was that why he had befriended me? I averted my eyes, unwilling to show how much that thought hurt.

"You know, I'm getting really sick of all the secrets."

Reno stepped closer, placing his hands on my shoulders.

"That's why I'm tellin' ya all this," he said in a low voice, stroking my arms. "I'm tryin' to do better, all right?"

It was what I had wanted, wasn't it? To know what had been going on behind my back all this time? I sighed and nodded.

"Anything else I should know?"

"Uh... Well, there's that hidden camera in your bedroom—"

"What!?"

I stared up at his face in shock, only to find him shaking with poorly contained laughter.

"I'm kiddin'!" he hurried to say. "Just kiddin'!"

"Oh, you're such a..." I finished the sentence with a half-hearted shove at his chest.

"Irresistible sex-beast?"

I shot him a withering glare. "I was thinking more along the lines of 'dick'."

"Aw, that ain't very nice. Tho' if it's dick you want..." He waggled his eyebrows. "I've got just the thing, baby."

"Oh, god," I groaned, hiding my face in my hands.

Tyco pointedly cleared his throat.

"Oh-kay, I think I had better, um, check out those samples we got last week."

"You're leaving me alone with him?" I craned my neck to peek at him over Reno's shoulder. "Aren't you supposed to be my bodyguard or something?"

"Sorry, Doctor," he said with a grin, slipping back into his northern accent. "There's nothing in my contract about keeping this red devil away from you."

With a mock salute at the older man, to which Reno responded with a rather different kind of gesture, Tyco headed back into the house.

"He's a good guy," Reno murmured. "You can count on him."

"Count on him?" I scoffed. "I don't even know if he likes me."

"Course he likes ya. Why wouldn't he?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because it's his job to be around me?"
"If he didn't like ya, he would just keep an eye on ya from a distance." He hesitated, then added, "Same goes for that Cosmo Canyon furball, far as I know."

Just like that, the painful doubts about Nanaki raked their way back to the surface.

"How would you know what Nanaki thinks?" I snapped. "Or was the hostility between you fake, too?"

"Nah," he said with a dry wheeze of a chuckle, "the dog-cat thing hates my guts for real. I'm just tellin' ya what Reeve told me."

I closed my eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath. If Reno was truly being honest with me at last, it was a terrible time to let my temper get the better of me.

"Cat," I corrected, smoothing out his shirt that I had mussed up with my shove. "Sort of. Not a 'thing', anyway."

"Eh, whatever."

I adjusted the lapels of his jacket too, then let my palms rest on his chest.

"I just... I don't like secrets."

"I know," he sighed, placing a hand on one of mine. "But secrets or no, you can count on Tyco, and you can count on me, all right?"

"...All right."

He squeezed my hand, then glanced over at the WRO house.

"Speakin' of secrets, tho'... Now that you know 'bout him, pay attention to what he says. How he answers questions, how he talks about his past. The guy doesn't lie unless he has to. He's good enough at it, but he thinks it's more fun this way. Maybe you can pick up a few tricks, y'know?"

I frowned, looking him over. His speech had become rushed and jittery, making it clear that what little peace he had found as he bantered with Tyco was already waning. Reno could be borderline hyper at times, but recently I had picked up on a different kind of anxious energy. It simmered just beneath the surface, bubbling hotter and hotter until it peaked in outbursts like the one about Chelsea.

"Something's really bothering you, isn't it?"

"Eh, I'll figure it out. Don't worry 'bout it." He kissed my cheek, then as he pulled away he came back for a quick kiss on my lips, too. "Keep it in mind, what I just said, yeah?"

I nodded, and with half a smile he left, sauntering off toward the town gate with his hands in his pockets.

I found Tyco in the lab, working his way through a set of slides I had prepared the week before. I paused in the doorway and studied him, from his brown loafers all the way up to his short blond ponytail. I couldn't see anything remarkable about him. He had perfected the guise of a studious, somewhat nerdy scientist-to-be.

"Can I help you with something, Doctor?"

"I'm not sure."
He switched slides, taking the opportunity to peer at me over his glasses, and now I was the one being appraised.

"In that case, I suggest we continue as before. I need to go through the mail before the next lab lesson, but I wanted to look through these first. I was hoping you could correct my notes before we begin."

"I see. I think I can manage that."

I walked up to him and bent down, pretending to take a look at his notebook.

"Do I know anything about you, really?" I asked under my breath.

"Sure you do," he said, his voice as low as mine. "You know I'm from Bone Village, that I have a brother and a sister. You know I made the most of Midgar's nightlife, though it wasn't biology I was studying at the time. You know I play pool on Thursdays, that I like cooking..." He gave me a thoughtful look. "You probably know more about me than I know about you."

That gave me pause. I hadn't asked Reno how well-informed Tyco was about me. Maybe all he knew was that I was important enough to Shinra to warrant his presence; maybe he knew none of the whys.

"How much do you tell him?"

"This really isn't the best place for these questions," Tyco murmured without looking up from the microscope, then raised his voice to a conversational level. "How about another cooking lesson? Tonight at your place?"

"My place?"

I knew what he was aiming for, but despite Reno's reassurances, I didn't feel comfortable with the thought of being alone with Tyco right now – now that his double role had been confirmed.

"You need to learn how to use your own kitchen, don't you? You could invite your gentleman caller as well, if you like."

I snorted. "Gentleman caller? Don't think I have one of those."

"Your loverboy, then," he said with a crooked grin. "Go on, invite him over. Sis is in town, I'll bring her, too. We'll have a party."

"A party, huh?"

"Sure. Both of you could do with some time to unwind, I think."

And what better way than with another vigilant Turk around to take the load off for an evening, was the implication. Tyco had a point, I mused; one likely informed by our unfortunate encounter on the weekend. Judging by Reno's fraying nerves, he was in dire need of a night off.

"All right. I'll give him a call."

The Monday morning lab routine kept me occupied until lunch time. When I finally got a chance to call, it rang and rang. I began to suspect Reno was too busy for personal calls, but once he finally picked up, his drawl was as leisurely as ever.

"Miss me already, babe?"
"I guess I do," I said, smiling. "Are you still in town?"

"We're around, yeah. Why?"

"I was wondering if you'd be up for dinner at my place tonight? Tyco will be there, and he's bringing his sister."

"Who?"

"Tyco and his sis."

The line was silent for a couple of seconds.

"Shit, really?" I could hear the grin in his voice. "Hey, d'ya mind if I bring Rude? It's been a while since we all hung out together."

"Go ahead. The more, the merrier."

"Awesome. See ya tonight."

I couldn't keep the smile off my face as I put the phone away. He sounded so delighted. It seemed Tyco had the right idea. After all the recent stress, an evening among friends might be the perfect way to recharge Reno's batteries.
Reno and Rude were the first to arrive, the latter with a case of bottles under his arm. Reno, who carried a smaller pack of ginger ale, paused long enough to give me his customary kiss on the cheek on the way in. I was getting used to the sight of him in casual clothes, but Rude was a different matter. As he walked past I couldn't help but give him a once-over, taking in the tight white t-shirt, the khaki shorts and the tweedy tan boat shoes. The man's broad shoulders had been obvious even in a suit, but his getup tonight gave a much better view of his physique.

"I don't think I've ever seen you out of uniform before," I said with a smile.

Rude stood silent for a second. Then he held up the book in his hand; a cookbook, judging by the cover.

"Tyco asked me to bring this."

"Oh, okay. He's not here yet, but they should show up soon. Just put it on the coffee table."

As he set it down, Reno returned from the kitchen.

"Put the beers in the fridge, will ya?" he told his partner. "The kitchen's back there."

"Rude seems a bit stand-offish," I murmured once Reno and I were alone.

He shook his head.

"Nah, he's just shy, what with this bein' his first social call at your place. He likes ya."

"Shy? The big, scary Turk who could probably snap me in half with one hand, is shy?"

"Aw, don't go tellin' him he looks scary," Reno chuckled. "That'll just make the poor bastard even more awkward 'round ya. Why don't we start with the first round of drinks, yeah? Booze oughta loosen him up. Ginger ale for ya?"

I nodded. Just as he had returned to the kitchen, the doorbell rang. Outside stood Tyco with a shopping bag in his hand. He had left his glasses at home and had released his hair from the stubby ponytail. It was clearly him, yet he looked so very different from the assistant I knew from work. The petite woman beside him wore a blue dress and a serious expression, her brown eyes alert as she studied me. Her bronze hair fell in loose waves over her bare shoulders.

"Hello, you two." I smiled and backed out of their way. "Come on in. The others are already here."

The woman entered first and held out her hand.

"Good evening, Doctor FitzEvan. I'm Cissnei."

It clicked into place at last, and I nearly slapped my forehead instead of offering her my hand. Not 'sis' as in sister. Ciss, as in another Turk. No wonder she looked familiar.

"Nice to meet you. Please, call me Tess."
"As you wish."

"Ciss!"

I barely had time to register the surprise on the woman's face before Reno barrelled past me and scooped her up in a hug.

"Where the hell ya been, girl?" he scolded her with a grin. "Dontcha got time to say hi to old buddies no more?"

After a second or two, Cissnei placed her hands on his back, and a shy smile lit up her face.

"Maybe I'd visit if you guys hadn't holed up in the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah, tell me 'bout it," Reno scoffed and let her go, beckoning her into the kitchen. "Wasn't my idea. But hey, I'm in Edge most of the time now, y'know, for that memorial we're makin' in the plaza? Drop by anytime, yo."

His warm welcome seemed to have melted her reservations in seconds. Cissnei had already struck me as very pretty, but when she smiled she was downright beautiful. A gnawing in my belly was making itself known, growing stronger as I watched them wander together into the other room, already chatting like the old friends they appeared to be.

"What have you done to that guy?" Tyco wondered with a little grin, shaking his head.

"Wha--"

He cut me off by thrusting a bag of groceries into my arms. His attention had already turned to the man ducking out of the kitchen to meet him.

"Hey, Rude! Did you bring that book?"

The bald man nodded and picked up the cookbook from the coffee table, offering it to his former colleague.

"Great, thanks!" Tyco flicked through the pages, grinning. "Tess, do you remember that paella Jon's mom made for us? I thought we could do something similar, but with prawns and squid and the like. A-ha!"

He held up the book, opened to a large platter of yellow rice, decorated with rings of prawns and lemon slices. *Paella de marisco*, the title announced.

His enthusiasm made me smile. "Looks great."

"I've never tried it before, but we are lucky enough to have an expert with us." He nodded toward Rude, who raised his eyebrows a fraction. "I know you like seafood, and Ciss loves it too. Reno, well, he'll eat anything and everything."

I followed Tyco into the kitchen as he chattered on about his dinner plans, feeling my mood brighten after the momentary dip. The reprieve didn't last long. Reno and Cissnei stood by the fridge, bottles in hand. I wondered if her ginger ale was the one he had promised me.

"Yo, Tyco, want a beer?" Reno grabbed another bottle from the fridge, tossing it to the man after just a cursory glance in his direction. "Ginger ale for you, babe?"

"Actually, I'll have a beer."
Tyco, who had caught his bottle with one hand, shot me a look from the corner of his eye. I looked levelly back at him while Reno pulled out another beer. The blond raised an eyebrow, gave a subtle shrug, and resumed his search for a bottle opener.

"Here ya go," Reno said, handing me the beer after popping it open against the counter, then turned back to Tyco. "So, what's the plan, stick man?"

"That's Señor Two-Sticks to you, Goggles."

Tyco declared himself master of the frying pan. Rude was appointed the overseer and took up watch by the stove, arms folded and shades in place, looking more like a bouncer than a chef. I sliced and diced the vegetables. Cissnei translated the recipe for us and Reno... mostly hovered in her vicinity. He was attentive, full of jokes and sunny grins. He made her laugh. I gulped my beer at an accelerating pace.

"Careful now," Tyco warned, pulling my attention away from the other two. "The pan is getting hot."

The two men by the stove had swapped places. Rude continued stirring the contents of the frying pan in silence.

"Okay, you should remove the fish now," Tyco said after a few moments.

"No."

"Look, you really should, it's--"

Rude turned his head and despite the dark lenses I could feel the look he gave the other man. Tyco frowned.

"What?"

"Hey, master chef," Reno called with a grin, "I'm pretty sure the big guy knows how to do Costan food, y'know."

Tyco folded his arms across his chest as his cheeks turned pink.

"Just stick to what you know, smartass. Like booze and bothering the girls."

Before Reno could reply, Cissnei asked him about something in the recipe. As he bent down to read what she was pointing at, he placed his arm over her shoulders, and I chopped my bell pepper hard enough to send the slice flying.

"Whoa there," Reno snickered, swooping down to recover the wayward piece. "Don't tell me I gotta cut you off already?"

The embarrassment flared hot across my cheeks, but Tyco spoke up before I could find my tongue.

"Look who's talking," he called over his shoulder. "Do you know how many times one of us has had to drag his sorry ass home because he's been too drunk to walk on his own?"

"Oh, c'mon," Reno protested, "don't go tellin' my girl all the dirty details. You'll scare her off, yo."

"If you haven't scared her off yet, I can't fathom how we'd be able to."

Tyco and Cissnei laughed, while Reno rolled his eyes and flicked the pepper slice at his former
"Thanks, jackass. That's real nice."

"It was a compliment!"

"Oh, fuck off, Tyco."

"It was!" the blond insisted with a wicked grin. "I was complimenting Tess' fearless nature."

As the two bickered on, I kept my head down, hacking away at the vegetables with greater care. It was just Reno's way, I tried to reassure myself. He liked to have a physical connection with friends. I had seen him clap Rude on the shoulder, hadn't I? It shouldn't take too much effort to come up with more examples.

My brain was not cooperating. Instead it recalled the look on Reno's face as he pictured my sister in the sexy black dress. My younger, prettier sister with the long bronze hair so much like Cissnei's. Cissnei, who got hugs and arms around the shoulder when I barely got a peck on the cheek.

God. With a mind like this, who needed enemies?

The dinner itself went better. The kitchen table wasn't designed for five people, so we had to squeeze together. Reno sat next to me, his leg warm and reassuring where it touched mine, and I soon relaxed enough to take part in the banter. Four Turks and me, crammed around an undersized dinner table. The scenario was almost comfortingly familiar.

After dinner, Cissnei cleared the table and dropped the dishes into the sink, while Reno washed them. Rude, who had already formed an accurate mental map of my cupboards, put away the dishes that Tyco and I dried. When everything was clean, the first two took the chance to ditch our little work camp. Soon after, Rude asked for the bathroom.

"So, is this a better place for my questions?" I asked in a low voice once I heard his footsteps on the stairs.

Tyco glanced at me, then over his shoulder toward the living room.

"About as good as it will get, I suppose."

"So. What do you tell him?"

"I told you already," Tyco said, picking up another plate to dry. "I let him know when you leave town. I'm supposed to keep an eye out for suspicious characters lurking about, not spy on your every move."

I kept my eyes on my towel as I asked the next question.

"He didn't seem to know about my... problem."

"That's because I never told him."

"He never asked about me?"

Even I could hear the disappointment in my voice. Tyco cocked an eyebrow.

"Of course he did. I said you were hurting and left it at that. Seems to me that it's the sort of thing you should tell him yourself."
It was a relief, yet it felt like a weight on my shoulders.

"Thank you," I mumbled.

"Don't mention it. I've still got the Paraiso bottle, by the way. What should I do with it?"

I had forgotten about that. I didn't want it back in my house, that much was certain.

"Bring it to work the next time there's a celebration. It's fine as long as I don't drink alone."

"Will do," Tyco promised, with a touch of relief in his smile.

I set down the plate and glanced toward the door.

"Why has he been wound so tight lately?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

I frowned. "What?"

"Shinra versus the 'RO. Rufus and the Turks on one side, you and Reeve on the other... Guess who's stuck in the middle?"

That gave me pause. I hadn't thought of it that way, but now one of Reno's old comments came back to me. *I stayed with the Turks.*

"Not to mention Shinra versus the whole damned world," Tyco continued. "The four who still wear the suit have their work cut out for them."

I thought of Reno's woolly attempts to explain his concerns the previous day.

"He's mentioned following up on leads and hunches in Edge... Do you know why he's so worried?"

"Hard to say," Tyco muttered after several seconds' thought. "It's got something to do with those Shinra employees going missing, but as far as I know, there's nothing solid one way or another. Reno works on gut feeling most of the time. I'll be damned if I can figure out how the man thinks... but I have to admit his instincts are often right."

"What about Rufus Shinra, then? Why would he agree to waste Turk time on me?"

He shrugged.

"Can't help you with that, I'm afraid. I never worked for Shinra Junior and I'm not a Turk anymore, officially speaking. They don't give me the inside scoop."

"Of course they don't," I sighed and tossed the damp towel onto the countertop.

It was a plausible explanation, but so was the possibility that Tyco was feigning ignorance out of loyalty to his fellow Turks. Once a Turk, always a Turk.

Tyco set down the last glass, then folded his towel and placed it next to mine. He pursed his lips and a slight frown creased his brow.

"I can tell you one thing, though. Watch yourself around him. He knows how to work people."

Steady thumps descended the stairs, signaling the end of the conversation. Tyco headed into the
living room to join the others, giving me a quiet moment to reflect while I put away the last of the dishes. Vague warnings here, speculation there; all of it impossible to substantiate. It irked me beyond words. Where were my honest facts and solid proof?

Not to be found tonight, that was for sure. I decided to file away Tyco's intimations for a later time. With a house full of Turks I was either as safe I could get, or the complete opposite. As long as I was still breathing and in one piece, I may as well assume the former and try to relax.

The kitchen was tidy once again. I peeked into the living room to offer everyone more drinks, but only Tyco and Rude were present.

"Another round of beers?" I asked, keeping my puzzlement to myself.

"Sure," Tyco said, while the bald man replied with a solemn nod.

As I turned around, the orange glow of a cigarette drew my attention to the courtyard outside. Reno was leaning against a wall and smoking. Cissnei was with him. They were having a conversation. They were smiling, laughing. He passed the smoke to her and she placed it between her lips for a deep drag, then gave it back. The whole scene made me ache. That seemed to be the one constant of the evening.

As I watched, Reno brought out a small box, wrapped in red paper and decorated with a golden bow. Cissnei opened it, taking care not to tear the paper. When she peeked inside, her face lit up with joy. She placed a hand on Reno's shoulder and kissed his cheek, he gave her a fond smile, and it felt like someone had just dug their claws into my gut.

I spun around and stalked across the kitchen. I snatched the drinks from the fridge, then fled to the farthest corner, out of sight of the window. *Stop being silly*, I told myself, *they're just friends*. The words echoed in the hollow inside, rattling around without weight or substance.

As I pried the caps off the bottles, I heard the door behind me open.

"Could I have one of those too, Tess?" Cissnei asked.

"Sure," I said, my voice too bright. "I'll bring these over in just a sec."

"Thanks."

I heard her heels click across the floor and into the living room. A pair of hands touched my waist, but before Reno could slide them around, I grabbed one and shoved the bottle opener into it.

"Could you finish this and take them to the others? Cissnei wanted one too."

"Huh? You okay?"

"Yes," I lied, avoiding his gaze on my way out. "I just want a bit of air. I'll be back in a minute."

I put some distance between myself and the door, crossing the small lawn with rushed steps, then leaned back against a brick wall and raked both hands through my hair. This was ridiculous. No one else seemed to pay them any mind. I needed to get a grip before I embarrassed myself.

Then again, why would they tell *me* anything? They were his friends, not mine. I scoffed and tilted my head back to stare up at the sky, seeking calm in the faint glimmer of the evening’s earliest stars.
A minute was all I got before the door opened and Reno poked his head out.

"You okay out here?"

"I'll be fine. Just give me a moment, will you?"

Instead of returning inside as I had hoped, he strolled out and let the door swing shut. Maybe my tone had been too testy. He came to a halt beside me and hooked his thumbs in his pockets. My skin tingled, as if his gaze was capable of exerting some physical power on it.

"Fine, huh? So why won't ya look me in the eye?"

As much as I wanted to prove him wrong, I just couldn't face those sharp blue eyes.

"I said I'll be fine," I mumbled, staring at the building on the opposite side of the courtyard.

"Lemme guess. You saw me and Ciss just now, right?"

When I glanced at him, there was a grin on his face. A heat crept into mine. Was he laughing at me?

"Yes."

My curt reply only made him grin wider.

"You jealous, baby?"

"No! I'm not... jealous, just..."

"Totally jeeel-lyyyy," he sang.

"God, you're such an ass," I groaned, letting the back of my head thud against the wall.

Reno just chuckled as he settled in next to me, not quite close enough to touch my arm. The resentment seethed beneath my skin. Forget hugs. I didn't get so much as an accidental brush of elbows.

"Relax, Fitz. I may be an ass, but I ain't that kinda asshole. It ain't like that between Ciss and me. It's just a Yuletide thing."

"It's nowhere near Yuletide," I muttered, folding my arms over my chest.

"Yeah, well, didn't get much of a Yule last year. I'd already gotten somethin' for Ciss before everythin' went to shit and this was my first chance to hand it over."

His tone was dry, the kind he used when he wanted to keep his emotions in check. I frowned and thought back. That would have been back when Reno and I were just getting to know each other, when most of the other Turks were missing and presumed dead. I recalled a squabble in the Shinra cafeteria with a blonde woman who was less than impressed with Reno, and the excuses he made of being blind drunk at an office party. At the time I had thought him callous and irresponsible. Now, I was starting to feel bad about jumping to conclusions.

"So," I said, making the effort to keep my voice light, "was this a tradition for just you and Cissnei, or for all the Turks?"

"Not all, but a bunch of us, yeah. Veld can be a real old-school hardass, but he goes a bit soft 'round
"Yuletide."

"Veld?"

"Uh, you met him when all the old Turks showed up for the Midgar evac. Guess you weren't
introduced, but he was the old guy."

Much of that day was a blur; I couldn't remember Tyco being there, for example. I did recall an
older man, though, whose age had made him stand out. Tall and authoritative, with graying hair
and a scar down his cheek.

"Oh, right. I remember."

"Well, the old boss man would get a tree for the Turk offices and let us put up decorations. He'd
even keep the place open over the holidays, so those of us with no families had somewhere to go.
Him, me, Ciss, Tseng, and a few others, usually. Just... hangin' out, y'know. Food, drinks, settin' up
pranks in the other departments."

*I stayed with the Turks.*

Reno's line played in my head once again as I thought back on the desolate Turk offices at Shinra
HQ, trying to picture them full of tinsel and misbehaving Turks.

"Holiday pranks?" I said with a small smile. "Is that the tradition around here?"

"Eh, dunno how Veld explained it to everyone else, but we just called it practice." He shot me a
grin full of mischief. "So long as no one could prove it was us, it was all good."

"Sounds like fun."

"Yeah." Reno turned, resting one shoulder on the wall. "So is this."

His smile had changed; softened to something warmer, like the glimmer in his eye. I felt my heart
speed up. This wasn't the face he had shown Cissnei.

"I'm glad." I reached out to run my fingertips over the bare skin of his arm, pleased to see they
raised goosebumps in their wake. "No pranking the neighbors, though. You'll get me in trouble."

His low, throaty chuckle made me shiver, and my breath caught in my lungs as he dipped his head
closer.

"I'll be good," he murmured just before his lips touched mine.

A single kiss wasn't enough. One became two, then three, before we parted. Reno gazed at me with
half-lidded eyes, a sly smile forming as he smoothed my hair into place.

"Y'know, I've been havin' all sorts of naughty ideas about this smokin' hot girl all evenin'."

"Is that right?" My lips still tingled with the heat from his, making it hard to keep a casual tone of
voice.

"Uh huh. It ain't Ciss I'm talkin' about, neither."

"You'd better not be..." I gave him a playful scowl, but I couldn't keep the smile off my face. "So...
how about some details? I'm intrigued."
"I bet you are, babe. Tell you what, as soon as everyone else clears outta here, I'll tell ya all about 'em."

"Is that a promise?"

My question was little more than a breath. His hand had slid down to my neck, and one of his fingers was drawing slow circles just behind my ear. I couldn't help but imagine how they might feel elsewhere on my body.

Reno smiled like he knew exactly what I was thinking about.

"You betcha."

Once we rejoined the others, I noticed a change in Reno's behavior. His warmth toward Cissnei remained, but now I got my fair share of his attention as well. He stretched out an arm along the back of the couch, letting it drape over my shoulders as he sat next to me. When I leaned over him to set my empty bottle on the coffee table, he gave me a peck on the cheek. I rested my hand on his thigh and he held my gaze for a couple of seconds, smiling. They were little things, but this was a roomful of Turks, each of them trained to spot the details. Reno may as well have gone down on bended knee to declare his affection, then proved it with a makeout session.

At some point, Tyco produced a set of playing cards and announced it was poker time. I was hopeless, though I suspected that owed less to my lack of skill than to the enthusiastic cheating of all the other parties. After a few rounds I bowed out; it was more entertaining to try and spot the bluffs and tells of everyone else.

It was well past midnight when we called it a night. No one batted an eye when Reno stayed behind, waving the others off with an arm around my shoulders. I liked that.

While I drew the curtains closed, he dropped himself down in the middle of the couch with a long, satisfied sigh.

"Well, that was awesome. Never thought I'd get the chance to fleece those two again, yo."

"Mm. It was fun, wasn't it?"

I curled up next to him with my legs on the seat and leaned on his shoulder. He rested his cheek on the top of my head and for a while we just sat, adjusting to the stillness.

"I wasn't tryin' to make ya jealous, y'know."

"I know. Don't worry, I had a good time." A wry smile lifted the corner of my mouth. "Once I got my act together."

"Once I started treatin' my woman right, ya mean."

There was humor in his voice, but not enough to be a tease or a joke. It was more of an apology, Reno-style.

"You know, speaking of treating me right..." I shifted around and straddled his lap, tracing his jaw with my fingertips. "I do believe you made me a promise earlier."

"I did, huh?"

Reno slid his arms around my waist and smiled up at me. I loved that smile. It was happy and
unguarded, with no trace of pretense.

"Uh huh." I ran my fingers through his hair, then stroked them down his neck. "Time to pay up, pretty boy."

Chapter End Notes

If you want to know more about the history between Reno and Cissnei, I have another story that fits the bill. It's called Monochrome Humans and describes how the two met as teenagers and grew close on their path to becoming Turks.

In other news, I just got home from the ER with my leg in a cast, and here I am posting chapters. Maybe that says something about my priorities. X)
Despite the late night, I headed into work early. As I had hoped, I found Tyco having breakfast in
the breakroom.

"So you managed to escape the red devil, huh?" he quipped with a grin.

"More like he escaped me. He was gone when I woke up." I smiled as I poured myself coffee. "He
left me a note, though. Well, a picture he'd drawn of the five of us. You were wielding a ladle,
smacking down the tentacles coming at you from the frying pan."

Tyco chuckled. "Dare I ask what you were doing in the picture?"

"Making out with the artist himself, of course," I replied with a good-natured roll of the eyes. "Or
choking him. It was open to interpretation."

"One is as likely as the other, I suppose."

"Tell me about it." With a chuckle, I took a seat at the table. "And speaking of telling me about it...
How was Junon?"

"Eh, much the same as ever."

"I only saw a bit of the RO base when I was there. What else does Junon have going on?"

"Not much besides the ocean view," he said, absently drawing circles in his cereal with his spoon.
"Even the giant cannon is gone now. Most visitors are just passing through."

"I'm surprised at you. I'd have thought you'd spend your vacation somewhere with a nightlife, like
Edge. You know, take the chance to relive your days as the party animal of Midgar."

He shrugged. "Thought the sea air might do me good."

Caught off guard, I just sipped my coffee. I had expected him to tease me back, so it took me a few
moments to come up with some way to keep the conversation going.

"So... did you go swimming?"

A strange look passed over his face.

"No," he said, glancing down to adjust his colorful vest. "The water's no good anymore. Too
polluted."

"Oh."

He got up and poured the rest of his cereal into the sink. Quite a lot of it. My frown deepened.
When Tyco turned around and saw my face, he paused and cleared his throat.

"Didn't get to do any cooking either, so I'm itching to spend time in the kitchen again. How about
another cooking night tomorrow?"

Whatever it was, he wasn't in the mood to talk about it. I offered a smile and let him change the
subject.
"Can't wait."

When Wednesday evening rolled around, though, Tyco cancelled via text. The next day he left as I arrived at work, throwing me some excuse about errands as he passed me in the doorway. That was the only glimpse I caught of him that day.

On Thursday Reeve called me, full of apologies. Once he had finished lamenting his busy schedule, I asked him about the Geostigma. Reeve claimed to know very little. I asked if he knew any of the researchers in Edge.

"I do have a contact at Edge General," Reeve said. "Doctor Uzuki. She doesn't work on the Geostigma herself, but she could put you in touch with the right people."

I had called the hospital several times earlier in the week, only to be told with varying politeness that the Geostigma team was too busy for chitchat. Reeve's inside lead should have pleased me, but I knew that name. Dr. Lin Uzuki, whom Reno had rounded up at a moment's notice for a rescue mission. A week ago I might have called it a coincidence, but now...

"Is she a Shinra doctor, by any chance?"

"...She is, actually. Dr. Uzuki's been on Shinra's payroll for about a decade, though that's hardly unusual. The Geostigma team at Edge Gen gets funded by Shinra, too. Hell, the whole hospital was built with Shinra gil."

I scowled. Of course it was. I had planned to save my questions about Rufus Shinra for later, but Reeve's shady benefactor seemed to be waiting for me at every turn. I took a deep breath.

"Does Rufus Shinra fund the 'RO as well?"

The line went quiet.

"We accept donations from everyone. We don't have much choice."

"Donations, huh? Was Tyco Finnegan one of those 'donations'?"

This time, his silence was longer.

"That wasn't Rufus's idea."

"And that makes it okay?" I scoffed. "You've been keeping some damn big secrets from me, Reeve."

"I'm sorry, Tess, but it was for your own good."

I squeezed the phone tight and tried to bite down on my anger.

"I think its time I get to be the judge of what's for my own good."

Reno had kept those same secrets, but he had explained himself, and he had apologized. He hadn't tried to tell me that he knew best.

"Tess, please. Let's not fight over this. Whatever we've done, it's been with the best intentions in mind. That goes for the donations, too. The 'RO can do a lot of good with that gil."

"Do you really expect me to believe Rufus Shinra wants nothing in return for his 'donations'?"
"He hasn't asked for anything that clashes with the 'RO's goals."

The phrasing of his answer told me more than I wanted to know.

"Do you really think it'll stay that way?"

Reeve sighed, and I could picture him pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Do you have any idea how much it costs to build a new city from scratch? I can spend months convincing those who still have any gil to part with it for a good cause, and I'll still get a pittance compared to what I can get with a single phone call to Rufus Shinra."

Midgar had fallen and brought down Shinra's ivory tower with it, yet that manipulative son of a bitch controlled a new city from his lofty perch up in the mountains. What would it take to get out from under him? Yet another question I couldn't answer.

Instead I swore and hung up. I stomped out of my office and down the stairs, so wrapped up in my own sour thoughts that I crashed into Tyco at the bottom. He yelped and stumbled aside.

"Shit, shit, I'm sorry! I should've watched--"

"It's fine," he hurried to say, fumbling with the zipper of his windbreaker. "Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Everything okay?" I asked as he pushed past me.

"Nothing to worry about," he said over his shoulder. "Just a personal matter."

Tyco scurried up the stairs. I didn't see him again that week.

The other side of the bed was empty when I woke up on Sunday morning, but the metallic clinking and scraping from downstairs told me I wasn't alone. I smiled as I stretched under the covers. Reno had shown up the evening before, carrying a box of chocolates stacked on top of a box of pizza. It seemed this would be an extended visit.

Soon, the scent of fresh coffee seduced me out of bed and lured me downstairs. Upon entering the kitchen, I found Reno in nothing but his boxer briefs, hunched over my disemboweled radio and poking at its insides. An array of screws, washers and other bits and bobs were laid out in neat rows on the table.

"Yikes. What had the poor thing done to you?"

He gave me a grin as I wandered over to the coffee machine.

"Nothin'. I'm doctorin' it."

"Oh dear. Should I be afraid?"

"Be nice, Fitz, or I'm gonna leave it like this."

I sat down in the opposite chair, watching his nimble fingers work while I sipped my coffee. There was no rush in his movements, no restless gaze. Despite the facade of indifference Reno liked to wear in public, he was rarely as relaxed as this. It made me think of his funny little projects in Reeve's old workshop at Shinra HQ.
"Did Reeve teach you how to fix things?"

Reno smiled, without looking up from his work.

"Yeah. Used to sneak out whenever I was s'posed to do paperwork and go to his workshop. He was cool about it. Let me help him out with stuff here and there."

"Beats paperwork, huh?"

"Hell, yeah. All those fuckin' reports were the worst part of joinin' up with the Turks. Made me feel stupid."

I tilted my head, cocking an eyebrow.

"Stupid? You? I'd have thought you'd use the opportunity to praise yourself to high heaven."

He glanced up at with a rueful smile.

"Yeah, well, kinda hard to do that when you don't know how to spell worth a damn. Didn't get much chance to read or write as a kid, so never got any good at it."

"Didn't you learn at school?"

"Nah, the slum schools were shit back then. Too many kids, too few teachers, fuck all in the way of books and stuff. Someone like me, who couldn't sit still for two minutes? I got kicked outta class most days. It was Ma who taught me and El to read. The only book we had at home was this ratty little kids' book, 'The Bravest Lil' Chocobo' or somethin' like that. That's what she used."

Reno's hands had stilled as he lost himself in the memory. There was fondness in his smile now. Then he laughed.

"The last pages had fallen out, so we made up the end ourselves. It was different every time. I still dunno what really happened to that dumb bird."

His cheeks went pink as the wistful look faded. He dropped his gaze and went back to poking at the radio's innards.

"Ain't much to brag about, is it?" he said, his laugh too tight now. "Ain't exactly much compared to a doctor."

I had been about to take a mouthful of my coffee, but the last part made me draw my head back in surprise.

"Oh, come on, don't worry about something like that. It's a sweet story. Your mother clearly cared about you two."

Reno didn't reply. I stared at the coffee cup cradled in my hands, hoping I hadn't said the wrong thing. Wishing I knew what the right thing was.

After a minute of silent work, he cleared his throat.

"Anyway, the workshop?" he continued, pulling out a few colorful wires. "That was nothin' like school or those goddamn reports. I could watch Reeve put stuff together, and the manuals and blueprints had pictures in 'em. Never had to feel dumb in there."

"Dumb is definitely not the word I'd use for someone who was able to hack my suit."
He glanced up and grinned when he caught my raised eyebrow.

"Aw, you ain't still mad about the blast off thing, are ya?"

"Not mad, no," I said with half a smile, "but I was scared shitless the first time I had to use it."

"Thought I was just a pretty face, huh?" He snickered as he examined the frayed ends of the wires. "Got any wire cutters 'round here somewhere?"

"Don't think so, sorry. I don't have much in the way of tools."

"Eh, don't worry 'bout it. I'll just use this."

He reached into a pocket of the jeans that hung over the back of the chair beside him and pulled out something that fit into his hand. I couldn't tell what it was at first, but when he flicked out the blade, it was as if he had dumped ice water in my gut.

Reno had been focused on his work, but my sharp intake of air made him look up. He frowned.

"What is it, babe?"

"Shit," he hissed, folding up the switchblade and pushing it back into his pocket. "Sorry, Fitz, I didn't think."

"It's okay," I said quickly, flattening my fingers around my mug to hide the trembling.

Reno threw himself back with a huff, making the chair creak in protest.

"It ain't fuckin' okay. You've gone all white in the face."

His face had hardened, but his eyes betrayed a flurry of emotions. I couldn't face their scrutiny, so I turned away and stared out the window.

"I just... got caught off guard," I mumbled.

"Whaddya want me to do?"

"I don't think there's anything you can do. It just takes some time, you know?"

From the corner of my eye I saw him rake a hand through his hair and stare down at the gutted radio for a while. Then, he let out a deep sigh.

"See this?" When I looked over at him, he pushed his index finger along the red crescent under his left eye, stretching the skin. "It didn't start out as a tattoo."

I gave him a puzzled look, then squinted, trying to see what he meant. Reno leaned back and tilted his head, inviting me closer with a flick of his hand. Hesitantly, I got up and stepped over for a better look. It wasn't until I ran my fingers along the tattoo as he had done, that I felt the uneven edges of it. I touched the other one, but the skin was smooth.

"I wasn't smart enough to talk before it got ugly," he said with a bitter smile, replying to the question in my eyes.

I frowned, tracing the scar. Reno closed his eyes and kept still.
"What happened?" I asked.

"Got caught on a job. They wanted to know who'd hired me, who I was workin' with, that sorta thing. I was young and dumb enough to think I could weasel my way out of it."

I had forgiven him... yet part of me seethed at the thought that he had put me through the same, knowing what it felt like. A larger part of me worried what else he had suffered.

"Why the tattoos?"

He shrugged.

"I got sick of thinkin' about the fucker every time I looked in a mirror. Once I joined the Turks I did somethin' about it. Got it fixed up, got it inked. Got the other side done, too, 'cause it looks cooler like this. Best idea I ever had, yo."

"It does look pretty cool," I said with a frail smile.

He responded in kind, then grew serious again.

"Point is, I know just how fuckin' scary it is. I hate to think that's how you feel 'round me."

My fingertips still lingered on his face. I brought up my other hand, too, cradling his cheeks.

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Didn't look that way to me."

"I'm not," I insisted. "It's the ghost of an old feeling, that's all. It's intense when it's triggered and I can't help but react to it, but it's not how I feel about you now. It's just a memory."

As he searched my face, I forced myself to meet his gaze. Eventually he nodded and his dubious expression began to fade. He reached up and wrapped his long fingers around my wrist, stroking his thumb across the back of my hand.

"Y'know, if it starts to get to ya again, try to get mad at me. Yell at me or somethin'. Hell, punch me if ya gotta. Just don't be scared of me, okay?"

"Come on. I'm not going to hit you."

A smile grew on his face, taking on the more familiar air of mischief.

"Yeah, on second thought that ain't such a good idea. Wouldn't want ya to break your hand, yo."

I tried to scowl, but the corners of my mouth kept twitching, ruining my grumpy face.

"Don't make me take that back, Turk."

He chuckled. As I turned away to refill my coffee, I could have sworn I heard a sigh of relief.

While Reno continued his tinkering, I rustled up cheese on toast for us. He was still at it by the time I finished my breakfast and headed upstairs. The giddy sort of disbelief that had crept into me over breakfast still simmered inside me. I had asked about his past. He had actually answered. It was ridiculous how much that touched me, but I couldn't help it.

Our plan for the day included a walk around town and a pub lunch. Nothing fancy, but when I
opened the wardrobe to search for an outfit, my gaze kept coming back to the sundress I had bought in Edge. I hadn't worn it a single time. After that weekend I had just shoved it in the closet and left it there.

I brought it out, holding it up by the hanger while I smoothed out the fabric. When had I last worn a dress? It had to be years. I would probably look silly in it. I would feel silly in it, that was for sure.

I hung the dress up on the door for a better look. It was pretty, with its delicately painted flowers scattered along the hem. As I recalled, it flattered my figure, too. Reno might like it. He might like me in it.

With a huff I pulled the dress off the hanger. Why was this such a big deal? It was just a dress! That didn't keep my stomach from filling with a thousand butterflies as I tiptoed down the stairs. Reno was putting his dirty plate in the sink when I stepped into the kitchen. As soon as he laid eyes on me, he straightened up and his face lit up with a smile.

"Well hello, beautiful."

I had been wrong. I didn't feel silly at all.

"You like it?"

"Sure do," he drawled, looking me up and down as he sauntered up to me. "Can't wait to head out with ya, so I can show everyone I've got the best thing this hole of a town has to offer."

The smolder in his eyes made it awfully hard to tease him with an unimpressed look.

"You know, if I ignore the fact that you objectified me, declared ownership of me and insulted my new home... that almost sounded like a compliment."

Reno gazed into my eyes with an intensity that left me breathless, so close I felt the heat of his body on my skin. He smirked.

"You're welcome."

He took my hand and lifted it above my head, spun me around, then brought his other palm to the small of my back.

"Sides, it goes both ways," he said, swaying us both to the music. "You get to show off one helluva sexy beast."

My retort was lost in a squeal of surprise as Reno dipped me back without warning. He pulled me up again, laughing, while I clung to his shoulders and tried to regain my bearings. That's when it finally hit me.

Music!

My broken old radio was burbling happily on the table.

"You fixed it!"

"Course I did. Piece of cake, yo."
In spite of his nonchalance, he couldn't keep the proud grin off his face. I, in turn, couldn't resist planting a happy kiss on his lips.

"Keep this up and I'll have to invite you over more often."

"And here I thought you only wanted me for my body."

"Come on, that's not true," I protested, then gave him a crooked smile. "I want you for the pretty face, too."

Faint regret snuck in as soon as the words left my lips. I wanted him for so much more than that. But Reno just laughed and twirled me around once more.
A Pain Shared is a Pain Doubled

The crackle of broken glass shattered my concentration. I froze, all senses on high alert, but I heard nothing else. Probably Tyco knocking over a beaker in the lab, I told myself as I got up to check, or dropping a glass in the break room. It was barely an hour past my leaving time and the foyer was still bright with sunlight as I tiptoed down the stairs, yet I couldn't keep my heart from racing.

The break room was empty. The lab was not.

"Tyco!"

I dashed to his side, heedless of the broken glass crunching under my shoes. He lay curled up on his side, clutching his chest and panting for air in ragged gasps, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Can you hear me? Tyco?"

Some of his hair had come loose from his ponytail and stuck to the side of his white face. I brushed it aside for a better look at him and touched his forehead. The skin was hot and damp with sweat.

"Hang on, okay? I'll call for help."

His hand shot up and grabbed my wrist with such force that I nearly toppled over on him.

"No!" he panted, his voice harsh with pain. "No calls. It'll pass."

"I have to call someone! I can't--"

"No, no one! No calls!"

His fingers squeezed my wrist to the point of pain. Then they went slack, and his hand fell as his whole body went limp.

I stared, my mouth dry with fear, but I wasn't looking at him anymore. I wasn't thinking of his words. I couldn't think at all. I just sat there, my mind reeling, and stared at the oily ooze he had smeared on my arm.

Two hours later I still sat by Tyco's bed. I had honored his request and kept watch by his side until he woke up. I had helped him get changed and clean up. I had cleaned up the mess in the lab, too. It hadn't been easy. My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Tyco was lying on top of the covers, a clean t-shirt covering the ugly bruise on his chest. He had been disoriented at first, but now his eyes were focusing blearily on me.

"It hasn't been long," he said. "A week or so. It's the first time it's hit me like this."

"So you know when you got it?"

He nodded.

"That week I spent in Junon wasn't a vacation. I checked a lead on the break-in and got into a bit of a scuffle. Ended up falling into a reservoir with the guy, of all things." He huffed out a hoarse laugh. "That's when it happened. He had it. That black stuff got into the water and then into me."
I went cold all over.

"It spreads through the ooze?"

"I don't think it's that simple," he said, frowning. "It behaved differently in water. It was more fluid, spreading faster. Some got up my nose when the guy pulled me under. Barely made it out before the pain hit me."

I forced myself to take steady breaths to keep calm. There were no signs of infection, I reminded myself. No pain, so far. I had washed off the ooze and disinfected my wrist. My skin was intact. I shouldn't worry about it.

Easier said than done, though.

"You haven't told anyone?" I asked.

He gave me a smile, cynical and crooked.

"No Stigma allowed within the walls, remember? If word gets out, I'll be shipped to Edge."

The town council claimed it was for the good of the patients. It was true, to a degree; when it came to the Stigma, the local clinic had nothing on the state-of-the-art hospital in Edge. The excuse wore thin, though, when none of the Geostigma sufferers were allowed back within the town walls.

"I don't want to tell anyone, not yet." Tyco continued. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

"Why not?"

He gave a half-hearted shrug.

"What's the point? There's no cure. The medicine is just a glorified painkiller. No one can fix this."

"The medicine doesn't do anything?"

"It's diluted hyper," he explained with a mirthless chuckle. "A pick-me-up, that's all."

"So you're just giving up?" My voice was getting too shrill.

"I'm choosing how to spend the rest of my life," he said patiently as I took a few moments to regain my composure. "When it becomes too much, I'll step aside. Until then, I want to keep my life as normal as possible."

He couldn't be much past twenty, yet his voice didn't even tremble as he talked about his own death. It wasn't right. None of this was right!

"Don't tell anyone at work," he urged. "Don't tell Reno either, or the other Turks. Promise me."

"He's going to be upset."

"Yeah," he sighed, finally showing something more than calm resignation. "I'll tell him eventually. Just not yet."

Was it right or wrong of him to hide it? I couldn't say. I couldn't think straight anymore.

"Let me have this choice. Please, Tess. Promise me."
What I thought of it was irrelevant, anyway. At the end of the day it wasn't my choice to make.

"Okay," I whispered, giving in under the fierceness of his stare. "I won't tell anyone... but you have to promise me you'll call me if you need help."

"I promise," he said with a weak smile. "Now go home, Doctor. You're racking up way too much overtime here. I don't need all that paperwork."

I walked home in a daze. The evening sun had disappeared behind the town walls, but there was no need for streetlights yet. The air was still and cool on my skin. My wrist tingled, though. It was likely only my imagination, but I kept glancing down, checking the area that had been smeared. I remembered the faintly rancid smell that had clung to my skin until the antiseptic drowned it out. At times I would have sworn I could smell it again.

I paused in the street outside my house and stared up at the dark windows, rubbing my wrist. I couldn't call Reno. He would know something was wrong, and then he would ask questions I had promised not to answer. I looked over at the neighboring house. A warm glow spilled onto the street from the downstairs window. With a deep breath, I stepped up and knocked.

I desperately hoped Elmyra would answer the door, but I should have guessed that would be too much to ask for. Mrs. Cole did not look pleased to see me.

"Well. This is a surprise."

"Sorry for dropping by so late without warning," I said, doing my best to keep my voice even. "Is Elmyra here?"

The frown on the woman's face changed as she looked me over.

"Come in," she said, stepping aside. "She's in the kitchen."

The layout looked the same as my house, but I let her lead the way past the saggy plaid armchairs and the small army of houseplants that occupied the living room.

"Myra, you've got a visitor."

The kitchen walls were decked with crocheted pot holders and the scent of cinnamon hung in the air. It was warm and homely and everything Mrs. Cole was not – around me, at least. Elmyra sat at the round kitchen table with a cup of tea in her hands. The moment she laid eyes on me, she frowned.

"What's the matter?" she asked, setting her cup down.

"Hi," I mumbled, acutely aware of both women watching me. "I'm sorry to bother you so late. I, um..."

"No bother at all, Tess." She patted the opposite side of the table. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Judging by the two cups on the table, I had interrupted a conversation over evening tea. Neither of them mentioned it, though. Mrs. Cole placed a new cup before me as she collected her own, then left us alone.

"Now," Elmyra said, pouring me tea from a chubby teapot, "tell me what's got you so upset."

With the small white lie of referring to an unnamed friend in Edge, that was exactly what I did.
My talk with Elmyra lasted well past midnight. It calmed me down, but once I was lying in my bed, sleep still eluded me. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Tyco curled up on the floor. I stared at the ceiling instead, while my mind dissected every tidbit of Geostigma data I could recall.

The so-called treatment just eased the pain, Tyco claimed, yet Rufus Shinra was willing to send his Turks halfway around the world to ensure its availability. Did hyper have any effect on the disease itself, I wondered, or did it just give you the kick of a battle stimulant in your system? Worse yet; was Rufus already addicted, and was the effect he craved simply relief from the agony of withdrawal?

Then it hit me. The Stigma medicine wasn't the first time I had dealt with hyper. The flood of recollection sent me shooting out of bed and down the stairs.

The file was still there in Sparky's memory: the formula of the drug I had developed for James. The hyper-based drug, that had slowed his degradation in those last doomed weeks, even halted it completely for a time. That, at least, had plainly been more than just a pick-me-up. If Rufus Shinra's claim about the Jenova connection was true, I might be able to do something.

Was it even possible to synthesize the drug here, though, given Gaia's level of technology? I would need to figure out Gaian substitutes for the chemicals I had used back on Earth. For that, I needed the books and WRO databases at work, and I doubted Tyco would be overjoyed to have me show up at three in the morning, no matter how well-intentioned my reasons.

Reluctantly, I headed back up to bed. A couple of hours of fitful dozing was the best I managed.

At seven in the morning, Tyco wandered into the WRO library with a coffee cup in his hand and a puzzled expression on his face, wondering why I had surrounded myself with piles of heavy chemistry tomes. I outlined my tentative plan while he finished his morning coffee. He was quick to offer his help.

The work was slow, though. While many of the same substances ought to exist here, I was still learning the naming conventions used on Gaia. It was detective work, winnowing down the possibilities by their chemical structures and reactive properties, and pure chemistry had never been my strong suit.

After two late nights of research, I had a few tentative options for the chemicals. Most of them weren't among the modest inventory we kept in our lab. Tyco was able to track down suppliers, but expense was a problem. Grigori wouldn't approve acquisitions without thorough justification.

There was a bigger issue with the formula, of course: Geostigma wasn't the same thing as James' affliction. My chemical cocktail would need adjustments, and for that I needed more data. In many ways, Tyco was as poorly-informed as I was, but I had another source, with months of first-hand experience. After an afternoon spent steeling myself, I was ready to give Reno a call.

"Somethin' on your mind, babe?" he asked after less than two minutes of small talk.

I wasn't surprised. I had guessed he would pick up on something being amiss sooner rather than later.

"Actually... yeah. I wanted to ask some questions about the Geostigma. Rufus Shinra's case, to be exact. How it affects him, how you're all handling it, that sort of thing."

The line was silent for a few moments.

"Thinkin' about the job offer, are ya?"
"Something like that." Not a lie, exactly, but close enough to bother me.

"Sure, I've got time. Fire away."

He sounded like he was smiling. I felt awful.

Reno's description of the president's illness rambled all over the place, but it was clear he had paid attention. His account of the seizures covered not only physical symptoms, but changes in frequency and severity over time. I recognized similarities with Tyco's collapse in the early stages. I hated knowing what was in store for him. It was a relief, though, to hear that the Turks had come in contact with the black discharge several times with no ill effects.

Reno confirmed that the medicine was made with hyper. When I tried to bring up the Jenova connection, though, he became evasive.

"Can't talk about it, Fitz, you know that. Company secrets, yo."

"Look, is it really such a big deal? You had me go through a bunch of Hojo's files at HQ."

"Things were different back then. You work for the 'RO now."

"Come on, Re, you know me. Who would I tell about it?"

"Sorry, babe, but the answer's no."

Discouraged, I dropped the subject before he could get suspicious. It had been more than half a year since I read those files; I remembered the gist, but not the details. I needed facts, not half-remembered guesstimates.

After we had said our goodbyes, I sought Tyco out. I found him in the lab, doing the work I had neglected during my investigation.

"Do you know anything about 'Jenova'?” I didn't bother keeping my voice down. We were the only ones left at work.

"I've heard the name," he said as he scribbled in his notebook. "It's something Hojo worked on, isn't it?"

"Yes. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing, really. When I joined Shinra four years ago, Hojo had moved most of his team to the Nibelheim lab. I never went there myself and none of the senior Turks wanted to talk about the place."

With a sigh I slumped into a chair and stared out of the window. Always Nibelheim. Why couldn't Hojo have stashed his secret lairs closer to Midgar?

Would rummaging through his labs be any use, though? The more I compared the symptoms Reno had described to me with the ones I had seen in James, the less correlation I saw. Was Rufus Shinra's research team mistaken about the Jenova connection, or was I the one making a mistake in relying on what I had seen on Earth? The entity that had infected James was somehow related to Jenova, but it was possible –likely – that they weren't one and the same. What if the one here on Gaia had mutated–

"I assume there's a reason you're asking about this," Tyco said, rousing me out of my thoughts.
"Something connected to all the digging we've been doing these past days."

He was watching me now, with an unblinking intensity that reminded me of Reno. I should have guessed words like "Hojo" and "Nibelheim" would bring out the Turk in him.

"You assume correctly." I shifted in my chair, sitting up straighter. "Rufus Shinra's people claim that cells corrupted by Jenova have striking similarities to those infected by Geostigma."

"What is Jenova, then, and what does it do?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, I suppose," I sighed. "I know Hojo used it for the SOLDIER project."

As I spoke, Tyco's face flinched in a brief grimace. He cleared his throat and reached for the mug on his worktable. The scent of ginger and cinnamon wafted over us as he raised the drink to his lips. Whenever I had seen him these past few days, he'd had a mug of his grandmother's tea at hand.

I should have pointed out his breach of lab protocol. I didn't.

"We all knew the First Class SOLDIERs got more than just Mako shots, even if no one seemed to know exactly what it was," he said as he settled back into his seat with the mug in his hands. "There were rumors of trials with 'volunteers' from Second Class, too."

"Okay, well..." I paused, wondering how much I could tell him. "I once studied someone injected with something a lot like the Jenova Hojo used, and the symptoms I saw were different from the Geostigma. Rapid aging, mood swings, strange changes to the pupils of the eyes..."

Tyco nodded. "Degradation'. I heard of it, but I never knew much about it. The official reports were above my clearance level."

"If you know that much, though, you know the symptoms don't match at all." I huffed and threw myself back into my chair. "It just doesn't add up!"

"Sounds to me like you need more to work with."

"Do I ever," I sighed, staring up at the ceiling. "For all I know I'm wasting our time with a drug that's meant for the wrong illness."

"Well, that part is easy enough. We'll just try it on me."

I stared at Tyco in surprise. He stared back, his face solemn.

"No," I said. "No, that's a bad idea."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Didn't you hear me just now? I have no idea if the drug will even work!"

"We already know hyper can alleviate the symptoms. It's a good enough start, isn't it?"

"No! Your immune system is already fighting the Geostigma. Taking untested drugs might just make it worse! It might kill you!"

Tyco just gave me a small smile.
"You're talking to a man who is already dying, Tess."

His voice was so quiet and serene. It gave me chills.

"Don't... don't say that. There has to be a way to fix this. Research teams all over Gaia are looking into the Stigma. Someone will come up with a cure."

"Whether they do or not, the fact remains. Right now I am dying. If something goes wrong with the drug, big deal, I may lose out on a few months."

My fingers were digging into the armrests of my chair. Tyco's were gently wrapped around his mug. I stared at them, because I didn't want to look at his damnably calm face.

"And now that we're being honest," he continued, "from what I've seen, those last few months are... horrific. What's the point in just lying down and waiting for an end like that?"

"It'd be just as pointless to pump you full of an experimental drug when we have no idea what it'll do," I growled. "I can't test it here, okay? I don't have the simulations, the cell lines--"

"You've got infected cells right here." Tyco pointed at his chest. "Use them."

I stared at the spot, at the Stigma bruise that was hidden behind his cheery argyle vest. I wanted to counter with a better idea, but I had none.

"Tess." Tyco waited until I looked up at his face. "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. I know I can't beat this, not on my own, but I refuse to just sit and wait. If I can make a difference by helping scientists like you look for a cure, then that's what I'm going to do. It's the only way I can fight this. Please! Help me do that."

The use of living test subjects went against all the scientific ethics I had absorbed and upheld on Earth. We hadn't needed living test subjects on Earth, though. I had never had to consider the possibility. All I knew of it came from the history blurbs in textbooks, that presented the medical practices of old as brutish counterexamples to what was acceptable, ethical, modern.

The acceptable methods weren't modern here on Gaia, though. They were just visions of a better future. Here, I had nothing but imperfect options to choose from. I could always refuse to choose... but wasn't that a choice, with much greater consequence? To do nothing at all, when there was a chance I could help?

"Okay," I whispered. "I'll help you."

The next day, the doubts came creeping back. I tried to suggest other research teams who could make use of Tyco's cells, but he was stubborn about his secrecy. Eventually we agreed to try something minor and harmless: shaving off a thin layer of damaged skin from his Geostigma bruise for preliminary study. Just a small cut, quickly healed with a drop or two of potion. His words.

Once it was just the two of us left in the building, we headed to the lab. Tyco took off his shirt and leaned back in a chair, giving me a full view of the uneven stain that spread from his sternum toward his left breast. I could have hidden the whole thing by placing my hand over it.

I dabbed antiseptic across his skin. The smell of it made my skin crawl. My heart was racing as I picked up the scalpel, faster and faster as I brought the blade to Tyco's chest. His fingers tightened around the arms of the chair as I bent over him.
I had been in a chair once, strapped down and helpless. It had been my fingers clawing at the unyielding armrests.

I glanced up at Tyco's face. He was staring up at the ceiling, his jaw clenched tight as he waited. I had been the one waiting, once. The one dreading the scalpel's touch.

I took a deep breath to shake away the memory, but it wasn't enough. I closed my eyes. Hojo and his assistant were waiting for me there, their faces looming out at me from the dark, and the prickling in my arms became the pinpricks of a dozen needles digging into my flesh. With a gasp, I dropped the knife and bolted.

I came to from my senseless flight in the break room, huddled up against the wall by the fridge.

"Tess! Tess, what is it?"

I hadn't heard Tyco follow me. The sound of the blood pounding in my ears was deafening.

"Bad memories," I bit out and covered my eyes with a shaking hand. My fingers were tingling. Breathe in, count to three. Breathe out.

I heard footsteps, approaching me. I tensed, but Tyco just slid down to the floor next to me. I focused on my breathing, wishing he had left the door open. The break room didn't have enough oxygen in it. I filled my lungs, fighting the urge to do it faster, faster, and again now, right now, you need more–

"Have you talked to anyone about... this?"

I let my hand fall and looked at him. He had pulled on his shirt, though it hung far enough open for me to glimpse the fringe of his Stigma bruise. I averted my eyes.

"No," I said, releasing the breath I had been holding.

Breathe in, breathe deep. Count to three. The advice of a healer in Cosmo Canyon. I had never explained why I needed it. He had never pried.

"Tess... I think you should. This is a pretty severe reaction."

I couldn't stand the softness of Tyco's voice. So bloody gentle, as if he was soothing a child or a frightened animal. I snorted, but the sound was pathetic in my ears.

"I'm not saying you should talk to me," he continued in that unbearably quiet voice. "You can, if you want, but you don't have to. I'm guessing your options are limited, though. I expect you've seen enough to make Shinra very uncomfortable with you talking to someone who isn't officially vetted. You could talk to Reno, maybe. He knows more about this stuff than you might think."

"This stuff?"

"Hard stuff. Dealing with traumatic events."

"Wow. Talk about pot and kettle." I was snappish. Rude. In the moment, the anger helped.

"It's not the same. Me telling people won't help. In your case, it can."

And he was too gentle. Too damned nice.
"Stop being so damn understanding! I should be the one helping you, and I'm just being a useless jerk!"

I glared at him, while he stared back in barefaced surprise. His shoulders began shaking and he covered his mouth, but it wasn't until a half-stifled snort slipped out of him that I realized what he was doing.

"What's so damn funny?"

My indignant question only released a torrent of giggles.

"You know who you sound like?" he choked out. "That damn flyboy."

I gaped at him in stunned fury, but he kept laughing. Soon enough my scowl began to melt away.

"Quit being such a sweetheart," I mumbled, and felt my lips twitch. "Maybe I've been spending too much time with him lately."

"I doubt he'd agree with you on that," Tyco chuckled, then drew in a slow breath that dispelled the last of his chortling. "You're not useless, Tess. Bit of a jerk, sure, but I forgive you."

My laugh may have been shaky, but it was genuine.

"Thanks."

He let his head thud back against the wall, and we sat in silence a while. I should have felt ridiculous, hiding behind a fridge after running off like that, but I didn't have the energy for shame. It was oddly peaceful, in fact, once my pulse began to slow.

"Here's a terrible idea," Tyco said, staring up at the ceiling. "How about we finish that Paraiso bottle of yours?"

"You're right. That is a terrible idea."

"You wouldn't be drinking alone, at least." He shot me a wry smile, then gave another one of those long sighs. "Or I can do all the drinking, if you like."

Terrible or not, I was too worn out to think. I was tired of thinking, tired of worrying. Tired of the Geostigma haunting every second of our time.

"I'll have a drink with you," I said, "though you have to make sure I stick to just one."

"Deal."

In the end, he didn't have to. I managed that small victory, at least.
Reno invited me to Edge on Saturday. I told him I had too much work to see him at all. He didn't push, but I picked up on his disappointment. I felt awful, but I told myself it would have been worse to lie to his face about Tyco – or fail at the lie, which was far more likely. I spent the weekend in the company of chemistry books.

Tyco had his second attack the following week. I collected a sample of the oily substance that oozed from his blackened skin and took a look under the microscope. I saw cells in various stages of degradation, but a visual examination alone couldn't tell me much. It frustrated me beyond belief; if Grigori was so stingy with chemicals, he would definitely shoot down a request for equipment that could do molecular analysis. I wasn't sure that kind of technology even existed here. In addition to chemical nomenclature, I began scouring the WRO databases for methods of biomedical analysis.

More than once I thought of the job offer and the unlimited budget it promised – and then I thought of Rufus Shinra. There had to be another way, one that wouldn't expose me to his power trips and his petty mind games.

There was one thing only Shinra could provide, though: their Jenova data. Rufus Shinra would give me nothing unless I agreed to his deal, I was sure of that, and Reno's Turk pride wouldn't let him go against the wishes of his employer. He might help if he knew the personal stakes... but that would mean betraying Tyco's secret.

No. I would try other avenues first.

I may not have found my answers in Kalm, but Edge was a different kettle of fish. The slow work of migrating Shinra's old records into the WRO's online databases was still in progress, that much I recalled from my tour of the Edge premises. If I was on-site, I might get the chance to look through the unprocessed records first... It would mean asking for Orin Faro's help, but compared to Rufus Shinra, he was definitely the lesser evil.

I headed to work early the next morning, eager to get the phone call over with as soon as possible. As I crossed the WRO's back yard, I spotted Chelsea through the open double doors of the garage, and a last-ditch idea to avoid dealing with Orin Faro popped into my head. I scanned the yard and the windows for any signs of life, and once I was sure the coast was clear, I joined Chelsea in the garage.

"Can I ask you something? It's, uh, to do with what you told me in the park."

She glanced over her shoulder as she finished tightening the nuts on the wheel of the quad bike. Finally she stood up and held my eyes for a moment as she wiped her hands on a rag.

"Okay. You'd best be quick, though. Jon will be here any minute."

"How much did you learn about Shinra's activities while you were in AVALANCHE?"

Chelsea scrunched up the rag in her fist and leaned back against the quad. She gave me a searching look.

"What are you asking, exactly?"

It occurred to me I had to take care with my questions. They had to be precise enough to get me the
right answers, but vague enough not to arouse suspicions about Tyco, or about my own past.

"Do you know anything of what went on in Shinra's science department?" I began. "Biological research, human enhancement, that sort of thing?"

"No. I was a tool to them. They told me what I needed to know about the Turks to complete my mission, that's all."

"What about the people you worked with? Can you think of someone who might know, someone I could contact?"

"I'm afraid I cut ties with the lot of them after their first attempt to murder me."

"Oh," I said with an awkward laugh. "That's... understandable."

Chelsea was still watching me carefully, now with a frown.

"What's this about, Tess?"

"Sorry, but it might be best if I don't go into details yet," I said with an apologetic smile. "It's a delicate matter and I don't want to risk landing you in trouble."

I held my breath under her steely gaze and hoped Chelsea's deep mistrust of Shinra would discourage further questions. Then she sighed, and shook her head.

"Well, I can tell you one thing. Shinra's dirty secrets will get you killed. Dig too deep, and not even your Turk friend will save you. Be very, very careful."

Killed by the Turks themselves, she no doubt suspected. As I wandered up to my office, it occurred to me that if I accepted Rufus Shinra's offer, Chelsea would never understand. Reeve might, and Tyco, but what about Elmyra or Nanaki? I might find myself as isolated and powerless as I had been back inside Shinra HQ. A prisoner forced to rely on the goodwill of a Turk.

A shiver crawled up my spine. With a sigh, I grabbed my phone and brought up Orin Faro's number.

I stared out the coach window, drumming the armrest to the rhythm of the upbeat song in my earbuds. My head bobbed up and down, in spite of my half-hearted effort to stay still in public.

We were already in Edge, a minute or two from the station. I had set up a meeting with Orin Faro under the pretext of finalizing the details for the equipment order. On its own, it wasn't enough to convince Grigori of the need for a business trip to Edge, so I sold him on the idea of using my suit to analyze soil samples from ground zero for Chelsea's project. She was keen, fortunately, and together we secured Grigori's approval.

I also had a lunch date with my red-haired boy toy, to make up for the weekend I had denied him. If anyone could help me put my worries aside and enjoy the moment, it was him. As long as I could avoid talking about Tyco, it would be fine. I would be fine. That was what I told myself.

The coach rolled to a halt at our destination, and irritation simmered in my veins when I saw who was waiting on the platform. Orin, meeting me at the station, against my express wishes.

What was it Tyco had called him? A human barnacle?

As I stepped out of the coach and into the muggy air of Edge city, it occurred to me that I was
being unfair. I could easily imagine Reno ignoring my wishes in such a fashion. Why would it annoy me less coming from the Turk? Because he would smooth it over with jokes and the pretense of a chance meeting? Maybe he would just stalk me from the shadows unseen and avoid the confrontation altogether.

Oh boy. I sure knew how to pick them.

Orin waved, then used the same hand to slick back a few stray strands of sandy blond hair. Most of them fell back down right away. It was funny; Reno's hair was on a whole different plane of chaos, yet Orin was the one who looked like he had lost control.

As I approached him, his eyes went wide. It must have been the armored suit. I had borrowed a long trenchcoat from Chelsea to hide it from curious eyes, but it wasn't enough to fool anyone up close.

"Hello, Orin. I was not expecting to see you here."

"Hi. This, uh, must be the famous hazard suit," he said, ignoring my pointed remark.

"That it is."

I received my suitcase from the coach attendant – along with a curious look at my armored legs – then strode out of the station with my Edge colleague in tow.

"A bit of overkill for a meeting, isn't it?" he asked with a nervous laugh.

"It's not exactly something you can pack in a suitcase. I thought I'd make the most of this trip and put the suit's sensors to use. We could use some follow-up data near ground zero."

I nodded toward the ruins of Midgar in the distance. Orin's face fell.

"Oh. That's why you wanted to stay a few nights."

"Well, yes." I gave him a wary glance. "I thought I made it clear I was here to work."

"Yes, yes, I..." He trailed off, then cleared his throat and changed topics. "I-I saw you listening to music. On the coach, I mean. Looked like you were enjoying yourself."

"I was."

"What bands do you like?"

"Oh, nobody's ever heard of the bands I listen to," I said with a dismissive laugh. My usual evasion.

"Well, maybe you could introduce me to them? I could keep an eye out for you, you know, to see if one of them comes to play here in Edge. W-we could go see them... together, maybe."

My polite smile was evaporating quickly. Had the man forgotten the way we had parted last time?

"I don't think any of them exist anymore. Underground bands from Midgar, you see."

I averted my eyes, looking back toward the ruined city as I lied. Fortunately, Orin dropped the subject and plied me with technical questions about my suit instead. Those were easier to dodge. All I had to do was feign ignorance.
The building next to the WRO tower had been completed since my last visit, and they had acquired one of the apartments for employee use. I made a quick stop to drop off my suitcase before following Orin to his tidy office. On our way through the lobby, he asked to take a photo of me in my suit. It was as good a moment as any to bring up my real reason for coming to Edge.

"Okay, but maybe you can do me a favor in return? I was hoping to get a look at the old Shinra files before the meeting. You know, the ones that aren't on the network yet?"

"Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I couldn't tell you what, exactly. I'll know it when I see it."

Funny how it was easier to lie on someone else's behalf. Orin agreed to the deal, so I took off the coat, dug out the helmet from my backpack and put it on, then struck a pose for him. So much for a low profile – but this was indoors, in friendly territory.

Orin led me to a narrow office on the third floor, where a looming, flickering tower of computer monitors was stacked up around a tiny desk in the middle. Hunched over the desk was the technician in charge, who I recognized as the chatty man who had joined us for lunch on my last visit. He was happy to give me a few minutes on the computer that stored Shinra's unprocessed records – in exchange for a six-pack of beer, which Orin was quick to promise him. While the two men chatted, I began my search.

"Jenova" yielded no results. I wasn't surprised. According to Reeve the WRO hadn't received anything top secret, and that had to include research on alien lifeforms, be they terrifying cellular parasites or accidental visitors from Earth. "Hojo", on the other hand, yielded too many. Narrowing the results with terms like "research" or "projects" or "human enhancement" produced nothing connected to Jenova, as far as I could tell.

"Well, I'll go grab a coffee," the chatty tech guy announced. "Give me a call if you need me."

Once he had left, Orin stepped up to the desk and peered at me over a monitor.

"How's it going?"

"No luck so far," I sighed. "It's a long shot, anyway."

"No rush," he said, smiling. "I can get you as much time as you need."

Orin had worked for Hojo, Reno had told me. On a whim I searched for Hojo's and Orin's names together. Nothing. Something told me that searching for "fucked-up shit" wouldn't be much use either.

If it was true, though, Orin might know something I could use. The question was, how would I get it out of him? If he had worked on something top secret – and likely unethical – he wouldn't tell me just because I said pretty please. How did one lure information out of someone? This was Reno's area of expertise, not mine.

Reno wasn't here, though. I was, and I had to try. I recalled Tyco on the floor, rigid with pain, and used the memory as fuel.

"...Didn't you use to work at the Shinra Science Department?"

That wiped the smile off Orin's face.
"W-who told you that?"

"It's fine. I know some people at the 'RO have their opinions about Shinra, but I won't tell anyone," I said with what I hoped was a friendly smile, paraphrasing an old line of Tyco's. "What did you work on?"

"Oh, it was just... You know, to do with... well, the SOLDIER project, kind of. And, uh..." He wet his lips, glancing at the door. "Why are you asking?"

SOLDIER, meaning Mako and Jenova cells. It was the best lead so far.

"I was just wondering if you know what happened to the Science Department's records," I said, doing my best to sound casual. "This can't be all of it, right?"

"Well... no. It's just a fraction of it."

"Do you know where I can find the rest?"

"You can't. Shinra has it. Well, they have whatever survived Meteorfall."

My heart sank.

"There had to be backups?" I asked, grasping at straws.

"Well, the lab I worked at did keep physical copies, and those are--" He cut himself off, then barked out a strained laugh. "Well, I wouldn't know. It was a long time ago."

"Where was that?"

"I-I can't talk about it. It's... classified."

That was as far as I got. I tried to coax some more out of him, but he had clammed up completely. As frustrating as it was, I decided to let it go before he could get suspicious.

After a few more fruitless searches I deemed the records a dead end and we relocated to Orin's office. Only a few minutes into our meeting, it became clear there was very little of substance to discuss. At first I was relieved that he hadn't complained about my unnecessary request for it, but my patience wore thin as he stretched out a half-hour meeting to absurdity. By lunch time, we were just rehashing old agreements.

"Well, I think we have everything in order by now," I finally declared, glancing pointedly at the clock on the wall of his office. "Let's call this a done deal, shall we? It's time for lunch, anyway."

Orin's eyes lit up.

"I know a good place we could go to," he burbled. "It's near the plaza."

"Thanks, but I already have plans."

I rose to my feet, but I should have known he wouldn't give up that easily.

"Is it someone from the office?" he asked, shooting up from his chair. "We could all go--"

"Orin," I said, trying to be gentle about my interruption. "It's a date. I'm seeing someone."

"Oh," he said. "Oh."
He stared at me with a bewildered frown. I feared the message wasn't getting through, but then he blinked and seemed to snap back to reality.

"I, uh, I won't keep you then. Take your time. I'll be here when you're ready."

I got the eerie impression he wasn't referring to my lunch date.

A layer of armor plate may have been my preferred attire in Orin's company, but I had no desire to keep Reno at bay. I stopped by the apartment to change into my flowery sundress. By the time I stepped back onto the street, the sultry weather had taken a turn for the worse. The heavy low clouds hadn't yet begun to weep, but they seemed to smother Edge in their gray and sap the life out of its inhabitants. I picked up my pace.

Once I reached the plaza, it didn't take me long to spot my lunch date. Not even the dull clouds could suck the vibrancy out of that red mess of hair. When Reno looked my way, I waved. He grinned and held up two fingers. I nodded and found myself a quiet spot, looking over the construction site while I waited.

It was a memorial, he had told me, to commemorate the lives and the city that were lost in Meteorfall. How Reno had ended up in charge of a civil construction project was beyond me. He claimed the work was proceeding on schedule, and I had heard no reports of explosions or disaster. That was perhaps more surprising.

As I watched the crowd milling around the site, though, I began to see why Reno had taken the job. It may not have offered him much in the way of thrills, but here he was surrounded by people and could keep a finger on Edge's pulse. The quiet isolation of Cliff Resort, so prized by its convalescing patients, would drive someone like Reno out of his mind.

He concluded his business before the two minutes were up and strolled my way. Just as he came within hearing range, he was waylaid by a man in a yellow hard-hat.

"Sir, we need to decide on an inscription for the monument."

"The fuck...?"

The perplexity on Reno's face brought a grin to my own.

"The inscription on the pedestal?" the man tried again. "It needs a motto. You know, some kind of heroic slogan?"

Reno just stared at him.

"Do I look like I pull 'heroic slogans' outta my ass?"

"But sir, we need a decision on this today, so we can..."

While the two bickered, a third man ambushed me from behind.

"Excuse me, miss! Are you familiar with Midgar's Hope?"

He must have been under twenty, with brown hair and bright blue eyes that shone with a dogged sort of optimism. A scar cut down his cheek and curved toward his chin.

"No?" I blurted, caught off guard by his sudden arrival as much as his question.

"Midgar's Hope provides help to children and teenagers in need. We began our work in the Midgar
slums..."

I tried to pay attention, but Reno's loud annoyance was enough to spoil anyone's concentration.

"Look, you can stick 'Keep on Rockin' in Midgar' on it for all I care," I heard him snap. "You're askin' the wrong guy here."

"...over the years our shelters, clinics and schools have helped thousands of young lives..."

"But sir—"

"But nothin'! What's so damn hard to get about..."

I realized the brown-haired lad was still speaking to me and tore my focus away from the squabble in the background.

"...since Meteorfall, our Brothers and Sisters have served the fledgling city of Edge in honor of the Healing Light of the Ancients. Many children were orphaned during Meteorfall and more lose their caregivers to the Geostigma every day—"

"Ask someone who cares! I'm off for lunch, yo."

I glanced toward the quarreling pair to see Reno stomp my way, looking none too pleased. He arrived in time to catch the last few lines of the teenager's pitch.

"...Midgar's Hope is building a shelter here in Edge, to give these children a safe place off the streets. Would you be willing to donate to the cause?"

I opened my mouth to speak before the irascible Turk said or did something to frighten the poor kid, but Reno was already reaching for his wallet.

"Yeah, sure," he said, pulling out a wad of bills.

My eyebrows shot up at the amount he forked over. The young man's eyes nearly goggled out of his head.

"T-thank you, Brother! May the Light of the Ancients shine upon you!"

"Pretty sure that ain't gonna happen," Reno said with a chuckle and clapped him on the shoulder, "but keep up the good work, bro."

Hands stuffed into his pockets, Reno ambled on toward the largest avenue that stretched onward from the plaza. I followed, looking back and forth between him and the stunned kid we left behind us.

"Time to get a bite to eat, yeah?" Reno said. "There's this lil' Costan place just off the main street that's pretty good." He pulled out one hand to point in the direction we were walking, then scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin. "And, uh, you're gonna have to buy me lunch. I'm kinda low on cash right now."

He glanced over at me for confirmation and frowned when he saw my expression.

"What? That a problem?"

"No, no, lunch is fine," I hurried to say. "I'm just... surprised. I didn't expect you'd be one to give away all your gil to charity. Brother."
"Eh, they have this weird-ass Ancients kink goin' on, but they do good work. I owe 'em. Would prob'ly be dead in a ditch if it weren't for the good ol' Brothers and Sisters."

The smile on his face was hard to classify. It was cynicism and fondness and regret all wound together, with hints of other emotions I couldn't place.

"Sounds like there's a story there."

Reno hesitated, glancing at me from the corner of his eye.

"You sure you wanna go there? It ain't pretty."

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

I teased, but his sigh held no amusement.

"Well, since we keep hookin' up... I guess you oughta know what you're gettin'."

Reno was silent for a bit, his narrow eyes following the construction workers lining up for lunch as we walked past the makeshift stalls along the edge of the plaza.

"After Ma died, I was on my own. Long story short: made some bad calls, fell in with the wrong people, ended up with a habit." He sighed again. "Didn't give much of a shit back then. Wasn't exactly smart or safe about anythin', so it wasn't long 'til I caught somethin' and got sick. Real sick."

His voice was quiet, but calm and matter-of-fact. It wasn't the detachment I had expected from him; it was something more like acceptance.

"...Caught something?"

He made a face.

"Eh, everythin' back then is a bit... fuzzy. Can't remember what it was, to be honest. Hell, don't even know if it was from sex or needles, or just some bug that was going 'round the slums at the time. Guess it don't really matter. Point is, that's when a Brother found me. Couldn't walk no more, so he dragged me back to their slum clinic. They gave me antibiotics and Cures, and kept me locked up and alive while I got through the worst withdrawal."

It took me a few seconds to find my voice.

"How old were you?" I managed to ask, even though I was pretty sure I wouldn't like the answer.

"Like I said, it's fuzzy..." He took a few moments to think. "Fifteen, I guess? Stayed at one of their shelters for a while, but the whole glory to the Ancients bullshit wasn't my thing. They let me come back whenever I wanted, tho'. Went to their school on good days. Had some trouble stayin' clean at first, but it's only been cigs and booze since I joined the Turks. Tseng made sure of that."

He looked at my face. One corner of his mouth lifted.

"Bet you're sorry you asked now, huh?"

"No, I... I'm just..."

"Freaked out?" he guessed, his wry smile growing wider.

"I get it."

We walked along the avenue, side by side but in the privacy of our own thoughts, until Reno cleared his throat.

"Any of this a problem for ya, Fitz? 'Cause if it is, I want ya to tell me to my face right now, instead of just... ditchin' me without a word."

I frowned at the wariness in his voice.

"Has that happened?"

"Eh, kinda," he said with a shrug. "Got a girlfriend right before I turned seventeen, but she freaked and dumped me when someone told her. Signed up with the Turks soon after, and bein' a Turk don't mix too well with havin' someone special, so it hasn't come up since."

This time his nonchalance was feigned, I was sure of it. I just couldn't tell what emotion he was hiding.

"Haven't you told anyone else?" I asked, hoping to get a better idea of his inner state.

"Rude knows. Tseng, too, 'cause he was there when I was recruited, and a few others who were with Shinra back in the old days. Scarlet found out somehow. She didn't use it much, tho'. Guess she figured it was more fun to use my sis to fuck with me."

"What?"

"Scarlet knew about her. She knew that every time she suggested I'd whored my way into the Turks, it'd remind me of El. Hell, she made sure of it."

"That's why she...?" As I recalled the vile things I had heard her say, the blood drained from my face, only to rush back again in a holy fury. "Ohh, the bitch."

Reno glanced at me, a small grin on his face.

"Yeah, thanks again for punchin' her in the face. Never could do it myself, or she would've had me thrown off the plate."

"I wish I'd been wearing Sparky at the time," I muttered darkly.

"You and me both, babe."

His grin faded and for a moment I caught sight of the darkness it had hidden. Then he cleared his throat, and the mask was back up.

"Anyway, how 'bout you quit askin' questions for a bit and gimme an answer? I did ask first, y'know."

It was my turn to take a few moments, trying to make some sense out of the tangle of feelings inside. He had only offered me glimpses of his past, but my imagination was quick to fill in the gaps with all kinds of misery.

"It's a shock," I admitted.
He nodded, looking down at his feet again. "Yeah, I get it."

"I think you're asking the wrong question, though. You want to know if I have a problem with you now, right?"

He shrugged, still avoiding eye contact. It made my heart ache.

"The answer to that is no. None of it changes who you are today, and I happen to like that guy. If anything..." I gently traced his shoulder blade with my fingers. "It makes me appreciate him even more."

I couldn't see Reno's expression – I had only seen his eyebrows rising as he turned his face away – but as I continued, his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"What you had to go through, that I have problems with. It's just..." I struggled with the words, trying to find the right ones to express the sadness and anger I felt on his behalf. _Fifteen_. "Shit. I don't really know what to say, to be honest."

"So say nothin'. If it changes nothin', then nothin's changed. Just be like you always are 'round me. Y'know, laughin' at my crappy jokes, tellin' me off when I'm bein' a dick... Beatin' up my bullies."

I gave a soft snort.

"All right. I can do that."

He finally looked at me and offered me a faint smile. On a whim, I reached for his hand. He removed it from his pocket and watched as our fingers weaved together, then slowed to a halt.

"I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself, all right?" he said quietly. "It ain't a secret or nothin', I mean it is what it is, can't change it. But I've left that shit behind me. I wanna keep it there."

"Of course. I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks, babe."

Reno's smile was delicate, almost shy, yet powerful enough to quicken my heartbeat. I smiled back, stood up on my toes, and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

As I pulled away, my gaze fell on a familiar face behind his shoulder. Orin was standing in the doorway of a café across the street, staring at us in shock. He flinched when our eyes met, snapped his mouth shut and stormed off.
Glass Houses

Reno noticed my reaction and twisted around to follow my gaze. His smile soured when he spotted my rapidly retreating colleague, Orin Faro.

"I told ya, I don't want that guy near ya."

In the blink of an eye his whole demeanor had changed and his low voice held that cold edge I hated to hear. I suppressed a shiver.

"Trust me, I don't want him near me any more than you do these days. Unfortunately, I have to work with him."

He narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, well, we'll see 'bout that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Reno didn't reply. The look on his face made me suspect I didn't want to hear the answer anyway.

"What did he actually do?" I asked.

He turned his attention back to me and gave me an appraising look, then glanced around at the passers-by in the street.

"What, the words 'Hojo' and 'fucked-up shit' didn't paint a clear enough picture for ya?" he asked me under his breath.

My chest tightened. An awful possibility occurred to me.

"He didn't work on me, did h–"

"Think I'd let him walk 'round like this if he had?" Reno snapped. "Faro got his ass fired years before you showed up. 'Misuse of company property'."

I crossed my arms, hugging myself. Sure, the guy had a weird streak, but it was a leap to consider him on a par with Hojo.

"Are you sure about all this? I mean, that sounds more like something an employer might use as an excuse to fire someone."

Reno fixed me with a level stare, his features frightfully solemn.

"Wanna know what kinda 'property' he messed up, Fitz? Lemme give ya a hint: you ain't the first person Hojo dragged off to his lab."

The thought alone made me queasy. I would have dropped the subject – but then I saw a chance to fill a gap in my knowledge.

"How long ago was this?"

"Eh, four years or so. Long before your time here."

Four years... That meant Orin was still with Hojo when Tyco joined the Turks. On Gaia, all roads lead to Nibelheim.
I feared the incident would cast a pall over our lunch, but Reno soon reverted to his easygoing self, which in turn eased my fears. I got the feeling we were both steering well clear of sensitive topics. I would certainly need some time to digest what he had shared about his past.

After lunch I headed straight to the WRO apartment to change into my hazard suit, eager to get started on field work. An afternoon gathering soil readings along the eastern perimeter would give me much-needed space to sort out my thoughts in peace.

I had just pulled on the undersuit when my phone rang. My eyebrows shot up when I saw Reeve's name on the screen.

"Tess?" I heard him ask as soon as I answered the call.

"Hi, Reeve. This is a surprise."

"It's also official RO business, I'm afraid." His voice sounded grave. "We have a situation."

"All right... What's wrong?" I swallowed the anger that lingered after his previous call. Our grievances would have to wait.

"There's a problem with one of the Midgar reactors. An hour ago, sensors picked up rising Mako levels near the core. We need someone to go in and shut it down before we have a disaster on our hands."

I frowned, trying to figure out what this had to do with me.

"Hang on. You can't be asking me to go in there, can you?"

"I'm afraid so. Part of the reactor collapsed during Meteorfall, so we can't just waltz in without serious protective equipment. Mako leaks aren't the only dangers in there."

"Hazardous environment, huh?"

"Quite. Are you up for it?"

What a day. It was barely past lunch, too. Incredulous laughter bubbled in my chest and threatened to spill free.

"What do you even expect me to do? I don't know anything about reactors, you know that."

"I already have a technician ready to head in. We just need to clear the way and make sure she gets to where she needs to be."

"This isn't my job description, Reeve," I sighed, rubbing my temple. "How did you even know I was in Edge, let alone with my suit?"

"I called Kalm, Tyco told me. Look, we could really use your help. I'll owe you one."

Of course Tyco told him.

Tyco... Without warning, an idea popped into my head.

"Owe me, huh? I could use your help with something, too."

"Fair enough. What do you need?"
"I want to get to Nibelheim."

"What? Why Nibelheim?"

I floundered, racking my brain for a pretext that would let me keep Tyco's secret, until I remembered the reports that had sparked my interest in the region in the first place.

"There's something I want to look into. Possible environmental disruption, technically, but I don't think Grigori will give me the go-ahead for a trip halfway across the world on company gil."

"We can work something out, but later. Right now we need to deal with the reactor situation."

After all the fruitless wrestling with Grigori, I hadn't expected such an easy win. I pushed down my sudden giddiness and sat down on the narrow bed, forcing myself to focus on the situation at hand.

"All right. What's your plan?"

"We need to get the technician into the reactor's control room. Accessing the control systems requires high-level Shinra clearance, which brings me to the second part of the favor I'm asking."

"Which is...?"

"The Turks. They either have it or know where to get it. Can you ask Reno to help out?"

I went still, staring straight ahead while I parsed his request.

"You want me to enlist a Turk? Wouldn't it be better for you to ask them officially? This is an emergency, right?"

"It's a situation that needs to be dealt with before it can get critical, but there's still time and to be honest, the less I have to deal with Rufus Shinra, the better. If I have to involve him, I will, but I'd rather try other options first."

I couldn't put my finger on why it didn't sit right with me, but I couldn't think of a reason to deny it either.

"Okay. I'll ask Reno."

"Great. Thanks, Tess. Have him call me for details."

As soon as the call disconnected I pulled up the phone's list of contacts, with fingers already trembling with nervous excitement. I scrolled down to Reno's number. He picked up after the second ring, a flirtatious smile in his voice.

"Hey there, Fitz. Just can't stay away from me, can ya?"

"Reno, hi. Sorry to be blunt like this, but I need your help."

"Yeah? Whatcha need?"

"I have to get to Midgar. There's a problem with a Mako reactor."

There was a clang in the distance, followed by shouting and Reno's distant cursing. A normal day at the site, by the sounds of it.

"Where?" he asked once his attention returned to the call.
"Midgar, reactor 6. The 'RO engineer who can fix it needs help to get there. Apparently my suit fits the bill."

The line was silent for a while, before I heard a dry chuckle at the other end.

"Reeve doesn't even bother to ask me himself anymore, huh?"

He said it lightly, but I picked up on the core of disappointment. It cut straight to my heart.

"Can't blame him, I guess," he continued. "Man in charge of a big setup like that gotta be smart about gettin' the job done."

"Reno..."

"Don't worry, Fitz, I'll help ya out. You know I got your back."

For once, that promise didn't make me feel better.

"This wasn't my idea."

"I know it wasn't. Guess Reeve's gotta brief me, huh?"

"Yes. He asked you to call him."

"Suit up, Doc. I won't be long."

I stared at the phone as I lowered it into my lap. The screen displayed the caller ID for a couple of seconds before the call disconnected.

Fitz's boy toy

I had thought of it as a joke, but there was truth in it, I realized. Before our falling-out Reno had always showed up when I called, hadn't he? All those times I had called him because I felt lonely, or empty, or scared; he had shown up, ready to please me however I wished. He hadn't hesitated to come to my aid in the badlands, even though he must have known it would bring down trouble on him. Now, he was doing it again.

That's why. That's why Reeve wanted you to call Reno.

I slumped back in my seat as the unpleasant conclusion sank in. I mulled over the time I had spent with Reeve and Reno. As my thoughts drifted around Reno's relationships and what I knew of them, I noticed a pattern. Shinra had raised him up from the slums, given him training and perks and a family and a purpose – in return for doing whatever horrible thing they ordered. Reeve had offered him a sanctuary of sorts, had helped him build up his self esteem – and now he was using Reno's loyalty to work favors.

I thought of our first weekend in Edge, of Reno's difficulty adjusting to the idea of being held and caressed. He had been so reluctant to accept it as a kindness, with no ulterior motive. He expected a price. And I hadn't done much to correct his expectations, had I? All the times I had asked him over, asked him to satisfy my needs and soothe my fears – they hadn't been for us. They had been for me.

It's just so hard sayin' no to ya. The words rolled around in my head, and the ache grew in my chest, squeezing my heart against my ribs. He'd had no one special to tell about his past, he had said. No one until now.
I let the phone drop into my lap and hid my face in my hands, feeling ill. Why did it have to be me? I was a terrible choice. I had used him too, again and again, and now I was pulling his strings on someone else's behalf. I didn't deserve his loyalty.

Nor did the people in Edge deserve a Mako-saturated catastrophe. I took a deep breath and pushed myself to my feet. I would suit up, I would get this done, and then I would make it up to him somehow. I would make it up to him and I would make damned sure to treat him better.

I had just pulled on the gauntlets when Reno called back to tell me the mission was on. Ten minutes later he pulled up in front of the WRO apartments.

"Rude's picked up that 'RO tech of yours," he said once I was in the car. "He's roundin' up a few guys as muscle, too. We'll meet up at the airfield."

"We need muscle?"

"Ain't safe to hang 'round Midgar these days. Got everythin' from gangs lootin' the place to monsters on the hunt. Don't s'pose you brought the bazooka, huh?"

I huffed and raked a hand through my hair as the nervous anticipation curdled into worry.

"Of course not. I was planning to have a nice little stroll on the outskirts of Edge, not dive straight into the lawless junkpile of Midgar."

"Good thing you got a Turk to do the shootin' for ya, then."

It didn't sound sarcastic, but the guilt squirmed in my belly nonetheless.

I stared out the window on my side, catching glimpses of Midgar's hulking ruin between the buildings we passed. Reno was quiet, but his silence said all I needed to know about the state he was in.

"You know, I was wondering....," I began in the hopes of cheering him up with a chat. "How did you first become a Turk?"

Reno glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, a sardonic twist to his lips.

"You mean, why did the Turks bother with a slum junkie with barely enough schoolin' to write his own name?"

"That's not what I said," I protested.

"Yeah, I know," he said, grinning. "you're too much of a sweetheart."

"I asked 'how'. I didn't question the 'why'."

"Yeah, all right."

As the silence stretched on, it became clear he hadn't agreed to answer my question.

"So?" I prompted. Silence wouldn't help either of us right now.

"Hmm?"

"Are you going to tell me?"
"It's a long story, yo."

"We've got time." I gestured at the dusty outskirts of the city that lay between us and the airfield.

"Ehh, fine, if you're gonna be that stubborn 'bout it."

Reno settled into his seat with one hand on the wheel, letting the other rest on his thigh.

"Well... While I was stayin' at that shelter I told ya 'bout, I met this guy. He needed a partner to rob houses and figured I might be good at it. Turns out he was right. Got better at it than him, which pissed him off. Learned how to use my irresistible charm, too, to get my hands on keys and intel and the like."

He waggled his eyebrows at me, and grinned when I snorted and shook my head.

"That's a quite a career change."

"Nah, not really. I'd been shopliftin' and pickin' pockets for years. Was just movin' up to the pricier stuff."

"Well, when you put it that way."

"We had a pretty good thing going. We got a bit of a rep after a while, got hired for jobs. Tricky ones sometimes, alarm systems and guards to worry 'bout." He smirked. "That's when the real fun started."

I didn't bring up the break-ins at work, even though that was where my thoughts had gone as soon as he mentioned alarms. I had pushed him to open up. The least I could do was listen.

"Trouble was, the guy liked poppin' pills."

I waited for him to continue, but Reno was silent, his eyes aimed down the road in front of us. Just when I thought he might end it there, his lips twitched in some quick excuse of a smile and he picked it up again like he had never stopped.

"Had enough of it after a while. Ditched him, went solo."

I got the feeling he had skipped a part of his tale, but if that was what he wanted, then so be it. I had pushed him enough for one day.

"So, one day I got hired to steal intel from Shinra," he continued.

"From HQ?"

I had only seen a fraction of the Shinra tower's security measures, and even that had been more than enough to daunt me.

"Nah, not HQ. I could prob'ly pull it off these days, but back then?" Reno laughed and shook his head. "It was just a Shinra warehouse below plate, but it was a tough one, tougher than anythin' else I'd done on my own. I had to be real careful, too. Get in and out like a ghost, or Shinra would've been on my tail in a second. No way in hell did I want that kinda heat."

"But... the heat found you anyway?"

"Guess you could say that," he said with a dry chuckle. "Finished the job just fine, but when I went to get my gil Tseng shows up outta nowhere and tells me it'd been a job interview. Gave me a
choice: join the Turks or rot in prison for the rest of my sorry life. Guess which one I picked."

I stared at him in astonishment. The smile on his face was far too cynical for a joke.

"Doesn't sound like much of a choice."

"Eh, was real pissed at the time," he said with a shrug, "but it turned out okay in the end, so I got no grudges. Some of the others do, tho'. Can't blame 'em, I guess."

"You mean the former Turks?"

"Yeah. Pretty much all of 'em will give another Turk a hand for old times' sake, but a few don't want nothin' to do with Shinra anymore."

I could relate to that sentiment.

"Great recruitment strategy."

He chuckled.

"Yeah, well, wasn't like that for everyone. Tyco applied for the job, which I guess is why he don't mind playin' undercover for us these days. Laney, too. Rude got a fair offer."

I would have liked to ask more, but we were pulling into the airfield. Reno flashed his ID to the guard, who buzzed the gate open with no questions. We got through a second guarded gate the same way, after which the Turk drew the car up alongside an unmarked hangar.

A black helicopter crouched on the paved circle of the helipad, stinking of aviation fuel. Rude was strolling around the aircraft, clipboard in hand; doing pre-flight checks, I assumed. A trio fitted out with Shinra infantry gear and assault rifles stood just outside the range of the drooping rotor blades, exchanging barbed jokes while they passed a cigarette around. Further off was a woman in gray overalls, kneeling and rummaging around a duffel bag.

While Reno made a beeline for Rude, I decided to introduce myself to my WRO partner for the day.

"Hi, I'm–" I cut myself short when the woman looked up from her bag. "Oh! I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Shalua Rui smiled as she got to her feet.

"Hello again, Doctor. Looks like we'll be working together today."
Necropolis

Shalua Rui examined my suit as she shook my hand, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"Looks like you got the nicer model."

She held up her arm. A fine mesh of wires was laced into the fabric of her overalls and connected to small, round emitters at regular intervals. It looked very similar to the shielding matrix sandwiched within the armor of my suit. It had to be one of Reeve's Mako shielding prototypes.

"I guess we're good to go then," I said with a smile, sidestepping the implied question. It was better to let Reeve handle the explanations – excuses, more like – for the suit's technology. "So, you're our technician? I didn't know you'd worked at the reactors."

"Uh, that's not exactly—"

"Well, lookie here, ain't this a surprise. Is Reeve tryin' to 'round up everyone who's ever been in AVALANCHE?"

Shalua flinched at the mocking drawl and whipped her head around. I was about to ask Reno just what the hell he was talking about, but she was quicker.

"That has nothing to do with my current employment."

I wasn't even surprised anymore; nothing this day decided to throw at me could stir up any new astonishment. If any more shockers came my way, I would just toss them on the pile.

"Well, guess it makes sense pickin' you for the job," Reno mused. "You guys must've figured out all sorts of ways to wreck Mako reactors, huh? Hope you're not plannin' to blow up this one, tho'. That shit got a bit old, yo."

Shalua stared at him. Reno stared back with half-lidded eyes, a faint sneer on his face. I sighed.

"Please don't make me regret getting out of bed today, guys."

"Relax, Doc, I'll play nice," he said, but he kept his eyes on the other woman as he handed her a portable radio. "Here, take this. The plan's to stick together, but you never know. Fitz, you got one in the suit, right?"

"Yes."

He nodded in acknowledgement, but he was still watching Shalua.

"So, Lil' Miss Techiepants, they tell me we gotta get you to the control room on reactor six."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. This was going to be a long afternoon.

Shalua finally looked away as she pocketed the radio. I wondered if she'd just had enough of Reno's unblinking stare.

"Yes," she muttered. "If everything goes as planned, that's it. But, if there's too much damage, I may need to go down to the core itself."

"Awesome," Reno sighed. "Best get this show on the road, then. I'll take us above-plate to a
helipad in Sector 5. We'll have to go on foot from there, but it ain't a long walk."

"Above-plate?" Shalua shook her head. "No, that won't work. The main entrance has collapsed. We're better off using the maintenance elevator at ground level."

"Have ya been under Sector 5 lately?"

"Well, no... but I know the structures below reactor six are intact."

"Sure," he said, openly amused, "and they're surrounded by fuckloads of grashtrikes, with a nice lil' nest of behemoths just a block away from the elevator."

"Oh."

"Yeah. I can get us down to the catwalks under the plate. We can reach a maintenance door from there. That's our best bet, yo."

Shalua didn't look very pleased with that prospect, but she made no more objections.

A few minutes later we were in the air. Travel by helicopter was a much louder experience without the headsets. Rude had taken my usual place in the cockpit – or rather, reclaimed it – so I sat in the hold with the rest of the team. The seats were less comfortable, but at least I had made sure to snag one by a window.

Below us, Edge spilled out from the remains of Sector 3 like guts from an eviscerated carcass. Midgar may have fallen, but it would clearly be a long, long time before its successor would rule. Looking out over the torn steel and crumpled concrete of Midgar's skeleton, I recalled the night I had seen it for the first time; the breathtaking twilight city that had stretched out below us from the spire of Shinra HQ, thrumming with life. If only I'd had the chance to see it from this vantage point during its glory days.

"We got movement on the ground," Reno's voice crackled over the internal speakers. "Be ready for trouble."

I scanned the cratered buildings as they swung past below, but whatever the Turks had seen was not visible from where I sat. The infantrymen checked their guns. So did Shalua, to my surprise; a large pistol had appeared in her hand from somewhere. I was definitely the odd one out, in more ways than one. With no weapon of my own to prepare, all I could do was pull on the helmet and have Sparky rattle off a rundown of the systems while the Turks brought the helicopter down.

The armed escort hopped out first, taking up positions around the helicopter while the rotors spun down. I peeked through the open door. Beyond the halo of dust and debris stirred up by the rotor wash, everything was still. The metal gate to the small heliport hung open, though, trailing a broken chain from the latch. I wondered if it was a recent break-in. There were plenty of hiding places among the crates and containers stacked around the landing zone.

"Get ready, ladies," Reno said over the intercom. "Rude and me will check out the hangar real quick and then we're off."

Shalua climbed out before me, bag in hand, and set it down just inside the yellow ring that marked our landing zone. While she went through what looked like another gear check, I followed in her steps. The Turks were already halfway to a squat half-cylinder of corrugated iron. I couldn't see Shinra logos anywhere, but I guessed the whole landing zone was the company's property.

"And just who the hell are you?"
We all turned our heads at Reno's question. He and Rude faced a group of men wearing ratty clothes and sour expressions.

"You lot have some nerve, showing your faces here again."

The speaker, presumably the leader, was a tall and heavyset man. His dark hair was matted and his face smudged with dirt, but his eyes shone bright blue. At first glance they reminded me of Reno's, but his eyes had a greenish tint to them; these were the pure blue of cornflowers. What really set them apart, though, was the intensity of the color. Even on a dull, overcast day like this, the stranger's eyes gleamed, as if lit from within.

Reno stepped forward and placed his hands on his hips, pushing his jacket open in the process.

"And you lot are trespassin' on Shinra property. You better clear on outta here before someone gets hurt."

The man's eyes flicked down to the pistol grip that peeked out from under Reno's jacket, but he scoffed and stayed put. He looked us over, one by one, finishing with a slow appraisal of my suit.

"Shinra's got new robots, huh? You think that'll be good enough to replace us?"

"Good enough to kick your sorry asses," Reno said, nonchalant as ever. "Now move. I ain't got time to piss around."

The man bared his teeth in a resentful grimace.

"I'm getting really tired of assholes in fancy suits telling me what to do."

"Then maybe ya should've picked a different career, yo."

"I didn't have a choice!" the man roared as his face puckered in anger. "You Shinra bastards never gave me a choice!"

He took a step forward. In the blink of an eye, Reno had his pistol in hand, aimed at the other man's head.

"Here's a choice for ya," he drawled. "Start walkin' or get a bullet between the eyes."

I froze, my breath caught in my lungs. The burly man went still as well, his fisted hands shaking and his face contorted with rage. His blue eyes bore into Reno, gleaming with an unnerving brightness.

Reno, though, seemed completely unperturbed. He stared down his opponent with cold eyes, the shadow of a smirk playing on his lips.

"Like I said, I ain't got all day. What's it gonna be?"

The finger on the trigger tightened. I stared, mesmerized; terrified by the prospect of seeing this man shot to death before my eyes, but unable to look away.

The blue-eyed man took a slow step back, then another. He turned and stalked toward the gate, his companions falling in behind him. Reno kept his gun pointed at the ragtag group until they rounded a corner and disappeared from view. In a daze, I watched him holster the weapon, still reeling from what I had just seen.

"Were you actually going to shoot him?"
He gave me a blank look. I glanced at Shalua's startled face and got the chilling feeling that without our WRO presence, that man would have been dead on the ground.

"Notice the eyes, buddy?" Reno asked, turning to his partner.

Rude nodded.

"Could be trouble."

"Yeah. Stay sharp, yo."

"What about the eyes?" I asked.

After one more look through the gate, Reno turned to me.

"Didn't ya see that weird glow in 'em?"

I nodded slowly. It hadn't just been my imagination, then.

"That's Mako," he explained, "and Mako eyes mean SOLDIER." He paused for a second, then shrugged. "Well, most of the time. That guy was ex-SOLDIER, tho'. Third Class, prob'ly. The glow's pretty weak and those reflexes ain't much to write home about."

Of course. I should have guessed, perhaps, but I had imagined the famous Mako glow would be much stronger. I stared out through the broken gate, feeling a new kind of apprehension creep in. I had expected to fend off monsters, not people. We were barely on the ground and this mission was already more complicated than I had thought.

Rude stayed behind with two of the soldiers. Boss man's orders, was all Reno offered as an explanation; a salvage operation was what I guessed. Rude had begun inspecting the two helicopters parked in the hangar, sleeping under dusty hoods with their rotors folded away. I wondered if Tseng knew the whole story.

I didn't recognize the district we had landed in, but I had no idea whether I had ever been to this part of Sector 5 or if all my landmarks had simply been obliterated. The last time I had been here – the day Meteor was vanquished by the Planet itself – Midgar had been an inferno. My memories from that day were shrouded in smoke and flames. Now, the streets were still. Lifeless. Black dust had blown through here, piling up in every nook and cranny, coating the windward faces of the hollow buildings like snow. We were walking through a mausoleum.

That was what it was: a shattered tomb for the thousands who were still missing, whose bodies might never be found. The sole priority for the rescue teams had been the living, not the dead.

If Reno's saunter was anything to go by, he wasn't troubled by such thoughts as he led the way. I supposed this part of the mission was easy enough; it wasn't as if our target was hard to find. The gigantic, swollen stack of Reactor No. 6 loomed tall above the buildings, a sliver of the red Shinra diamond visible on its side from our approach. About fifteen minutes after we set out, we arrived at the broad gap that marked the sector's edge – and the sharp plummet into the undercity below. No. 6 was wedged into this gap, plate support and power plant all rolled into one.

Reno ignored the narrow bridge between the sectors and headed straight for a ladder on the lip of the plate itself. Before, the ladder would have been behind a barred gate, but now the gate lay on the ground, torn from its hinges. I hoped the ladder was in better shape.

The Turk climbed down first. While the rifleman kept guard, Shalua and I knelt down and peered
over the edge to watch Reno's descent. There was nothing in the way of safety measures; just a simple, uncaged metal ladder leading down to a railed catwalk along the bottom of the plate. Beyond it, far below, I could make out the ramshackle roofs of slum houses. A dirty wind blew into our faces from the gap, rising out of the undercity with a shrill wail.

Something glistened and shimmered among the roofs; it looked like the undulating bodies of grashtrikes swarming below. It seemed Reno had been right about the bugs, though it was hard to be sure at this distance; it was one hell of a drop. A familiar tingle of excitement stirred in the pit of my belly. I hadn't climbed anything since I had left Cosmo Canyon.

I was next. It would hardly have been a challenging descent, but the wind howled through the substructure in gusts, shaking the catwalk and the ladder with it, which added a bit of a thrill. That may not have been the word Shalua would have chosen, though, judging by the look on her face once she joined us at the bottom. She grasped the rail, knuckles as white as her face, while the wind whipped her ponytail back and forth.

"Please tell me you have a different route back up," she told Reno, her voice unsteady.

"Nope. Sorry." He grinned, not looking sorry at all, nor bothered by the gusts mussing up his hair.

As we made our careful way onward, the catwalk rattled and swayed under the feet of four people. I felt a twinge of concern about the added weight of my hazard suit. After the damage Midgar had suffered, how reliable could these catwalks still be?

Fortunately, we didn't have far to reach the reactor. A locked gate blocked our way, but Reno pried it off its hinges and led us straight on. The catwalk ended at the steep wall of the reactor shell, where we found the maintenance door he had mentioned. He punched in a few digits on the keypad next to it, but nothing happened.

"Battery's dead. Figures." He looked over his shoulder at Shalua. "Yo, Rui. Reeve says you got an inductive charger among those gadgets of yours."

"That's right," she said slowly, clutching her bag closer.

"Cool. Hand it over."

She lowered her chin, but opened her bag and brought out a metal box about the size and the shape of a thick paperback novel. Instead of giving it to Reno, though, she walked up to the door.

"Tell me where to place it."

Reno rolled his eyes and slapped his hand on the wall just above the keypad.

"I haven't seen inductive chargers here before," I remarked as he came up beside me.

"Outside the workshop, ya mean?" Reno asked, with a pointed look that made me realize my little blunder. "Far as I know, only Reeve's been tinkerin' with it. He had them installed on some of these doors a couple of years back, since they won't open without power."

"Sounds like a safety hazard."

"That's what Reeve thought, but the rest of the bigwigs went for security first. Never know when someone might try to blow up a reactor, after all."

He raised his voice for the last part. Shalua shot him a dirty look as she removed the charger and
stepped aside. I sighed.

"Reno..."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember," he called as he returned to the door. "Playin' nice."

A green dot had lit up in one corner of the keypad. When Reno punched in the code it beeped and the door slid open with a hiss. It only managed a third of the way before it got stuck, and I had to use Sparky to shove it the rest of the way back into its recess.

"Ladies first," Reno said, waving me in. "The door at the end should be unlocked. Have Sparky check for leaks and such."

I switched on the suit's flashlight, which revealed a corridor lined with gray metal panels. One of them had blown out and lay bent against the opposite wall. The hole revealed a tangle of pipes and wires stretching up into darkness, but I could see no further damage. I walked to the door at the opposite end of the short corridor, lifting the torn panel to one side to push my way past. The doorway opened onto a platform over a vast, dark chamber, so wide my flashlight wouldn't reach the far walls.

"Sparky, read all external sensors."

"Initiating external sensor reading."

While the suit ran its analysis, I swept the light around. I couldn't get an accurate impression of the space, just a jumble of lattice girders, pipes and railed metal stairways. Occasionally, warning patterns of yellow and black stripes popped out amid the gray brick and rusty metal.

"External sensor reading complete. All parameters nominal."

"All clear," I called over the radio.

Three more light beams pierced the darkness, frolicking with each other as their owners approached me from behind.

"Damn," Reno said. "Sure is dark in here, ain't it?"

"I know where the control room is," Shalua said on her way past. "Follow me."

She strode off across the platform. Her route took us up and down stairs, along catwalks and, at one tense point, up a wobbling ladder that groaned under the weight of my suit. Within minutes, I was hopelessly disoriented.

"Shit!"

As I came around the bend in the wall of pipes we were following, I saw what Shalua was swearing about. The cones of our torches lit up a hissing, turbid wall that filled the walkway ahead. It was steam, scalding hot, spraying out of a diagonal tear that had split through several of the pipes.

"It's water," Shalua said, her face tinted sickly yellow by the glowing screen of her scanner. "It must be from the cooling system. It's turned off, but the unstable core is generating enough heat to vaporize what's left in the pipes."

"How do we turn it off?" Reno asked.
"We don't. Not from here, at least. The valves are on the other side."

While the two were talking, I had leaned over the railing for a sideways look. Our flashlights couldn't penetrate the cloud of steam, but it only covered a limited distance of the walkway. It shouldn't take more than ten seconds to pass through it.

"Not a problem," I said, "as long as you can tell me what to do when I get there."

Shalua looked over at me with her eyebrows raised, but her surprise turned to deliberation as she sized up my hazard suit.

"Huh. Okay. The valves are on the level above us. You can use the ladder at the end of the catwalk to reach them. I'll tell you the rest over the radio when you get there."

"Keep your eyes peeled, Doc," Reno added. "Could be more than steam and Mako leaks to worry 'bout in here, yo."

I nodded, then checked the seal on my gloves and helmet. With a deep breath, I stepped into the white cloud.

"Warning. Extreme temperatures detected."

It was as confusing – and unsettling – as walking in a blizzard. My flashlight was useless. I fumbled for the railing, cursing under my breath. I wouldn't go too far astray on a catwalk, but there was a limit to what Sparky's cooling systems could handle; I couldn't let the low visibility slow me down.

The change was abrupt. One second I was blundering blindly ahead, the next I was through into clear air with the last wisps of steam boiling off my suit. A bright red ladder stood just a few steps ahead.

"I'm through," I called over the radio instead of trying to shout over the hissing. "Climbing up now."

"Good," Shalua replied. "On the next level, head back toward us. There should be valves on the pipes above."

The upper level had a solid concrete floor, much to my relief. Rickety catwalks and a heavy hazard suit were not my favorite combination. I saw the valves in my beam of light as it played across the river of pipes that flowed down the wall, framed by warning stripes. The valves were stiff from months of disuse, but Sparky's powered gauntlets made short work of them.

"Stay put," Shalua instructed as the steam ebbed away. "We'll join you."

The control room was on the same level. Its door was equipped with both a manual lock and a keypad. Reno's key fit the lock, but the door wouldn't budge no matter how much he jiggled and swore. I had to press my back against the door and force it, Sparky's servos whining as the door inched open against the debris that had piled up behind it. Then we were through; into a cramped octagonal room that was in a very sorry state. Both of the tall screens on the walls were cracked. Part of the ceiling had collapsed, spewing twisted metal and broken wires all over the floor.

Shalua bent over one of the consoles in the middle of the room and hooked it up with another device from her bag. She was able to bring the control panel back to life and Reno's access codes got her into the system, but after a couple of minutes she huffed and slammed her palm against the
"I can't access the systems I need from here. I have to run the core down manually."

"Well, main elevator's fucked and the nearest stairwell is full of concrete," Reno said. "Got any ideas that won't take all day?"

"I do," she said with a grimace. "The air ducts. We can use the vent just outside."

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "This mission just keeps gettin' better and better. Fine. What are we waitin' for?"

"Well, you will have to stay here. The lower floors are contaminated. Near the core, the Mako levels are lethal without shielding."

"Balls," he grumbled, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets as he stalked out of the control room with the infantryman in tow. "Dunno what's worse. Crawlin' through fuckin' air ducts or havin' nothin' to do but babysit a goddamn hole in the wall while you two have all the fun."

By the time I followed Shalua back into the hallway, he was already unscrewing the wing nuts that held the vent grill in place. I bent forward to peer into it over his shoulder. With Sparky, it would be a tight fit, but not impossible.

Reno lifted the grill down and stared into the dark duct, his eyes narrowed in thought. Then he took off his jacket and flung it at Shalua.

"Hold this for a sec, will ya?"

She yelped in surprise, but managed to grab it out of the air. It must have been instinctive, because she glared at the jacket with so much distaste I feared she might toss it over the nearest railing. Reno paid her no mind.

"What are you doing?" I asked, watching in puzzlement as he shrugged out of the shoulder holster.

"I ain't lettin' ya go down there unarmed, Fitz."

He removed his pistol, then handed the holster to me.

"That's the safety, just flick it down to shoot, like this." Reno demonstrated, then placed the weapon in my hand. "There's a round in the chamber, so, safety off, point and pull the trigger." He mimicked the motions with his right hand as he listed them.

"Is this really necessary?" I asked, eyeing the gun.

"Prob'ly not," he said, shrugging, "but in an abandoned, leaky reactor ya never know. Might be giant mutant rats down there for all we know."

"Thanks for that thought."

"That is highly unlikely," Shalua interjected.

"As unlikely as grashtrikes and behemoths in the streets?"

She had opened her mouth to say more, but at that she clamped her lips together, her eyes narrowing to slits. Reno smirked and turned back to me.
"Anyway, bein' a biologist and all, ain'tcha s'posed to get all excited about new kinds of critters, Doc?" he asked with a grin as I wriggled around to get the leather straps over my shoulders.

"I'd rather stick to observing them from afar, thanks," I muttered. "Behind armored glass, actually, considering what 'critters' Gaia comes up with."

"Well, let's hope there's nothin' waitin' for ya, then. I'll keep watch here. Be as quick as ya can and keep me posted." He tapped the device on his ear with a finger, then grabbed his jacket from Shalua. "Thanks, doll."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah," I said, raising an eyebrow, "what's with calling her 'doll'?"

The emphasis on her may not have been entirely intentional.

Reno gave me a sheepish grin. "Uh, sorry... babe?"

"You're not doing yourself any favors, you know."

"Guys? Let's just get this over with," Shalua said with a sour look at Reno.

She pulled out a hood with a large face shield of see-through plastic. Once it was in place, she switched on her Mako shielding. A thin glow shot from the emitters and along the wires, spreading across her body like a translucent shroud. I told Sparky to do the same as Shalua pushed her bag into the vent. While she clambered in herself, I stepped up to wait for my turn by the wall.

"Don't worry, baby. Your suit's way sexier," Reno murmured and patted my armored behind. "Heh, that shield tickles."

I snorted. "You so need to get laid more."

"That a promise?"

He grinned and gave me another pat, then stepped back. It was my turn to enter the duct.

The air duct was cramped, loud with echoes, and an unpleasant experience in every imaginable way. I crawled on my hands and knees, arms tucked in to avoid bumping into the top of the duct. Dust particles shimmered and danced in Sparky's beam of light, making me glad the suit had air filters.

"I'm through," Shalua said after a few minutes. "We can use the stairs from here."

I reached the end of the passage soon after and poked my head out for a look around. We had reached another large room criss-crossed by catwalks. I could see the cone of Shalua's light in the distance, panning up and down a metal stairwell.

The duct was too narrow for me to turn around, so my exit would not be very dignified. I placed my hands on the edge and half-crawled, half-pulled myself out of the hole. Just as my upper body was outside, my hand slipped and I crashed onto the catwalk with a clatter that echoed around the room. I clambered to my feet, cheeks blushing behind my helmet. Not very dignified, indeed.

The catwalk groaned. Something snapped with a twang like a plucked string, and the surface under me lurched and tore free. As Shalua whipped around, the shock on her face was the last thing I saw before I plunged into the darkness below.
In the Belly of the Beast

Everything was shaking, crumbling under me. The building groaned and thundered while I tumbled through one collapsing floor after another, sliding and rolling. The suit's lamp flashed back and forth in a crazy kaleidoscope of light and shadow.

I smashed against an immobile surface, bounced off and rolled until I hit another, then came to a halt on my back. I stared up at lines of light and dark spinning madly around, trying to hear anything over the ringing in my ears. After a while the lines slowed to a halt and I realized they weren't lines at all, nor had they been spinning. They were pipes and ducts, threaded along the ceiling.

My hazard suit was firing off warning after warning.


"You don't say," I mumbled, trying to bring my panting under control. "Sparky, check suit status."

"Power at seventy-eight percent. All systems nominal."

That was some comfort, at least. I rolled over and got up on my knees for a better look at where I had ended up. A concrete floor, pockmarked by debris and crated from the impact of the suit. Cracked concrete walls, and air thick with concrete dust. A corridor of some kind. It could have been anywhere; it could have been in the Cobalt facility back on Earth, in the state it had been right before–

I squeezed my eyes shut and swallowed hard, pushing those thoughts back to the furthest corners of my mind. The present. Focus on the present.

Now that the clatter of debris had died down, it was stiflingly quiet. Without my suit's flashlight, it would have been pitch black, too. As dark and silent as the grave.

I groaned. Sometimes, my brain was just the worst.

One end of the corridor was blocked by broken concrete and torn meshes of rusty steel wires. I got up on shaky legs and stumbled closer, peering up through the cracks. I wondered how far I had fallen.

"Shalua? Can you hear me?" My voice sank into the heavy air without a trace.

Something answered with a skitter in the darkness behind me. I spun around, but couldn't see anything beyond the range of the flashlight. Keeping my eyes pinned on the direction of the noise, I groped for the control panel on my left forearm and flipped it open so I could turn off the external speakers without a voiced command. It might have been just debris settling after the collapse, but Reno's remarks about monstrous rats were fresh in my mind. I mentally cursed the need for a light source.

"Shalua?" I tried over the radio instead, my voice unsteady and pitched too high. "Reno? Can anyone hear me?"

Nothing, not even after boosting the signal. I was on my own.
My chest felt tight. My breaths were getting shallower and shallower, and my fingers had begun to tingle. I focused on my breathing, on the techniques I used to stave off panic attacks. Panic may have been an understandable reaction for once, considering I was freaking buried alive, but it would get me nowhere.

So, what would? Digging wouldn't, I decided after another glance at the hopeless pile of debris behind me. I needed a way up, or out, to a spot where the radio would work. There was only one way ahead at this point. With my muscles coiled tight and my ears pricked, I made my way down the corridor with wary steps.

The darkness was absolute. I could have sworn it crept in closer by the minute, encroaching on Sparky's light. Cracks and broken pipes made strange shadows that danced across the walls as I moved, throwing my imagination into overdrive. I could hear sounds – taps, knocks, shuffling – or I thought I could. My pounding heart made it difficult to be sure. I had seen nothing, not even any marks in the thick blanket of dust, yet my nerves were frayed to their limits. I wanted to flee in a blind panic. I wanted to curl up and hide in a corner.

Ten minutes later, I had learned two things. The place was a maze, and it was huge. After countless dead ends, either by design or by structural failure like the corridor I had landed in, I was no closer to finding an exit.

It could have been worse, though. The dust everywhere made it easy to retrace my steps when necessary. At least I wouldn't spend the rest of my days wandering in circles.

My current hallway ended in a red metal door, just like all the others that had led into empty rooms. It seemed this had been another fruitless turn. With a weary huff, I pushed the door open for a peek.

"–in, Fitz."

My heart leapt into my throat. My knees went so weak I had to touch the wall.

"Reno?" It was halfway between a sigh and a sob, a desperate plea. "Can you hear me?"

There was a second of silence, and then I heard his crackling voice again.

"You had me worried there for a while, baby. Thought I told ya to talk to me, yo."

The drawl couldn't mask his relief. I closed my eyes and smiled.

"Fell down a hole. No reception down here."

"Yeah, that's what Rui guessed. Too much concrete and shit. The core's shut down, but she rigged up an emergency generator and fiddled with the old comm systems of the reactor, hopin' to reach ya that way. Guess it worked."

As he spoke, I moved to the door to close it, just in case, and his voice began to wash into static.

"It works partly, at least," I noted, hurrying back to the center of the room. "If I move too far, the signal gets weaker."

"Gotcha. You okay?"

"I'm fine, but can't wait to get the hell out of here. Not sure where 'here' is, though." I scanned the room for clues. "It's a small room with a bunch of flat metal boxes along one of the walls. The
ceiling's caved in, must be how I'm getting a signal in here. A sign on the door says..." I squinted. "...‘Level B TG-4 Aux Service’.

"Doctor? It's Shalua. I think I can get you out. Do you see a vent in there?"

"Yes, near the door."

"Good. We might lose contact again once you go in, so you'll have to memorize the route."

"Fan-freaking-tastic," I muttered.

"It won't be far. We should be able to hear you again once you reach the main ventilator stack."

"All right. What's the route?"

Shalua went through the steps a couple of times, then had me repeat them back to her. The path wasn't too difficult; just a handful of lefts and rights in the vents, followed by a short jaunt along a couple of corridors. When I had listed the correct sequence twice, she was satisfied.

"You got this, babe," Reno said. "Call me on the other side."

Left turn at the first crossing, up the ladder at the hub, then second on the right. Who would have thought it would be a relief to return to the air ducts? They were as dim and dusty as the concrete corridors I had left behind, but there was a limit to what could be hiding in them.

A faint green glow filtered through a grill at the end of the duct. It reminded me of the Lifestream. Funny that that would be my first thought, I mused as I loosened the grill, and not the fluorescence of the Mako reactor smokestacks.

The grill slid aside, revealing the room I needed to traverse – only it wasn't a room. My jaw dropped. The immense chamber rose through several floors, hazy with greenish light from the lake of Mako below. Pipes snaked up and down the stained brick walls as lattice girders criss-crossed the space between them. One of the girders started directly below me and ended at another vent on the far side of the chamber.

"You've got to be kidding me," I groaned, letting my helmet clang against the duct wall.

I tried the radio, hoping the vast open space would facilitate a signal, but got nothing but static. Maybe the Mako radiation interfered, or maybe the chamber was too well insulated. Back or forward, then; that was the question.

The more I entertained the idea of backtracking, the less appealing it was. Judging by the sheer size of the chamber, chances were this was the only way through to the other side, anyway. The girder below looked structurally sound, as did the walls it was bolted to. I wriggled out of the vent far enough to test it with one foot. A kick met with solid resistance. So did a power-assisted one. I took a deep breath and let the beam take my full weight.

It held.

On to step two: crossing the girder without tumbling down to my premature, Mako-soaked death. The beam was a little wider than I was, but the lattice made it easy to put a foot through by mistake.

No point in showing off. I got down on my knees, then my hands, and used the girder as a horizontal ladder.
I noticed the strange clucking sound when I was about three quarters of the way along, and made the mistake of looking up. The flashlight pierced the darkness and triggered an eruption of screeches and flapping, leathery wings. I yelped and hid my head between my arms, curling up into a ball as the creatures descended upon me.

"Sparky, shields up!"

The hazard suit's acknowledgement was drowned out by a loud crack of lightning. The electricity sparkled harmlessly across my suit and grounded itself out into the girder. Another blast followed, then another. Savage fangs and huge, cyclopean eyes gleamed blue in the bright flashes of energy. I yelled at the creatures, shouting curses they couldn't hear through my soundproof helmet, and clung to the steel beam for my life.

When their lightning failed, the beasts switched to dive-bombing me with their claws. Sparky's armor would hold – but one of them slammed into me hard enough to wrench my hand off the girder. I screamed and flailed out, and by some miracle managed to grab hold before I slipped over the edge.

I might not be as lucky next time. My limbs were shaking and my heart was hammering in my throat, but I had to do something. After ducking another swoop, I pulled out Reno's gun, pointed up at the nearest creature and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"Fuck!"

I flattened myself against the beam as another one-eyed creature dove toward me. Staying down, I thumbed the safety off, then tried again. The gun roared in my hand and the target shrieked and plummeted down, one wing frantically chopping the air. The rest of them scattered, their panicked howls echoing off the brick walls. I shoved the pistol back in its holster and scuttled toward the vent. Just as I reached it, a critter dove for me with renewed courage and smacked me into the wall. I had to fire another shot to get them off my back again.

I didn't bother with the wing nuts. I just thrust my fingers through the grill and pulled. The metal groaned in protest, but was no match for Sparky's strength. As the grill clanged off pipes and struts on its way down, I scrambled into the duct. At the first crossing I writhed around until I could aim the gun down the passage I had entered through.

It was empty. The shrieks had died down as well. The winged beasts were content to have me out of their territory.

I gave myself a minute or two, lying on my side in the duct with a death grip on the gun while I waited to stop gasping for breath. Once I got out of here, I would have a thing or two to say to Shalua.

The last crawl through the air vents was blissfully uneventful. I emerged into a corridor like the maintenance access we had come in by: the walls and floor were covered by metal panels, and the doors and vent hatches were marked out with yellow warning stripes that shone in the lamplight. The emergency lights were on, so I tried the radio. Reno responded right away.

"We heard a shitload of noise a lil' while ago. Was that you?"

"I guess so. I ran into a bit of trouble along the way, but I'm fine."

"What kinda trouble? Sounded like gun shots, yo."
"Yeah. For your information, it isn't mutant rats down here. It's demented hell bats."

"Hell bats, huh?" He chuckled. "That's a new one."

"Doctor," Shalua interjected. "Have you reached the ventilator stack?"

"Almost there," I replied as I followed the corridor. "It should be just around the corner."

My footsteps rang harshly off the narrow metal walls; it sounded like someone was walking just behind me, making me glad for the low but steady gloom of the emergency lights.

"Good. I've restored power to the service elevator. You should see a lit sign when you're in the right corridor."

"Got it."

The elevator was at the end of the next corridor, as per Shalua's directions. I had to clamber over a fallen ceiling section to reach it and the doors shuddered as they scraped open, but my careful inspection found no visible damage to the elevator car itself. With a deep breath, I hit the button for plate-level and hoped for the best. The cables groaned and sang as the elevator jerked into motion. I stood in the middle of the small chamber, feet planted wide apart and hands raised to keep my balance, and hoped this would be the shortest elevator ride of my life.

It wasn't, not by a long shot – but against all expectations, I didn't plummet to my death.

"I never, ever want to do that again," I said as soon as I had leapt out to safety at the top.

"You made it!" Shalua exclaimed. "There's a door that leads outside at the end of the corridor."

"About bloody time," I muttered under my breath as I staggered to freedom.

Even dimmed by a layer of clouds, the light outside was blinding after who knows how long in the bowels of the defunct reactor. Out to my left, the blackened emptiness of the badlands spread as far as my eye could see. I had wandered through the whole reactor, I realized, and come out on the Sector 6 side. This section of the plate was in much worse shape than its neighbor. Just a few feet to my left, the pavement came to an abrupt and catastrophic end. The enormous wall that girdled the plate perimeter had toppled inward and taken a large portion of the plate with it, leaving nothing between me and a deadly drop straight into the slums.

With a wheeze of laughter I lowered myself to the ground and leaned back against the reactor wall. At this rate, I would leave this place with a profound fear of heights.

"I'm out," I called over the radio. "In Sector 6, looks like."

"Head around the reactor and cross the ramp between the sectors," Shalua said. "We'll meet up with you on the other side."

"Yeah, okay. First, though, I need a breather."

"Heh, fair 'nuff," Reno replied in her stead. "Don't take too long, tho'. It ain't safe to hang out alone 'round here."

I let my head loll back against the wall with a long, slow breath, relishing the vast open space above my head. Was there a suitable phobia for being trapped in ruined reactors, I mused, to go with the fear of heights? Claustrophobia, maybe? The fear of being buried alive?
A thump nearby startled me out of my rambling thoughts. Another followed, then footsteps, drawing closer. I froze, pricking my ears. Whoever it was, they were very close. I couldn't scramble back inside the reactor unnoticed.

A hulking dark-haired man vaulted over a collapsed section of the wall surrounding the reactor, followed by a stocky blond one. The ex-SOLDIER, I recognized, and one of his buddies. The former stopped dead in his tracks as soon as he looked my way and held out an arm to stop his friend. His upper lip curled back in a smile.

"Looks like they're here."

"All right, all right, you were right. C'mon, let's go get the others before anyone sees us."

The blond one turned to leave, but the former SOLDIER used his outstretched arm to grab hold of the man's tattered shirt.

"Relax, man, I'll hear them coming long before they can spot us. No one's around. As long as we don't trigger its limits, we're good."

It? What was "it"?

"Good? It's right there! It's gonna hear us!"

"Chill, all right? It's just a robot. It may kind of look like a person, but I bet on the inside it's no different from the spiderbots we used all the time back at Shinra. Nothing but sensors and blinking lights."

I frowned. They were talking about me?

"I don't like this, and I don't like that thing. C'mon, let's just do what we're s'posed to."

"No, no, hang on a sec. I've seen it before. A buddy of mine sent a picture of it, says it's worth a lot of gil to the right people..." The SOLDIER pulled out a phone and flipped it open, then showed it to the other man. "See? That 'thing' is our ticket out of this shithole."

My mouth went dry.

"Reno," I rasped, glad beyond belief that I had turned off the external speakers. "I've got trouble."

"Tell me."

"That ex-SOLDIER we met earlier? He's here with a buddy and they want Sparky."

Two seconds ticked by in silence.

"You're still on the northern side, right? By the service door?"

His voice was calm, steady. Mine was not.

"Yes! Reno, what do I do? I don't want to fry anyone!"

"Hang on, Fitz, we're on our way. Just keep a cool head."

As I called for help, I had tuned out the conversation between the two scavengers. Now I wished I hadn't, because the former SOLDIER pulled out a cylinder a little longer than the width of his palm, pressed his thumb down on one end of it, then threw it at me. The cylinder clattered along...
the uneven ground and rolled to a halt at my feet.

A blue ring of light around its middle blinked faster and faster. I sucked in a startled breath, and then the time was up.
I stared at the device on the ground. The blinking light went solid for a second, then winked off. I had expected something more... dramatic.

"Warning. Electromagnetic disturbance detected."

Ohh.

"These guys are getting impatient," I called over the radio. "They just tried to take out my suit with some kind of EMP grenade."

"Shit," Reno hissed, sounding a little short of breath. "Guess it didn't work?"

"No, Sparky's rad-hardened."

"Thank fuck for that. We're almost there."

The two men poked their heads out behind the tumbledown section of brick wall they had used for cover. I watched them from the corner of my eye, not daring to move my head.

"Think it worked?" the blond guy asked.

A scowl formed on the former SOLDIER's face as he studied me.

"I don't know. It's still got that weird energy field, but it's just sitting there. With or without the EMP, an incoming projectile should've triggered its sensors."

The Mako shielding! I had forgotten to turn it off. A lucky lapse, if it made my attackers hesitant to act.

"Wait here. I'll take a closer look."

The dark-haired man broke cover and began creeping toward me. My breaths quickened with each slow step he took. I couldn't see any weapons, but I had been around Reno long enough to know that didn't mean a thing.

These men were wary, uncertain, and every second they hesitated brought Reno and the others a second closer. My best bet was to keep them that way: stay still, keep them guessing. Retain the element of surprise.

So I stayed still, and watched him come. His broad shoulders and thick arms spoke of raw power; his steady, measured movements told of the training behind that power. I knew SOLDIERs were unnaturally enhanced, made faster and stronger than normal humans. If the situation came to blows then I wouldn't be able to run. The suit gave me brute strength, but not the skill to win a fight.

I would have to use Sparky's power surge. The thought made me queasy.

Another step, then another. He was close enough that I could see the glow in his eyes.

"Sparky..." I whispered, priming the suit for my command.

He froze, then whipped his head around. "We've got company!"
His blond companion swore and dove into cover. The SOLDIER didn't run, though. He stretched to his full height and held out his arms, as if to welcome the approaching enemy. His face split into a disturbing grin.

"What are you doing?" the blond hissed. "Let's go!"

The SOLDIER ignored him.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, but I forced myself still. The man wanted a fight. I was no fighter, but if I played this right I could give my rescuers an advantage. I waited, stifling my jitters, straining my eyes to see where he was staring without moving my head.

A figure burst into view, black-clothed and flame-haired, weaving through debris and leaping over slabs of fallen concrete with the grace of a gazelle.

The SOLDIER slapped his thighs and hunched down into a wrestler's crouch.

Reno cleared the last obstacle between us.

The SOLDIER grinned wider.

That's when I drove my foot into his side with a power-assisted kick.

The man staggered to the side with a wordless shout, caught unawares. My heart leapt into my throat. Any normal man would have been knocked down.

Then Reno was on him, mag rod crackling. The SOLDIER narrowly ducked past the first blow, but I missed the next seconds of the fight while I scabbled to my feet. When I looked up again, the punches the two were throwing and dodging were almost a blur. Sparks leapt as one of Reno's blows connected and the larger man lurched backward, twitching. He didn't fall, though, and when Reno followed up with a second strike, he knocked it aside with a cry of glee. The Turk cursed and lunged again.

"Doctor! Look out!"

Shalua's warning came at the last second. I spun around and saw the blonde man and the flash of the metal pipe chopping down at my head. I threw up my arm, barely in time.

"Warning. Impact detected."

I had no time to heed Sparky's warnings. The man's blow skidded off the armplate and I staggered, my forearm numb. As he reeled around for another swing I stumbled back, desperate to put some distance between us.

"Get down!" Shalua yelled.

I dove to the side. The second I hit the ground, I heard the sharp slap of a gun – one, two, three. The blond man twitched and jerked and crumpled to the ground, blood gushing out of the holes in his chest. Before his death could fully register in my mind, I heard a yell – Reno's yell. I rolled to my feet and scrambled around the broken concrete slab that blocked my view. When I saw the two fighters, I stopped dead in my tracks with a gasp.

Reno was on the ground, clawing at the fingers around his throat. The ex-SOLDIER straddled him, pinning him down. He pulled Reno up by the throat, then smashed his head into the pavement. Reno gurgled, and for a second his hands went limp.
"Help him!" I shrieked at the two behind me.

They were still running toward us. The infantryman veered off toward the reactor, his rifle raised at the wrestling pair. Shalua tried the other direction.

"I can't get a clear shot!"

The SOLDIER pounded Reno's head against the ground again, a mad grin twisting his face.

I charged.

My tackle swung me onto the SOLDIER's back and I grabbed at his wrists. Reno's eyes nearly bulged out of his head; he squirmed and redoubled his struggle to get free, but the SOLDIER didn't react at all. I pulled and pulled, servos crying, until at last his grip failed. He stumbled upright, and with a frustrated roar he flung me aside. I hit the reactor wall and my feet went from under me.

"Warning. Major impact detected."

The SOLDIER lunged for me, blue eyes blazing, and grabbed my helmet with both hands. He slammed my head back into the wall, and my vision exploded in a million stars. I flailed around in a panic, trying to find some solid ground. Instead, my foot caught him in the stomach and sent him flying back. Too far. He tumbled behind a section of broken wall, out of sight from Shalua and the infantryman. The next second, he was hauling himself to his feet.

I clawed at the ground, at the wall. I had to get up before he did, but my vision was swimming and my limbs didn't seem to work right.

"Warning. Head trauma detected. Administering hi-potion."

A different face filled my view, and for a split-second I caught Reno's eyes, hard as pale ice. He yanked his gun out of the holster under my arm and whirled around. The ear-splitting crack of a shot sent black spots dancing before my eyes, and in a drugged and concussed haze I watched the SOLDIER jerk back and hit the asphalt.

I could do nothing but wait for my vision to clear. The man raised himself up again, clutching his shoulder as the blood spread between his fingers. He sat on his knees for a few moments, panting and glaring at the Turk with pure hatred. Then he swung his hips and planted one foot on the ground.

Reno shot again. Blood sprayed from a new hole in the SOLDIER's belly. I gasped in shock as he toppled forward with a pained cry, but I couldn't look away.

"Stay the fuck down, will ya?"

Reno's voice was hoarse from the stranglehold, but there was no emotion in it. He watched the man writhe on the ground with the same interest he might give a TV commercial. My stomach lurched.

At first, it seemed like the bleeding man would take the advice. Then he pulled his good arm under his body and pushed.

"Oh, c'mon!" Reno groaned. "D'ya get off on gettin' shot, ya goddamn freak?"

The man pushed himself to his knees, then struggled to his feet, a hand clamped over the bubbling wound in his stomach.
"Fight's over, SOLDIER boy," Reno warned. "Give up already."

"No fucking way. I know what Turks do to prisoners."

The bloody grimace on his face might have been a smile. Then he wheeled around and ran. Reno fired twice in rapid succession. The SOLDIER lurched forward as the first round hit him in the back, sending the second whistling over his head. He didn't stop. Reno fired a third time but the man was too close to the jagged edge of the plate. He jumped and plummeted from view without a sound.

Reno took off after him. At the edge, he leaned over and peered down.

"Fuck!" He kicked a chunk of concrete off the plate. "Stupid shitfuckin' son of a bitch!"

He spun on his heel and pulled out his phone as he stalked toward the rest of us.

"Don't stare at me," he barked at the infantryman. "That jackass had more buddies than just the stiff over there. Eyes on the streets!"

The man snapped to attention and obeyed. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Shalua keeping lookout, too, but I just stared at the blood spattered along the pavement.

"Just had a run-in with that SOLDIER guy," Reno said into his phone, his words rushed. "He was after Fitz. Nah, he was workin' for someone. Dunno, fucker took a walk off the plate before I could ask him. Yeah. Prep the chopper, we'll be there in fifteen."

He snapped the phone shut and shoved it into his jacket pocket. Then his knees buckled, sending him shoulder-first into the reactor's brick wall.

"Reno!"

I dashed to his side, just in time to catch him as he made a failed attempt to straighten up.

"Fuck," he hissed through clenched teeth, touching the back of his head. "Asshole must've smacked my... my head... few times too..."

He swayed and blinked repeatedly, then withdrew his hand and squinted at his bloody fingers.

"Sit down," Shalua said, crouching down next to us. "I'll take care of it."

Reno obeyed, but he slumped forward as soon as he had stretched out his legs on the asphalt. I caught him by the shoulders, and as I held him a steady green mist enveloped his body. I had seen people use healing materia before, but never up close like this. It made my hands itch, even through the suit. I looked over at Shalua and saw the same green glow around her weapon.

When I looked back at Reno, he was watching me. His blank expression had been replaced with a frown.

"Lemme look at ya."

It was Reno the Turk asking. He wanted to check for injuries, nothing more. I forced down the lump in my throat and unlocked the helmet. My eyes darted between his face and the golden mirror of the helmet's surface as I lifted it off and held it in my lap. I found it hard to meet his eyes without its protection.

At first Reno's scrutiny was just that, intent on searching for damage, but as he studied my face, his
own features softened. He raised his hand, reached for me. The mag rod dangling from a strap
around his wrist clanged against my chest plate, but his fingers on the back of my neck were gentle.
He kept them still, touching, holding, and just gazed at me, his pupils impossibly large. I barely
noticed the tickle of the magic that enveloped them. I was bound by a different kind of spell.

Shalua's magic faded. Reno let me go and got up to his feet. He pushed his gun into the holster I
carried, then pulled off his jacket.

"'Kay, Fitz, time to give that back," he said, indicating the shoulder holster with a look and a flick
of his chin.

I kept my eyes cast down as I obeyed, so that I wouldn't have to see the looks Shalua was giving
me or the mask Reno was wearing again. He had the holster and jacket back on quicker than it
took me to shrug it off my shoulders.

"We're outta here. Let's move!"

The march back to the helicopter passed in a daze; not even the groaning, swaying metal scaffold
that bridged the sector gap could stir a reaction in me. I just focused on driving my weary body
forward one step at a time. Reno, on the other hand, was a boundless well of high-strung energy.
He was in perpetual motion, darting between the front and rear of our small group, scouting down
each side street and alleyway.

I managed to keep my mind blank until Reno and I parted ways with the others at the airfield, but it
was impossible to zone out while trapped in a car with the wound-up Turk. One by one, flashes
from the day replayed in my head, no matter how hard I tried to push them away.

It was the glimpse of Reno's vicious side that haunted me the most. His expression hadn't so much
as flinched when he pulled the trigger. It was the same one he was wearing now, hard and pitiless.
It was the one he had shown me in the interrogation room.

"Somethin' you wanna say to me, Fitz?"

His question made me realize I was staring again. My first instinct was to avert my eyes and
pretend he hadn't asked, but the urge to fight that impulse was quick to follow. Perhaps I had
learned that sweeping my worries under the rug wouldn't make them go away.

"You didn't even warn him."

"I did warn him." He bared his teeth in a savage grin. "Twice."

"It's not funny! You shot him!"

"Yeah and I would've blown his fuckin' brains out if he'd tried to come for us again."

The words tumbled out of him in a rush, yet he sounded completely detached about it all.
Dismissive, even. I shivered and had to look away.

For a minute, only the restless tapping of Reno's fingers against the wheel kept the silence at bay.
Then he huffed.

"Look. With all that Mako in 'em, SOLDIERs can take a helluva beatin'. Sometimes the Mako
messes with their minds too, makin' 'em pull stupid shit like that 'cause they think they're fuckin'
invincible. A couple of rounds to the body ain't nothin' to those freaks."
I gnawed on my bottom lip, considering it. Their physical resilience certainly tallied with what I had seen in Hojo's files; when it came to what was going on in a SOLDIER's head, though...

Reno was still speaking.

"You wanna take on a psycho like that and live? Forget warnin' shots in the air. I oughta know. Some of the shit I used was laced with Mako."

My jaw dropped as I turned my head to stare at him.

"You're Mako-enhanced?"

He barked a laugh.

"Don't think 'enhanced' is the word you're lookin' for. What we had in the slums was third-rate shit distilled from leaks, so good thing there ain't much of it in me."

I frowned. If Reno had told me truth about his former habit, he hadn't used since his teens.

"It stays in the body?"

"Yeah. It does."

Glimpses from the fight played in my mind's eye; Turk against SOLDIER, swapping blows at lightning speed.

"That's what makes you so fast, isn't it?"

"Sure. Makes me faster, tougher, better with materia – and a bit fucked in the head. A better Turk in every way, yo!"

His laughter was brittle, so unlike the warmth of his usual chuckle. I gave him a wary look. His fingers drummed out an incessant dance on the steering wheel. His face was slack, but his eyes kept darting this way and that, never settling on any one thing. I frowned, leaning in for a closer look. Despite the airconditioning in the car, beads of sweat had gathered on his temple. His pupils were still dilated, wide as coins.

"Are you on something?"

He grinned. "Hyper. Like a speedball of adrenaline and testosterone, baby."

"Are you kidding me?"

I stared at him in disbelief, my mouth hanging open. Reno was still grinning.

"Think I'm gonna take on a SOLDIER without juicin' up first? I'm fast but I ain't that fast."

"Hang on, you were high while you were flying? And now you're driving?" I whipped my head back toward the road and pressed myself back into the seat. "Oh my god, you're driving!"

"Chill, Fitz. It's all good, babe, perfectly legal. Shinra-approved, standard Turk issue."

He snickered as if he had just cracked a joke, but I had no idea what he found so amusing. I just couldn't read him like this. I didn't even know what to think anymore, but my frayed nerves had definitely reached their limit.
"I've fucking had it," I hissed. "Either drop me off now or take me straight back to the 'RO. I'm taking the next coach back to Kalm!"

There was a change in his eyes, a shift toward something darker. A sudden chill took the edge off my ire.

"Like hell you are," he snapped, and every trace of his amusement was gone. "These guys didn't know their asses from their elbows, but someone else out there is after ya. They might know who you are and where you live and work. Hell, they could've figured out you're stayin' at the 'RO place already."

"What? You won't let me go home?"

"Home ain't safe. We're goin' to the Turk safehouse. Right now. There's cameras, alarms, people we know nearby. It'll do for tonight."

"And my stuff? My bag?"

"Gimme the key and I'll have one of the others bring it over."

One of the Turks, in other words. Turk safehouse, Turk custody. How quickly my freedom was taken, once more.

If I was in Turk custody today, what would tomorrow bring? Imprisonment at Cliff Resort? What then, when Rufus Shinra decided he wanted something in return for all his Turks' trouble? Would Reno side with his boss, if he thought that would be the best way to keep me alive? Would he even listen to what I had to say?

"It's back to this, is it? I just smile prettily and do whatever the big bad Turk says?"

"Think I'm wrong, Fitz? You're the one who told me what those guys said. That suit of yours ain't exactly subtle. Loads of people in Kalm know who it belongs to by now. If I was one of the bad guys lookin' for it, I'd be knockin' on your door first thing in the mornin'."

I huffed and crossed my arms over chest. I couldn't fault his reasoning. That was immensely frustrating.

"Can't argue with that, eh, Doctor?" Reno drawled, echoing my thoughts.

"I don't like your tone."

Reno's fingers snapped tight around the wheel, squeezing like a stranglehold.

"You don't like my tone? You got any idea of the shit I've gone through today for ya? Gettin' the company chopper, draggin' Rude along, havin' to see my old neighborhood all fucked? Havin' to get hyped up so I could take on a fuckin' SOLDIER? I ain't sayin' you owe me, but would it kill ya to show some fuckin' appreciation?"

I gaped at him, stunned. After my little bout of guilt following Reeve's call, I had completely neglected Reno's point of view.

Again.

"I-I'm sorry," I stammered. "I didn't mean..."

To use him again? To take him for granted, only to think the worst of him? To be an insensitive,
self-centered bitch? I trailed off, daunted by the number of wrongs I needed to make right.

"I didn't ask for apologies."

His curt dismissal made me swallow the words I had been trying to choose. The rest of the drive was spent in uneasy silence. Irritation and fear bled into my remorse, and in the embers of the day's intolerable stress, they cooked into a jittery energy that made my stomach flutter and my fingers twitch. Reno was no better off; his whole being thrummed with tension. When we finally arrived, I nearly gasped with relief to get out of the car.

Reno led the way into the Shinra apartment we had stayed in before. The door had barely shut behind us when he grabbed my face and mashed his lips to mine. I was caught off guard; unable to respond with anything but a surprised kind of whimper in the back of my throat. His tongue was hot and relentless, his teeth scraped my lips, and when he finally let me come up for air, we were both panting as if we had just run all the way from Midgar.

"I need you naked," he growled. "Right fuckin' now."

I had the suit. I could have shoved him through the wall, but his voice was low and harsh, raw with lust. It lit the fever he had spread in me, fanned it up into a blaze. I tore off the gloves, then the armguards, dropping them to the floor without a second thought.

"This fuckin' suit," Reno groaned, snapping open the locks on the chest armor. "Who the fuck made it so fuckin' complicated!"

"It wasn't designed for a striptease," I snapped.

He bared his teeth and nearly pulled me off my feet as he yanked off the armor. My annoyance fueled the frenzy of frustration and want, smothering my brain in a lust-filled haze.

"This takes fuckin' forever! Why don'tcha wear a goddamn lab coat like all the other eggheads?"

"If I did, I'd be dead. Is that what you want?"

Reno seized my head in both hands, his eyes aflame with a dark fire. I felt a thrill down my spine.

"Shut your mouth," he snarled, then did it himself with another fierce kiss.

Nothing mattered except the physical: the rough pawing of greedy hands, the electric flashes across my tingling skin, the forceful thudding of my heart in my chest. A second beat pulsed between my legs, throbbing around that unbearable void. By the time the last piece of armor clattered to the floor, it had become an excruciating ache.

I peeled off the undersuit, hands shaking with impatience, vaguely aware of him undoing his pants and cursing as he fumbled with a foil packet. As soon as I was free, his hands were on me, groping and clawing as he pushed me backwards with his body until I hit the kitchenette counter. He hoisted me up, yanked off my panties and shoved himself in all the way. My nerve cells fired in mind-blowing unison and I screamed out some string of obscenities, egging him on.

It was frantic, loud and lasted about thirty seconds. Spent, Reno slumped onto me, his hands on the counter, chest heaving, legs trembling. His breaths were hot and heavy in my ear, and strands of his hair stuck to the side of my face. My hands were under his jacket: one clutching the leather strap of his shoulder holster, the fabric of his shirt bunched up in the other. Slowly, I released both and flattened my palms against his back, holding instead of clinging on for dear life.
"Fuck," he mumbled, "I so needed that."

With a breathless giggle, I rested my forehead on his shoulder, trying to catch my breath. His neck was damp against my temple.

"You need a shower, too."

I felt his body shake with soundless laughter.

"Same back atcha, babe."

"No kidding," I breathed, still in a heady daze. "Whoa. That was... intense."

"That Fitz-speak for too damn quick?"

"Well, now that you mention it... a shower isn't the only thing I need right now."

He chuckled and turned his head, kissing my ear.

"Don't worry, baby, I ain't gonna leave ya high and dry."

"I'm hardly dry." I barely got the last word out before I broke into giggles. I was still wound tight, buzzing with all kinds of tension.

Reno laughed again; that low, throaty laugh of his that might have irked me with its smugness had it not been brimming with promise.

"True... but I bet we can get ya wetter." Another kiss, which turned into a nibble that sent a jolt straight down to where our bodies joined. "Let's move this party to the shower, yeah?"
Decisions

I collapsed on the bed, my skin still damp and flushed from the shower. My body felt heavy, exhausted, sated. What a day. If I closed my eyes, I might sleep for a week.

That sounded pretty damned good at this point. My lids began to drift shut.

Reno flung himself onto the bed, nearly bouncing me off it, then yawned and dragged a hand down his face. His fingers trembled.

"I hate this part," he grumbled. "Half my body wants to crash after the Cure, but the other half's still jacked up on hyper. Worst of both worlds, yo."

I hummed and curled up next to him, but when I closed my eyes the sleep I had hoped for eluded me. The day had been a blur of shocks and adrenaline, culminating in a moment of wild, unraveling abandon. As the weight of it all began to settle on me, my drowsiness evaporated away.

Someone out there was looking for me. The hypothetical threat had become solid, a presence, a thing out there in the dark.

"Did you know about this? That someone's handing out pictures of me?"

"It's news to me. Rude's sniffin' around in Edge tonight. I called Ciss too, asked her to look into it in Junon. The trail's taken us there a couple of times before."

His voice was so weary, but the look on his face told me he wasn't any closer to sleep than I was.

"Why, though?" I wondered. "Why would someone be after me?"

"It's obvious, ain't it? You heard about Kerrigan already. If someone's lookin' for ya, my first guess is him or someone else who knows where you come from."

I wrapped my arms around my waist, trying to hug the goosebumps away.

"I thought that was a pretty short list."

He reached around me and placed a hand on my shoulder, then folded his other arm under his head. His thumb stroked back and forth across my skin as he pursed his lips in thought.

"It is, and it ain't. Maybe someone else from Hojo's team remembered somethin', spread it 'round. They don't need to know for sure to come after ya, just gotta be curious enough to wanna check it out."

"Seems to me like an awful lot of trouble for a hunch."

"Maybe," he said with a shrug, "but I've been tearin' up all of Edge on hunches lately. Remember what I tried to tell ya a while back? 'Bout patterns? It's people that should be something, or somewhere, that ain't. It's stuff that ain't where it's s'posed to be. Tech, lab gear, old Shinra stockpiles back in Midgar and the other places... Maybe whoever's snatchin' it all up decided you're next on the list."

"You think it's all connected?"

He nodded slowly as he scowled up at the ceiling.
"Got nothin' solid, tho'. It's all been anonymous buyers offering gil to whoever'll do their dirty work, anyone from gangs to clueless bozos off the street. Every time I sniff one of 'em out, they're long gone, or they're dead by the time I show up. Whoever's behind this knows to cover their tracks."

"Those break-ins at work," I mumbled. With everything that had happened lately, I had barely spared them a single thought.

"Yeah. Could be they're really after the suit, and you just happen to be in it. It's a pretty fancy piece of tech. All we know for sure is that someone got close enough to take a pic of ol' Sparky."

I paused. Reno had warned me about it once already, but... Inside the suit, it felt like nothing in the world could touch me. The idea that Sparky might be a threat to my safety felt bizarre to me, no matter how much sense it made – and that, in turn, made it too easy to dismiss his concerns as excessive caution.

"I haven't exactly kept it a secret," I said, feeling a bit sheepish. "I guess anyone could have taken a photo of me wearing Sparky. Orin snapped one just this morning."

"Did he now."

Reno's thumb went still. When I glanced up his eyes had narrowed to slits, still staring up at the ceiling. I had seen that same look in him earlier that day, right after Orin had stormed off.

"You don't think he has something to do with this, do you?"

He scoffed. "Let's just say it wouldn't be a big fuckin' surprise. In any case, we gotta get ya outta Edge 'til we figure this out. Away from Kalm, too, prob'ly." He patted my arm, then rolled away. "I'll check with the boss man, see what ideas he's got."

"I've got one," I said quickly, pushing myself up on an elbow. "Nibelheim."

Reno paused halfway off the bed to stare at me over his shoulder.

"The fuck?"

"I want to go to Nibelheim. Do a bit of digging of my own. I already talked to Reeve about it."

He sat back down again, listening with a puzzled frown.

"Dig for what? The reactor's under quarantine and Reeve would know 'bout any leaks. The town itself is just a sham."

His phrasing threw me off. Chelsea had once said Nibelheim wasn't a real town, but I had thought she meant the size.

"What do you mean, it's a sham?"

Reno made a sour face and waved off my question with flick of his hand.

"Long, ugly story for another time. Point is there's nothin' there to find, 'cept bad memories."

I was curious, but right then my mind was too full with the present to start digging into the past. I just wasn't sure how to argue my case with him; bringing Jenova into it, and Hojo's lab, might force the question of Rufus Shinra. Better to wait until we were half a world away from the man, somewhere too far to reel me in for another non-consensual chat.
"I'm interested in the wildlife, not the town," I said, falling back on the excuse I had given Reeve. "Animals in the Nibel region have shown odd migration patterns lately. I want to know if there's a common denominator."

"Like what?"

"That's what I want to figure out. Could be a Mako leak that Reeve doesn't know about. Could be a new monster, maybe. If something's messing with the ecology, the 'RO will want to know about it."

Reno's expression had gone from doubtful to incredulous.

"You wanna go lookin' for monsters now? What, fallin' down a reactor and gettin' into a fistfight with a SOLDIER wasn't enough excitement for ya?"

"I'm talking about a few hikes through the woods, not a monster hunt," I sighed. "Come on, Re, I don't want to hide away in some safehouse for who knows how long. You say I have to leave Kalm, I want to take a look around Nibelheim. It's a good compromise."

He gave it a few moments of thought, then huffed and shook his head. It was more a show of disbelief, though; not rejection.

"I'll talk to Tseng. No promises."

Reno got out of bed and picked up his jacket to fish out his phone from a pocket. Moments later he had stalked out into the living room, speaking in a low murmur. The phone call lasted about ten minutes, but I couldn't make out any of it through the door he had shut behind him.

"'Kay, Fitz, it's on," he reported as he returned to the bedroom. "We're off to the western continent tomorrow."

"That soon?" I asked with a jolt of excitement.

"The sooner we're outta here, the better."

Reno didn't bother rounding the bed, just sank down onto the edge next to me and patted my thigh. I shuffled to the side, just enough to let him him lie down next to me. Once he was stretched out on the bed, I shifted closer again until my cheek touched his shoulder. There was a sharp and musky note to his scent – the hyper, I suspected – which mingled with the fragrance of the shampoo we had used earlier. Different, but not unpleasant.

With a tired sigh, he rubbed his eyes.

"Didn't think I'd ever say this, but it's lucky the Prez had one of his episodes this mornin' and is down for the count. Dealin' with Tseng means less bullshit, 'specially where the 'RO is involved."

The front door lock rattled. Before I had even sat up, Reno was out of bed and up beside the bedroom door, pressed against the wall with his gun in hand. He didn't peek through the doorway, though, and only then did I realize the bedroom mirror had a tactical purpose. From his vantage point, he could see who entered the apartment without being seen.

When a key turned in the lock, he lowered the gun.

"That's gotta be Laney."
Oddly enough, that kicked my heart into a wilder race than the unknown.

"What? Why is she here?"

"She was just bringin' dinner, but now she's got night watch, too. I need a good night's sleep before flyin' and that ain't gonna happen if I gotta worry 'bout bad guys sneakin' up on us."

"It didn't occur to you to warn me?" I hissed, scrambling off the bed in a desperate search for clothing. "My suit's in pieces on the floor out there! Christ, my panties!"

"Don't worry, it'll be good for her," Reno drawled with an infuriating grin as he bent down to pull on his uniform trousers. "She still goes all red in the face when someone says the word 'sex'. Gotta help her lose those rookie habits, yo."

"She goes red?" I snapped, throwing on a bathrobe. "What about me?"

"Uh, guys?" Elena called from the other room.

"Hey there, Laney! Just gettin' outta bed, be there in a sec."

In the mirror I saw Elena look up from the chaos strewn across the living room, her mouth falling open as realization spread in a deep pink hue on her cheeks. I doubted it would help to point out that our bedroom was the one place that hadn't seen any action tonight.

Reno tucked the gun into his belt by the small of his back and strolled out. Upon seeing her half-dressed colleague, the poor woman turned a bright shade of crimson.

"Could you put on a shirt?"

"I'm off the clock, Laney. Be grateful I put on anythin' at all."

She opened her mouth to respond, but pressed it shut again and straightened up when I stepped into view. If possible, she looked even more uncomfortable.

"You remember the Doc, right?" Reno said, pouring himself a glass of water.


"Good evening."

My greeting was on the frosty side. I wasn't ready to act chummy with her, not while that evening in Kalm was still fresh in my memory.

Reno and I sat down to eat the pepperoni pizza she had brought. He was too busy scarfing down slice after slice to make conversation, so Elena stood by the kitchenette, touching up her neat, blonde bob and fidgeting with her sleeves. The blush never fully left her face. Despite my resentment, I ended up feeling a bit sorry for her.

Once I'd had my fill, I left Reno to finish the last slice and retired for the evening, picking up my undersuit – and underwear – on my way out. Once in the privacy of the bedroom, I flopped backwards on the bed, blowing my hair out of my face with a long sigh. Talk about awkward.

I had left the door cracked open, expecting Reno to follow soon, so when Elena spoke up, I could hear everything.

"Sir—"
"C'mon, what have I told ya 'bout the 'sir' thing?"

His words were muffled by a mouth full of pizza.

"Reno, I think this is really inappropriate."

"What, the night watch?"

"No, you! Like... this! I don't want to see my superior half-naked! It's... harassment!"

A sigh, followed by a chair scraping against the floor.

"Laney, I ain't tryin' to harass ya. You gotta get over these hang-ups."

"It's not a hang-up to expect some common decency! I came here to do my job. I wasn't expecting to wander into your... personal sex den!"

I had gotten over my mortification once I had realized the damage was already done, helped along by Reno's indifference. Hers was still going strong, it seemed.

"Oh, c'mon," Reno snorted. "You're a Turk and a grown-ass woman. You must've picked up on a few basic facts of life by now. Like the fact that people like to fuck now and then."

"Th-that sort of thing is private. It's no one else's business."

"No, that's exactly what it is. Business. Turk business, yo."

I went cold. He didn't mean he was...?

"What? You mean you're..."

Whatever face Elena had made to complete that question, Reno's reply made it clear that she and I had been thinking the same thing.

"I ain't talkin' about Fitz and me. I'm talkin' about you and how you do your job. This ain't your usual nine-to-five, you gotta change your thinkin' about a lotta things if you wanna make a career outta this."

"What are you talking about?"

Her voice was quivering. Reno sighed.

"C'mon, Laney, don't look at me like that. I ain't some creep, I'm just sayin' that we get the job done, whatever it takes. And as for what it takes, well... I know you like to use your fists, but sometimes you catch more flies with honey."

"What!?"

Her shriek was loud enough to hurt my ears, and I was in the other room.

"Loads of marks let the wrong end of their bodies do the thinkin'. Use that and you might get whatcha want without havin' to beat someone up."

"That's... That's sexist!"

"Seriously? That's your problem with it? That ain't even an issue. Whaddya think happens if the
"mark is into dudes?"

"I... That's, um..."

I had no more words than Elena. Listening to this conversation was like watching a trainwreck.

"For what it's worth, I get where you're comin' from," he added after a while. "You saw the Don's girls when you were workin' down in Wall Market, you served drinks to the guys who rented 'em. You don't wanna be one of 'em, right? I get it."

Elena scoffed.

"This ain't like that, tho'," Reno insisted. "Turnin' people on is their job. For us, it's sometimes just the best, quickest way to get our job done."

Reno paused, but Elena stayed silent.

"Besides, it ain't like ya gotta go all the way. Maybe a bit of flirtin' will get you the intel you're lookin' for. Maybe you need 'em to follow ya somewhere quiet without drawin' attention. Sometimes you want 'em to let ya into their place, so you can slip somethin' into their drink and look around while they're out. You get me?"

"I'm... not... comfortable with that."

"Yeah, that's the whole point here. You ain't gonna seduce anyone if you're all gawky and weird about it. And what if we gotta go undercover as a couple? Am I gonna get slapped every time I put an arm around ya?"

They were silent for a while. I guess Elena and I both needed to digest what we had just listened to.

"Um, when you say the mark is 'into dudes'... You mean women?"

Reno snorted. "Bahamut's balls. We really gotta work on this."

"Oh." Another pause. "I'm not sure this is what I signed up for."

"Big sis didn't fill ya in on all the dirty details, huh?"

Elena's laugh was pitched too high.

"Not this part, no."

"You heard anythin' from her?"

"No. Not since Meteor."

Apparently they had pivoted from work-related seduction to family history. My mind was reeling.

"She's around somewhere. At least you know that now." A chair scraped, followed by the sound of a yawn. "Well, I'm gonna hit the sack. Feel free to ogle me in my sleep, too."

"I-I wasn't ogling!"

He laughed. "You keep tellin' yourself that, Laney."

"Get out of here already," she groaned.
A few moments later Reno pushed the door open and sauntered into the bedroom, still snickering to himself.

"Do you often invite people to ogle you?" I asked once he had closed the door behind him.

He merely arched an eyebrow as he set down his gun on the bedside table.

"Hey, no harm in lookin', right?"

"Sounds like you do more than that, though."

Reno had sat down to pull off his trousers, but he left them bunched up by his knees as he twisted around enough to look at my face. This time, both his eyebrows had disappeared beneath the red fringe.

"With Laney? You gotta be kiddin' me."

"Your 'marks'," I clarified.

He turned back and continued undressing.

"Eh, don't worry 'bout it," he said, his tone casual. "It hasn't come up since we got back together."

The unpleasant twisting in my gut intensified.

"What if it does come up?"

Reno threw himself back on the bed and folded his arms under his head, then shot me a smirk.

"You jealous again, babe?"

"I might have to be, if you keep dodging the question!"

The amusement faded from his face as he turned his gaze up to the ceiling. He sighed.


"Nothing personal?" I echoed with an incredulous stare. "I think I have the right to know if you're--" The word 'whoring' had been so close to slipping out. "...Sleeping with other people," I finished lamely.

Reno frowned.

"I'm not, and I ain't plannin' to either, all right? I turn on the charm, sweet-talk 'em a bit, that sorta thing. It's enough to make 'em think they're gonna get some, y'know?"

"No, I don't know," I snapped.

"No. 'Course ya don't."

It wasn't the sarcastic quip I might have expected with those words. Reno's expression wavered between frustration and wonder, until he abruptly averted his face and rolled over to turn his back to me.

"If it's too much for ya, I get it. No hard feelings."

What, that was it? Go along with it or buzz off? My temper flared sharp and hot, but I bit down on
it before it could spill out in angry words. Reno had sounded indifferent, but I had caught the
dejection on his face before he turned away. I hesitated, watching him as he lay still. Too still –
tense.

Reno seemed to know this could be a deal-breaker, but from everything I knew about him, sex was
just a means to an end to him. No big deal one way or another; just one skill among many, to get
what he wanted, to manipulate, to let off steam. To please those he cared about. What sort of
enjoyment could someone like him get out of it, beyond simple hardwired physical gratification?
Did intimacy matter? Were emotions even a factor at all?

My lips curled into some kind of a smile. Well now, I was quite the little hypocrite, wasn't I? If
Reno used sex as a tool, I used it like a vice, the moment I let myself slip back into bad old habits.
It was not a trait I was proud of, but it did allow me to relate. Emotional intimacy and sex could
add up to a powerful thing, but they weren't intrinsically coupled.

Still, if I was honest with myself... When it came to our, well, whatever this was, emotion was the
lure that kept drawing me to him, again and again. It had been there right from the start, had only
grown stronger since. I couldn't help but wish it was mutual. He never said anything – nor did I –
but...

Actions, not words, that's what Tyco had said. I thought back on the day's events, trying to see
them through Reno's eyes, and a strange sensation filled my chest, warm but nervous and jittery at
the same time. He was willing to risk so much for me.

I could see the muscles outlined on his back and his arm, stiff and hard. Maybe sex wasn't a big
deal to him, but this clearly was. Was he trying to offer me an easy way out? He was anticipating
rejection, and after the way I had treated him today, could I blame him?

And was any of it a problem, really? Honeyed words and empty promises, that was all he claimed
to be selling. It wasn't something I could approve of, but could I live with it?

I nearly snorted out loud. Talk about having screwed-up priorities. I already accepted that Reno's
job included killing people; if it hadn't been clear before, then today's events were ample proof of
that. What was a bit of flirting compared to taking lives?

I scooted over on the bed and propped myself up on one elbow so I could run my fingers up along
his bicep and over his shoulder. I pushed back the red mess that hung in his face, one lock at a
time, combing my fingers through his hair with each one.

"You're smart," I said softly. "Funny. Sexy. I'm in no hurry to give that up."

I saw the corner of his mouth rise a bit.

"That's gotta be the first time anyone's ever called me smart."

"Well, I know smart when I see it. Trust me. I'm a doctor."

That earned me a little chuckle, and the muscles in his arm softened. I took the opportunity to press
my body closer to his, and moved my hand down to trace the staggered outline of the eight-point
star on the back of his shoulder. The tattoo reminded me of the stylized north star on a compass
rose; like the red crescents on his face, it camouflaged the starburst pattern of a scar. His first
gunshot wound, he had told me, after three months as a Turk. Not a nine-to-five job, indeed.

The last part was the hardest. I wet my lips, gathered my courage, and went for it.
"I've got limits, though. Charm and sweet-talking I can live with, as long as I never have to see it or hear about it. But if things get physical, we'll have a problem."

I held my breath until the stiffness in his shoulders dissipated.

"I can work with that."

I kissed the nape of his neck, then closed my eyes and settled in behind him, my arm slung lazily over his waist. With every breath I inhaled his scent, as the steady rise and fall of his chest lulled me into sleep. Just as I was about to drift off, he shifted and placed his hand on mine, interlocking our fingers.

Actions, not words. I fell asleep with a smile on my face.
When the alarm clock rang, Reno groaned and slapped it off the table. That didn't stop the beeping. When he was still motionless a minute later, I dragged myself out of bed and silenced it, then pulled on a robe and shuffled out of the bedroom. To my surprise, it wasn't Elena's flustered face that greeted me.

"Good morning, Doctor," said Tseng. "I took the liberty of preparing some coffee. I know Reno needs it to become functional."

He observed me from his seated position, his hands folded on the table. Impeccably dressed, not a single strand of his long, dark hair out of place. I adjusted my robe and tightened the belt, but I resisted the urge to smooth out my unbrushed hair.

"Thank you."

I could feel his eyes on me while I took out two cups from the cupboard. I wondered if it had been this awkward for Elena last night. If so, I owed the poor woman an apology.

"How is he?" Tseng asked in his smooth, low voice.

I turned around and leaned back against the counter with a full cup in my hands.

"Tired, it seems."

"And last night?"

I shrugged, unsure of how to answer the question. "Worn out, mostly."

"Tense? Aggressive?"

"At first, yes... but he was pretty much his normal self by bedtime."

Tseng hummed, then turned his head as the bedroom door swung open. Reno, once again opting for dress pants and nothing else, paused in the doorway and scratched his head.

"Oh, hey Tseng. Thought you'd be on call with the Prez today."

"Rude is handling that."

Reno's lips quirked into a cynical smile.

"Here to check up on me, huh?"

"Rude's report was thorough."

"'Course it was," he scoffed, then yawned. "I need some damn coffee, yo."

By the time he had shuffled over to me, I had a second cup ready and waiting. As he took it off my hands, he pressed a kiss to my forehead.
"Thanks, babe."

He pulled out the chair opposite of Tseng and plopped himself down at the table with a loud sigh. As soon as he had gulped a mouthful and lowered the cup, Tseng got up and stepped right up to him. Without warning, he grabbed Reno's chin and tilted his head back to stare into his eyes.

"This again?" Reno groaned, but submitted to the examination. "Seriously?"

"Consider it part of your pre-mission evaluation." Tseng released his face. "Hand."

Reno rolled his eyes, but held up one hand, keeping it horizontal and steady. "Check the hyper stash in Fitz's suit while you're at it, why dontcha?"

"That won't be necessary," Tseng said, unruffled by Reno's sarcasm, and straightened up. "Both of your suitcases are by the door. All travel arrangements have been made. But..."

He paused and waited until Reno looked up from his coffee.

"You will only get cleared for takeoff once Dr. Uzuki gives the go-ahead. You're scheduled for a checkup at eight thirty."

Reno sank deeper into his seat with an exasperated huff, but glanced over at the wall clock and nodded.

"Yeah, got it. Thanks, boss man."

Tseng inclined his head. "Excuse me for a moment. I have phone calls to make."

As soon as he was out the door, I took a deep breath and blew it out in a sigh of relief. Reno grinned.

"Did the boss man spook ya, Fitz?"

"I have no idea how to read that man," I said, shaking my head.

"Yeah, it takes a while. Laney's all confused by him too, if that helps. It's worse for her, tho', 'cause she's got the hots for him."

As he spoke, I walked over to the table and sat down in Tseng's chair. The last part caught me off guard.

"Elena has a crush on Tseng?"

"Yeah, head over heels." He yawned and stretched. Now that it was just the two of us, I let myself appreciate the view. "Too bad, really," he added when he was done.

"What's so bad about it?"

"She ain't exactly up the boss man's alley, if ya know what I mean."

He brought the coffee to his lips and sent me a pointed look over the cup's rim.

"Oh. Too pretty, huh?"

He smirked. "Yeah. She might have better luck with Rude, tho'. Gaia knows he could use some action. Her too, prob'ly."
I snorted and shook my head.

"I didn't know your duties included playing matchmaker for your fellow Turks."

"Eh, gotta help out partners in need, y'know."

I smiled at him over my mug. It was good to see him in better spirits.

He leaned back into a shaft of morning sun that filtered in through the blinds. It glittered in his eyes; caught in the bright light, they were the intense turquoise of a tropical sea. In my time on Gaia I had noticed a few hues that would have been odd back on Earth – the red ones had made me stop and stare the first couple of times – so I had assumed that Reno's were normal by Gaian standards. Now I couldn't help but wonder how much of it came from the Mako.

I remembered the SOLDIER's gleaming eyes, boring into me, and suppressed a shiver. It all seemed so surreal; gossiping about the Turks' private lives in a sunny kitchen over coffee, while waiting to flee the continent from an unknown adversary? I would never again lead a normal life, would I? Oddly enough, the thought no longer felt so terrifying. Maybe it was the carefree grin on Reno's face.

After a quick breakfast, I changed into clean clothes from my suitcase while Reno grabbed one of the spare uniforms from the wardrobe. Tseng returned a little before Reno left for his appointment – granting me the uncomfortable experience of collecting my hazard suit off the floor under his dispassionate gaze.

I thought of his questions, of his inspection, of what Reno himself had told me. Once my suit was packed away in a box, I sat down and faced Tseng across the kitchen table.

"Reno says you were there when he was recruited."

"That's correct."

"He says you helped him with his... problems."

He watched me with a blank face.

"Is it really necessary?" I wondered. "To still check up on him like this?"

Tseng was silent for a while. Then he unfolded his crossed arms and set his hands on the table, one on top of the other. Something flickered in his dark eyes. My unease rose a notch.

"Do you know why Reno caught the eye of the Turks?"

"He said it was because of his skill as a burglar."

Tseng's lips thinned into a humorless smile.

"About a decade ago I was sent to investigate an incident below plate. One of our informants had been tortured for hours and murdered, in his highly secure home. Every lock and alarm was bypassed, nothing was stolen, nobody saw anything. We suspected a precision strike by one of Shinra's enemies. Imagine our surprise when the trail led to a teenage delinquent with a drug problem."

The blood had drained from my face. This was not the story I had been told.

"We kept an eye on him from then on," he continued. "I asked him his reasons when we eventually
recruited him. He blamed it on the drugs. I watched him even closer after that."

I was too rattled to listen to more, or even to remain in Tseng's stony presence. With some mumbled excuse, I fled to the bedroom.

I sank down on the bed in a daze. Who was the man who had shared this bed with me last night? In a single day I had learned more about Reno than I had in all the months since we reunited in Cosmo Canyon, and none of it was good. It only got worse. How many dark secrets were still lurking in his shadowy past? Did I know him at all?

The shirt Reno had worn the day before had been thrown on the bed. I had absently picked it up, began folding it in my lap. It didn't smell like him, I realized. It smelled like blood and hyper. I bunched it up and threw it at the wall.

I heard the front door open. I shot up from the bed, then paused, unsure of what to do next. As I paced, there was a brief conversation, followed by the sound of the front door opening and closing again. I slumped back against the wall and pushed a hand through my hair. Just as I did, Reno swept into the room.

"There you are," he said with a quick grin, then shrugged out of his jacket. "I got the all-clear, so Tseng's off. Grab your stuff. Time to hit the airport, yo."

He flung a suitcase onto the bed and opened it. As he headed for the wardrobe, he spotted his shirt hanging off the mirror, where it had caught after my throw. He looked over at me, frowned and came to a halt.

"Somethin' wrong, babe?"

"Tseng and I had a chat." My voice sounded strange to my ears.

"Aw, did he scare ya again?" Reno snickered as he plucked out a few of the shirts hanging in the wardrobe.

"He told me about your recruitment. About how the Turks found you."

In the blink of an eye, his amusement vanished. He stood frozen by the bed and stared at the shirt in his hands.

"Did he now."

His voice was cold. My mouth felt dry.

"You didn't tell me you... murdered people."

It sounded so dumb, saying it out loud. It wasn't as if it was news that he had killed. This, though, this was different. It hadn't been his job back then. It hadn't been about defense, or survival.

Reno shot me a sharp look, then breathed out slowly. He bundled up the shirt, tossed it into the suitcase, and picked up another one.

"Did Tseng tell ya who the guy was?"

"One of Shinra's informants."

The second shirt joined the first. Reno shook his head and sat down on the edge of the bed. After a few seconds, he looked over at me. I met his gaze, searched his eyes for... something. I didn't know
what I was looking for, but I found nothing there. I wasn't sure what Reno saw in mine, but soon he lowered his eyes and his shoulders sagged.

"Remember the guy I told ya 'bout, the one I teamed up with at the shelter? Like I said, the guy popped pills like candy. I tried to stay clean, but... it was just a matter of time."

He was silent for a while, his eyes aimed at the rumpled sheets beside him. I waited.

"He knew people who'd sell him new shit to test for cheap. One night, that's what he gave me, only he forgot to tell me it was his weird experimental shit. He swore later that it'd been an accident..." Reno shook his head slowly. "Whatever it was, it fucked me up bad. Broke into my sister's pimp's house, all jacked up to my eyeballs. Don't remember much of it, to be honest. But it was one helluva mess they found the next day."

"What did you do to him?"

It came out as just a whisper. He glanced at me through the hair that hung in his face.

"You don't wanna know, Doc. Trust me, you don't."

There was no emotion in his voice. It chilled me more than the confession did. I hugged myself and looked away.

"Soon everyone in the sector had heard about it. Turks, too. Had no clue at the time, 'course. I didn't know theucker was in cahoots with Shinra. Wouldn't have cared if I did, I guess. I just... wasn't me. When I woke up the next day in a ditch, I thought it'd been a real fucked-up trip. But there was all this blood on me that wasn't mine, and then word got around that the guy was dead..." Reno shut his eyes and dragged a hand over his face. "Fuck," he mumbled, and let out a brittle laugh. "Still freaks me out."

Shaken as I was, knowing who the man had been shed a light on what Reno had done. It didn't make it right, not by a long shot, but I could understand the rage and the pain behind it. If I'd had someone to blame for Camille, for my parents...

He cleared his throat.

"Look, I know I ain't... right. I hadn't been usin' that long when Midgar's Hope found me, and afterwards I never slipped up for more than a few weeks, but..."

His voice wavered. He stared down at his feet and wet his lips.

"The Shinra docs told me it messed up some of the wires in here," he finally said, tapping on his head. "I ain't stupid, but I don't always... think right. Somethin' makes sense in my head, and then normal people say it's a bit fucked up. But it ain't like I'm some nutcase that's gonna flip out any second, okay? That's the only time I ever took someone out for personal reasons. I don't go 'round killin' people just for the hell of it."

"Well, that's all right then."

The quip was out of my mouth before my brain could catch up. I regretted it as soon as another awkward silence filled the room.

"Eh, guess it don't really change anythin'. No way the Lifestream's gonna take me back now, after all the shit I've done."
He sounded so resigned. More regret crept in, followed by a deep twinge of shame. I had taken lives, too. Different reasons, different circumstances... but the outcome was the same.

"Anyhow... That's when I ditched my fuckup of a partner in crime. Didn't want nothin' to do with him and his messed-up shit anymore, and I never used again."

An uncomfortable possibility occurred to me. At the start of the conversation, Reno had made it sound like his boss had known the real motive for the attack. Had Tseng left out that part on purpose? He wasn't overjoyed by our relationship, that much was clear, but would he actively work against it? Reno seemed to trust the man, but maybe that just made him blind to that kind of treachery.

"Offer still stands, y'know. No hard feelings if it's too much for ya."

Like the night before, he wouldn't look me in the eye. He just sat there with his shoulders hunched, deflated. My heart ached for him, but I couldn't let that keep ruling everything I chose. The weight of the choice felt so much greater this time.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Ehh... you know what I'm like by now. Once people say why they got a problem with somethin' I've said or done, I usually get it, but sometimes I gotta think about it some more first. My mouth usually runs quicker than my sense, I guess, so if you've wondered about me sayin' dumb shit at times, now ya know why."

"At times?"

It was a tease, a reflexive attempt to lighten the mood. Fortunately that was how he took it.

"Don't get me wrong, pissin' people off on purpose is fun as hell," he said, with the ghost of a grin that faded as soon as it appeared. "Guess that's another thing that's a bit screwed, 'cause I'm pretty sure I don't always feel what I'm s'posed to. Y'know, what normal people would? I laugh at the wrong things, or I just don't give much of a shit about somethin' that's a big deal to everyone else."

"That's... pretty rough."

He shrugged.

"It ain't all bad. It landed me a career, at least. Veld figured it made me a better Turk. Said I spot things and get ideas that others don't."

Silence fell on the room once more as I took a few moments to reflect. First the bombshells he had dropped on me the day before, and now this... It would take time to process it all. One thing I already knew, though. In his misdeeds, even the worst ones, I could see the one thread that connected them all. Reno didn't act out of malice; he acted because he cared.

"No hard feelings," he said, reaching for a casual tone despite the quiver in his voice. "Just say the word."

And he acted because he put the people he cared about before himself.

We all had our regrets. We all made mistakes. Reno was still paying for his.

I pushed myself off the wall.
"You seem awfully eager to be rid of me," I said as I stepped over to him.

His half-hearted smile came nowhere near his eyes.

"Course not."

I stopped right in front of him, but still he refused to look up at me. He didn't even breathe.

"Then stop bringing it up," I said softly, running a hand through his hair.

Reno sat frozen at first, but as I combed my fingers through his hair again, he lunged forward and wrapped his arms tight around my waist. I had to grab his shoulder for support, but with my other hand I kept caressing the top of his head as he pressed his cheek against my belly.

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

As I was writing this chapter, it occurred to me that Reno would have grown up in the belief that something like the Lifestream was a bunch of hogwash. To have it spring up from the ground in front of his eyes to repel Meteor must have shaken his world view to the core – and made even him doubt a whole bunch of his justifications and life choices.
The helicopter was waiting for us at the airfield just outside of Edge. Was it only yesterday that we had left it there? It felt like weeks.

I was in a contemplative mood; still a bit raw, a bit shaken. Reno had bounced back to his chatty self by the time we began our drive through Edge and had filled the car with his idle monologue. I suspected appearances were deceptive, though. I didn't fail to notice his frequent glances my way, that lingered longer than necessary. They had soothed my restless thoughts.

The pre-flight protocol was becoming routine for me, but I still found a special thrill in that momentary struggle with gravity when the helicopter lost contact with the ground. I watched out the window as the broken skeleton of Midgar slid away below us, but once the scenery changed to the flat nothing of the badlands, I turned my attention to my purse. I had found it in the passenger's seat of the car when we left the apartment, but only now did it occur to me to check its contents. My keys and wallet were where I had left them, but I opened the latter to make sure everything was in place. Pulling out my ID from its slot caught Reno's attention.

"Hey, it's your birthday, ain't it?"

He was right, I realized. After such a crazy twenty-four hours, it had slipped my mind. I looked up in surprise.

"How do you know that?"

"Fixed your ID for ya, remember? So, how old are ya?"

I frowned. Reno smirked.

"That one of those questions you ain't s'posed to ask?"

I snorted softly and shook my head.

"I don't mind you asking. I just don't know how to answer. Do I count Earth years, Gaia years? Both?"

"Huh. Hadn't thought about that."

"Maybe I'll just stick with my last confirmed age. Forever twenty-nine."

He chuckled.

"Sure, works for me. Gives me a chance to catch up, yo."

I gave him a curious look, studying his profile. His face was smooth and youthful, but at times I would catch him with an expression that seemed a decade or two older than his appearance.

"How old are you?"

"Gonna be twenty-seven soon."

"Hm. That's not so bad. The way you act, I sometimes worry I'm robbing the cradle."

He rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue. With a soft laugh, I looked back down at my ID. I ran
a nail over the card's plastic surface, scraping gently at the birthdate. Twenty-nine, it claimed -
well, thirty as of today. It had been my age when I was whisked to Gaia for the first time. When I
had returned to Earth, about a year later, my old Cobalt user profile said forty-four.

"I never got a thirtieth birthday," I mumbled.

Had I never left home, I would have been well past fifty by now. Maybe sailing through the
cosmos on a starship, or hopping from world to world through the Gateway. Married to James,
probably. If we'd had children, they would be adults. I might have been a grandmother by now.

I slid the card back in, irritated by the sudden thickness of my throat. Such pointless daydreaming.
It was far more likely that we would have been stuck on that barren rock of a planet. Were I still
alive at all, I would be starving to death, if the thirst hadn't done the job already. Just like the rest
of the poor bastards I had stranded there.

"Tell you what," Reno said. "When we get to Costa, we'll celebrate in style."

It took me a few moments to switch mental gears and figure out what he meant.

"What? No, no, this isn't a vacation. I have a job to do."

"Hey, whatever creepy critter might be lurkin' in Nibelheim has been there for months, if there's
anythin' there at all. A couple of days ain't gonna matter. C'mon, Fitz, you could do with a break.
Tyco says you've been doin' shitloads of overtime."

That made me swallow my next protest.

"You talked to him?"

"Yeah, called him this morning to fill him in on our plans. He got real bossy about makin' sure you
got some downtime. I'm beginnin' to think the guy's sweet on ya."

I tried my best to respond to his grin in kind. Maybe Tyco had a point. One couldn't expect
miracles from a mind running on fumes.

"C'mon, it'll be fun. I know a place we can stay at, too. The Prez has a villa by the beach, all fenced
up, top-of-the-line security."

"Rufus Shinra would lend me his house for my birthday?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Eh, what he don't know won't hurt him," Reno said, grinning. "Sides, ain't like he's got any use for
it right now. Would be a shame to leave a nice place like that empty all year around, yo."

The eagerness was plain on his face. Hadn't I promised myself to make up for taking him for
granted? This would give him a holiday in the sun, too. We could both do with a chance to wind
down after the mess at the reactor.

"I suppose..."

"Nothin' like celebratin' the big three-oh in Costa del Sol, baby. The bartenders can mix anythin'
you want. You like Sex on the Beach? Seduction on the Rocks? Sloe Comfortable Screw?"

He waggled his eyebrows, eyes glittering with impish glee. I laughed.

"You've tried them all, haven't you?"
"Maybe, but I bet they're all better with you, babe," he shot back with a wink. "Seriously tho', we could rent a boat, maybe go to one of the islands to get away from all the tourists. Hey, we could hit Rude's old home-turf."

He was getting more animated by the second, and his enthusiasm was infectious.

"He's an islander, huh?"

"Yeah, from Isla Arbo. It's tiny, but worth a visit for the beaches alone, that's for sure." His face lit up, as if something had just occurred to him. "Oh, and the caves by the shore are awesome. Would ya be up for a bit of spelunkin'?"

I fixed him with a stern look.

"If you're going to follow that up with anything containing the words 'love grotto' or 'fun tunnel', I'm going to hit you."

Reno exploded in a bellow of raucous laughter. For a second I feared the helicopter might take a nosedive into the desert.

"I'm serious," he managed to choke out after a while, red in the face. "There's this really neat place I wanna show ya."

"Huh." I had to admit the idea put an enjoyable tingle in my belly. "I've climbed all sorts of oversized rocks, but I've never explored them on the inside."

"We'll have a good time, I promise. I'll even let ya hold my hand the whole way if you're nervous about it."

"Aren't you the gentleman today."

He shot me an amused glance, but there was a satisfaction in his smile. He knew he had gotten his way.

"I got my moments."

After the dead black dust of the badlands, we came up on the vast expanse of water that separated the eastern and western continents. Both sea and sky were calm, which gave us a smooth transoceanic flight. At Costa del Sol, a few changes to the previous arrangements were necessary to turn an hour's fueling stop into a three-day vacation. It took half an hour of arguing with Costa airport officials for Reno to get clearance; then we were through, and on our way to the beach resort.

Thanks to the time difference, it was still before noon in Costa del Sol. The late morning was hot and sunny, as expected, but the humidity made the air thicker than what I had been used to in Cosmo Canyon. Part of me was tempted to wear the air-conditioned hazard suit, but it was stowed away in the helicopter and I doubted stomping around in full armor figured into Reno's plans.

The Turk spent most of the taxi ride chatting with the driver in Costan, gesticulating wildly – whether keeping him in line or just catching up on local news, I couldn't tell – so I drank in the view instead. The route took us down dusty lanes past yellow stucco buildings roofed with bright red terracotta tiles. The locals seemed to love arches, and balconies with wrought-iron railings, crowded with potted plants that flowered in riotous colors and sent out vines to conquer the walls.

In the center of town, the sidewalks were paved with irregular flagstones in sunbaked hues of
yellow and orange, making Costa del Sol appear as warm as the sun above us. Occasionally I caught a glimpse between buildings of the turquoise sea and the stripy parasols dotting the beach, but it was hard to get a proper look past the throngs of tourists. The driver was forced to slow to a snail's pace, honking and shouting at the people crowding the streets. Reno leaned out of the open window, happy to add his contribution to the din, but he moderated his yelling with waves and toothy grins.

The Shinra villa was situated in a quieter part of town, near the water but beyond the cabins of the beachfront hotels. From the road, all I could see of it was a tall brick wall. The wrought-iron gate offered a peek of white plaster rising above trimmed hedges and paths of orange tile, but it wasn't until Reno had taken us through it and into the garden that I got a good view of the whole sprawling property. The villa followed the style of the Costan houses I had seen on the way, but with a modern twist and on a much grander scale; the front was a long, curving portico, set in with large, airy windows and topped with a steel-frame terrace that circled the whole upper floor.

"Whoa. This looks fantastic."

"Yeah, pretty snazzy."

Once inside, I stood in the spacious foyer and let my eyes do the exploring. A spiral staircase curling up to the second floor landing. Broad hallways sweeping off from either side into the wings of the villa, their clean lines broken up by the light and shade of the portico. Designer furniture tucked artfully into every nook and alcove. White dominated the palette, detailed in black and silver. It all felt stiflingly new.

"Sheesh. I don't dare touch anything in this place."

Reno laughed.

"Don't worry 'bout it, babe. The cleaning lady will deal with whatever mess we make in here."

"Great," I groaned. "Now I definitely don't dare touch anything."

"Shut up, Fitz, it's fine. Now get your ass upstairs and into that sexy bikini of yours. Don't wanna waste daylight. There'll be plenty of time to ogle the house later."

I shot him a dirty look, but followed him up to one of the bedrooms. Ten minutes later we were out of the house again, heading toward the beach.

On our way over, we had made a pit stop at a kiosk selling swimwear and other clothes. My bikini was a green one he had cajoled me into getting, which I wore under a loose tank top and shorts. Reno had picked out the most hideously garish boardshorts the shop had for sale – love at first sight on his part. In his lurid shorts and t-shirt, he adopted a laid-back amble and played the part of the obnoxious tourist to a T. He had exchanged his goggles for a pair of sunglasses; with nothing to rein it in, his hair hung in an uneven mess over his eyes. My fingers itched to ruffle it up even more. It wouldn't have been the first time I had done so today.

Stairs covered in painted tiles led down to the beach. I saw more towels and blankets than sand as we strolled along the brick wall that raised the town above the beach. Children and adults alike squealed and hollered in the water, turning it into a roiling pit of chaos. I was glad we had other plans for the day.

I could see why Costa was so popular, though. I hadn't caught a single glimpse of the telltale blackened bandages or refugees huddling in alleys. It was as if the Geostigma didn't exist in this
part of the world. Whether it was some quirk of the disease, or just careful preening by the local authorities, it was no doubt a welcome respite for the resort's visitors. A place where you could forget. It shamed me to admit I found it a relief, too.

Our destination was a white, wooden house at one end of the main beach. Behind it was a pier with several boats, ranging from small sailed catamarans to speedboats. It was the latter Reno was interested in.

In the shade of the building's porch stood a man, leaning against the wooden railing that also served as a surfboard rack. At first glance he seemed like just another beach hunk in baggy shorts, but there was something familiar about him – an impression that grew stronger when he spotted Reno and raised his eyebrows. His gaze shifted to me, and I saw the curious appraisal play out in his eyes. I wasn't entirely at ease with his blatant once-over of my body.

Once we were within hearing, the man pushed himself off the railing and straightened up to his full height.

"Well, well. Look who's crawled into Costa."

The greeting held bite. I couldn't tell how Reno took it; he had already donned his game face.

"Rod, ya sonuvabitch," he said, smirking. "So this is where you ended up."

The man shrugged.

"Plenty of booze and a beach full of babes. Could be worse, like bein' stuck in that half-assed concrete hell you call Edge."

One of the former Turks, I recognized at last. With the spiky ginger hair and the sloppy drawl he struck me as a diluted version of Reno, which was why I remembered him in the first place. He had picked up a tan since I last saw him, which contrasted with the white sleeveless t-shirt he wore. A rather tight-fitting shirt, I couldn't help but notice. The man wasn't shy about showing off his – admittedly appealing – physique. It made me wonder why he had bothered with a shirt in the first place. Employee dress code, maybe, as he was presumably hanging out with surfboards for a reason.

"The booze is better here, sure," Reno said, "but I got no complaints about the babes back east."

Rod's eyes lingered on me again. I was beginning to feel like a piece of meat on display. My eyes narrowed, but he had already looked away. After a glance through the open door behind him, he lowered his voice.

"You here on business, or 'business'?"

"Just want a boat, yo."

"Uh huh." Rod looked him up and down with a calculating stare that went on a tad too long, then gestured with a flick of his head toward an overweight man behind the counter inside. "Talk to the manager. He handles boat rentals."

"Won't be long, baby," Reno told me, then stepped into the building.

While he sorted out the details, I browsed the postcards on display in a rotating rack by the door, idly checking for a nice one I could mail to the office in Kalm. I didn't notice Rod sidling up until he was right behind me.
"This your first time in Costa?"

Now that he was speaking to me alone, the man's manner had changed from borderline hostility to something smooth and ingratiating. It didn't improve my impression of him.

"First vacation, yes," I replied over my shoulder with a tight-lipped smile.

"Well, you're in for a treat. Loads of fun to be had around here. Got any evenin' plans?"

I circled around the rack, pretending to look at the cards on the other side. I didn't want him behind my back.

"Not yet, no."

Rod took a step closer and leaned his arm up on the rack. He lowered his voice to a murmur.

"Well, there's a quiet lil' cove a bit outta town with a nice view of the sunset. Real... romantic, y'know."

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. There was a slight curve to his lips, but it wasn't exactly friendly; more like he was enjoying some private joke. Between the wall, the rack and his body, I was beginning to feel cornered.

"I don't think anything 'romantic' is on the cards."

"Oh, I get it. Ain't exactly Reno's style, huh?"

I jumped a little when he touched me, pushing up the tank top strap that threatened to slip over my shoulder. He must have completely misunderstood my message. I frowned at his hand in disbelief, but he didn't remove it.

"Y'know, it's more my style." His fingers slid down, skimming along the bare skin of my arm. "I could take ya there, tonight--"

I was about to whirl around and pin him with a glare – but as he said it, he flinched back and drew in a sharp breath. Reno had appeared by his side, his fist tight over Rod's wandering fingers.

"Rod, buddy, a quick word."

Reno's grin was decidedly predatory as he hustled the other man aside with a firm grip on his shoulder. He spoke with a voice too quiet for me to make out, but at the end of it, Rod did not look happy. Scowling and rubbing his hand, he stalked off. Reno returned to me, looking pleased with himself.

"Want to tell me what all that was about?" I asked, planting my hands on my hips.

"Just settin' a few things straight, yo."

"Getting rid of the competition, you mean."

My tone was needlessly sharp. The skin on my arm still crawled after Rod's unwelcome touch, and it made me spit out my irritation on the nearest target.

"Makin' sure you don't end up in trouble 'cause of me, is all. Don't wanna hurt your ego or anythin', but Rod's only tryin' it on with ya to mess with me."
He rolled up on his toes and back a few times, speaking in a breezy tone. I figured his nonchalance was an act, in case Rod still lurked around nearby, but it still irked me. I felt like a bone tugged this way and that by posturing dogs.

"Do you seriously think I'd fall for moves like that?"

Reno raised his eyebrows.

"'Course not. I know you're a smart one, Doc. I just don't trust him to know when to back off."

Flattery and chivalry in the same response. More importantly, I noted, a touch of respect. Reno really did have his moments. I rubbed my arm, wiping the memory of Rod's touch from my prickling skin, and let my temper simmer down.

"And here I thought you Turks were one big happy family."

"Sorry to disappoint," he said with half a smile. "Rod and me never hit it off. The guy can't stand bein' second best and I'm the one who caught him stealin' from Shinra back in the day. As a Turk, he wanted my job. Guess now he wants my girl."

"So, that was your 'hands off my woman' routine, huh?"

With a chuckle, Reno hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts. His t-shirt bunched up, revealing a sliver of toned stomach that was awfully hard to ignore.

"Nah, that'd just make him try harder. Told him you're in Turk custody and I'm on protection detail. That oughta keep him in check." Mischief crept into his smile when he noticed where I kept peeking. "So, y'know, try not to jump my bones while he's around. Might make him suspicious, yo."

"It'll be a challenge, but I'll try."

There was a sly smile on my lips. Reno grinned and dangled a set of keys in the air.

"C'mon, let's get outta here. Boat's ready."
What Lurks in the Dark

It was a beautiful day to be out on the sea. The breeze made an even worse tangle of Reno's hair, but judging by the grin on his face, he didn't mind one bit. I certainly enjoyed the feel of it, the salty sea air against my face, and even the occasional startling spray as the speedboat skipped across the waves.

Isla Arbo was an emerald green dot on the horizon when we set out from the pier. Little by little, I could make out more details, like the steep cliffs rising along one side of the coastline and the strip of pale sand reaching around the other. The cries of gulls and other seabirds greeted us as our boat rumbled into the bay of the scattered community on the southern side. The lack of screeching humans was noticeable – on our way from the dock to the local restaurant, I only saw a handful of other tourists.

"Far as I know, the ferry only comes by here once a week," Reno said as we enjoyed a lunch of fried fish and fruity salsa. "Ain't exactly the sorta place tourists go for."

I looked around at the weathered wooden buildings peeling in the sun. We sat outside by the wall of the restaurant, in the shade of an awning. It was wide enough to cover the large, open window that served as the bar counter, currently manned by a few chattering locals. A couple, pale enough to be visitors like us, lounged under a tree near the edge of the forest. The scene was a far cry from the colorful hustle and bustle of the mainland resort.

"I guess Rude is the one who told you about it?"

"He's invited me over a couple times, yeah. His folks live a few minutes that way." Reno waved in the direction of the village road. "Both of 'em talk even more than I do, believe it or not."

I grinned at the thought. "I guess he showed you the caves, too?"

"Yeah, he knows all the best spots around here. Shame he ain't here this time, but the ones I know of oughta keep us busy for one afternoon. Speakin' of, I gotta check somethin' with Alberto."

Reno spent a few minutes chatting with the restaurant's proprietor. I wondered if Rude was the one who had taught him Costan. It was as difficult to imagine Reno as an attentive pupil as it was to imagine Rude teaching someone how to speak.

When Reno returned, he had a couple of flashlights in his hand and a pleased smile on his face.

"Kay, we're good to go. Get ready for a good time, babe."

We headed out as soon as we had finished our meal. The trail Reno chose led us through the welcome shade of a lush tangle of woods. I kept wanting to stop for a closer look at the giant fronds and creeping vines, but Reno rushed me along, telling me I would have time to poke at the greenery on the way back.

At the pace he set, it wasn't long before we came out onto the seaside cliffs I had seen from the boat. Reno peered over the edge, then led me along another path that followed the contour of the cliffs, until we found the spot he had been looking for. The sun had dried the rocks and made it a quick and easy climb down to the white sand below – just enough to whet my appetite for the next part of our little adventure.

Reno pointed out a jagged hole in the rock underneath a jutting cliff, and with a grin I took off at a
run along the hot sand. As we got closer, though, I felt a hesitation creep in. The mouth of the cave was tall and wide, but the light it let in shrunk into nothing before it could reach the back of cavern. I thought of the winged things hiding in the dark rafters of the reactor and shivered.

Reno looked out toward the distant sea, scanning the horizon, then checked his watch.

"We're good for time, but no point in wastin' it. Let's head in."

I shifted my weight from one foot to another. "Pretty dark, isn't it?"

"Well, duh. It's a cave, yo."

I switched on my flashlight for a quick sweep. The cavern was empty and shallower than I had thought, but at the back a tunnel carved a path deeper into the cliff.

"Are you trying to lure me in there so you can have your way with me?"

"C'mon, Fitz. Where's the fun in doin' it in the dark?" he protested with a smirk.

"Prefer the beach, do you?"

"Eugh, no thanks. The sand gets everywhere." He made a face and shuddered, then gave it some more thought. "Oh, hey, the boat! Speedboat out on the sea might be fun, yo."

The excitement on his face made me chuckle.

"You're a bit of an exhibitionist, aren't you?"

"Maybe," he drawled with a shameless grin. "Right now I got somethin' else to exhibit to ya, tho'. C'mon, in you go."

Reno nudged me forward with a hand on the small of my back. As soon as we entered the narrow tunnel, we had to rely on flashlights to guide our steps. I had expected as much; what I hadn't considered was how much it would remind me of my misadventure through the bowels of the abandoned reactor. The damp sand and rough, wet walls were nothing like the dusty concrete of Midgar, but the darkness and closeness and dead air were just as oppressive. My heart drummed faster and faster the deeper we went. Soon, my fingers sought out Reno's. I felt silly for it, but he squeezed my hand and held it.

The passage took us through several sharp turns and tight squeezes – a few of them too tight for comfort – until at last we emerged in a larger chamber.

"Wait here for a sec." He took a few steps forward until his torch swept across a pool of still water in the center of the cave. "Yeah, this is the place. Turn off your flashlight."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

As I fumbled with the button, Reno returned. He took my hand and led me to the edge of the water. I heard the click of his flashlight and we were plunged into darkness. I held my breath and darted my eyes back and forth, but everything was pitch black.

"I don't see anything," I whispered.

"Shh, it's fine. Give it a lil' longer."
I fell silent and waited. The occasional plop of dripping water echoed through the caves, but all else was still. It was so dark. Anything could be lurking in here with us.

Reno's fingers squeezed my hand gently, perhaps in response to my tightening grip. Then I noticed a faint bluish glow from below and realized he had meant it as a signal, not comfort. The color shifted like a prism, from green to blue to purple and back again. As the light intensified, I saw motion in it, a rhythmic pulsing in different directions. I leaned forward, gazing intently down into the strange vision. Jellyfish, I realized. Dozens of phosphorescent jellyfish, dancing in the pool.

"Pretty cool, huh? You like it?"

An incredulous sort of snort escaped me. As I looked up, I realized the glow was now strong enough to illuminate the whole cavern. Ripples of blue and green shimmered across the craggy walls, moving together only to come apart again in an ever-changing choreography. It felt unreal, like a scene from science fiction.

I had no words to answer his question. I cupped Reno's face and pinned his lips with mine.

"Whoa," he mumbled once I let him go, breathless but grinning wide. "Guess that's a 'yes'."

As I returned my attention to the glowing creatures, I lowered myself into a careful crouch. I released Reno's hand and placed both of mine on the lip of the pool, leaning over it for a better look.

"Careful, Doc. They sting like a sonuvabitch." With a chuckle, he sank down to his knees, supporting himself with his hands on his thighs as he peered into the water. "Learned that the hard way, yo."

"I've never seen anything like this," I whispered. "We had similar ones on Earth, but that was before my time. I've just seen pictures."

"Nothin' like the real deal, huh?"

I laughed and shook my head. A picture had never stolen my breath away. A mere photo could never make my pulse race or fill me with such an incredible, giddy lightness.

"Not even close."

I felt Reno touch my hair, caress it into place behind my ear. When I looked up, he was smiling.

"Happy birthday, Fitz."

A picture could never make my heart skip a beat.

Time lost its meaning as we watched the jellyfish dance. I had no idea how much time had passed by the time he nudged my arm.

"'Kay, gotta get goin'. Tide's comin'."

The return trip through the tunnels seemed much shorter. It was strange to step out into the bright Costan sun again. Not like waking from dream into reality, but more like slipping from one fantasy to another; between a vivid tropical paradise and a bewitching secret in the dark. We climbed the cliff and watched the tide roll in, listening to the songs of exotic birds in the palm trees at our backs while I basked in the afterglow of the experience.
Screw Rod and his sunsets. This was my kind of date.

Once we were back at the village, we hit the sandy beach nearby. The water was warm and Reno an enthusiastic playmate in the waves. I squealed like a schoolgirl. I giggled. I yelled bloody murder when he pilfered my bikini top and taunted me from the shore. I hadn't had that kind of fun for years. Before I knew it, a couple of hours had flown by.

"So, whaddya wanna do next?"

He was leaning back on his elbows, his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. His red canvas shoes sat on the sand beside him, next to the rumpled pile of fabric that was his t-shirt. We had retired to the shade, so his sunglasses were perched atop his head, keeping his hair out of his face. Despite the sunscreen, his cheeks were tinged with pink.

"Looks like working on our tans is out of the question," I said, brushing the back of my fingers over his hot skin.

"Yeah, 'fraid so. Sun and redheads don't mix too well, yo."

I dug out the sunscreen from my shoulder bag.

"I don't know what there is to do around here, really," I mused as I daubed a fresh layer on his face. "You're the expert on Costan delights."

Reno had closed his eyes, and his mouth curved in a lopsided smile.

"Well, how 'bout we head back to the mainland? Could grab some dinner, then hit the beach bars for a drink or two. Ooor... we could sneak away somewhere quiet first, maybe, and I could go spelunkin' in your love grotto--"

I smacked him in the arm.

By the time we got back to the Shinra villa, it was well into the evening. Just as the gate closed behind us, something skittered toward us. Several somethings, with far too many legs. I gasped and ducked behind Reno, grabbing his arm.

"Relax, babe," he sniggered. "It's just the saucer bots. They patrol the garden at night."

Oh god, those things. The security robots that had scurried around the corridors of Shinra HQ like squat metal spiders during Orca's attack. I felt like an idiot, but the hammering of my heart wasn't something I could control. I kept my eyes averted while the little contraptions scanned us with their single, red eyes. Hearing them scuttle away was a relief, but the sudden scare made it difficult to relax. The adrenaline rush was still in full swing.

"Sit down for a bit, Fitz," Reno said once we were inside the villa. "I'll get a drink for ya."

There was concern in his voice. He even pulled out a chair for me by the kitchen table. While he went to the fridge I sat down, feeling ridiculous. The tiny spider bots were still skittering about in my mind, dredging up old, dark memories from Shinra HQ. I did my best to will them away. This was not the state of mind I wanted to be in on my birthday.

Reno came up behind me and set down an opened bottle of something pale green and carbonated on the table.
"Thanks," I mumbled with a half-hearted smile over my shoulder.

"No prob."

He smiled back and straightened up. I expected him to fetch a drink for himself, but instead he hovered behind me.

"Y'know, I've always wondered. How'd ya get this?"

He touched a faded scar on my upper arm, tracing it with his light fingertips, and I went cold all over. In my mind's eye I saw my terrified eyes staring back at me in the mirror. I was strapped down and helpless, trying to shy away from the touch, but his fingers followed until...

With a gasp, I jerked away. Reno froze and stared at me with a startled look on his face.

"The hell...?"

I couldn't explain. I was too busy fighting the senseless fear surging through my veins.

"Fitz, baby, what's wrong?"

"Fuck!" I snarled and shot out of the chair to pace in angry circles. "I thought I was over this!"

"What's goin'–" He went silent and from the way his face fell, I knew he had remembered. "I did that once before, didn't I? When you were–"

"Yes!"

I hadn't meant to cut him off so sharply, but I just couldn't bear to hear him say it. Coming to a halt, I pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes, trying to focus on the flow of air, in and out of my lungs.

"Hey, d'ya need–"

He placed his hands on my shoulders. It was intended as comfort, I knew it was, but the panic lashed out again, choking my breath.

"Don't!"

I yanked myself free of his grasp, and put several steps between us. Reno's mouth snapped shut and there was a hurt in his eyes I had never seen before.

"Just... give me a moment," I added, hoping he could hear the regret in my voice.

If he did, it didn't matter. When I glanced up at him, his face had become an empty mask.

"I'll leave you alone," he said flatly, then all but bolted for the door.

"Reno!"

"Stay here," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be back."

The front door slammed shut. I stared in its direction as sheer bewilderment drove the flashback from my mind. Eventually my panic subsided, but instead I was caught in a strange state of disbelief, a disconnection from reality. The feeling persisted while I emptied the bottle Reno had brought for me sip by sip, trying to figure out how the evening had taken such a disastrous turn.
I wondered when he would be back. I wanted him back. I brought out my phone, but when I called, his ringtone sounded from the kitchen counter. He had forgotten his phone. He never forgot his phone.

I had a shower and changed into a teal sundress I had picked up during the earlier shopping trip. Soon I was all dressed up and ready for the evening, but Reno was still missing. All I had for company was the lingering feeling that none of this was real. I wandered through the rooms, unable to keep still.

The house felt cold and distant, like its owner. I couldn't stay here anymore, alone. I needed to go out somewhere. A café, maybe. A bar, or the beach. Anywhere with people around me, distractions from my thoughts.

A few minutes later, I was ready to head out. I scribbled a note for Reno and left it on the table.

Stepping out of the air-conditioned house was like walking into a sauna. The Costan evening was just as sweltering as the day, only without the brightness of the searing sun. The faint beat of something like salsa drifted up from the beach and mingled with the ceaseless chirping of crickets. Fortunately, their concert covered the clicks of patrolling metal legs. I kept my eyes on the gate and crossed the garden with hasty steps.

Once outside, I slowed and strolled down toward the music, staying close to the trees where the sand was firmer. Simply being outside was enough to ease the flow of my breathing. The cabins I passed were dark and quiet; the guests were likely out enjoying the nightlife. The sea was peaceful, too, its waves lapping at the sand at a pace that matched my own. It was a perfect evening for a romantic walk on the beach. Staring out over the water, I wondered where Reno might be.

The crickets really were very loud. That must have been why I was taken by complete surprise when someone threw their arm across my throat and pulled me into a chokehold. I bucked and clawed at my attacker's arm, but it was like fighting a statue. I didn't stand a chance. Within seconds, everything went dark.
Okay folks, **warning time**

We've reached the third and final act of this story, and this is where things get dark. It's much like the bad stuff in the first few chapters of The Unwelcome Guest, only... well, worse. :P So be warned, dear readers: creepy, messed-up shit is about to go down.

(Should I add something more specific to the tags? Let me know!)

I couldn't breathe. Coarse fabric covered my face, pulled tight against my sore throat, robbing me of both sight and breath. The fear only worsened when I realized I couldn't move my limbs. I tried to stay calm, but the deeper I breathed, the thicker felt the air that seeped through the fabric and into my lungs.

"Help! I can't breathe!"

I tried to yell, but the words I rasped out were more like a wheeze and only made my aching throat worse.

I thrashed and strained until a deep chuckle made me freeze to the spot. Someone was right next to me. I was suffocating and some sick bastard was *laughing at me*.

"I'm guessin' she's awake."

"Get this thing off me!"

More laughter. Then I felt a few tugs and the pressure around my neck eased. The fabric scrubbed against my face as it was yanked off of my head and then I was free, free to *breathe*. For several seconds I did nothing but gulp in air. It wasn't until the man spoke again that I realized he was still standing in front of me, holding the bag in one hand.

"Hey there, girlie. Nice to finally meet ya face to face."

More like crotch to face. I was tied to my seat, while he towered over me, making me crane my neck to catch a glimpse of his leering face.

"Didn't your mama teach ya manners? You're supposed to say 'thank you' when someone gives you a hand, y'know."

His manner of speech reminded me of Reno, but that was the only similarity. The man's hair was styled into a mohawk, its blond hue incongruous with his dark skin. Reno was lean and wiry; this guy had bulk and liked to show it, judging from the oil-stained muscle shirt stretched tightly across his chest.

Even without the bag, the air was stale and hot. I was still to short of breath to speak, so I just averted my face.
The dim light came from a single source above and behind my head. I glanced around, but all I made out were steel walls piled high with industrial containers. The hum of an engine and the vibrations I felt through my seat suggested I was in a vehicle of some kind.

The man was still looming over me.

"Y'know, looks to me like you're feelin' pretty hot in here... Maybe I oughta take that dress off ya, too."

He grinned, and a fresh burst of fear surged through me.

"Move."

The female voice was low and commanding. It was familiar, but I couldn't place it. Then the man stepped aside, and a chill shot through my veins. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, exposing a face that was barely more than a web of scars – but it was those icy blue eyes that I knew in an instant.

"You... You're dead."

"Oh no, not dead, darling," Scarlet crooned. "Presumed dead."

She stood up from the bench, stepped up to me and smashed her fist into my face. My vision flashed bright white as heat bloomed across my cheekbone. I just let my head hang where it had spun from the strike, my eyes open but too stunned and disoriented to register anything.

"I've been waiting a very long time to return that particular favor," she purred.

"Scarlet, p-please! We need her intact!"

I froze for a second, then raised my head and craned my neck; trying but failing to see the owner of the third voice behind me.

"Orin?" I breathed.

"So, you remember Mr. Faro. Good. Our newest recruit is a great admirer of yours, you know."

I was still trying to look over my shoulder, but a hand grabbed my hair and forced my face back toward Scarlet.

"Eyes to the front, girlie. The commander's talkin' to ya."

"Get your hands off me," I snarled, spurred on by the pain in my scalp as I twisted my head out of his grip.

"So, you've got more fight in you these days," Scarlet sneered. "Good. You'll last longer."

Yanking my head away set off a searing throb in my cheek and my vision swam. As I struggled with a bout of nausea, Scarlet bent down to whisper in my ear.

"You see, Faro here was a big fan of the late Professor Hojo, too. Not to spoil the surprise or anything, but I think he wants to make you his Jenova."

For several seconds, my lungs refused to work.

"What the hell do you think you'll get from me?" I blurted, my voice shrill with the rising panic.
"I'm no Jenova, I'm human, just like you!"

Scarlet smiled, and traced a blood-red nail down my stinging cheek.

"But you're not, are you? Not 'just' like us. In fact, I think you'll prove much more useful than Hojo's pet project ever was..."

My chest grew tighter as the realization dawned in me. She knew.

"...because I know a thing or two about your kind now," she continued. "For example, I know to tell Kotch not to bother with Sleep materia."

It didn't make sense! How on Earth could she know about it? Who knew of my magic resistance, except for Reno and Reeve? Had Reno told the other Turks? Was there a leak?

Scarlet's self-satisfied cackle cut through my frantic thoughts like a saw.

"I have to admit, your little show with the Sleep spell back at HQ was a clever move. I should have known Reno was up to something. Never could trust that shifty little slum rat."

I latched on to the flash of anger, stoked it, used it to fight back the fear.

"If you treated people with any respect," I spat, "you might get a little in return."

"Aw, hit a nerve, did I? Well, no wonder. A woman with brains and ambition should be able do much better, really. The idiot can barely read or write."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, please. Faro tells me he saw you two all over each other. Are you sure you want to do that, darling? You don't know where that mouth has been."

She found delight in my reactions to her goading. Loath as I was to rise to the bait, I needed the anger to cling to right now. My breaths were still too shallow, making me lightheaded.

"I... know more about him... than you ever will."

"He told you all about his sordid past, hm? He must really trust you." I only noticed she had my bag beside her when she reached into it and pulled out my phone. "Boy toy has been quite distraught, you know. Trying to call again and again, asking questions all over Costa, sniffing for a trail. We might have to do something about that."

I stared at the little device. Help was so close, yet so far.

"Why don't you give him a call, hm? Tell him everything is fine, that you're sick of him, that you're taking some time to yourself. Whatever gets him to back off."

Scarlet gestured to Kotch with a flick of her head.

"No sudden moves, darling," she cautioned as he freed my left hand. "We wouldn't want anyone to get hurt, now would we?"

I didn't move a muscle. I just watched her.

"You expect me to lie to a Turk?"
"If you don't get him off our backs, we'll simply take him out," she said with a shrug. "You've got one chance, darling. Make it count."

It was a trick, it had to be. This was some game.

"You think we won't?" she continued, studying her nails. "I've got a team of former SOLDIERs waiting for the command. One word from me and they'll grind your loverboy's bones to dust."

In my mind's eye I saw the man with the glowing eyes, slamming Reno's head into the Midgar concrete.

"The others know where he is. They'll know where he's heading, too."

My voice was too small, too brittle. Scarlet smiled.

"A missing Turk will bring more of them snooping around, yes..." She clicked her tongue. "It would be an awful shame to have to rub out the other three as well, don't you think? Who would change dear Rufus's diaper then?"

Maybe she was bluffing. Maybe she wasn't.

I couldn't take the risk.

She held out my phone. I gave her a long, resentful look before I took it, desperate to buy even a few precious seconds to think. Lying was pointless, I was sure of that. He would pick up on it and start asking questions I would be unable to answer. No, I would have to warn him, but how?

"Good girl," Scarlet crooned. "If you try something stupid like naming names or places, I'll lock you in here with Kotch for an hour. He's got a bit of a thing for you, you know."

I refused to look at the man. The mere thought of his lecherous grin was enough to make my skin crawl.

"Put it on speaker. Call him."

I could use this. I had to, somehow. Reno was a Turk, trained to pick up on anything out of character. He already knew something was up. All I had to do was nudge him in the right direction, without arousing suspicions. Just a little hint or two. That was all.

My fingers trembled and slipped on the buttons. By the time I had brought up Reno's number, I felt physically ill. After a single ring, the call connected.

"Fitz? That you?"

My tongue darted over my lips. My whole mouth felt as dry as dust.

"Reno, hi."

"You okay?"

Scarlet was staring at me, a cruel smile on her lips. It was lopsided, one corner pulled too high by the scar tissue that quilted the left side of her face. The damage spread down her neck, and the shell of her ear was gone.

"I'm fine," I lied. "You don't need to worry about me."
"Where the hell are ya? I've been lookin' all over for ya!"

I lowered my gaze, unable to face Scarlet's hateful eyes any longer. Her red dress was gone, replaced by a black sleeveless top and fatigues like the ones I had seen on Shinra infantry. I saw more scarring down her shoulder and arm. She may not have died like everyone thought, but she must have come pretty close.

Scarlet was waiting. Reno was waiting. I had to say something.

"I'm... at the Gold Saucer."

"The hell...?"

"I'm sorry, I know it's sudden. I just needed some time to myself."

My voice was unsteady, pitched too high. He had to know something was wrong. He had to.

"The fuckin' Saucer? Just like that? What, you got some gamblin' problem I don't know about?"

Her scars looked like burns.

Burns. Fire. Dragon's breath.

"No, not that. Remember the play they used to put on here? 'The Evil Dragon King'? We saw that kid's version of it once and wondered what the real deal was like? Well, I have my chance. The Evil Dragon King is back on now."

There was a few seconds' silence. Then Reno exploded.

"The fuck's wrong with ya?" he yelled. "For fuck's sake, you couldn't just tell me you wanted to see the damn thing?"

I blinked, trying to get my watering eyes under control, but it was so damned hard. My cheek pulsed, my skin felt too hot, my throat ached and I just wanted to open my eyes and wake up next to him in Costa del Sol.

"I'm sorry. I was upset, I needed time to myself. Look, I have to go. I just wanted to let you know I'm okay. Let's talk about it later."

The more my lip quivered, the wider Scarlet's sneer became. This wasn't just about removing a potential threat, I was certain of that now. It was one of her games. She wanted to pit us against each other and enjoy the show.

"Yeah, whatever. I'll come find ya, all right?"

"Okay." I swallowed thickly, and forced out the last words. "Goodbye, Reno."

"See ya soon, Tess."

My breath caught in my throat. That single word was the confirmation I had silently begged for.

Scarlet snatched the phone out of my hand, while Kotch wrenched my arm back down and tied me up.

"Well, that was fun," she purred. "Kotch, darling, have someone take this to the Saucer and plant it. Tuesti likes to put trackers in everything." Scarlet handed the device to him, then looked down at
me. "Faro, put her under."

There was nothing to be gained by struggle or protest. I sat still, defeated, as the needle stung my arm and my mind began to spin into darkness.

When the fog lifted, the motion under me was different. Not the steady vibration of an engine, but an uneven bobbing and rocking that jostled my brain against my skull and made the pain in my head even worse.

I cracked my eyes open just a sliver, trying to hide that I was awake. All I could see was worn concrete and lights intermittently sailing by. A stretcher, I realized. I was on a stretcher, being carried along a corridor.

A scarred face filled my field of view.

"Heavy sleeper, hm? It's about time you woke up. Wouldn't want you to miss the first meeting with another one of your fans."

I was too dazed to feel more than a passing interest. Drugged, maybe.

"Who?" I mumbled through numbed lips.

"You'll see, darling."

"Where am I?"

Scarlet chuckled.

"That isn't something you need to know. It might interest you, though, that this facility was once used to store Jenova. It only seems appropriate to continue research on alien organisms here."

Some old Shinra lab, I guessed. Not that that knowledge was of much use. In the chaos after Meteorfall, dozens of Shinra properties had been abandoned or taken over by others for their own ends.

We passed a man with a large creature on a leash. With shiny black fur and gleaming fangs, it looked like the fusion of a dog and a black panther. Instead of a tail, a long tentacle sprouted out of its neck.

"Guard hounds, genetically enhanced with materia resistance," Scarlet said, noting my gaze trailing after it. "One of our more successful projects. Packs of them roam outside."

A warning, maybe, or just a chance to brag. I couldn't seem to muster much of a reaction for either.

My carriers came to a halt as we entered a large, bright room, and set down the stretcher. Kotch appeared beside me and undid the straps with lingering hands, then pulled me to my feet. While I tried to make the room stop spinning, my carriers grabbed me by the arms and dragged me further inside.

It was a lab, of sorts. Not designed as one, but refurbished for a new purpose like our Kalm station. I saw racks of glassware, elaborate machinery, bulky computers. The main feature was a see-through chamber in the middle of the room, divided in two by a thick metal slab. In front of the structure stood a stocky, balding man in a white coat.

"Here you are, at long last. My efforts have finally borne fruit."
His voice was calm and even, to the point of robotic. He peered at me with a detached curiosity over the rim of his glasses, as if appraising a new pair of shoes. It reminded me of my first meeting with Hojo.

Definitely drugged. My mind was present, but my emotions felt dulled like distant thunder. The effect was wearing off, though; a glimpse of the grin on Kotch's face made the bile rise into my throat.

"Here she is indeed, Kerrigan," Scarlet said. "Give us a rundown of your project, hm? We're all very eager to hear what you have planned for your newest specimen."

The name was like a kick to the gut. Reno had been right.

"Very well," Kerrigan said. "Preliminary study of the subject's DNA suggests–"

"Where the hell did you get my DNA?"

"Samples kindly provided by Mr. Faro, to prove his usefulness," Scarlet explained with exaggerated patience. "Now shut up and pay attention, darling, or we'll shut you up."

I followed her glance and saw that Orin had appeared by my side, his hands fingering the sleeves of his lab coat. He refused to meet my eyes.

"As I was saying," Kerrigan continued, "preliminary analysis indicates that the resistance is not purely genetic in nature. As with the previous subject, we have been unable to isolate the trait to any specific mutation or combination thereof."

My eyes flew wide open. I jerked my head to the side to stare at Orin.

"What previous subject?"

"Tess, please," he pleaded, sending a nervous look at the other man in white. "Be quiet."

"The current hypothesis is that the subject is completely isolated from the Lifestream itself," Kerrigan droned on as he paced. "As she was not born of it, she has neither the ability to manipulate its essence nor the vulnerability to its effects..."

I wasn't paying attention. The last of the drug's effects had evaporated in the blink of an eye.

"Orin, answer me!" I hissed under my breath. "What previous subject?"

He gave me a sideways glance, still avoiding eye contact. Still fidgeting.

"To confirm this and obtain further data," the monotone continued in the background, "Faro and I have devised a series of hybridization experiments using the subject's ova–"

"WHAT?"

As soon as the shriek left my lips, my head was yanked back. Moments later, a piece of tape was slapped over my mouth.

"I warned you, didn't I?" Scarlet sneered. "Kerrigan, please continue."

After a scowl in my direction, the man cleared his throat.

"As the subject can genetically be classified as human, standard fertility treatments should suffice.
During this period, we will restrict ourselves to level one materia testing..."

The words began to bleed into each other, lose meaning, as my breathing quickened to panicked huffs. My mind screamed, but all that came out through the tape was a muted whimper.

"Excellent," Scarlet crooned. "You may proceed."

They took me deeper into the facility, along so many twists and turns that I lost track. The panic was swelling, relentless, but the tape over my mouth forced me to breathe through my nose and kept me from hyperventilating into a blackout. It wasn't until we reached a bulky metal door at the end of a corridor that I was jarred out of my stupor. I stared at the sign on the door. Level B TG-1 Aux Service, it said.

I scanned the room intently as they led me inside, barely aware being manhandled onto a gurney as I chased down the flicker of memory. I looked past the recent medical furnishings; what I saw was the familiar crisscross of old pipes along the ceiling, the faded warning stripes, the air duct grill at the very same height on the wall. This was a Mako reactor.

Everything crashed into place, all at once. Scarlet's guard hounds, roving the area and driving off the wildlife; the horror stories of Hojo's hidden research facilities. Nibel.

"I'm sorry, Tess. I-I tried to tell them not to be so rough."

Orin's apologetic stammer brought me back to the present, and I realized we were alone.

"I-I have a plan," he said in hushed tones as he removed the tape. "It'll be all right."

I watched him. Fucked-up shit, Reno's voice said in my head.

"What kind of plan?"

"You'll see. It'll be okay."

I didn't like his strange smile. I didn't like the way he watched me.

"Tell me! What plan?"

He licked his lips and looked over toward the door, but didn't reply.

"Orin," I said, keeping my voice steady with tremendous effort. "What previous subject?"

"Shinra HQ was attacked by foreign intruders last year," he said, toying with his sleeves. "Um, I guess you know about that, since you were there..."

My whole ribcage felt too tight, squeezing at my heart.

"One of Orca's people?" I whispered.

"Two male subjects survived the initial skirmish, but one of them died soon after from his injuries. The second recovered."

I stared at him, trying to process what he was saying. Could it be true? Why hadn't anyone told me? Why hadn't Reno told me?

"Where is he? Is he in here too?"
"Th-the subject perished recently. One of the elemental materia experiments... caused more
damage than we expected."

I let my head slump back against the gurney and stared up at the cracked concrete ceiling. I hadn't
been alone. I hadn't been alone – but I never knew, and now it was too late.

"It won't happen to you, I-I promise," Orin said urgently. "I have a plan. It'll be all right, you'll see.
Just... trust me."

"Trust you? You're the fucking reason I'm here!"

Orin clamped his jaw tight. With a determined gleam in his eyes, he began tugging at my dress,
pulling it up from under the strap over my thighs.

"Stop it!"

"You'll see," he repeated like a mantra. "You'll see."

I squirmed and twisted, but it was futile. He pulled up the skirt until it was bunched up under my
breasts.

"No, stop this! What are you doing!"

Fury and mortification burned hot on my cheeks, under my eyelids. As he picked up a glass bottle
from his trolley and unscrewed the cap, I felt the first wet trickles down my face.

"It's time to begin your treatment," he announced, soaking some of the liquid into a cotton swab.

"No!"

The leather around my wrists creaked as I strained against my bonds.

"Don't be afraid, Tess. I'll make this as quick as I can."

I couldn't take my eyes off the bottle. It was just disinfectant, but I knew that once it was set aside,
it would only get worse.

"Why are you doing this, Orin? I thought we were friends."

The liquid in the bottle began to ripple at the surface. His hands were trembling, I realized.

"I... I am your friend. They promised that if I brought you to them, I could take care of you."

He wiped a spot on my lower abdomen with rubbing alcohol. The smell sickened me, like the
memories it pulled up to the surface.

"This is your idea of taking care of me?"

"Don't you see? I'm trying to help you, Tess! As long as you're undergoing fertility treatments, they
won't risk the more dangerous materia tests."

He set the bottle down, then picked up the syringe.

"If you want to help me, then get me out of here," I pleaded with ragged breaths. "Help me go
home."
Orin gave me a strange look.

"But you can't go home. You can never go home." He removed the cap off the needle and flicked the syringe in preparation for the injection. "This is the only way."

"I don't want this," I growled, clinging on to a semblance of calm. "Do you understand what I'm saying? I do not want this!"

"It's you who doesn't understand. This is for the best. Doctor Kerrigan's work will make your children strong and powerful. They will be beautiful. Just like you."

His bottom lip quivered as he reached for my face. I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I screamed, snatching my head to the side before he could touch me.

Orin flinched and shrunk back, looking like a kicked puppy.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this, you know. You were supposed to choose me. We were supposed to be happy together!"

My shriek of rage as he plunged the needle into my abdomen was the least human sound I had ever made.

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy. Want to know why we can't have nice things? My brain, that's why.

Just wanted to mention that Kotch is in the original game, as one of the creeps who work for Don Corneo. One way the Corneo's mansion bit can play out is to find Kotch chasing Aerith around the dungeon, until she kicks him down the stairs. Ugh.
I lay strapped to the gurney in Orin's lab, waiting for him to begin whatever "tests" he was planning next. Over the course of the week, his examinations had become less and less relevant. Yesterday he had administered my daily injection, taken my blood pressure, then sat next to me for an hour writing in his notebook. An hour of nothing but the sound of pen scratching on paper. By the end of it, every stroke of the pen seemed to carve into my skull.

Kerrigan, on the other hand, used every opportunity to probe the limits of my materia resistance. Once or twice a day I would be moved to his larger lab, put through disinfection procedures and placed in a test chamber. Sometimes I would be held in place behind a protective screen while an "expendable" part of my body – an arm, usually – was subjected to more targeted materia spells. I had been Slowed. Petrified and Hasted. Confused and Silenced. There were more, but I couldn't remember the names. My skin would prickle, feel warm or cool, maybe a little numb. Kerrigan had yet to reach any limits.

It was only a matter of time before they would move on to more damaging spells. I couldn't just lie here and wait for a rescue that might never come. I had to think of something.

"You were here before, weren't you? Before they closed it? Working here in Nibelheim."

Orin snapped his head up at my remark.

"Who told you that?"

"Scarlet says Jenova used to be kept here," I said, stepping around his question. "Is that what you worked on?"

He frowned. "That's... That's not–"

"I've done cellular research myself, you know," I hurried to add. "I'm very curious to hear about your projects."

At first his eyes grew wider, but then he smiled and rushed to my side.

"Yes. Well. I assisted Professor Hojo with his work of course, but..." He glanced at the door, then bent closer, lowering his voice. "I also designed and executed a series of experiments of my own. It was an elegant set of tests, very thorough. It would have guaranteed me a permanent place on the research team, if... if the results had been... less unsatisfactory."

He averted his eyes as his enthusiasm gave way to reluctance. Fucked-up shit, Reno's voice warned in my head.

"Why don't you tell me about them?"

He hesitated, but only for a second.

"I used SOLDIER cells, first generation," he said, speaking in a hush. "Unfortunately, there were some... complications. The parasitic properties had grown too weak. The subject's body rejected the infusions. The test was a failure."

"Rejected?" I asked, no longer needing to fake my interest. "How?"
"The usual immune response to an infection, really. Fever, pain, degradation of tissues. In the later stages the foreign matter was physically excreted through the skin near the injection points. It was... messy." He ended his sentence with a nervous laugh.

I just stared. The symptoms he described... He had no idea, had he? He had no idea how valuable his work might prove to be.

"You recorded all of it, right?"

"Of course!" he huffed. "I kept careful notes of my work, but they were confiscated when I... left. They should still be at the manor, but I haven't had time to look through the records."

"They're still here, then? The records?"

"At the manor, yes. The professor kept it all," he confirmed, his smile filled with pride. "He must have come to his senses and seen the value of my work after all."

"Yes," I mumbled just to keep him going. "I'm sure he did."

Orin took a deep breath, still smiling at me.

"I'm so pleased you're interested in this. Kerrigan hasn't been able to find any Jenova cells, but there are still former SOLDIERs around. When we get out of here, we can continue my work, together."

I gave him a sharp look. "You're getting me out?"

"Yes, I-I have a plan. I'll get you--" A banging on the door cut him short and made him jump out of his seat. "I'll be right back," he whispered, backing toward the door. "It'll be all right."

After exchanging a few hushed words with whoever was on the other side of the door, Orin left.

With a groan, I slammed my head against the headrest of my gurney. So close, yet so damned far.

I couldn't tell Orin of my suspicions. A potential break with the Geostigma was huge, and his priorities were skewed by his thwarted ambition. I couldn't trust him not to use it to ingratiate himself with Kerrigan and Scarlet, and those two would only find a way to twist it to their own ends.

The door opened, interrupting my thoughts, but it wasn't Orin. My whole body tensed.

"You again. What do you want now?"

Scarlet swaggered up to me, smiling her predator's smile.

"Just checking up on the progress of my favorite project."

She slipped her hand in under my top, pushing the fabric higher as she slid it up over my stomach.

"My, my, those shots do make you swell up, don't they?" She jabbed a finger into my midsection, and her smile widened when I hissed and flinched in pain. "Painful too, isn't it?"

My glare made her laugh. She walked over to the foot of the stretcher and leaned back against the wall, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You can't seem to take your eyes off of me." She gestured at herself, indicating her fatigues. "A fan of the new look, hm?"
"It's quite the makeover. Not sure it really works for you, though."

"Aw, miss the red dress, do you?" Her laughter was hard this time. "I don't. It was useful at the
time... the more cleavage I showed, the more advantage I had over randy fools like Heidegger and
Shinra Senior. Even your pet Turk couldn't resist taking a peek."

I schooled my features into a blank expression. I refused to rise to her taunts.

"How dignified."

"Dignity had nothing to with it, darling," she scoffed. "It was a means to an end. I'd have been a
fool not to use every weapon in my arsenal. Here, however, I don't need it. I no longer negotiate."

"Now you just take, huh?"

Scarlet looked me over with half-lidded eyes and a condescending smile.

"Mm. Unlike you, I hear."

"It might have something to do with the fact that I'm strapped down."

She clicked her tongue.

"Now, now, you know that's not what I mean. Orin's told me much about you, you know. He's told
me how you slave away at that tiny outpost for Tuesti, held back by your oaf of a boss, and waste
your time with that womanizing sleaze of a Turk while his dear leader yanks you around like a
puppet on a string."

My jaw tightened, but I kept glaring at her, unwilling to reveal that one of her needles had finally
hit a nerve.

"How can you can stand it," she sneered, "allowing your life to be smothered like that? All that
smiling and playing nice. Do you seriously think that will get you anywhere?"

"If you're trying to convince me that my current situation is better, you'll have to try a lot harder."

Her mocking smile only grew wider.

"You should have taken me up on my offer, back at HQ. We could have avoided all the
unpleasantries."

"Yes, kidnapping me must have been such a bother compared to tricking me into coming here on
my own."

"Well, you did make it easy for us. Imagine my surprise when I heard you were on this side of the
ocean, and heading to Nibelheim no less. If that Turk wasn't following you like a dog in heat, we
could have let you just walk straight in."

My contempt for the woman grew with every petty dig at Reno. After a week in her clutches, it
was the size of the eastern continent. I pinned on a smile.

"He must be a real thorn in your side, the way you keep putting him down."

Scarlet's eyes narrowed, and I felt a twinge of satisfaction.

"Why were you heading here?" she asked, her voice suddenly cold. "Nobody comes to Nibelheim
for a vacation."

I was tempted to ignore her question, until I realized it was a chance to confirm my suspicions – and perhaps learn something new.

"Little things caught my attention and made me curious. Like the dragon attack on Corel."

Scarlet stared at me with a puzzled expression, but moments later her eyes lit up.

"That dragon!" she exclaimed, cackling with laughter. "Now there's a surprise."

"There was a connection, then."

"A dragon had decided the reactor's chimney was a good place to roost. Not a problem for us, of course. The minute we needed more fuel storage, the dragon had to go. Didn't expect it to flee all the way to Corel, though."

Without thinking, I drew in a surprised breath. Fortunately, Orin chose that moment to enter his lab, drawing Scarlet's attention. When he noticed my visitor, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"C-commander," he stammered. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"At ease, Faro. I was just leaving." She gave me one last icy smile. "Enjoy your date, darling."

Orin spun away to face the workbench, but he wasn't quick enough to hide the blood-red blush on his face.

Scarlet left, and I barely noticed the clang as the door swung shut. My mind was already racing, dissecting the information she had revealed. As far as I knew, few vehicles had been converted to run on alternative fuels, which meant that fuel cache was likely packed full of refined Mako. If the woman had told the truth, I had found my ticket out of here.

Now all I had to do was to get out of these restraints. As for how to do that... I rolled my head to the side and studied the weakest link in Scarlet's chain of cronies, watching as Orin laid out the necessities for my injection. A means to an end, Scarlet had said. Back in Edge, Reno had talked about people thinking with the wrong part of their body.

The thought alone turned my stomach. There had to be another way.

"Orin? You said you had a plan."

He glanced over his shoulder. I gave him a smile.

"Yes. Yes!" He set down his tools and rushed to my side. "It'll be all right. Soon, it'll be just the two of us."

"Soon?" I asked, trying my best to ignore everything else he had said. "Why not now?"

Orin glanced at the door as he finger-combed a few wilful strands of hair back behind his ear.

"Kerrigan insists on his resistance tests," he said, his voice hushed. "It's the price I had to pay for their help. Don't worry, it won't be long now."

My temper flared hot, but I bit down on it. Blowing up in his face would get me nowhere.

"The guard hounds have resistance, Scarlet said so herself," I said, struggling to keep my voice
even. "Kerrigan doesn't need me for his tests."

"Oh, but you're not just resistant. You're beyond the magic of this world. You're... untouchable."

He was gazing at me, his eyes gleaming with some perverse form of reverence. Orin was the polar opposite of Kerrigan, yet the fears he stirred in me were just as potent.

"The hounds are genetically engineered, aren't they?" I tried, grasping at straws. "Kerrigan has my DNA. He doesn't need me!"

"They tried, with the previous subject." He shook his head. "It's not enough. But don't worry, we'll give Kerrigan another test subject soon." Orin raised his hand, reaching for my stomach. "We'll give him several and then he'll have to leave you alone."

I strained against the bonds in a futile attempt to escape his touch, but his hand just hovered above my hips for a few seconds, close enough for me to sense his heat. Then he swallowed hard and pulled away.

"Untouchable," he whispered, then spun around and strode to the workbench.

Bile rose in my throat. I had to get out of here. I had to get out of here right now. I would be damned if I let these sick freaks experiment on my children.

"Orin, help me. It hurts."

He set down the syringe he was preparing and turned to me.

"What hurts?"

Despite all the awful things he had put me through, I still felt a pang of guilt at seeing the genuine concern on his face.

*If you don't act now, he'll put you through worse.*

"My wrist." I glanced over at the hand that was farther away from him and wriggled my fingers. "The binding's too tight. Could you loosen it?"

"I, uh... I don't--"

"Please, just for a minute, to get my circulation back. I can't feel my fingers anymore."

Inwardly I recoiled at what was coming out of my mouth, every manipulative word of it. Orin should have seen right through me. He should have laughed, and mocked my pathetic whining. Instead he hesitated, his gaze flickering between my hand and the door.

"Please, Orin. You said you'd take care of me."

"And I will! I-- Okay, I'll do it, but you have to stay still, all right?"

I nodded and obeyed, too nervous to even breathe, while he bent over me and undid the strap around my wrist. I waited, my eyes riveted on the side of his head until he was done and began to pull back.

"Is that bett--"

I slammed my forehead into his temple, cutting off his question. My vision exploded in a starburst
of pain and Orin staggered to the side, one hand pressed to his head. He clawed at my legs for purchase with the other, but failed and fell, smacking his head on the metal railing of the gurney on his way down. He hit the floor without a sound and remained still.

Forcing myself to act through the strobing pain in my skull, I unstrapped my other wrist and my legs. Orin was groaning, but remained limp while I tugged him closer to the stretcher, the adrenaline fueling strength I didn't know I had. The straps were long enough to reach his wrists. By the time both of his hands were secured, pinning him to the side of the gurney, he was already blinking sluggishly and mumbling. I had to be quick.

I knew Reeve monitored the Mako emissions of all their decommissioned reactors. The Turks had an eye turned this way as well, thanks to the local materials that Shinra Junior's scientists were using in his Geostigma treatments. All I had to do was make a big enough bang to get their attention.

The key to the chemical storage cabinet was in the pocket of Orin's lab coat. On a lower shelf, I found the bottle of ether I was looking for. In my research of Gaian chemistry, I had learned that it had nothing to do with the diethyl ether back on Earth. Gaia's "ether" was used for restoring magical energy, much like their various potions restored the body; I had never needed it myself.

I had also read up on the potential dangers of the ampoules in my suit. Prolonged exposure to remedy irritated the skin. Hi-potion lost its potency over time if stored in sunlight. And when hyper fumes combined with ether... the results were highly volatile.

Nothing like a colorful explosion to catch the eye of a Turk.

Unfortunately, I found no trace of hyper in the cabinet. I scoured the shelves trying to come up with an alternative, but I still struggled with the naming conventions on Gaia. Nothing stood out.

I spun around, frantically scanning the other shelves in the room. Tucked away on top of another cabinet I spotted what I was looking for: a first aid kit. Out of my reach, of course. I rushed to the nearest chair and bent over to lift it. The next second I was on my knees and gasping. Searing pain shot through my lower back, like someone had stabbed me in both kidneys.

I couldn't afford to slow down. Hissing curses between clenched teeth, I dragged the chair into place and climbed onto it. I was just tall enough to reach the kit. Inside were small bottles color-coded red, green and purple. With a deep breath of relief, I grabbed the red ones. I took a sip from a green one, too. With an unsettling rush it washed away the headache, but it did nothing to ease the pain in my midsection. I had suspected as much; that wasn't an injury. It was the fertility shots.

Orin stirred again, his mumbles louder this time. I used a roll of gauze from the first-aid kit as a gag.

The corridors were out of the question, but I could use a different way out from Orin's makeshift lab. The wing nuts of the air duct grill were much harder to remove without Sparky's help and rubbed my fingers raw, but I refused to give up. It took several pained minutes.

Staring into the black depths of the open duct, I mentally ran through the route Shalua had given me, and crawled in.
The air ducts were smothering. I had to go slow to stay quiet; I couldn't have rushed even if I had wanted to, because it was so dark that I had to rely on touch. Curled up and crawling on all fours, any hasty move left my bloated stomach in agony. Worse, the ducts were filled with decades of dust, tickling my throat and making my eyes water. I really didn't want to think about what the layers of old Mako-contaminated soot might be doing to my lungs.

Shalua's earlier instructions weren't a perfect fit for this reactor. I had to reverse several times, fumbling backwards in the dark, until I finally stopped and took a few minutes to retrace the whole route in my mind. Once I located the hub between levels, it became easier: up the ladder, through the vent, along the shaft that angled steadily upward.

Eventually the labyrinth of ducts brought me to a grill that looked onto a familiar sight: a metal-paneled service corridor, like the one that had gotten me out of the bowels of Reactor 6 – I could only hope the same held true here. I waited for several minutes, all senses on high alert, but nothing stirred except the dust from my own breath. I crawled out and lifted the grill back into place, but left it unscrewed. I would need a quick escape.

The corridor was threaded with pipes that ran along the ceiling and one wall. It curved off in either direction, neither more promising than the other. I didn't have time to debate. I picked a direction at random and followed along it at a jog, my ears pricked for any sound.

Luck was on my side. Just beyond the curve of the wall, I found what I was looking for: a massive bulkhead door, unguarded. My captors weren't expecting an attack so deep inside their base.

The wheel on the heavy door required a lot of coaxing, but the door itself swung inward on well-oiled hinges, onto a large, cylindrical space. The walls tapered up to an opening so high above that it was a dim gray dot. A gigantic ventilator stack, blackened with soot – the dragon must have made its mark. Despite the many years since the reactor had last seen use, the stale Mako smell still lingered.

Pallets of drums and canisters were stacked high around the chamber. When I screwed open the cap on the nearest canister, the fresh reek of refined Mako assaulted my nostrils. What Scarlet had let slip was true. I hurried from pallet to pallet, opening all the canisters I was able to with bare hands.

I wasn't sure how to provoke an exothermic reaction with the chemicals I had stolen, but since it needed hyper fumes, I decided to start with that. It proved harder than I had expected. My hands shook like mad from the adrenaline rushing through my veins, and once I had fumbled off the metal lid from a bottle of hyper I managed to spill some over myself. Cursing my clumsiness, I splashed the rest over a row of large Mako drums. It was a good thing I had found two bottles.

The shakes had lessened by the time I unscrewed the second bottle, yet my heart was thumping louder and louder in my ears. I wasn't afraid; it was more like each of my senses was suddenly
sharp as diamond, like there was a bright outline around everything in the world. My motions were faster, more precise, decisive. I felt powerful. I felt ready for anything.

An acrid tang was filling the air. I had smelled it before, in Reno's sweat as he pounded into me on the countertop in Edge. That was when I realized what was going on. No wonder he had seemed ready to tear my hazard suit to pieces with his bare hands to get at me. I could only hope the hyper high would help me see this plan through to the end.

Once I had poured out the last of the hyper, I returned to the corridor and checked the thickness of the walls and the door on the way. They looked pretty solid. I had to hope they had chosen the ventilator shaft as a fuel cache because it would withstand accidental – or less accidental – blasts.

One final part of my plan remained. I rehearsed the actions in my mind, weighing the ether bottle in my hand. I couldn't risk opening it, especially with hyper splashed all over me, but the impact would shatter the glass. That would have to be enough.

With a deep breath, I hurled the bottle inside, then slammed the door and wrenched the wheel tight. I crouched down a few steps away, squeezing my eyes shut with my hands pressed over my ears.

Nothing.

I waited several seconds, but nothing happened. I swore and climbed back to my feet. I would have to think of something else, and quick.

The floor quaked, nearly throwing me off my feet. While I pawed at the wall for support, another explosion shook the building, then another. Klaxons went off, throwing the whole world into a chaotic din.

*Hide!*

I stumbled off down the corridor, struggling to stay upright through another series of detonations. The air vent wasn't far.

The crump of another explosion knocked the air from my lungs. The pipes above me groaned, and crumbling concrete trickled down from the ceiling. I had created one hell of a show. I could only hope someone on the outside was watching.

I made it to the air vent, yanked off the grill and clambered inside. Once the grill was back in place, I scrambled deeper, fumbling blindly in the dark. I didn't know how to find my way out of the reactor, but maybe I didn't need to. I just had to hide long enough for help to arrive.

It was harder to breathe this time around. The air was thick with dust, kicked up by the tremors and my own frantic crawling. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on my breathing, forcing myself to breathe slower. All I needed to do was hide. Keep calm and just stay quiet and out of sight.

My pulse wouldn't slow down. My heart pumped at a crazy pace, clenching away in my chest with wild abandon. Convulsing. *Spasming.* It couldn't be normal. I couldn't see, but it felt like my head was spinning. Was it the hyper? Was I going to have a seizure in this tiny, claustophobic vent?

*No,* I wasn't. It was just the adrenaline. Hide and wait. That was all. I could do this.

My lungs were already seizing up. I couldn't breathe properly. I was panting, but I couldn't get enough air.

Oh, no. No, no, no—
The dust was in my nose, my mouth, my lungs. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe!

I scrabbled through the blackness, groping, blundering, until at last I saw a glimmer of light. I clawed at the grill, at the wing nuts. My fingertips became wet and slippery, but I wouldn't stop, couldn't stop, until the grill clattered to the floor. I pulled myself through, arms shaking, hands slipping, and at last I was out, I was free, I was–

"There she is!"

I didn't even check who it was. I just bolted in the opposite direction, dashing down the corridor on blind instinct, my lungs burning. The footsteps behind me pounded closer and closer, but I made it around the corner.

A heavy body crashed into mine and slammed me into the wall. Crippling pain flashed out from my stomach through my whole body. I slid to the floor, gasping.

"We got her! Inform the commander!"

Someone made a fist in my hair and yanked me back up again. It felt like they were pulling my scalp off my skull. I screamed and clawed at the hand, but they just shoved me into the wall. The back of my head smacked against it hard enough to send a white flash across my vision.

"You've been a very bad girl, you lil' bitch," Kotch snarled in my face. "I don't care what the egghead says, you're gonna pay for this."

He jerked my head to the side, then bit down on my neck. The shock jolted me back into my senses.

"Get off me!"

I pummeled his chest, yelling curses at him, but he just pressed against me harder, shoving a knee between my thighs.

"Hey, we're not--" The other man cut himself off as Kotch pinned him with a glare, and swallowed nervously. "We're not supposed to do that, man!"

"You think that matters now? After what she's done?"

"Kotch, darling, my orders always matter."

He stiffened and straightened up at the sound of Scarlet's voice, laced with threat. He turned on his heel and tugged me along in front of him, spinning me around to face the woman. One arm pinned mine to my sides, and a burly hand covered my throat.

"Behave, or else..." Kotch's hand tightened for a second.

Scarlet came up to me and grabbed me by my chin, yanking it up so she could stare me down with glacial fury.

"You are turning out to be quite the nuisance."

Her hand traveled down, until it reached my side. There, she dug her fingers into me, squeezing until I cried out in pain.

"Commander, I must protest," I heard Kerrigan say, faint irritation coloring his monotone. "We still need to collect the ova."
"Want us to deal with her?" Kotch growled. "She ain't never gonna pull shit like this again once we're done with her."

Scarlet's lips thinned into a vicious smile, and I knew that no matter what she said next, I was in for a world of hurt.

"Sorry, boys, this one has donated her body to science."

She stepped back and looked me over.

"So. Our little test subject likes to play with fire, hm? We've got a bit of time before we're ready to evacuate the labs. Why don't we give her what she wants?" She ran her fingers over the ruined skin of her forearm, and her lip curled into a grimace. "Kerrigan, begin the elemental resistance tests. Start with fire."

As soon as I drew in a sharp breath, the hand around my throat squeezed tight, preventing me from speaking. This time, it wasn't a warning.

"That will disrupt the project schedule," Kerrigan objected. "The subject is still receiving fertility treatments—"

"Forget the treatments! We don't have time to wait for your 'superbabies' anymore. Take what you can get out of her now, then destroy the body. We don't want the WRO or Shinra using her cells."

Kerrigan's eyes went so wide they almost bulged out of his head.

"No! That is not what we agreed!"

"Do not forget who's running the show here," Scarlet spat. "You want results? It's now or never. Either you take her to the lab, or I shoot her myself."

The edges of my vision grew dim. I struggled and strained against Kotch's hold, but it only made him tighten his grip while he ground into me from behind. I hardly noticed. I was too desperate for air to have time for disgust.

Kerrigan's lips moved, but my ears were ringing too loud to make out what he was saying. Whatever it was must have pleased Scarlet, though, since she strode off toward the materia lab with a triumphant sneer. On her way past me, she paused and narrowed her eyes at Kotch.

"Don't overdo it," I saw her lips say. "I want her awake."

The death-grip on my throat loosened enough that I could gulp down a few painful breaths; it was a brief reprieve before he dragged me along with him after Scarlet and Kerrigan. I was too dizzy to focus on anything except staying on my feet.

"Kotch, get back out there and start the evac," Scarlet ordered once he had delivered me to the lab. "Salvage what you can, but be quick about it. I want this place empty in four hours."

Kotch hesitated at first, but once she glared at him, he shoved me sprawling onto the floor.

"Yes, Commander," he muttered.

As he stalked out of the room, two other goons took over and hauled me back to my feet. Kerrigan pointed to the door at the far end of the laboratory.

"Take the subject to the disinfection—"
"Get a move on," Scarlet snapped. "We're on a deadline!"

Kerrigan's lips twisted in disapproval.

"Very well," he muttered. "Place the subject in the test chamber."

The goons dragged me into the see-through chamber in the middle of the lab. While they wrangled me down onto the slab inside, Kerrigan picked up a voice recorder.

"Subject TU-021, resistance experiment number twenty-seven," he dictated. "Fire materia."

I opened my mouth to protest, but no sound would come out.

"Let's start with the left arm."

As one of the men held me down, the other pushed my arm through the opening in the protective mythril wall that divided the chamber in two.

"No, wait!" I wheezed, panic overriding the pain in my throat. "Wait! You can't do this! You can't fucking do–"

"Fire!"

Searing agony engulfed my arm. I screamed.

Gray stone greeted me as my eyes drifted open; mottled, rectangular blocks packed tight into curved arches above me. I followed one of them down along the wall. Metal cabinets covered in dials and cracked tubing nestled among shelves with round glass jars, all of it smeared with years' worth of accumulated filth. I didn't recognize anything.

Thinking back, I remembered feelings of fear and panic, but it was as if I was observing them through a veil of gauze. Every memory was hazy and too distant to recall in detail. I must have been drugged halfway to oblivion. My tongue felt like a thick slab and there was an odd, metallic taste in my mouth.

The outside of my head felt strange, too. My muscles ached and protested with every ounce of effort, but I managed to reach up and touch the side of my head. I flinched and hissed as soon as my fingers brushed wet, blistered skin. I tried again, aiming for a spot further down. Here, the skin was hot and tight, but not injured.

It was also smooth. Too smooth. Hot tears of humiliation burned in my eyes as my fingers explored further, finding nothing but bare skin. The bastards had shaved my head.

As I let my head loll to the other side, I noticed that my left arm was covered and stretched out to my side on the table I lay on. The white fabric that was draped over it was turning pink in some places, yellow in others. I frowned, realizing I couldn't feel it. I felt the dull pain that throbbed through my bones in time with my pulse, but at the same time the arm was numb, as if it had fallen asleep.

I didn't want to look. I didn't want to know how bad it was. But I had to. Struggling to maintain my feeble coordination, my fingers fumbled for, then lifted, one corner of the towel.

I stared. I just stared, while a strangled whimper sounded somewhere deep in my throat.

It couldn't be right. That wasn't my arm. I was just too groggy from sedatives and painkillers. I
must have jumped to the wrong conclusions. That... charred, grotesque thing couldn't be a part of me. To prove it, I waggled my fingers.

The red and sickly-yellow stumps at the end of the thing twitched.

I heard a door open, but I didn't turn my head. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the wrongness in front of me.

"No, no, no, don't look, don't look!"

My right arm was tugged back, and the towel fell down to conceal what was left of the other. Only then did my eyes move, crawling over the shocked face of Orin Faro. As he strapped my good arm down beside me, I was too consumed by panic and terror to even think of fighting back.

"Stop it, Tess! Please! Stop making that sound!"

His distraught babbling finally made me register the shrill wail that was coming out of me, yet I couldn't stop. It filled the room, maimed by broken sobs and gasps for air. I couldn't stop, didn't stop, until he jabbed a needle into my arm and I was plunged into darkness.

Searing pain shocked me back into consciousness. I cried out and jerked away, only to find that I couldn't. I was tied down.

Orin was sitting next to me, wearing a white coat and a mask over the bottom half of his face. He was hunched over the... thing. It was exposed again, as ugly and repulsive as before, only now it was bleeding too. My eyes flew wide as I noticed the scalpel in Orin's gloved hand, red stains smeared on them both, and I made another frightened sound, straining against my bonds.

Orin flinched and drew back.

"It's all right, Tess. I'm just removing dead tissue. It will help you. You'll be all right. You'll see."

He was babbling in near-panic, as if I was the one in control. It was surreal.

"Why? Why did you do this?" I whispered.

My words were slurred, and the sound of my own voice made me cringe. It was so weak and broken.

Orin's face darkened into a sullen scowl.

"I am looking after you! They were the ones that… that hurt you."

I didn't have the strength to argue. I just lay still, watching him with eyes so weary I could barely keep them open. Orin took a few deep breaths to compose himself. He wouldn't meet my gaze.

"Kerrigan decided to go ahead with the elemental resistance tests," he continued after a while, "without my counsel I might add, but he skipped protocol and... it went wrong. He hadn't realized that your skin was contaminated with flammable chemicals. They couldn't put out the flames quickly enough."

I remembered the screams, more than just my own. I squeezed my eyes shut, but that did nothing to block out the fragmentary flashes of memory, of a nightmare I would never be able to forget.

"They weren't able to restrain you, either. You broke free, and the fire spread to your hair, to the
clothes of an assistant... By the time they got both you and the fire under control, the damage was severe. Scarlet gave the order to, uh, d-dispose of your body, but Kerrigan let me take you here instead."

"Here? Where am I?"

"My old lab. Don't worry, you're safe here. Scarlet thinks you're dead. You're free. We're free. Everything's okay now!"

I closed my eyes for a moment, struggling to string my thoughts together. This wasn't his makeshift lab in the reactor. Was it his Shinra lab? The one he had used back when he had been Hojo's lackey in Nibelheim? A wave of nausea came over me.

"It's not," I coughed out. "I'm hurt. Need help."

Orin stared at me. His lip curled.

"No! No, it's okay now. I'll help you."

"You're not... a doctor. Need... hospital."

The words were hard to get out. My tongue didn't feel right, and it was difficult to keep my concentration for a whole sentence.

Orin's nostrils flared wider with every breath. Then his control snapped, and the hurt and anger twisted his face into something unrecognizable.

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" he yelled. "You're always so difficult! Everything would have been so much easier if you had just worked with me!"

The raspy laughter hurt my throat.

"Work with you?" I wheezed. "Like... good girl... while you set me on fucking fire?"

"I would have been good to you. I would have taken care of you. This? This would never have happened!"

I closed my eyes. His voice was so loud. The acrid stench of antiseptic and burnt flesh hung heavy in the air, making me sick, and I was so tired. So damned tired.

For a while I heard nothing, felt nothing. Then Orin gave up waiting for a reaction and returned to his work. I gritted my teeth as soon as the scalpel's edge dug into my ruined arm, biting back a scream. I was pumped full of drugs, I had to be, but the pain cut right through the cocoon they had made. The metal should have been cool to the touch, but it felt like he was dragging a white-hot poker through my flesh.

I could only hold it in so long. A pathetic whimper escaped me, then another. Soon I was sobbing, begging him to put me under again.

"I can't," he ground out through clenched teeth. "If I give you more it might kill you."

I couldn't keep quiet. For every sound I made, Orin's shoulders rose closer and closer to his ears. After a few minutes, he slammed the scalpel down on the table.

"I-I can't listen to this."
Orin covered my arm with the towel, which rapidly soaked through with red, then bolted from his chair to one of the cabinets along the far wall. When he turned around, I saw a roll of tape in his hand.

"No," I protested weakly, shaking my head. "No, please. Don't."

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice thick and hoarse, as he pulled the end of the tape free. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

When he tried to stretch it over my mouth, I squirmed and thrashed my head from side to side. My yells of protest were punctuated with panting gasps whenever my arm rubbed against the bloody fabric that covered it. Orin grew more and more wild-eyed each time he failed to get the tape in place.

My burned fingers rapped against the table, and sent a stream of agony up my arm. I screamed. Orin yanked himself upright and raised the arm holding the tape. For a second, I was sure he would strike me with it.

"Damnit, Tess!" he wailed, red in the face. "Why won't you let me take care of you!"

A door banged open. Before either of us had a chance to react, Orin's raised hand was grabbed from behind and twisted around at an unnatural angle. The roll of tape fell to the floor, accompanied by a sharp crack. Orin's howl of pain came to an abrupt end when he was driven head-first into the wall.

In his place stood Reno, muscles coiled tight and chest heaving, blood smeared on his cheek in a morbid match to the red crescent under his eye. I wanted to cry out his name; I wanted to make sure he was real and make him come to me, but the shock had stolen my voice.

Someone else strode in and took up station at the door. Reno's steely gaze finally left the disoriented scientist crawling on the floor, and his expression transformed into a shocked frown as he saw my face.

"Oh, Fitz, baby..."

His voice broke on the last word and he swallowed hard. He knelt beside me. His eyes were bright, shimmering with unshed tears.

"What did that piece of shit do to ya?"

I couldn't help it. As soon as the question left his lips, my tears came flooding out of me. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying in vain to hold them back as they rolled down my face. Reno's fingertips brushed over my aching throat and cheek, traced the burns down the side of my shaven head. His touch was light as a feather, more like a caress, as if he was afraid his examination would hurt me. I wouldn't have cared if it had.

"Is there more?"

The lump in my throat made it impossible to form words, but Reno saw how I was looking at my arm. He grabbed the edge of the damp towel and lifted slowly. His face fell, but he said nothing; he just kept his eyes fixed on my mutilated arm. With every breath, the emotion drained out of him, until only a lifeless mask remained. It scared me more than yelling and cursing ever could.

"Reno?"

He gently draped the fabric back over the ruined limb. When he dared a glance at my face, I saw
that the mask wasn't as perfect as I had thought. His eyes were alight with cold hatred, burning with such an intensity that for a second I forgot to breathe.

"Rude, get her to the medics," he ordered calmly. "Tell 'em to use potions."

Only then did I notice the silent presence of the other Turk in the room. As Rude began unbuckling the straps that held me down, Reno straightened up and turned to look upon Orin. He cowered in a corner with his broken arm clutched to his chest.

"Meanwhile, you and me are gonna have a chat, yo."

Reno's drawl held something that chilled me to the core.

"Look, th-there's no need for that," Orin stammered, shrinking back against the wall. "I'll tell you what you want to know!"

Electricity sizzled along the mag rod in Reno's hand as he stalked up to the other man like a wolf on the prowl. His whole arm was quivering.

"Damn straight you will."

Only once before had I heard Reno use that silky tone of voice. The realization of what he meant to do hit me like a punch to the gut.

"What are you doing?"

My voice was shrill as I struggled to get off the examination table. He wasn't supposed to do this, not anymore!

"Get her outta here," Reno growled without looking back.

Rude scooped me up in his arms and lifted me as if I weighed no more than a child. I squirmed and craned my neck, trying to catch Reno's eye as he loomed over the scientist. All I could see was the back of his rumpled Turk suit, divided in two by the tail of hair that flowed down his back like a stream of fresh blood. The terror on Orin's face made me sick to my stomach.

"No! NO! Reno! Don't!"

The crackle of the mag rod cut off as the heavy door swung shut behind us. It wasn't thick enough to muffle the scream that followed.
I drifted in and out of consciousness over the next few days, lost in a haze of pain and nausea. People in white coats came and went, speaking a language I didn't understand. It could have been one person. It could have been a different one each time. I couldn't recall any faces. The only thing I remembered was the smell. The reek of antiseptic was everywhere, crawling up my nostrils and into my brain.

Comfort came to me in a reverie of red fur and soft-muttered words. I reached out blindly and a warm body appeared beside me, speaking words I was too incoherent to parse. I turned my head, buried my face in the fur. It smelled of sunshine and freedom, and flushed the chemical stink from my senses. I could rest, safe at last.

When I finally awoke with my wits intact, I found myself on a steel-frame bed under white sheets, in a white-walled room. The only spot of color was the red-furred figure curled up on a mat beside the bed. When I gasped, he opened a yellow eye and raised his head.

"You are awake," he stated in his monotone calm, and tilted his head. "Do you recognize me this time?"

"Nanaki!"

What was meant as a squeal of delight came out of me as a rasping wheeze, but Nanaki's lips drew back into a toothy feline smile.

"It is good to have you with us again, Tess."

He got up, shifted his weight onto his hind legs and put his paws on the side of the bed to draw himself up to my level. As he sniffed the air above me, his flaming tail began to flick back and forth.

"You are in pain. I will bring help."

The joy of seeing my friend at my side had banished the dull throbbing in my arm. Even as I began to notice the pain again, his presence was more important to me.

"No, don't go--"

My protest was cut off by a coughing fit; my throat was as dry as Cosmo Canyon. Fortunately, Nanaki had only poked his head out the door to call for the staff. He barely had time to leap out of the way before a woman bustled in. She busied herself with the dials on the apparatus that was hooked up to my good arm while a stream of unintelligible words flowed from her lips. I recognized that she was speaking Costan, but that was all.

"You wait, rest," she finished in a thicker version of Jonuel's accent. "Doctor comes soon."

Whatever she had done, it was working. The ache lessened with every heartbeat until it was nothing but a distant murmur. On her way out, the woman stepped around Nanaki and glared at him with a mistrustful look. Her reaction was understandable – much like my own when I had first met him, flame-tailed and decked out in metal bracelets and intricate black tattoos. It was clear
from a single glance that Nanaki was more than a wild beast, but that only made it harder to know how to react to him.

Nanaki's reaction caught me off guard, though. He was crouched down, his tail swishing rapidly through the air. He kept his teeth hidden, but his unblinking eye had followed the nurse until she had maneuvered out the door. As soon as we were alone again, he relaxed and returned to my side.

I frowned, perplexed. "Wha–," was all I could get out before I had to stop and swallow.

"You are in Costa del Sol," Nanaki explained, answering a different question than the one I had been trying to ask. "You were brought here four days ago."

I cleared my throat.


"I came across the Turks in the Nibel woods. I tracked them as they made their way to the reactor in the mountains. When I learned of their mission, I offered my help."

Nanaki whipped his head around, his nostrils flaring. The door opened as he glared at it, and a row of white coats filed in. My questions would have to wait.

After far too much poking and prodding, the doctors left me alone in my room. Not even Nanaki remained; after much persuasion, he had acquiesced to leaving until the doctors were done.

A few minutes later the door cracked open once more, but it wasn't Nanaki who peeked into my room. It was Reno.

A flood of conflicted emotions surged to the surface. My mouth fell open, but I didn't have anything to say. My mind was empty.

Upon seeing me awake, Reno pressed the door gently shut behind him and stepped up to the foot of the bed. He looked terrible. He watched me with hollow eyes, hands buried in the pockets of a suit that had gone beyond rumpled and into outright neglect. I might have guessed he had been sleeping in it, only he looked like sleep had eluded him for days.

"Hey," he said.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to pull him into a hug and never let him go. I wanted to confront him, defy him, demand to know what he had done to Orin. I wanted to hear him say everything would be okay, but he just stood there and stared at me with those haunted eyes.

"Hey," I whispered.

Reno wet his lips and glanced over his shoulder.

"That furball of yours is worse than a goddamn Shinra guardhound, yo."

"He's not mine." I cleared my throat. "Nanaki is his own person."

He didn't scoff at that, or offer a nonchalant whatever. His mouth opened a couple of times, but he said nothing. The silence loomed over us. There was so much I wanted to say, but the words just shriveled into nothing before they reached my lips. Why wouldn't he come closer?

...Was it the way I looked? I didn't need a mirror to feel the fabric of the pillow on my bare scalp. I didn't need to look down to remember the gut-churning ruin I had seen on Orin's table. Reno had
seen it, too. The horror and disgust on his face were etched into my memory.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, and forced my thoughts onto another track. With a deep breath, I picked a question that had rattled in the back of my head since I first ended up in Scarlet's clutches.

"There were others," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. "Orca survivors. People from Earth."

Reno's dead-eyed look didn't change.

"Yeah. That's what Faro said, too. Their files confirm it."

"Did you know?"

A crease formed on his brow. Finally some sign of life in him.

"Course not. Hojo had 'em."

"They were caught in Shinra HQ, they had to be," I said, trying and failing to sound calm. "You're a Shinra Turk, how could you not know?"

"Look, I knew nothin', okay! It was just me and the rookie when shit went crazy, remember? We couldn't be everywhere." He huffed and put his hands on his hips, staring down at his shoes. "Hojo's people nabbed 'em and told us fuck-all. Scarlet got her hands on 'em much later, when Kerrigan joined her crew."

I wanted to believe him, so much. I studied him, every little detail, but couldn't read anything in him. He was completely closed off.

There was something else on my mind, too, that wouldn't leave me alone.

"How is Orin?"

Reno raised his eyes. I saw a glimmer in their depths, but I couldn't say what it was.

"Dead."

I had guessed as much, but the malice in that single word felt like poison in my heart.

"You killed him."

"Yeah, I killed him. I killed a bunch of people that day. So did the furball. Hell, the 'RO guys killed a bunch more. You got a problem with them too?"

His temper grew and grew until he was spitting out those final words. I was nearly breathless. Why couldn't he understand?

"They didn't torture anybody!"

"We needed answers. It was my job to get 'em."

Orin's muffled shriek echoed in my ears, as full of pain and fear as the day I had heard it. The sound of it toppled the flimsy wall of my self-control.

"I heard him! He was ready to tell you everything he knew. You didn't have to hurt him!"
"Don't you dare defend that sick fuck," Reno growled and took a step forward, his index finger raised in warning. "Don't you fuckin' dare."

"This isn't about him! It's about you! It's about me, waking up screaming because of a nightmare where you gouge my fucking eyes out!"

He flinched, and his face fell in shocked dismay.

"Why'd ya go and throw that in my face?" he whispered.

The hurt in his voice tore at my heart, but I couldn't stop. I had to make him understand.

"Because you did to him what you threatened to me, and it scares me. It scares the shit out of me that you still do such awful things!"

"If anythin', that proves you of all people knew what I am from the start."

His whole countenance shifted as he spoke, sharpening into something hard and dangerous.

"Those days are gone," I pleaded. "Shinra has changed, everything has changed! You don't need to do that anymore!"

"Oh, honey," he sneered, "the whole fuckin' world may have gone upside-down, but some things ain't gonna change. You think gil is all Reeve needs from the Prez? Think smooth talkin' and a charmin' smile are gonna solve all the 'RO's problems? Well, think again!"

It was what I had begun to suspect, ever since the reactor mission, but to hear it shook me to the core. Nothing was what I had believed. Nothing was what I wanted to believe.

"It doesn't have to be you!"

"Givin' up the suit ain't gonna change a fuckin' thing. It ain't gonna change who I am and it sure as hell ain't gonna change what I've done!"

"It can change who you become!"

His lip curled.

"Oh, I gotta 'become' for you now? So all that stuff about liking me just the way I am, that was just more of your bullshit?"

Tears were burning under my eyelids. My throat was raw and sore, yet I kept trying.

"Don't twist this into something it's not! I do like who you are, but that doesn't mean I have to accept what you do, not when it's wrong. You tortured him! Nobody deserves that!"

Reno slammed his hands down on the railing at the foot of the bed and glared at me with blazing eyes.

"You think you're some fuckin' saint?" he snarled. "How many did you blow up with the Gateway, huh? How many of those fuckin' deserved it?"

I recoiled as if he had slapped me. As I stared at him I felt tears roll down my cheeks. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe Reno would be the one to tear that scar open.

Then his anger was done, and the realization dawned on his face. He went pale, and rounded the
bed in a flash.
"Fuck! Fitz, I didn't--"

"Don't you touch me!"

He had reached for me, but snatched his hand back as I spat my warning at him. Instead, he raked his fingers through his hair.

"Shit, shit, I'm sorry I said that, I--"

"Just get out!" My breathing had gone ragged. It was only a matter of time before my composure would give out.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean it, all right?"

The door crashed open and Nanaki sprang into the room, fur bristling and teeth bared. Reno had no time to react before Nanaki bodily shoved him backwards.

"Leave!" Nanaki roared, shaking with a savagery I had never seen in him before. He rounded on Reno and planted himself between us, tail flicking intently.

Reno reached for his weapon as he caught his balance, but seemed to think better of it before his fingers touched the handle.

"Fitz...," he began, seeking out my eyes with his own. He fell silent when I turned my face away.

"Have you not done enough damage?" Nanaki growled.

He stared down his opponent with head bent low and ears flat against his skull. In place of my intelligent, soft-spoken friend I saw a ferocious predator, ready to strike. A sudden fear spilled into my gut. I couldn't say which of the two I feared for the most.

"Just go," I hissed.

The silence grew thicker with each second that ticked by. Then, I heard the door open and swing shut, and Nanaki relaxed.

"I am sorry, Tess," he sighed, turning around. "I never should have left you alone with that human."

The lump in my throat made it impossible to answer him. Nanaki planted his forepaws on the side of the bed, bringing himself within easy reach. I hugged him tight with my good arm, and hid my face in his fur once more.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy. You didn't think it would be simple, did you? __.

But hey, Nanaki's back! He actually does stay in the Nibel woods around this time, according to his On The Way To A Smile novella.
The doctors in Costa del Sol had little experience with patients who exhibit such extensive resistance to healing materia. Once I was stable they decided to move me to Edge Central, which was better equipped for experimental treatments. That decision might also have been informed by the escalating skirmishes with Scarlet's guerillas, who had been encroaching closer and closer on the outskirts of Costa.

The first three days in Edge were agony. Healing a cut or a broken bone with hi-potions brought brief discomfort; reconstructing a ruined limb was on a whole different level. The daily changing of dressings, the debridement and potion application, were nothing short of torture. The doctors were forced to keep the treatments to less than an hour a day, because neither my body nor my mind could take any more.

Yet I was fortunate to be on Gaia, where potions made that hellish period of recuperation a matter of days instead of weeks. Now that the healing process was in full swing and the worst damage had been undone, the potion applications were much easier to take. It was still a painful and disconcerting experience, but it no longer left me sobbing and soaked in cold sweat.

Complete recovery would take weeks, maybe months. The doctors weren't sure. They were pleased with my progress, though, and claimed I would regain most of the function in my fingers by the end of the process. One of them even dared hope that the scarring would be minimal.

Nanaki stayed with me. He let me cry into his fur whenever the pain and the nightmares got the best of me, and told me stories of his travels and cubhood to pass the time. He had spent many months in the wild, he explained, and his feral instincts had grown strong. We were helping each other along the path toward a balanced mind, he claimed. I dismissed that at first as a well-meaning platitude, but as Nanaki supported me through recovery, I noticed that he regained more and more of his philosophical temperament.

Reno didn't return. Nanaki thought it was for the best. I nodded and wore a brittle smile to hide the hole in my heart.

The more days that passed, though, the more I wondered if Nanaki was right. The things Reno was prepared to do, the things he had done to me in that interrogation room... It had been too easy to convince myself that his Turk stripes were fading, that they would become nothing more than a dark memory to bury in the past. Now that I knew better... was it even possible to work through something like this? Would I just be lying to myself, again and again?

Or maybe Reno was right, and I was a pathetic little hypocrite who pointed the spotlight on his sins just to draw attention from my own. My guilt for what I had done back on Earth hadn't stopped me from wreaking havoc once again. Had I killed more people in that Mako explosion? It was possible.

The fate of the Orca survivors on Gaia preyed on my thoughts as well. Had they died afraid and alone, each believing they were the only human left on this alien planet? I had failed my homeworld, but could I have done something to save those people, had I known sooner? Why had it never occurred to me to ask about the Orca soldiers left behind in the attack?

"How can you stand it?" I asked Nanaki in a fit of frustration. "The loneliness? The knowledge that the rest of your kind is gone?"
"There is no quick path. The one that leads out of the darkness requires time. Time and forgiveness."

He lay on his mat beside my bed, large head resting on his paws. His triangular ears were upright, and his tail formed a complacent curve around his body; his whole body said that he was at peace with his words. I envied him.

"I guess it's easier to forgive and forget when others are to blame," I muttered, picking at a loose thread on my blanket.

"Oh, no, not forget. One must remember, so that one can learn. For this, forgiveness is necessary, as is acceptance. When one accepts and forgives, one may remember without pain."

"That's a very enlightened attitude."

Nanaki bared his teeth in his feline adaptation of a smile.

"They are my grandfather's words. He was a very enlightened man."

"I wish I'd had the chance to meet him," I said with half a smile of my own.

"So do I."

Nanaki closed his eye. We fell into silence, but I was not comfortable in it. Soon, I spoke up again.

"You have... killed?"

"Yes."

It was a simple statement. Not proud, or ashamed; just a fact.

"I have lives on my conscience, too," I confessed, staring at my hand. It had formed a fist around the blanket.

"A warrior must do what is required. We accept this burden, so that others never have to feel the weight of it."

Someone's gotta do what it takes to keep things rollin', yeah?

I wasn't sure what made Reno's old remark return to mind. The similarity of the sentiment, perhaps. It was odd in a way, how much the guardian and the Turk had in common. I doubted either of them would appreciate the comparison.

It startled me to realize how easily Reno had slipped back into my thoughts. He kept doing it, again and again. I slammed the breaks on that train of thought, shut the door on those memories. I didn't want to think about him. That pain hurt worse than any other.

Some fighter I was.

"I'm not a warrior," I sighed.

"Yet you bear the burden well, in your way."

"Okay, now I know you're full of it."

Nanaki's purring cough of a laugh made his whole body vibrate.
"You respect the burden, you understand its weight, but you have not let it break you. You continue to fight, and fight well." He shot me a sideways glance, the corner of his mouth stretching. "For a human in a white coat."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "I think."

His tail twitched a few times in amusement, then it stilled again.

"It has a purpose, this burden. In time, as you accept it, even embrace it, you will find its weight on your shoulders has made you stronger than you thought possible."

I snorted. "You really think so?"

"It is what I choose to believe."

Nanaki made it sound so simple. Choose a belief. Pick your flavor of reality.

"I'm a scientist. I don't choose beliefs."

He tilted his head to give me a searching look with his single eye.

"Treat it as a hypothesis, then. Observe your spirit, analyse, contemplate. Sooner or later... you will discover that my kind is wiser than yours."

The flaming tail was twitching again. I chuckled.

"Smooth, Nanaki."

"I do try."

In spite of my doubts, my heart felt a little lighter. Perhaps Nanaki was on to something.

The sound of voices startled me out of my slumber.

"...Please, I'm Tyco. Tyco Finnegan. I work with her in Kalm."

I snapped my eyes open to see him by the door, watched by a vigilant Nanaki. A big smile spread across my face.

"He's a friend," I called to Nanaki, then turned to my visitor. "Tyco, this is Nanaki, a friend from Cosmo Canyon."

"Um. Hi," he said, and gave a small wave to Nanaki.

"Greetings."

Nanaki lowered his head onto his front paws. He kept his eye open.

I gave Tyco a once-over as he took a seat in the chair by my bed. He wore a navy t-shirt with long sleeves rolled down, and he had left his blonde hair loose. With a backpack slung over his shoulder, he looked more like a high-school student than a science nerd – and nothing like a Turk.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" he countered, arching an eyebrow.
I gave him a faint smile.

"How is the world holding up, then? I don't get much in the way of news in here."

He was surreptitious about looking me over, but I noticed his eyes lingering on my bandaged arm, on my bald head. I always noticed, these days. Fortunately, he answered my question instead of remarking on my appearance.

"Confused. Disorganized." He sighed. "Costa has the situation under control on their end, more or less, but it's worse this side of the sea. Most citizens hadn't realized that Shinra's military isn't around to come to the rescue anymore. Reeve is raising a temporary militia, but they're struggling to muster a defence, let alone a counterattack. Scarlet had built up more of a force on this continent than we thought, and now they're coming at us from all directions."

As bad as that sounded, I appreciated his honesty.

"What about the Kalm branch?"

"Everyone's safe, but Reeve ordered us all to Edge until the danger's over. Don't be upset if the others don't drop by, though. They think you're still in Costa. The fewer who know where you are, the better."

I nodded, though that hardly lifted my spirits either.

"How much do they know?"

"That you were caught in the crossfire during one of the first raids and you were seriously injured, but that you're out of danger now." He grinned. "Jon is brokenhearted, of course. We could barely keep him from hopping on the next boat to Costa. We're worried he might try to swim across next."

I rolled my eyes, but smiled.

"Oh, and before I forget." Tyco opened his backpack and pulled out a book. "Here," he said, handing it to me. "Thought you might like something to look at while you're stuck here."

I checked out the cover, then flipped it over to look at the back.

"Recipes from the frigid North, huh?"

"Yeah. These are the dishes I grew up with, which is probably why I haven't made them much. They're good, though. Pick out a few you'd like to try. We'll give them a go when things calm down again."

"Sounds like a plan."

I smiled. So did he, but there was something withdrawn about it; about all of him.

"Well, I should get going. I'm flying out to Junon in half an hour. I promised to help," he glanced at Nanaki, "...a friend smoke Scarlet's people out of hiding."

A Turk, in other words. Cissnei? Reno? I should have known Tyco wouldn't sit idly by while Scarlet's war party was on the loose. I wondered if he had told anyone of his Geostigma. Not that it would change anything. Reeve and the Turks still needed all the help they could get.

"Thanks for coming by. Be careful."
"I always am," he said with half a smile, then placed his hand on my good one to give it a gentle squeeze. "Take care, Tess."

His hand lingered a few heartbeats. We exchanged smiles, and I tried my hardest to believe that we would get to try out his recipe book. I wondered if he was doing the same.

He got up, but instead of heading straight for the door, Tyco hesitated by the foot of my bed. "That friend will be flying me there."

I dropped my gaze to the covers, saying nothing.

"Want me to tell him anything?"

Reno's cruel words rang loud, echoing through the hollow in my heart. "No," I whispered.

He sighed.

"Okay. I'll come visit once I get back."

Nanaki watched him leave. He glanced at me, then continued to stare at the door, his tail swishing in restless swipes.

"It's all right," I said. "I know he has the Stigma."

His tail stilled.

"I am sorry."

I gave him a sad smile. "That makes three of us."

Reeve dropped in to visit, too. He couldn't stay long, but he promised to come back soon and left Cait Sith with me. I appreciated the sentiment, at least.

Once I felt strong enough to venture out of my room, the toy cat insisted on following me. Nanaki was equally reluctant to let me wander on my own. I shambled to the patient lounge with both of them in tow, feeling like the craziest cat lady on the planet. Once I reached the room, I had to take a seat at one of the tables to catch my breath.

"For your information, guys, this sucks so hard," I grumbled.

Cait patted my good arm, its plush features scrunched up into what I assumed was meant to be a sympathetic frown.

"Even the greatest of whales is helpless in the desert," it said, nodding sagely.

I gave it a long stare.

"Was that intended to be comfort?"

"Um...," it said, scratching the back of its head. "Sure?"

"I think you need to work on your material. Maybe start by never comparing me to a whale."
"Especially the greatest of whales," Nanaki added, his nose wrinkling in mirth.

Cait's tiny cat shoulders sagged.

"Aww. I really thought I had something there. Reeve just checked my fortunes module and everything!"

Our mismatched group had drawn the attention of the other two patients in the lounge. One of them gaped at Cait Sith, but the other kept staring at my arm, trying to glare through my bandages.

"That ain't the Stigma, is it?" he asked when he noticed my pointed look.

"No," I mumbled, pulling my sleeve lower. "Burns."

"It's infectious, they say. Something in the water, leaking out of those damn reactors."

I hated the way he stared at my arm. I didn't look at it. I never looked at it.

"Is that so?"

"All that Mako keeping the city running, that's what caused it. It got in the water when Meteor shook the city apart. That's when people got sick."

It wasn't the official hypothesis, but I had heard a similar rumor over a pub lunch before. I hadn't paid it much attention at the time; just another wild speculation among the many percolating around Kalm. It had been before my meeting with Rufus Shinra. Long before Tyco's collapse.

"Where'd you hear that?"

The man shrugged.

"Everybody knows it. It's the Mako. Ask any of them. You sure you don't have it?"

He was staring again. I gritted my teeth.

"I'm sure."

"Saw a bunch of Midgar slummers near the plaza last week, got that black stuff all over them. Some gang of skinheads."

His eyes had shifted to the top of my head. The sudden shame cut deep, much deeper than I had thought it could.

"Excuse me?" I spat.

"Time to get back to bed!" Cait Sith said, giving my good hand a tug. "You need your rest, Doctor."

Restraint, from Cait Sith? That was a new one. Maybe Reeve was pulling the strings.

"Yes. Yes, I do."

I let the toy guide me through the corridors. I was in a daze, oblivious to my surroundings. The conversation had unleashed a scramble of thoughts – not the man's rudeness, but his assertions about the Geostigma's origins.
"Is it true, what he said?" I asked my companions. "Do people believe that Mako pollution caused the Stigma?"

"It's a common belief, yes," Cait said, "but, I don't think it's that simple. Extensive tests on leakage and exposure to radiation pollution were performed with the prototype reactor, long before the construction of Midgar began. We've never seen anything like the Geostigma before."

That confirmed one thing. Reeve was definitely at the helm right now.

The patient's claims didn't tally with what Rufus Shinra had told me. What about the research teams at the hospitals? Were they just as ignorant, chasing down false leads because they didn't know what they were dealing with? It was plausible; likely, even. The Jenova project had been top secret, and Rufus Shinra would not be keen to reveal that kind of information – especially when it would expose Shinra's culpability for the deadliest plague in Gaian history.

No, Rufus would prefer an obedient team of scientists that he could keep firmly under his thumb. I wondered how much of Hojo's twisted research had survived Meteorfall. How many knew of Jenova now that he and most of his team were gone? How many, aside from me?

Nanaki slowed his pace and lowered his head, his ears flattened. Cait and I turned to see what he was staring at, and my surprise scattered my thoughts.

The blonde Turk, Elena, was rushing in our direction. It didn't seem to be us she was looking for; as soon as she noticed Nanaki's glare, she came to an abrupt halt and stood in the hallway, looking from one cat to the other, at a loss for what to do. Then she saw me. It took her a second before her hazel eyes, tired and red-rimmed, went wide with shock.

So soon after the man's tactless comments, her reaction was too much.

"Let's go," I growled, stalking off again.

Elena still stared. She opened and closed her mouth several times, as if wanting to speak. There was anguish on her face, too much to be simply from my appearance. I stopped and gave her a concerned look.

"Elena? What is it?"

My question made her even more awkward. She looked like she wanted to turn tail and run.

"Nobody... Nobody's told you yet, have they?"

"Told me what?"

It came out sharper than I had intended, but it snapped her out of her panic.

"Rude just arrived at the hospital with critical injuries," she blurted in a breathless rush. "He's in surgery."

My legs seemed to lose the last of their strength.

"What happened?" I demanded, fumbling for the wall for support.

"He jumped when they were shot down, but his parachute got shot up by the attackers. He hit the ground hard."

Something icy cold had dug its claws into my gut at that one, terrifying word.
"They?"

Elena wet her lips, and hesitated.

"Reno was the pilot. We couldn't find him."
I sat in the dim room, watching the slow rise and fall of Rude's chest. The steady beeps of the machinery attached to him filled the room with more sound than the man would ever produce himself. Unlike the quiet times I had spent with Rude, I found this silence unbearable. He may have preferred to remain in the background, but he had been a presence nonetheless, strong and irrefutable. Not mute, not lifeless, like this.

The door opened. Upon seeing who stepped inside, my mouth fell open.

"Reeve!"

I shot out of the chair and flung my good arm around his neck.

"Tess, I'm so sorry," he murmured into my shoulder, and I allowed myself several moments to soak up the comfort he offered.

Once I let him go, Reeve walked up beside the bed to look over Rude's motionless form.

"Do you know what happened?" I asked as I resumed my post in the chair.

"Unknown aircraft attacked them as they were crossing the Grasslands. When the helicopter was shot and crippled, Reno told Rude to jump, but never got the chance to do so himself. The aircraft forced him west into the Marshes, and that's not a good place to land or jump."

I closed my eyes and tried to picture the geography of the eastern continent. A zigzagging range of mountains cut the massive continent in two. Above them lay Midgar, Edge and Kalm to the northwest; the wetlands were to the southeast of the three, wedged into a deep dip in the mountain range that opened up into the vast plains of the Grasslands.

"Reno decided his best chance was to stay in the air until he could reach the other side," Reeve continued. "By the time the engine died, he was close enough to attempt an emergency landing at the foot of the mountains instead of in the swamp. There's been no communication since then."

"When will the search party reach him?"

Reeve was silent for so long that I looked up. He met my puzzled gaze for a second, then turned back to Rude.

"There's no search party."

"What? Why?"

"A fog has rolled down from the mountains. We can't send in any aircraft right now."

The knot in my stomach tightened. I stared down at Rude, taking what slim comfort the steady rise and fall of his chest offered me.

"How soon before it lifts?"

"There's been no forecast of wind. It could be days."

I stared at him, stunned.
"He could be injured! He might not have days!"

I had grabbed his arm. Reeve glanced down at my hand, then returned his gaze to Rude.

"I know, Tess. I know. I've come at this from every angle, believe me."

I kept staring up at him, hoping I had misunderstood, but the grim look on his face confirmed my fears.

"You're just leaving him there?" I whispered.

"The WRO is under attack. Even if I had aircraft to spare, which I don't, our own casualties come first. We have to leave this to Shinra."

"We're not talking about some random Shinra goon here," I snapped. "This is Reno. Our Reno!"

Reeve finally looked me in the eye.

"I'm not happy about this either. Believe me. I'm sorry."

He closed his eyes, and reached up to knead them with a thumb and forefinger. If the dark bruises under them were anything to go by, he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks. The situation was pushing Reeve to his limits as it was. He didn't need me shouting at him.

With a hiss of frustration, I decided to try a different tack.

"What about Tyco? The rest of the former Turks?"

He rubbed his face with a tired sigh.

"We'd need a pilot, which Tyco isn't. He's in Junon, anyway. The others we've been able to contact and convince to help are busy fighting Scarlet's people all over Nibel and Junon already. There's just too few of us."

"Hospitals, then. There has to be some kind of emergency service we can use?"

Reeve shook his head.

"The ones based in Midgar or Junon would have to cross the mountains to reach him. They don't have the means to do so."

"What about the east?"

"There are no major towns on that side of the mountains we could contact. Besides, the marshes make the approach too difficult."

I wasn't very familiar with the area, but I had heard about the marshes. I dug through my memory for what Chelsea had told me. Treacherous terrain, she had said, full of dangerous wildlife. Difficult, yes; but possible to traverse with the right preparations.

"A hazardous environment, huh? I've got just the thing for that."

Reeve turned his head to look at me. The twin creases between his eyebrows deepened as he examined my face.

"You've got to be joking."
"I'm told a spot of fresh air and light exercise will aid recovery. Doctor's orders."

With an incredulous snort, he shook his head.

"I don't think this qualifies as 'light'."

"With Sparky, it'll be a walk in the park."

"Tess, I don't think that's--"

"I'm not leaving him out there!"

My voice was firm and my gaze unflinching, but Reeve wasn't ready to give in.

"You cannot go out there either," he protested. "You're still recovering from your own injuries!"

"At this point, my treatment boils down to regular doses of X-potion. The hyper injection system in my suit has a manual mode. I'll just switch the ampoules."

"The mountains are hundreds of miles away! How would you even get there?"

"I don't know yet, but I'll bloody well walk if I have to!"

"You barely made the walk to the lounge yesterday!"

The silence grew thick as we stared each other down for the better part of a minute. Then Reeve sighed and shook his head.

"Reno stopped speaking to me after I let you go back to Earth during Orca's attack. If I let you go out there now and get yourself killed, he'll never forgive me. Or you, for that matter."

His words only strengthened my resolve.

"He won't have to. I'll be careful."

He was quiet for a while, his hands squeezing the railing of Rude's bed.

"Okay... let's make a deal," he said. "I'll fix up Sparky, help you with a plan and find you a guide, if – and only if – the hospital grants you an official release."

"Deal. I'll find you at the 'RO office."

Reeve left. I turned back to Rude's motionless form and placed my hand over his.

"I'll find him," I promised. "I'll bring him back. Don't you worry."

Reeve's deal was cunning. The doctors point-blank refused my request for an early release and no amount of argument or pleading would change their minds. I, in turn, refused to take no for an answer. I recruited Cait Sith to bring me a change of clothes. The toy was reluctant, but its need to be useful prevailed. It brought me a hoodie, sweatpants and a pair of high-tops, all of them a couple of sizes too large. One of the pockets contained a crumpled twenty-gil bill. I didn't ask; Cait didn't tell.

The elevators were right next to a windowed room that served as a reception desk. I recognized one of the three people inside, so they were likely to recognize me. I preferred not to risk unwanted
questions.

"Cait, feel up to providing a bit of distraction?"

"What?" the toy squealed. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Just do what you do best."

As I watched, the terrified expression gave way to understanding, then a sly grin. I gave the cat an encouraging smile and flicked my chin in the direction of the station. With an excited little leap, Cait took off and scurried around the corner. Moments later I saw the trio turn their heads toward the opposite side of the room.

"Hullo there, lasses and laddie! Might I interest you in a fortune or two?"

No one paid me any attention as I approached the elevator and pressed the button. I didn't get so much as a glance while I waited. Cait's prattle was still keeping the staff entertained when the doors slid closed behind me.

It wasn't until I stepped onto the sidewalk outside the hospital that somebody called my name. I pretended not to hear them. If I made it to the plaza avenue, I might be able to lose my pursuer in the crowd. I picked up the pace.

"Dr. FitzEvan! Wait!"

This time I recognized the voice. With a deep sigh, I slowed down enough to let Elena catch up with me. It wasn't as if I would be able to shake a Turk, especially in my current state. She fell into step beside me, her breathing heavy and her face flustered. I wondered how long she had been running after me.

"Reeve Tuesti says you're planning to look for Reno," she blurted out.

At least she got straight to the point. I could appreciate that.

"I'm not 'planning' to. I'm going to."

"Then I'm going with you."

I narrowed my eyes, and studied her determined face.

"Did Tseng send you?"

"No, he hadn't even heard about it yet. I requested permission to join you."

It surprised me, but she seemed sincere.

"I thought you didn't like Reno very much," I said, my suspicion giving way to curiosity.

"Well... at first I thought he was just a bully," she admitted, her cheeks turning pink, "but that was before I got to know him. Now he's more like a super-annoying big brother who never stops teasing you, but it's okay because you know that if someone else tries to pick on you, he'll take them out in a heartbeat."

Elena had a talkative streak. Unlike Reno, though, her own rambling seemed to stem from nervousness.
"That sounds like him, all right," I said with a faint smile.

"Reno has always been there to bail me out of trouble. I just want to return the favor."

"You and me both." I gave it some thought. "Does Shinra have another helicopter?"

"Yes."

"Can you fly it?"

"Um, yes. Not very well yet, but--"

"Good. Have it ready to fly in two hours."

"I-I can't just take it whenever I want. It's for the President's personal use. I'll need his permission!"

Elena's eyes were wide, her mouth ajar. It felt inappropriate to describe a Turk as horrified, but that was exactly how she looked.

"Is he coherent?" I asked.

"Um, not exactly," she said after a quick glance around. "He's been down with a fever for the past couple of days."

Just the answer I had been hoping for.

"Well, we'd better not disturb him, then. I imagine Tseng's permission is the next best thing?"

"Oh," she breathed as her face lit up. "Yes, that's true!"

"We've got work to do, then. I'll get my suit ready, you get the chopper. Give Reeve a call when it's all sorted. I'm sure you can find his number."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I kept the smile off my face until Elena had scurried off to see to her new task. Her reply must have been automatic. Then I thought of Reno and his responses to her habitual "sirs", and my smile faded. I hurried my steps once more.

At the WRO building, the receptionist took me to the computer lab that Reeve had commandeered. Walking into the brightly lit elevator brought an unpleasant shock. I had forgotten that the walls were mirrored; a view surrounded me, repeating into infinity, of my bare, pallid head covered in a shadow of patchy stubble. My eyes were puffy, and half an eyebrow was missing on the left side. It was a miracle the receptionist had recognized me at all.

I glared at the toes of my oversized sneakers, furiously blinking away the tears until we reached the right floor.

Tools and machine parts were piled up on one of the workbenches. Atop its neighbor, the back piece of Sparky was splayed open, its ampoule cylinder removed and currently in Reeve's hands. Shalua Rui leaned over the other side of the table, observing with great interest. Her eyes went wide when she saw me and darted from my shaved scalp down to the bandages on my hand. My jaw clenched, but I nodded and she returned the greeting.

"Thank you for your help, Shalua," Reeve said. "I'll let you get back to work."
Disappointment flickered on her face, but she said her goodbyes and left. Reeve looked up as I approached.

"I see the fugitive has arrived."

He continued slotting ampoules into one of the cartridges. The tiny capsules were a deep magenta, the color of X-potion.

"Am I to understand the hospital has noted my absence?" I asked casually, bending down for a peek at the exposed innards of the piece on the table. Nothing seemed out of place. Reeve must have taken the opportunity to do a bit of maintenance.

"When you were transferred to Edge I asked the staff to keep a watchful eye on you, as a favor for the WRO. It was Cait Sith's job, too, for that matter. Apparently, my efforts were in vain."

"Don't underestimate a woman on a mission."

"My mistake," Reeve said and set the cylinder down, then gave me a melancholy smile that was much warmer than his greeting had been. "How are you doing? Be honest with me, please."

"I'm okay. Honestly. I've been better, but I've been a hell of a lot worse, too. I can do this."

It wasn't too big a stretch of the truth. Reeve sighed and nodded.

"All right, let's get you suited up, then. Sparky's ready for recalibration."

In hospital pajamas and hoodie I had been able to ignore how bloated I was, but the undersuit was now depressingly tight around the waist. It would disappear with time, I had been told, once my hormones settled back into their natural cycle. That was no comfort right then and there. The suit felt heavier than usual, too; by the time Sparky's power-assisted movement kicked in, beads of sweat had formed on my temples.

Reeve worried, made another plea for a change of heart. I waved away his concerns.

Then came the tweaking of the suit's systems. Sparky's user monitoring needed a new baseline and the movement responses had to be recalibrated. As I had feared, the left arm was troublesome. I only had my thumb and two half-functional fingers, so Reeve locked the last two to the movements of my middle finger. The suit was slow to respond to my cues, too. He resynched, twice, but the response remained imprecise. Finally I huffed in frustration and let my arm fall limp.

"It's not working. It still feels clumsy."

"The tissue damage and the bandages are both interfering with the sensors in your undersuit. It's nothing I can fix on such short notice, I'm afraid."

"Fan-frigging-tastic," I muttered, glaring at my useless lump of a limb.

"I have something else for you, though."

Reeve waved me over to a computer screen. It was showing a map of the eastern continent, with a number of lines converging near the top middle of the landmass.

"I've had Cait run simulations from the helicopter's known flight path, local geography and weather conditions," he explained as he zoomed in on the area. "He's come up with a few possible routes through the marshes that will bring you near the likeliest landing site."
"Cait?"

"He's equipped with advanced simulation software. What do you think his fortunes are based on?"

"That does not fill me with confidence, Reeve."

His little smile grew into a grin.

"Complex simulations are what Cait was designed for. His results are very accurate, but the current version of the fortunes module tends to muddle them up too much."

"Please don't tell me he wants us to seek treasure where the mist kisses the water."

Reeve laughed.

"Don't worry. It's a simple, unambiguous set of coordinates. They'll take you here, to the last point of contact." He pointed at the dot that all the lines through the wetlands converged upon, then traced a dotted line to a second dot nearby. "This is the likeliest flight path and landing site based on Cait's simulations. I've transferred everything to Sparky's nav system. You can decide on a route once you're there."

His phone rang with a series of muffled trills. He answered, then cocked an eyebrow and held it out to me.

"It's for you."

"It's Elena," a female voice said once I had the phone to my ear. "We're good to go. I've charted our flight path and made arrangements for traveling through the swamp."

I shouldn't have been surprised by her efficiency. Rookie or not, Elena was still a Turk.

"Good. What's the plan?"

"There's an old Shinra airbase near the northeast end of the mountain range. It's no longer in use, but a friend will make necessary preparations for our arrival and acquire the chocobos. Everything should be ready by the time we arrive."

"We're using chocobos?"

"Yes. They're the best way to get through the marshes quickly enough to avoid the zolom."

Ah, yes. The marshes were infested with gigantic, man-eating snakes. A wee little detail that had slipped my mind.

"Great," I muttered.

"I'll give you a lift to the Cliff. Meet me behind the 'RO building in ten minutes."

"Okay, I'll be there."

"What's the plan?" Reeve asked once I had returned his phone.

I relayed what Elena had told me. He gave a nod.

"Very well. I've done what I can to adapt Sparky's systems to your condition. As far as the suit's concerned, you're good to go."
Reeve rattled off a list of advice and exhortations while he unplugged me from his diagnostic tools, then double-checked that I had all the coordinates I would need. With one final embrace, he sent me off on my quest.

When I stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby, a familiar face was waiting for me.

"Nanaki! What are you doing here?"

He fixed me with his single eye, his tail flicking back and forth in irritation.

"Cait Sith told me you had broken out of hospital to embark on a suicide mission."

I sighed and turned my eyes to the ceiling.

"Cait is far too prone to exaggeration."

"It did not occur to you to consult me before concocting this hare-brained plan?"

"It's no use trying to stop me," I said, my tone firm. "I've made up my mind."

"So I hear." The tail stilled. "That is why I am offering my services. As both friend and warrior."

"You want to join Reno's rescue effort?" I managed after a few false starts.

"No," Nanaki rumbled with a snap of his tail. "I want to make sure you do not get into more trouble than you can handle. If that means following you on this mad quest to save an unworthy Turk, then so be it."

Words eluded me, so I dropped to one knee and conveyed my feelings with a tight hug.
I sat in the passenger seat of the truck on our way to Cliff Resort. What had possessed me to do so, I didn't know. Elena had made a few halting attempts at small talk, but I wasn't in the mood. I spent the ride wishing I had joined Nanaki in the back.

At long last we left the desiccated emptiness of the badlands behind us, and turned onto a dirt road that snaked up into the mountains south of Edge. At times the road bordered on steep drops into the valley on our right, flashing us glimpses of the lush vegetation and glittering waterfalls of Cliff Resort, dotted with the peculiar rounded cabins that had caught my attention the previous time.

Our destination was a helipad not far from Rufus Shinra's cabin. Elena pulled into a rectangular patch of tightly-packed gravel that served as a parking lot, and as soon as I was out of the truck, I treated myself to a lungful of mountain air. Crisp, scented with pine; a welcome respite after the sterility of the hospital and Edge's rust and dust.

As I turned toward the helipad gate, I realized that a man in a Turk suit was waiting for us.

"Sir?"

Judging by Elena's puzzled reaction, Tseng's presence was not part of the plan. A wave of frustration crashed over me. I should've known it wouldn't be that easy.

To his credit, Tseng didn't beat around the bush.

"The President wishes to see you, Doctor."

"He knows, then."

"Yes."

I reined in the impulse to shake that blank look off his face with Sparky's help.

"Is this your doing?"

"Not by choice. The President overheard me on the phone with Elena."

It didn't seem like a lie. Not that I was any judge of that, and either way, the end result was the same.

"Damn it all to hell," I spat.

"You do have something he wants," Tseng said. "It's not over yet."

Would it ever be about what I wanted? Just once. Was that too much to ask on this damned planet?

I sat with Nanaki in the bed of the truck as we rode to the Shinra-owned cabin. That, at least, was my own choice.

"You will have to wait out here," Tseng told Nanaki once we were outside the front door. "The President's meeting with the doctor is private."

Nanaki's tail whipped back and forth in a tight figure eight.
"That will not happen."

"It wasn't a request."

Their staring match could go on forever. We were wasting time.

"It's okay, Nanaki," I said. "Please, just wait here."

He bared the tips of his fangs, but after a glance at my face, he sat down on his haunches.

Wood-paneled walls and generous sunlight made the cabin surprisingly inviting inside; yet the cozy atmosphere was undone by the framed poster of the Shinra logo that greeted us as we entered. Rufus Shinra waited for me in a chair in front of one of the large windows. His face was haggard and his neck wrapped in gauze, but his white suit was pristine and the smile was as aloof as ever.

"Dr. FitzEvan. What an unexpected pleasure."

"Mr. Shinra."

Rufus waited until the Turks had taken up position behind him, one on each side.

"I see you're helping yourself to my helicopter, along with one of my Turks. Again."

Just a few words from the man, and my good hand had already made a fist.

"We are going to rescue another one of 'your' Turks. I hope that will be worth the inconvenience."

"I cannot allow that. I'm one of Scarlet's targets, too. That helicopter stays here, in the event that a quick getaway becomes necessary."

It may have been true in theory, but it was a thin excuse. As far as I knew, there had been no reports of Scarlet's forces in the area. If there had been, the Turks would have relocated their president already.

"Surely Shinra has more than one helicopter at their disposal?"

"I'm afraid not. We've only been able to salvage two from Midgar so far. The other one... Well, clearly you know what became of it."

He spoke of Reno's disappearance as if it was no more than a minor inconvenience. I shook my head in disbelief.

"He puts his life on the line for Shinra. For you. Isn't that worth anything to you?"

I glanced at the faces of the Turks on either side of his chair. Tseng's face was blank. Elena's held a slight frown, nothing more.

Rufus gave me a long, appraising stare.

"I hear you have disapproved of his line of work. Quite vocally at times. If you find him and bring him back... What guarantee do I have that he will remain one of my Turks?"

"His choices are his own," I said slowly, unsure of where he was going with this. "I doubt I even have a say in them."

"Oh, please," Rufus scoffed. "He's been bending the rules to cater to your whims for months. Ever
since you invited him into your bed, you've practically had him on a leash."

It was a shame the Turks were so close and Sparky's energy surge so slow to charge.

"My private life is none of your business, nor is his," I snapped.

"Isn't it? Perhaps you remember the last time you happened to need a helicopter. One call from you and Reno rushed to your side, with Shinra resources, on Shinra time. I'd say that makes it my business."

Maybe it was the faint contempt in his eyes, maybe it was the curve of his tight-lipped smile. I couldn't shake the impression the man was toying with me.

"The point. Please."

"I made you an offer earlier. You will take it."

"You want me to work for Shinra." I spoke the words out loud to taste them, to feel them on my tongue. Sour, that's what they were. "And I refuse, you won't lend me the helicopter?"

His smile was definitely closer to a sneer now.

"Let's not kid ourselves, Doctor. We both know you don't have that luxury. Without Reno, you have no protector. You're alone on this planet." He leaned forward and pinned me with an imperious stare. "One way or another, you will take my offer."

"Alone?" I echoed, trying to ignore the chill that seeped into my limbs. "Do you think Reeve Tuesti and the WRO will just give up on me?"

"The WRO runs on Shinra gil, Dr. FitzEvan. Which do you think he'll choose, you or his precious infrastructure?"

That gave me pause. It was Reeve who had manipulated Reno into helping out with the reactor situation in Midgar, then refused to use the WRO's resources to help him. It was Reeve who had helped send me back to Earth to my presumed death, while Reno had spat and argued. Reeve focused on the greater picture, and was prepared to make hard decisions. To make sacrifices.

The cold crept into my spine as it sank in. I had lost this negotiation before it even began. No, so much more than that. I had lost everything.

Don't give up, Tess. Think!

Rufus Shinra saw the greater picture, too, and it must have looked like a win-win for him. He risked losing a Turk, but either way he was gaining something – someone – that might end up saving his life. I needed to spoil that view.

"I guess you're right. You can force me to stay. You can even force me to work. But tell me, how will you know I'm working for you?"

His eyes narrowed a fraction. I smiled, and continued.

"James and Orca thought they could force me. It didn't end so well for them, as you may have heard. Causing trouble for you would be so much easier. I could sabotage your Stigma research. I could pretend to work on a cure and send the rest of your team down all the wrong paths. I could create something that would make you wish the Stigma had killed you."
The mere thought of James and Orca was enough to crack my composure. I welcomed the anger and the seething resentment that came pouring out of that crack; they drowned out my fear, and I let the cracks widen until I spat out the last words like venom.

"You don't seriously believe I'd be the first to test anything, do you?" Rufus scoffed. "Besides, there's more at stake than my life alone. You would hardly risk thousands of innocent lives just to spite me."

"What makes you think I give a damn about a bunch of aliens?" I snatched off my helmet and pointed at my head. "Look at me! Your kind has put me through all kinds of hell on this blasted rock. There's only one thing I care about on this planet, and he's stuck out there in the middle of nowhere. Without him, you have nothing on me!"

Both Tseng end Elena took half a step forward; I had come too close to their president. With a slow, deep breath, I placed my helmet under my arm and backed up to my original position.

"Bring him back, though," I said in a calmer voice, "and you have yourself a deal and leverage."

We stared each other down. I hoped the arrogant man had dismissed Nanaki as a mere pet. I fervently hoped he didn't know about Tyco's Geostigma. If he brought either of them up, my bluff would fall apart.

Rufus smiled; a cold smile that moved nothing but his lips.

"Very well, Doctor. I accept your terms."

I made damned sure to keep the relief off my face.

"You will lend me your helicopter and Elena's services?"

"Yes. I will insist that you yourself remain here, though."

"I'm going."

"Be reasonable, Doctor. There is no need for you to risk your life."

While reason had not been the driving force behind the day's decisions, he had a point. I gazed at the waterfall through the window behind him, considering it. If I stayed, Nanaki would stay. The Turks were capable agents, but Elena was inexperienced. How much could she do alone in the wilderness? I wasn't familiar with the area, but I knew a thing or two about rock climbing and tramping through the wild. My hazard suit could go where others couldn't, it handled navigation and gave me brute strength beyond anything the Turks could muster. What if the rescue mission hinged on just those things?

I already had too many lives on my conscience. I couldn't bear the thought of adding Reno's name to the list.

"I'll be traveling with one of your Turks. Your trust them with your own life, don't you?"

A glance at Elena showed me she had gone pale, but her face still exuded proud determination.

"That is true," Rufus conceded, "but I am a businessman at heart. I want guarantees. If you and Reno both get killed, what will I gain?"

"I thought I made myself clear. Right now, you have nothing. Unless Reno returns safe and sound,
you will continue to have nothing. You risk nothing by letting me go after him. What you gain are better odds. Businessmen take calculated risks, don't they?"

He leaned back in his chair and fixed me with a piercing stare. I was bristling with impatience. Every second wasted here was a second I could have spent finding Reno.

"I have one more thing to offer you," I said. "With or without me, your science team will find it useful."

Rufus arched an eyebrow. "Go on."

If making myself more expendable would get me to Reno, then so be it. As much as I hated to admit it... Rufus did have a point, and I had a lead I couldn't risk taking to my grave.

"Search Hojo's files in Nibelheim. Look for reports by Orin Faro. He conducted a series of tests with SOLDIER cells."

"SOLDIER cells?"

"Yes. SOLDIER, not Jenova. I'm sure you'll be intrigued by the symptoms of Faro's victim."

Rufus steepled his fingers and watched me, a gleam appearing in his eyes. I could imagine his mind racing to evaluate this new piece of information, to weigh up its pros and cons.

"I believe we have a deal, Doctor," he said at last.

It didn't feel like victory. I just felt utterly drained.

"Then I have work to do, and we have nothing more to discuss."

As I turned to leave, Tseng strode past me to hold the door open for me.

"I'm pleased to see Reno's loyalty is not misplaced," he said quietly as I passed him. "You will find the Turks look after their own."

I'd had enough of the Turks and Shinra for one day, but Elena insisted on a second pair of eyes in the cockpit. I kept my helmet on and listened to my music.

The flight path followed the north rim of the mountain range, taking us east until we ran out of mountains. The old airfield was a small blip in a sea of green. As we got closer, I could make out a pair of low buildings next to a paved landing strip and a large, circled H. Elena headed for the latter. Her graceless landing lacked Reno's finesse, but she brought us down intact.

A woman in a Turk suit was waiting for us at the helipad, her copper hair lit up by the evening sun; I recognized Cissnei long before we had set down. She gave Nanaki and me curious looks as we hopped down from the helicopter, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Considering Nanaki’s past with Shinra, he must have been known to the former Turks, too.

Cissnei led us past the rusty hangar to a squat concrete bunker that had once served as an outpost for Shinra's military. The rooms above ground were empty, she explained, but the basement levels still contained old furniture, generators and equipment. The stairs led down to a wide room with concrete walls and a low ceiling. An open fireplace took up a third of the wall near the entrance, and behind a counter in the back I could make out a rudimentary kitchen. In the space between them sat two tables, long enough to seat a dozen people each. Camping gear was spread across one
of them; it looked new.

"It's too late to head out tonight, so pick a bed," Cissnei said. "We're spending the night here."

Four doorways on the left and right led to smaller rooms with cots. I headed for the closest one, dropped my rifle and satchel on the floor, then slumped down on the cot. I dragged my helmet off my head and let it fall. All I had done today was escape a hospital, talk to a man and sit in a helicopter; yet I was exhausted. After a day in armor and the rigors of travel, my arm throbbed hot and heavy.

I buried my face in the palm of my good hand. I was so weak. I had pushed this far on pure stubbornness, but now the doubts began to creep in. I had lied to Reeve. I was not okay, in any sense of the word.

"Tess?" The cot shifted as Cissnei sat down next to me. "Is there anything you need?"


"Nothing, right now," I replied with a bleak smile.

She examined my face with her serious brown eyes, then nodded.

"He's tough, you know. Lucky, too. I've seen him beat the odds more than once."

I stared down at my hands in my lap, gritting my teeth to maintain my composure. After a while, Cissnei rose to her feet.

"Get some rest. We've got an early start tomorrow."

Sleep eluded me, though. I stared at the ceiling, worry churning in my gut. Reno would have to spend another night out there; the second since the crash. He had to be starving by now, not to mention the thirst. What if he was injured? What if tomorrow was too late? What if Rufus Shinra's selfish stalling had cost us his life?

"Chocobos," Nanaki rumbled. "Several of them."

He lay on the ground near the door, his head tilted toward the exit. I clambered out of bed, grateful for the distraction.

"Let's take a look, shall we?"

The sky was dimming, but I could easily make out the four huge birds who gathered in a gaggle of slender necks and gangly legs by the gate to the compound. One of them was blue, the rest a bright yellow. Cissnei stood in front of the small flock, talking to a boy in his late teens. He wore a hat adorned with a yellow feather, and his broad accent carried to us on the evening wind.

As we got closer, the birds started clawing at the ground, clucking restlessly. Nanaki stopped, then took a few steps back. The kid glanced at his birds with a frown, then spotted us, his eyes going wide. I tried not to mind how he looked me over from bald top to toe.

"This is Tess," Cissnei said, raising her voice to be heard by all of us. "She's part of the team. Tess, this is Billy. He's from the chocobo farm a few miles east of here."

"Hello, um, miss?"

I didn't need that audible question mark. I really didn't.
"Hello. I see you've brought birds for us."

"That's right," he said, showing a mouthful of crooked teeth in a nervous grin. "Gotta have 'bos if you're headin' into the marshes. They're the only way to get past the zolom, see. Them snakes can feel every step you take. That's how they hunt. Ain't no way to hide from a zolom. You gotta be faster, and our birds are the fastest you're gonna find around here."

The poor kid was rambling. Maybe I should have offered him a warmer greeting.

"Thanks for bringing them here on such short notice, Billy," Cissnei said. "We appreciate it."

The boy beamed, stretching up a bit taller.

"Any time, Miss Cissnei. Any time."

As the two herded the flock to an enclosure behind the bunker, a series of soft beeps sounded from the suit speakers. My shoulders went stiff. It was time.

I found Elena in the main room, rummaging through one of the bags on the table. I wet my lips and took a deep breath.

"Elena, could you do me a favor? I need to change my dressings."

She looked up, eyes wide with surprise.

"Me?"

"Please. I can't do it on my own."

She glanced at my arm, looking uncomfortable. That made two of us.

"Um," she said, then nodded. "Sure."

We relocated to one of the side rooms. I pushed a couple of cots up against the wall to clear some space.

"Okay, I'm going to dose myself up with X-potion first, and it's going to sting. A lot. You might need to hold me down."

"But your suit..."

"I'll disengage the exoskeleton. The added weight will help keep me down."

"Right," she said, eyeing my suit warily.

"Once that's over, I need you to change the dressings." I dug out one of the of the pre-cut bandages from my satchel and handed it to her. "Just look at how the old one was done as you remove it and you should get a good enough idea."

There was nothing to be gained by dragging this out. I lay down on the floor, closed my eyes and gave the suit my command. The little prick on my neck was a paltry warning for what came next. The X-potion shot through my bloodstream in a searing torrent, and within seconds it converged on my damaged arm. I felt stunted nerve endings blaze to life and worm their way through broken tissue. Scarred skin split and muscle quivered, coming apart so they could reform anew, rebuilding themselves with unnatural speed. The whole limb was on fire again, regenerating in an inferno of its own making.
It ended abruptly, left me disoriented, reeling from sensations that had already passed. I lay on the floor panting, my eyes squeezed shut. My arm pulsed in time with my racing heart, every remade fiber of muscle twitching, every new nerve prickling.

"Doctor...?"

Elena's voice quivered.

"Give me a minute," I croaked.

I couldn't remember screaming, but my throat burned. It was worse like this, much worse, like the first week all over again. The only upside with a concentrated potion was that the torture lasted a fraction of the time.

Elena helped me lift off the chest armor, but it was quicker just to remove the arm pieces myself than to explain to her how to do it. As soon as they were on the floor I turned my head away, and kept it turned while I unzipped the undersuit and exposed my arm. When I felt Elena's fingers touch the top of the bandages, I tensed, bracing myself.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Not as much as the X-potion."

I had to give her credit. Once Elena got started, she worked with steady hands. If what lay underneath the bandages disgusted her, she didn't let it show.

"I didn't know," she said without warning. "About you guys, I mean."

I grew still. This was not something I had anticipated when I asked for her help.

"When Reno asked permission to bring you back from Cosmo Canyon, he made it sound like he'd found a Shinra asset to recover. The surveillance, too. All the talk was about protecting Shinra's interests."

The words bubbled out of her at an urgent pace. It seemed I had the same effect on her as on the chocobo kid.

"Rude knew the whole time, I get that now. Tseng too, I think. They'd known Reno for so long they could see it was just a show for the President, to get his approval."

"Elena," I sighed, "you don't need to talk."

"That sounds like something Reno would say," she said with a tentative laugh. "He doesn't act nice, does he? He just does what he wants and says what he wants. I mean, you know how he is. He breaks the rules, he lies half the time, he flirts with anything that moves—"

"You don't have to try so hard to break us up again," I snapped. "We're not a couple."

"W-what? No, that not what I– I'm trying to explain! I didn't know you were so important to him! I thought he was just reckless, that he was endangering the mission just because he couldn't keep it in his pants. Had I known about you two... I wouldn't have opened my big mouth."

I suppose it was some comfort to know I wasn't the only one Reno had kept in the dark.

"Well... not in public like that, at least," she added after a few moments. "That wasn't very smart. Reno keeps telling me to keep a cool head, to avoid showing my weaknesses."
It did sound like him, all right. I just didn't understand why Elena felt the need to reveal all this to me.

"He was so angry, after that night in Kalm. He stopped speaking to me altogether. He barely talked to any of us. I mean, it's Reno. He never stops talking!"

"He told me you got tired of it and gave him a proverbial kick in the ass."

"Uh, it may not have been so proverbial."

I turned my head a fraction and raised my eyebrows. She was smiling.

"Turks spar with each other," she explained. "Reno may have been angry with me, but he couldn't deny a request to help the rookie train."

My eyebrows rose even higher.

"You beat him up to prove your point?"

"I didn't exactly beat him, but I managed to avoid his hits long enough to say my piece. Landed a few good ones myself," she added with a grin and no small amount of pride. "I like to think it helped get the message across."

I shook my head. Turks.

"Reno turned quiet again, after he came back from Nibelheim," she continued after a while. "Did something happen between the two of you?"

The throbbing in my arm was nothing compared to the sudden ache in my heart.

"Hurry up, please. The open air feels unpleasant."

"Oh! Sorry."

She took my hand and began wrapping the limb in careful silence. The reprieve was short-lived.

"Is it true, what you said? That you're not a couple anymore?"

_Anymore_? The angry part of me wanted to yell at her that we had never been a real couple at all, just a one-night stand that had gone on for far too long because neither of us were willing to face the truth, which was that--

"But you love each other, don't you?"

I flinched and tensed. "Who said anything about love?"

"N-no one," she said quickly. "But why else--"

"Love isn't all it's cracked up to be. Trust me on that."

It was more of a growl than a reply. On some level, I knew it was unfair of me to lash out at her like this. Old wounds ran deep.

"He came for you," she insisted. "You're coming for him. Isn't that what matters in the end?"

I nearly snorted at her choice of words. Reno would have had a field day with that; I could almost
hear his laughter, the lewd remark he would make. But the amusement was brief. As Elena's point sank in, I felt a hollowness open up in my chest.

"It's complicated," I whispered, blinking away the infuriating wetness that was pooling in my eyes.

"Maybe you're making it more complicated than it needs to be."

I thought of the last time I had seen him. The shock and remorse on his face. Me, too hurt to listen, screaming at him to leave. How could that have been anything but complicated? Should I have given him a chance?

Maybe it would have turned out differently, if I had allowed him to apologize. Maybe we could have worked it out, then and there.

Maybe he would have stayed with me, and would never have flown out in that damned helicopter at all.

"This speculation is pointless," I said, my voice flat. "For all we know he's dead already."

"We don't know that! You can't lose hope now. Reno's alive. He has to be!"

"We don't know that, either."

Elena had released my arm. I reached for the armor pieces on the floor, but she stopped me with a hand on my wrist and held tight until I looked up at her.

"We'll reach the landing site tomorrow," she said firmly. "We'll find him, you'll see."
Winging It

When we left the building in the morning, the sky was still rimmed with orange from the sunrise. Nanaki stopped in the doorway and took a deep breath. Judging from his raised head and lowered tail, he was exhaling the tension from being cooped up with Turks in close quarters.

Cissnei came up beside me, glancing over her shoulder at the Shinra helicopter that squatted on the helipad.

"Someone needs to keep an eye on the chopper."

"You think someone might steal it?" I wondered. "Out here?"

"Not the chopper itself, maybe, but the fuel in those tanks is worth a minor fortune these days. I wouldn't be much good to you out there, anyway. I'm more of a city girl."

I sighed and looked out toward the mountains in the distance.

"I'm not sure any of us will be much good out there. Have any of you even been into the marshes before?"

"I have," Nanaki said, wrinkling his nose. "It was not pleasant."

"Well, then, you just volunteered for guide duty." I unfolded the map Cissnei had acquired for us. "This is the closest one of Cait's suggested starting points," I said, pointing at a spot just south of the mountain range. "From there, we have several options for how to cross the marshes."

"We only need to keep the mountain range on our right as we approach," Nanaki said with a nod that sent his mane swaying. "We can decide on the route once we see what we are up against."

The Turks saddled and packed the chocobos. Thanks to my suit, I was given the largest one. My bird had stumpy wings, legs like gnarled branches and smelled of musty cardboard. Her name was Goldenrod. Goldie for short.

"Hi there, Goldie."

The chocobo tilted her head and peered down at me with beady eyes.

"So, uh... We'll be working together for a while. Try not to kill me. Please."

The bird opened her beak and made a brief warbling sound – a wark, I had been told – then snapped it shut with a sharp click. I had no idea whether it was an agreement or a threat. Maybe she was just hungry.

"New to chocobos, Tess?"

Cissnei came up beside me and patted the bird's neck. Goldie cooed and lowered her head to sniff the woman's hair.

"You could say that," I replied with a nervous laugh, eyeing the beak. It was the size of my head.

"Don't worry, I'll show you what to do."

Cissnei walked me through the basics. She showed me how to mount and dismount, swinging
herself on and off the giant bird, lithe and agile. I felt like an elephant. She took particular care to teach me how to control the chocobo with my legs and body weight, instead of the reins. It was thoughtful of her. I still felt like an elephant. A crippled elephant.

She held the reins while I tried to replicate her moves. I didn't trust the bird not to bolt. I didn't trust my useless arm. I didn't trust my body. It took me several tries to clamber onto my patient steed. Such an elephant.

"You've got this," Cissnei said, handing me the reins. "Good luck."

A crippled, swollen, bald elephant.

"Thanks. Let's hope the bird agrees."

With a small, reserved smile she stepped aside and watched us ride out. Nanaki took point, keeping a safe distance so as to not spook the birds with his presence. Behind me, Elena rode the nervous blue chocobo with a yellow one in tow, which served as a pack bird.

The sun shone down from a cloudless sky. The green fields stretched out around us, the long grass billowing in the lazy wind. I had gobbled down a handful of painkillers for breakfast, so Goldie's bumpy gait wasn't an issue once I got used to it. The pills couldn't ease the worry gnawing at my stomach, though.

The change of terrain was both abrupt and treacherous. It wasn't until Nanaki came to a halt that I realized we were only a few meters from water. The surface was covered in a thick mat of duckweed, giving the impression of a green plain at a distance. Where the mountains left the wetlands in shadow, the view was obscured by a wall of fog.

We spent a few minutes gathered around the map. I pointed out the alleged landing site, along with the routes Cait had provided. While I took the chance to dose up on painkillers, Nanaki studied the map, then looked toward the swamp and sniffed the air.

"We go in here. Stay close. Do not stop. Do not even slow down until I do so."

The mist snuck up on us. At first it was a thin layer hovering just above the water. When our path took us into the reeds, the fog rose higher, swirling around my knees and obscuring the birds' feet. Higher and higher it crept, until we were enveloped in a soft blanket, thick enough to turn the sunshine into a pale glow. I had no idea how Nanaki was able to find his way, but he led on without hesitation, taking us deeper and deeper into the marsh.

As the light grew dimmer the duckweed thinned into nothing, leaving only murky water between clumps of stubborn reeds. Scattered trees tried to claw their way toward the sky with leafless branches, as dead as their waterlogged brethren. Only the rapid splishing of the chocobos' feet disturbed the silence, as if the marsh itself was waiting with bated breath. I watched every floating log and island with wary eyes. At a glance everything looked like a giant snake, lying in wait.

At long last the terrain began to rise, bringing us out of the water and into rockier surroundings. Nanaki took us far up onto higher ground before he allowed us to stop. We had spent close to two hours in the swamp, which in my opinion was about two hours too long. Not just for my own comfort, but for Reno's. The fog was heavy and daylight wouldn't last forever. We wouldn't be able to search for him in the dark.

Once I had hopped off Goldie's back, I brought out the map and checked our coordinates with the aid of Sparky.
"We're almost spot on target," I called to the others, impressed by Nanaki's sense of direction. "The last point of contact isn't far."

Elena peeked over my shoulder at the map, then surveyed what little we could see of the scenery. The fog was thinner this far up the foot of the mountain, but not by much. It seemed to thicken in the nearby ravine that would be our path onward.

"If we hurry, we can make it to the landing site before nightfall," she said. "We can't bring the chocobos, though. They're tired, and the terrain is too steep."

We left the birds tied to the branches of a skeletal tree, squabbling over half a sack of greens. The climb wasn't difficult, but it was indeed steep and I was in poor shape. My laboring breath turned to panting and my legs began to tremble, but I pushed on. We were so close.

The ground evened out, flattened into a small plateau. Sparky's navigation system beeped, signaling our arrival at the coordinates. I paced in a slow circle to see deeper into the fog. The glow of Nanaki's tail floated in the whiteness as he checked a larger perimeter.

"There's nothing here," he called.

I checked our coordinates from the suit's control panel. They were correct. My breathing had become shallow and rapid again, and this time it had nothing to do with the climb.

"Check our position again," Elena suggested.

"I already did," I snapped. "These are the coordinates Cait gave me!"

We were close, we had to be. I spun around, staring into the whiteness, but every direction looked much like any other. We were so close, but the light was already waning. We were running out of time. Reno was running out of time.

"Now what?"

Elena's question was subdued, half-hearted. The frustration and disappointment churned inside me, deeper and darker by the second, until it all spilled out.

"Reno!" I yelled. "Answer me, Reno! Where the hell are you, you son of a bitch!?"

My shout bounced back and forth between the cliffs, weaker and weaker, until it faded into nothing. There was no reply. No sound at all.

Nanaki turned his head and stared into the mist.

"I hear something. Follow me."

My dwindling hope roared back into life with such force that it squeezed the air out of my lungs. Forcing my tired legs into motion, I stumbled along behind Nanaki as he set off at a brisk trot, the flame of his tail serving as our guiding light. He led us through another narrow ravine, weaving a path through large, lichen-covered boulders. When the ravine spilt in two, he stopped, tilting his ears this way and that. I pricked mine, too, but still I heard nothing.

"It is quiet now," Nanaki said. He raised his nose and inhaled deeply a few times, facing different directions. "This way."

He darted off to the left. Elena had no trouble keeping up, but my feet were heavy, prone to
stumble over loose rocks. I fell behind, and lost sight of Nanaki's tail. Soon after, Elena's hazy figure vanished behind a massive boulder that blocked half the ravine. I tried to pick up the pace, but my breath was too short even to maintain my current tempo.

Past the boulder, I nearly crashed into my companions. I froze, too, and stared. Amid swirls of white mist, I saw the charred corpse of what once must have been a helicopter. Only jagged stumps, bent and twisted, remained of the slender rotor blades. The fuselage had torn open and lay tilted to one side, propped up by blackened rocks. The cockpit was out of view.

"Was he..." I trailed off, unable to complete the whisper.

"I cannot tell. The smell of smoke covers everything," Nanaki rumbled. "I will look inside."

He picked his way through the debris, tail held high for light, placing his paws with care. The slow pace was unbearable, but I couldn't bring myself to do it in his stead.

"There's no point just standing here and watching." Elena's eyes, wide in her pale face, darted across the scene. "Let's look around."

She headed left in a wide circle around the crash site. I lumbered in the opposite direction. If my feet had felt heavy before, now they were like solid lead. My eyes roamed the scenery, unable to process the surreal shapes of warped metal that drifted in and out of the fog. It felt like a bad dream. I wanted it to be a bad dream.

A discrepancy drew my eye. Red, among the black and white. A crimson shock of hair.

"Reno!"

I broke into a sprint, barreling through debris on my way to the dark heap on the ground. I shoved away the buckled sheet of metal he lay beneath and sank to my knees beside him. It was him. It really was him!

My initial relief gave way to a fresh kind of fear. He was still, and so quiet; his shallow breaths hardly moved his chest at all. His suit and face were smeared with grime and caked in dry blood from what appeared to have been a nosebleed. The goggles were still on his head, but one lens was cracked and the skin beneath marred by an ugly bruise, yellowing at the edges.

"Reno?"

His eyes cracked open in slow-motion, and blinked a couple of times. They focused on me, but all I could see on his face was blank confusion.

"Reno!"

Elena dashed into view, and dropped down at his other side. His gaze swam a sluggish path to her, then back to me. I touched his shoulder.

"Can you hear me?"

Reno cleared his throat with a dry cough.

"It's... my fave brunette and... my fave blonde. What took ya... so long?"

The smile tugging at his lips was as weak as his voice. His sunken eyes were hazy. The bright tattooed crescents looked garish on his ashen face, like bloody cuts in his skin. I forced a smile.
"Had to take the scenic route. There isn't much space to park a chopper around here, you know."

"Yeah," he mumbled. " Noticed."

His eyes slid shut, extinguishing the only spark of life left in his limp body.

"Oh, no, no you don't," I growled and tightened my grip on his shoulder, burying the sudden panic with anger. "You put me through hell getting here, you bastard. Don't you dare die on me now!"

His mouth twitched.

"Not... gonna. Too pretty."

"His leg's broken," Elena said.

I looked over at her. Only now did I realize Nanaki had joined us; he and Elena were inspecting Reno's right leg. I glimpsed angry mottled skin through tears in the fabric, and quickly looked away before I saw more than I could handle.

"Yes, in several places," Nanaki said. "I can Cure it, but the bones must be aligned first."

Reno's eyes fluttered open at the sound of the feline's voice.

"You... brought the furball too. Heya, Furball. Sorry, but you ain't... my fave redhead. That'd be me, yo."

His snigger turned into a hacking cough that went on far too long. Nanaki just scoffed.

"I'll do it," Elena declared. "Hold him still, Doctor."

My heart leapt into my throat, pounding at a furious pace that made it hard to breathe. My gaze flickered between her and Nanaki. Her mouth was a grim line. He nodded.

"C'mon, Fitz... while we're young," Reno rasped. "Let's get this over with already."

I had thought him too out of it to grasp what was going on, but the tremor in his voice suggested he had a better idea what would happen next than I did. Swallowing hard, I moved around to kneel by his head, then wriggled my hands under his shoulders and held him on either side of his chest by the armpits. I squeezed my eyes shut when Elena grabbed his ankle, but I felt the pull, and I heard his screams and the sickening crunch of bone. My stomach turned so violently I feared I might be sick, but I held on.

Then I felt the tingling of magic through my fingertips and Reno's cries quieted to ragged panting. Reluctantly, I cracked my eyes open to watch as more green tendrils appeared out of thin air and enveloped him, glowing brightest around his broken leg. By the time the glow vanished, the scowl of pain had faded from his face and his breathing was slowing to a more normal pace.

"The bones have begun to fuse," Nanaki reported, "but the leg should be stabilized until the next Cure."

"I'll get what we need." Elena shot to her feet and hurried toward the wreckage.

"Why can't you finish the healing now?" I wondered as I gently released my hold on Reno.

"Such unnaturally rapid healing takes its toll on the body. If pushed too far in this weakened state, the human might go into shock."
Nanaki had tilted his head to one side and was examining me with his single eye. Perhaps he thought it a strange question. I supposed that after all the X-potion treatments I should have been able to deduce the answer for myself, but my brain was as foggy as our surroundings. I remained seated where I was, feeling every bit of my exhaustion, and just gazed down at Reno's face, dirty and drawn. My good hand found its way back to his shoulder. He didn't say anything or open his eyes, just reached up and placed his hand on mine.

Elena returned with seatbelt straps and blackened pieces of metal. Again she recruited my aid, to hold the splints in place while she tied them to Reno's leg. Once done, Elena shuffled over and pulled out a blanket from her backpack. While I spread it over him, she brought out a thermos bottle. She unscrewed the lid and filled it with a steaming, amber-colored liquid.

"Careful," she said, offering the cup to Reno. "It's a bit hot."

He blinked his eyes open and reached for the cup with eager hands.

"Hot sounds pretty damn good right about now."

His hands shook so much that Elena had to help him hold it. I slipped my good arm around his shoulders and held him off the ground.

"Rude?" he asked after his third mouthful.

"In hospital," Elena said with a bleak smile. "He's stable."

I couldn't see his face, but felt his whole body sag.

"We should leave now, before darkness falls," Nanaki said.

"Come on, you," I told Reno, shifting my grip and my weight to help him up. "That's enough lazing about on your behind."

Elena draped the blanket over his shoulders and guided his other arm around her neck. Together, we got him off the ground and began the slow trek back to the birds. Nanaki kept his distance, and leapt from boulder to boulder as he scouted ahead.

"Fuck me," Reno grumbled. "This sucks ass."

"Afraid you'll have to get used to it. It'll suck ass harder once we hit the marsh."

"Anyone ever tell ya... you got a shitty bedside manner, Doctor?"

There was an edge to his griping, but his scrunched-up face told me it was the pain talking.

"Maybe so, but I've got a bag full of heavy-duty painkillers. Be nice, and I'll share."

"Why the fuck didn't you say so?" he panted. "Better yet, why the fuck ain't ya shoving 'em into my face right now?"

"Because... the bag is with the chocobos."

Had both my hands not been occupied, I would have planted my face in them. It was a pretty dumb move, and not just considering Reno's needs. Anything could have happened to the birds while we were away. Hell, the chocobos themselves might have chomped down the pills. Maybe the drug cocktail was affecting my memory. When dosing up before we headed into the swamp, I noticed I had left behind the blister pack I had used at breakfast.
Reno groaned. "Anyone... ever tell ya... your rescues suck, too?"

We had only reached the boulder, yet he was already huffing for air. That didn't bode well for the rest of the walk.

"Give me a break, Turk. It's my first rescue mission in the middle of nowhere."

"Fuck... everythin'..."

His arm was slipping. Elena, the shortest of us three, was struggling with her half of him. This wasn't going to work.

"Elena, let go."

She gave me a puzzled look, but complied with my request. I bent my damaged arm and told Sparky to lock the elbow joint, then swooped down to hook the arm behind Reno's knees and scooped him up. For a few seconds he just gaped at me, but when I took a step forward, he exploded.

"What the flyin' fuck, FitzEvan! Quit foolin' around!"

"Stop squirming! You'll make me drop you!"

I adjusted my hold, both to make sure he couldn't wriggle out of it and to support his injured leg with my shoulder. Elena fixed the blanket, bundling him up in my arms. Reno didn't appreciate our efforts.

"If you're worried about that, then put me down! C'mon! This is embarrassin'!"

"You come on! It's not like anyone's going to take a picture."

"Oh fuck, don't give Laney ideas like that!"

A mental image of it all popped into my head. Me in my suit, wrangling a pile of gangly limbs, one of which jutted straight up into the air thanks to Elena's makeshift splint. I couldn't help but smile behind my helmet's golden mirror.

"She'll behave. Won't you, Elena?"

"Probably." She didn't even try to hide her grin.

"I hate all you assholes," he groaned and went as limp as a ragdoll in my arms.

"Hush, you," I said as I took a tentative step forward. "It'll be fine."

"No, it won't," he whined. "It'll be witnesses next. A busload of tourists, with my luck."

"Here? In the ass-end of nowhere?"

"Could happen!"

"Oh, for crying out loud. If someone shows up, I promise I'll drop you on your ass, how's that?"

"Good!"

"Fine!"
"Great!"

"Good!"

Reno retreated into a sulk, glaring at Elena's back as we made our way through the craggy ravine. It didn't last, though. His eyelids drooped heavier and heavier, then fell shut. His head dropped, too. Within minutes, he had buried his face in the nook formed by my shoulder and the arm he had coiled around my neck.

The extra weight on my arm grated through the bandages. Despite the powered suit, my shoulders ached and my strength was at its limits. None of that mattered, though. None of it.
We arrived at our camp at twilight, greeted by the quiet warks of our chocobos. Nanaki provided light until Elena had started a fire, then moved to sit at the flickering edge of the firelight and covered his tail with his body, becoming a still shadow keeping watch over the marshes.

The rest of us huddled around the fire. As long as I didn't look at the flames, it was okay; I couldn't feel the heat through the suit. I kneeled behind Reno and held him steady with his back against my chest, while Elena cleaned his face and helped him drink. After a cup of sweet tea fortified with electrolytes, he had recovered enough to answer questions. The pill from my stash of pain medication helped, too.

Over the course of his second cup and a couple of energy bars, Reno told us bits and pieces of his ordeal. He was pretty sure the aircraft that forced him down was one of Shinra's old prototypes. He couldn't remember the crash itself or crawling out of the wreckage. The first night had been warm and free of fog thanks to the burning wreck. The ravine lay in permanent shadow, though, so the warmth was fleeting; by the second evening the mist had rolled in again, and coated everything with a dampness that brought in a seeping chill. By then he had been thirsty enough to lick the moisture off the broken piece of metal he had used for shelter.

Darkness had fallen long ago. Reno and I had holed up in one of the two tents Elena had pitched. The light was dim, nothing more than the glow of the fire filtering through the yellow fabric of the tent. I had closed the flap to give him some privacy while I helped him into a clean t-shirt. There had been no innuendo, no lewd comments. It put me on edge.

I wasn't sure how I had ended up with the task of putting him to bed, but I wasn't staying. I was just helping him get comfortable for the night. He was already bundled up in a sleeping bag, but concerned by his cough and constant shivering, I had brought the blanket as well.

"You don't need the helmet in here, do ya?"

I went still for a second, and finally responded with a shrug.

"C'mon, take it off."

After a few more moments of hesitation, I draped the blanket over him and complied with his request. The humid air felt strange against my scalp and made me all too aware of its bareness. I refused to look at him while I continued tucking the blanket over his sleeping bag. A glance was inevitable, though. His eyes were fixed on me, but I couldn't decipher his expression.

"What?" I mumbled, averting my face.

"Nothin'."

The back of my neck prickled.

"It's not nothing, the way you keep staring at me."

"Just wanna look at ya."

"Not much to look at these days," I said with a snort of fake laughter.

"Bullshit."
I didn't reply. After a few more seconds Reno pushed himself up, shrugging off the sleeping bag and the blanket.

"Oh, come on," I groaned. "I was almost done with that."

"I know."

His voice held a somber note, a sobriety that felt out of place coming from him. I sat back on my heels, fidgeting with a corner of the blanket in my hand.

"Look at me, will ya?"

I detected sadness this time. I snapped my eyes up, pricked by my chagrin, but I found no pity on his face. His expression was contemplative, with a touch of what I could only describe as wonder. A month ago I would have found it flattering. Now, it had to be some kind of misunderstanding.

Reno was slowly shaking his head.

"I can't believe it. You're sittin' there, lookin' so real, but I just can't fuckin' believe it."

He raised his hand, reached for me. My shoulders tensed and I drew back a fraction. I didn't mean to. It just happened.

Reno went still. His fingers hovered above my arm, trembling, before he exhaled sharply and jerked his hand away. An ache stirred in my chest, a familiar hollow feeling.

"Believe what?" I prompted, desperate for a distraction from the chasm I didn't know how to cross.

"I keep thinkin' it's a dream. I had a bunch of 'em while I was lyin' out there, these freaky dreams that felt like they were really happenin'. I mean, c'mon! That Cosmo Canyon furball, here? And you?" He shook his head again with a shrill laugh. "It can't be real. It's gotta be a dream, but it just keeps goin' and goin', and... I don't even care that it ain't real. I don't wanna wake up."

I didn't hesitate this time. I removed my right glove, then placed my hand over the one he had balled up tight in his lap.

"I'm here, Reno."

He stared at my hand. His chest heaved and his breath became ragged, but otherwise he didn't move.

"I'm here," I said again. "I'm real. We're all real."

Reno's gaze wandered up until it reached my face. That sense of wonder had returned, along with a hesitant smile. The ache inside deepened.

"I never thought you'd come for me," he whispered. "Hell, wasn't sure anyone would come for me, but you..."

I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "You came for me, remember?"

His gaze fell. Beneath my fingers, his fist tightened again.

"Yeah, well, look how well that turned out. I was sure I'd fucked things up for good this time."

"You came for me," I repeated, emphasizing every word. I knew you would, I silently added. "You
don't know what a relief it was to see your face again."

"Eh, don't be so sure 'bout that. I think I got a pretty good idea, now."

This time, his smile was more genuine. I returned it, and even though it was only for a fleeting second, it felt good to share something again. Then mine faded.

"It scared me, though, what you did to Orin."

He frowned, and for a second I thought he might throw up his defenses. But then it softened, into something like remorse.

"Yeah. I'm sorry 'bout that. Real sorry. You know I never want ya to be scared of me, don't ya?"

"I know," I sighed, "but you were scary. You didn't stop, you didn't listen... If you lose control when you get angry, what's stopping you from doing it to someone else next time?"

"And by 'someone', you mean you."

His eyes were sharp in their scrutiny, and I had to look away. The thought had occurred to me, of course. The ugly memory of my interrogation was why I had panicked in the first place. But did I really think he would do it? Would I be here now, if I thought he would do that to me?

Reno sighed.

"You've seen me angry before. You've made me angry. I didn't go nuts and start kickin' shit around, did I?"

"No..."

"Look, a Turk ain't no good if he blows up every five seconds. He's just gonna get dead. I didn't lose control with that Faro fucker. I decided to do it. Maybe it ain't any better. Hell. Maybe it makes me worse."

There was truth in that. Fiery, emotional Reno, loud in volume and loud in body language; him I could handle. He might yell and curse, but he didn't scare me. It was the cold, calculating rage I feared. That was the face of Reno the Turk, brutal and ruthless.

"It wasn't right," I whispered.

His fingers brushed over the back of my hand, and I raised it enough to let him take it.

"Remember what I told ya, 'bout needin' people to call me out on fucked-up shit sometimes?" he asked, drawing gentle circles on my skin with his thumb. "It's what you did for me at the hospital, I get that now, and I'm sorry I was such a massive dickhole about it. The look on your face..." He let out a harsh breath. "Fuck, it was all I could think about out there. I wish I could take it all back, but I fuckin' can't."

I stayed silent, watching our hands.

"I can't promise I'll always do what you want," he continued after a while. "I mean, you can't promise to always do what I want, right? No one can make promises like that. But I'll listen. I promise I'll always listen to ya."

It was enough, wasn't it? It was enough to ease the ache inside, at least.
"Apology accepted, Mr. Dickhole. And... I guess I could have done a better job at listening, too."

His lips twitched. Then his gaze traveled over my left arm, and though the damage was hidden beneath layers of tech and armor, his face twisted up in anger.

"Fucked up or not, I ain't gonna apologize for what I did to that creepy lil' shit. He sure as hell had it comin' and more besides. Seein' ya like that..."

"Revenge didn't make it better."

"Maybe, but you know what I am. Killin' and hurtin' people, that's all I'm good for."

Now he was the one who wouldn't look me in the eye. I squeezed his hand.

"Do you really think I would have come all this way if that were true?"

A wry smile creased one corner of his mouth, making him look more like his usual self.

"Well... Guess I'm pretty good at fuckin', too."

I snorted softly and shook my head.

"Reno..."

"And fuckin' up," he continued, losing every trace of humor. "I couldn't stop 'em from takin' ya, but I could at least make damn sure they'll never do it again."

His eyes were back on my arm, as cold and sharp as his voice.

"Hang on, you blame yourself?" I asked, caught off guard. "It wasn't your fault."

He scoffed, turning his head to glare at the tent wall instead.

"Course it was. I was assigned to ya. I was s'posed to keep shit like this from happenin' and I fucked it up. I never should've walked out on ya in Costa."

His voice was so full of anger and scorn.

"They did this," I said, fumbling for something that could ease his guilt. "They are to blame. Not you."

"It's my fault that Faro asshole realized who you are," he insisted. "I checked, and he started snoopin' around your files the day after I warned him off at that club. Fucker must've recognized me and got curious about your Turk connections."

I wet my lips, taking a few moments to form a reply.

"Orin was... not right. He was obsessed. He would've started digging sooner or later, regardless of what you did. You can't blame yourself for that."

"Sure I can. I fucked up and you got hurt. And now I even fucked up flyin' and put Rude in hospital, too."

"What? You were shot out of the sky, yet you kept the chopper steady long enough for him to jump. You saved Rude's life, and you saved mine."
He was quiet for a few moments, then barked out a grating laugh. It turned into a cough that shook his whole body.

"You're doin' it wrong, Fitz," he wheezed once the worst of it had passed. "You're s'posed to hate me now and tell me what a useless piece of shit I am, yo."

There was too much honesty in his attempt at a joke. It wrung my heart. I reached up and pushed the hair out of his face with my good hand, tucking it back behind his ear.

"Shut up, you silly man," I chided tenderly. "None of that is true and you know it. I may hate what you chose to do to Orin, but I know you did it because you care. Your heart is in the right place, and that matters to me. It matters a lot. And... it gives me hope that you'll make a different choice next time."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"You're breakin' my fuckin' heart, you know that? Quit bein' such a damn sweetheart."

I caressed his forehead, then brushed my fingers down the side of his face and traced the red crescent along his cheekbone, coming to halt as I cupped his cheek.

"Yes, there are things you could have done differently. There are things I could have done differently. But they are the ones who hurt me. They are the ones who hurt Rude. It's not your fault, Re. Let it go."

Reno sucked in a sharp breath, and his dark eyelashes fluttered open. With surprising speed, he lunged forward and swept me into a tight embrace.

"It ain't right," he growled. "It just ain't right."

I was in his arms at last. Tears welled in my eyes as I swallowed against the lump in my throat. Those bottled-up feelings sprung free so quickly, so urgently that I almost panicked and pulled away, but the raw emotion in his voice and the tremble in the hand that cradled my head kept me still. I closed my eyes and rested my head on his shoulder, stroking his back with my good hand.

"No, it isn't," I agreed quietly, even though I didn't know exactly what he was referring to, struggling to keep my shaky voice under control. "But you're not to blame." And then, some deep-rooted intuition kicked in and connected a few dots for me. I hesitated, and spoke again. "What happened to your sister wasn't your fault either. There was nothing you could have done. You were just a child."

He went perfectly still.

"What your mother did wasn't your fault. Her choice was her own."

Reno didn't make a single sound. He didn't even breathe. His shoulders began to quiver.

"Not your fault, baby," I whispered. "Not your fault."

The trembling spread until his whole body was shaking. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, clutching me harder. Hot droplets hit my neck, trailing in under the collar and soaking into the undersuit. I held him as best as I could, wishing there hadn't been thirty kilos of armor separating us, while he quaked with silent sobs in my arms.
Troubled Waters

Reno was out cold for the whole night, still and soundless except for the occasional bout of snores. My night was less restful. The suit was not designed for sleeping in, much less on the uneven ground of our camp. More than once I caught myself counting the seconds between Reno's breaths, feeling my heartbeat quicken for each pause that went on a hair too long, for every rattle in his lungs.

Even so... I would have picked this night over the previous two any time.

I must have drifted off near morning, curled up on my side with a rolled-up sleeping bag as my pillow. When I woke up, I was being watched.

"Mornin'."

Reno lay on his back, still bundled up in his sleeping bag, his face turned my way. He looked better. Under the faint stubble, some color had returned to his cheeks and there was more life in his eyes. He smiled.

"Still here, huh? Guess I gotta start believin' this ain't a dream, yo."

He slipped a hand out from the blanket and placed it on top of mine. It was dry and warm, and made my heart beat faster. I wanted to crawl closer, to press myself against him and have that arm around me, but I stayed still. I might accidentally hurt him in my heavy, bulky suit. I wouldn't feel him through it, anyway.

He didn't move either; he just watched me. My cheeks flushed hot and I had trouble meeting his gaze. All I could think about was the merciless sight of my reflection, in the elevator as I rode to Reeve's office. Not even Reno's soft smile could dispel that. I closed my eyes.

I felt his fingers caress the side of my face, felt his palm cup my cheek. He was so careful, so gentle; as if I had already broken and he feared I would fall apart from his touch. It was so close to the way he had touched me in Orin's lab. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, and my next breath was far too close to a sob.

We both flinched as the tent zipper rasped open and Nanaki nudged his head in through the flap.

"It is time for another Cure, Turk."

His ears tilted back as he stared at Reno's hand, still on my face. Some raw emotion had filled the hollow in my chest and was still swelling, threatening to burst free. I could have let it happen in front of one of them, but both at once was an audience. I drew back, out of Reno's reach, and scrambled onto all fours.

"I'll give you some privacy," I mumbled on my way out.

Once I was outside Nanaki slipped into the tent. Elena was already awake and thrust a steaming mug of tea into my hand. She didn't remark on my unplanned decision to share a tent with Reno, nor did she say much else. Maybe my feelings were all too visible on my face.

Once the other two emerged from the tent to huddle by the fire, I noticed less hostility, and more of a contemplation, in the long stares that Nanaki was giving Reno. It occurred to me that like other large felines, his hearing was exceptional. I wondered how much he had heard last night.
Reno was still a shadow of his usual self, but he cracked a few jokes over breakfast and was more liberal with his grins. None of them were for me, though; the few glances he gave me were careful and wary. It occurred to me that my hasty departure could be misconstrued. I hadn't meant to reject him, but that must have been how he read it.

While the rest of us packed up camp, he hobbled over to the chocobos. Soon, his murmurs were met with eager warks and coos. Once the tent was stoved away, I walked over to the flock of birds. Through the thicket of long legs and necks, I glimpsed Reno sitting on a rock, surrounded by his new fans. He was wearing the biggest smile I had seen on his face since Costa del Sol.

"I didn't know we had a chocobo whisperer among us."

"A what now?"

His smile shrunk. I mustered one of my own and tried my best to make it convincing.

"The birds, they seem to like you."

"Eh, guess I've always had a knack for dealin' with 'bos," he said, patting a feathery flank. "Which one's yours?"

As if on cue, Goldie swung her head and nudged my shoulder with a low wark. Reno chuckled.

"Guess that answers my question."

"Her name's Goldie," I said, stroking her beak. "Strongest bird of the bunch."

"Hey there, Goldie," he cooed and petted the feathers on the bird's long neck. "You been takin' good care of the Doc here?"

"She's been very patient with her clueless rider. Hasn't thrown me off a single time."

"That's a good girl," Reno approved with a little pat. The bird made a snuffling sound and clawed at the ground with one foot. "Gettin' impatient, huh? Bet you're tired of bein' stuck in this stinkin' hole. Wanna go for a ride?"

The chocobo warked again and bobbed her head up and down. Reno and I shared a grin, and as our eyes locked without a pang of discomfort, I felt my heart grow lighter.

The birds had been running for more than an hour, as eager as their riders to be out of this dismal place. My attention was shot after such a poor night's sleep, so I had soon lost all sense of direction in the fog and was following the others blindly. Nanaki had lead us right the first time. He would do so again.

The chocobo in front of me was the yellow one that had served as pack bird. Since it had carried the lightest load the day before, Reno and Elena had picked it to carry both of them; with his leg still out of commission, they didn't want to take any chances when we were racing through a treacherous marsh on chocobos. Elena sat in front, while Reno clung on to her and held the reins of the riderless blue bird. His bright red hair was my beacon in the mist.

Goldie scrambled to a halt without warning, so quickly that I fell forward and bumped against her neck. In front of us the blue chocobo warked and danced on restless legs. No matter how much Reno urged the bird, it kept trying to move in the wrong direction.
"What are you doing?" Nanaki called, his light a faint glow in the mist ahead. "We have to keep moving!"

The marsh erupted in a torrent of swamp water, accompanied by chocobo shrieks and frantic flapping of wings. The blue bird bolted with Reno still holding the reins. He fell off the other bird, and his weight threw the blue chocobo off balance, toppling it into the water with a great splash. Goldie leapt aside with a panicked cry, barely avoiding the same fate, just as a massive shape descended from above. In my struggle to stay on her back, I caught only a flash of dark, glistening scales before another wall of filthy water washed over us.

"Shit! It ate the damn bird!"

Goldie bucked again, straining against the reins. My maimed hand lost its grip and I tumbled off her back and fell. The cacophony of shrieks cut off in an instant and I felt the weight of water pull me down. I saw nothing but murky brown, but my flailing arms found solid ground and I pushed and pushed until I broke through the surface. I rubbed my palms over the helmet in a panic, trying to wipe the grimy water off the visor.

"Fitz!" A pair of hands grabbed my wrists. "Don't move. Don't move!"

Through smears of muck I saw Reno beside me, wet hair plastered to his face, kneeling awkwardly with his injured leg stretched out to the side. When I followed his gaze, I spotted my chocobo just before she vanished into the mist, fleeing the swell of water that pursued her.

"Oh, no! Goldie..."

"Don't worry 'bout the bird, worry 'bout us! 'Bos are faster than the zolom. We ain't."

"It's huge! I didn't know they were that big!"

My voice was pitched high, my words rushed. Reno's was quiet, but firm and steady.

"Yeah. Goddamn freaks of nature, yo."

"We have to get out of here! What are we going to do?"

"That's a damn good question." He whipped his head around, craning his neck. "Far as I know, the edge of the marsh ain't far. I'd say our best bet is to run like hell while the snake's after the birds, only I won't be doin' much runnin' with this leg."

The smatter of gunfire drew our attention. It sounded close, but so did any sound that was traveling across water. I couldn't even tell which direction it came from.

Then a gust of wind thinned the fog, and I saw it. The zolom shot up into the sky, towering over the swamp at an impossible height, coiling its serpentine body for attack. A crest like a cobra's flared out just below the blunt head as the snake opened its maw, revealing two pairs of fangs the size of swords. A series of gunshots rang out again and blossoms of red peppered the zolom's body just as it lunged. For something that size, the damage must have been as serious as a paper cut.

"Fuck," Reno growled. "Laney's in trouble."

Nanaki roared. It was a word or a few, but I couldn't make it out over the gunfire. The snake hissed, accompanied by an odd peal of brittle tinkles. I heard melodic pinging and popping like the cracking ice on a lake, culminating in a clap like thunder and a mighty splash that sent shockwaves through the water around us.
"We have to do something!"

"Then pull out that gun of yours and start shootin'."

"One puny rifle against that?" I squeaked, pointing at the empty air that had moments ago been filled by the zolom. "This is not a great plan!"

"I'm workin' on it! Start shootin'!"

I gritted my teeth and yanked the rifle off my back. Water spilled out of the barrel and I desperately hoped the unplanned swim hadn't ruined it. When I brought the gun to my shoulder, however, a different problem came to light.

"Shit! My aim is shot. My arm is useless!"

Spitting out a curse, Reno crawled behind me and placed his hand over mine.

"Talk about desperate measures," he muttered under his breath as he peered down the sights over my shoulder. "All right, when we see the ugly bastard again, we gotta be quick about this. My hands ain't much better than yours right now. Aim for the middle of the big flappy bit under its head, that's the biggest target."

The wait was only a matter of seconds. As the gigantic snake rose again, I followed the head through the sights, steadied by Reno's hand on mine. I released a slow breath as the creature neared the end of its arc. The snake spread its crest. I squeezed the trigger.

The zolom's left crest exploded in a spray of red. The snake recoiled and writhed in the air with a hiss so violent it was almost a snarl. When it reared up to its full height again, I saw that a chunk of the crest was missing.

"Ifrit's flamin' fuckstick!" Reno whooped by my ear, slapping my shoulder. "I love this gun!"

The snake swung around and fixed its yellow eyes on us. He froze.

"Oh, shit."

The zolom dove and rushed toward us in a tide of muddy water. We had only seconds. The panic clouded my mind, compelled my body to fight or flee. Don't move, the memory of Reno's voice yelled in my head, warring with my instincts.

I sucked in a sharp gasp of air. Don't move, he had warned. Attracted to vibrations, the chocobo kid had said. My suit made me the heaviest. If I moved, the zolom should come after me.

"Stay here!"

I shot up and took off at a clumsy run through knee-deep water, splashing away from Reno and the snake.

"FitzEvan!"

I could see the snake out of the corner of my eye. The zolom slowed down, hesitating while it tasted the change in vibrations. Then it turned its head toward me and raised it high. I heard the rapid staccato of Elena's semi-automatic, and looked over my shoulder to see the bullets smack wetly into the snake's body, but it didn't even flinch; instead, it coiled its body for attack.

In my rush to keep the snake away from Reno, I had failed to think through to the inevitable result
of my plan. I couldn't run from it. I couldn't hide.

There was only one thing I could do.

"Sparky, blast off!"

The zolom lunged. Time seemed to slow as the hum of the suit rose in my ears, drowning out the human shouts nearby. I stared up in awe, watched the monster's mouth open wide, saw the glint of sharp fangs as the gaping maw descended on me. Sparky's surface crackled with electricity as the suit siphoned more and more power from its batteries. Too slow, my brain screamed at me. Run! It's too slow!

It was too late to run. The gigantic jaws closed around me.

For a second, I was engulfed in darkness. Then, a bright flash turned everything white. I couldn't see a damned thing, but the lurch in my gut told me I was falling, falling, until something crashed into my back with a terrifying crunch.

Slowly, I began to make out more than just whiteness. Swirls turned into colors and shapes as I struggled to remember how to breathe. I felt a prick on my neck, then the sensory overload of hipotion rushing through my system. Over the pounding of blood in my ears, I heard the suit rattling off warning after warning.

I was still alive.

Once my muscles began to soften, I became aware of a cold dampness seeping into my left shoulder. Maybe the zolom's fangs had pierced the armor, or something had been torn in the fall. Fantastic. As I pushed myself up to a sitting position, I saw that I had landed in shallower water, smashing a half-rotten tree trunk in the process. Reno sat some distance away and gaped at me with huge eyes.

"Holy fuckin' nutballs," he breathed. "I think I just creamed my pants."

I stared at him, looked over at the headless body of the giant snake still twitching in the bloody froth of marsh water, then back at him again.

"There's something very wrong with you."

Reno laughed, a high-pitched laugh of relief and incredulity.

"Says the woman who just fed herself to a Midgar zolom, yo!"

As I surveyed the carnage again, laughter bubbled up in my chest until I was unable to contain it. Chortling, I collapsed onto one elbow.

"Christ. I think my ideas are now officially worse than yours."

"I know," he grinned. "I love it."

A patter of approaching splashes made me tense up, but it was only Nanaki. His fur was soaked through and he had lost some of the feathers he kept tucked in his mane. The impression was one of a very large, very pissed, very wet cat.

"Have you gone insane?"

"No more than usual."
My reply triggered another hysterical bout of snickering in Reno.

"That one's lack of sense must be contagious," Nanaki rumbled with a sour look at him. "Stay here, Tess. We will try to find the chocobos."

"Waste of time, kitty cat. They're halfway to their home farm by now, yo."

"The other suited one wishes to try. She is insistent."

"Yeah, she's stubborn, all right," Reno said with a sigh. "You could try tellin' Laney what I just told ya, but I'm guessin' she's gonna run after 'em anyway. Whatever. I ain't goin' anywhere right now, that's for sure."

"No one asked you to."

"Aw, tryin' to make me feel bad or somethin'? Gotta try harder than that, Furball."

"Reno," I sighed.

"What have I done?" he protested. "I was just tryin' to help out and then this guy starts mouthin' off at me."

"Tess, wait here. Rest up." Nanaki glanced at Reno again. "If you can. We will return soon."

He disappeared into the mist. Rest felt like a very good idea, but I wasn't keen on taking a break in murky marsh water, not when some of it was already seeping inside my suit. I got up to my feet, then rolled the shoulder to get a feel for the damage.

My whole arm went rigid. It was vibrating; my whole body was vibrating. A metallic screech sounded from the speakers, just as the hazard suit lost power. I stopped screaming as I collapsed to my knees. I smelled smoke and ozone, and struggled with twitching muscles to keep the damaged part of the suit out of the water. Sparky's systems rebooted, restoring my augmented strength in the nick of time.


The sudden dead weight on one side swung me off balance. I would have slumped into the marsh water if Reno hadn't caught me.

"Fitz, what's wrong? Talk to me!"

"Short-circuit," I choked out as he twisted the helmet off my head. "Water in the suit."

"Shit! Is it still goin'?"

I just shook my head, too busy trying not to gag from the olfactory assault of swamp stench and roasted snake guts. Reno cradled my face in his hands and tilted my head back for examination.

"Your suit keeps tabs on your heartbeat, right? Tells ya if anythin's funny?"

"Yes."

"You sure it's still workin'?"

"I can check."
"Do it."

I gave the command. While Sparky listed the status of its systems, I watched Reno's alert eyes study my face. As we waited and listened, the frown melted away and his fingers molded against my cheeks, no longer firm and commanding. His thumbs moved, began a gentle back-and-forth movement across my skin. I sat frozen, uncertain but mesmerized as he caressed my face. It was the worst time and place. For some reason that didn't seem to matter so much.

His eyes softened, until they held the same longing I had seen that morning. I wanted to look away. I had to be mistaken. He couldn't be looking at me like that, not anymore.

Reno's eyes darted to my lips, then back up. A request. Advance notice. I wanted to look away, but I didn't.

Loud, rapid splashes broke the spell. It was Nanaki again, loping toward us.

"What happened?" he demanded, ears tucked back and nostrils flaring. "I smell lightning."

Neither of us missed the suspicious look he gave Reno. He released me, his eyes narrowing a fraction. I cleared my throat.

"Suit damage. I got zapped."

"Anythin' feel funny?" Reno asked. "Pain, weird tingles, twitchin'?"

He was back in professional mode. I was relieved – and a touch disappointed.

"No, nothing like that."

"All right. Lemme know the second that changes, tho'."

Nanaki was still watching Reno with a wary eye.

"I was not aware you can play doctor, Turk."

"I use a mag rod, remember? Gotta have some clue of what it does to people, yo."

Nanaki's tail flicked and he lowered his head. I wondered if Reno had triggered some unpleasant memory with his comment; likely enough, considering how the two acted around each other. Some part of me worried they were going to start butting heads, edgy as they were and still coasting on adrenaline from the fight. The rest of me was too exhausted to think. My limbs felt like lead, yet they were shaking like leaves in the wind. My head drooped.

Turning away from Nanaki, Reno sat down next to me, his right leg straightened out in front of us, and guided me closer to rest my head on his shoulder. Nanaki came up to my other side, supporting my weary body with his own as he stood watch. I closed my eyes and let myself go limp. None of us moved until Elena returned.
Our chocobos had scattered. Reno's leg couldn't hold his weight, so Elena and I propped him up between us with his arms hooked around our necks. It worked better now that he was conscious and able to help us help him.

That didn't mean the trek through the marsh was an easy one. Sparky had kept me dry for the most part, but everyone else was soaked to the bone; by the time we had tromped out of the swamp, Reno's cough had worsened and his body was shaking incessantly. I pleaded with Nanaki until he acquiesced to carry Reno draped over his back. Unlike my hazard suit and Elena's wet clothes, Nanaki's assistance came with much needed body heat.

"Of all the indignities...," he muttered as we trudged on.

"Yeah, tell me 'bout it."

Nanaki heard Reno's words and rolled his eye in one of those adopted human gestures that didn't quite fit his feline face. I heard Reno's hoarse, weak voice and felt a cold knot in my stomach.

We made it to the airfield by nightfall. By then, it was already clear we would have to spend the night – Elena wasn't qualified for nighttime flight and Reno was in no condition to fly.

Cissnei waited at the gate. She pulled her former colleague off of Nanaki's back and gave him a hug I feared might crush his ribs.

"Gods, Reno, you smell like you're already dead. Did you go for a swim in the freaking swamp?"

"'Fraid so, Ciss," he rasped with a frail grin. "One of the zolom got a bit too close for comfort, yo."

"Damn, you even sound dead." She frowned and ran the back of her fingers over his forehead and cheek. "Cold enough for it, too. Come on, let's get you warmed up first. You can tell me all about it over dinner."

I watched as she and Elena helped him into the bunker. I took a seat on the ground instead, to catch my breath before taking on the stairs into the barracks. Nanaki came up to me and leaned closer to sniff the air by my face.

"The pain is worse," he stated.

"Can't be helped. Goldie ran off with my meds."

His tail drew sharp eights in the air.

"What about the treatment for your Burns?"

I ground my teeth together, turning to gaze out on the plains. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him watch me with a long, searching stare.

"I would offer a Cure, but that would do nothing, would it?"

"I'm resistant. You know that."

"What I sensed was not resistance. It was an absence. A nothingness."
Alarm bells sounded in my head, but I managed an even tone of voice.

"What does that mean?"

He was quiet a while.

"You are not of the Lifestream, are you?"

My heart kicked into a wild race.

"And if you are not of the Lifestream," he continued, "you are not of this world."

I couldn't think of a single thing to say. It was no use denying it, I knew that much. Nanaki must have smelled the fear by now.

"This is why you were taken," he said. "Experimented on."

With a shuddering breath, I gave a nod. He glanced over at the bunker entrance.

"Does the red-maned Turk know?"

"He's known from the start. I was captured by Shinra the moment I first arrived here."

"So when we met in the Northern Crater...?"

"My second arrival."

Nanaki took a few moments to think it over, studying me with a thoughtful gaze I couldn't quite meet.

"I have many questions."

"You can ask them, but another time, please. Turks have keen ears and I'm not sure how much the other two know."

"I dare say my ears are keener," Nanaki said, tilting his ears forward for a few seconds, "but you need rest, not questions. We shall talk later."

In the old barracks, Cissnei was disemboweling a couple of tin cans for our meal. Elena and Reno had discarded their sodden clothes for a couple of blankets. All bundled up, they huddled around either side of Nanaki as soon as he sat down on the worn mat near the door. He wasn't too happy about it, judging by the way his ears kept flicking backwards, but resigned himself to the role of heater without verbal protest.

The blister pack of pain medication I had left behind was still on the table, but my relief was short-lived. Only two pills left. I toyed with the pack in my good hand, battling both the muffled ache that pulsed through my arm and the dread that coiled in my chest. I could take them now and hope it would numb the effect of the X-potion. I could save them for the morning to make the flight back bearable, and try to just make it through the night on what was still in my system. Neither option was as tempting as gobbling them down and passing out on the nearest cot.

"Do you need water for those?" Cissnei asked once the canned soup was heating up over a camping stove.

"No," I said, postponing the decision, "but any chance there's soap and dressings around here?"
"I'll check the first-aid kit."

The kit had the former, but only band-aids and gauze pads in the way of bandages. After scouring the cabinets in the back rooms, Cissnei scored a few vacuum packs of military gauze. Swallowing down my humiliation, I asked for her help with them, too.

Fifteen minutes later we were standing by a large sink in one of the back rooms. My left arm was free of armor, the undersuit rolled up to my shoulder. Reeve would have chewed me out over it, but the damage was already done. There was no point in special care.

"Few people would risk their life for a Turk," Cissnei said.

She was peeling off the wet, filthy dressings. I kept my eyes firmly pointed in the opposite direction.

"There's more to Reno than just the suit," I mumbled.

"More than a pretty face, too."

"I know."

"Good."

Her fingers never paused their work. My arm was already fully exposed. She stepped up to the sink, kettle in hand, and dribbled some of the boiled water across her fingers.

"It's lukewarm now. That's okay, isn't it?"

"Should be."

She washed her hands. Such nimble fingers, the skin smooth and supple. I dropped my gaze to the concrete floor.

"Hold your arm over the sink," she said and waited until I had positioned myself. "I'll rinse off the dirt first, then use the soap. Ready?"

I nodded, then tensed and gasped as the water hit my arm. Maybe my reconstructed nerve endings were messed up, maybe it was my feverish skin, but it felt like ice water. Cissnei soaped up her hands and spread the lather over my arm, starting near the shoulder. It stung, at first, every time the soap came in contact with raw skin. I hoped it would lessen with time. It didn't.

"I didn't like you much when we first met," she said, her voice matter-of-fact.

"Why?" I choked out as Cissnei spread the soap down my forearm. Her gentleness didn't matter. Every stroke felt like a chemical burn seeping deeper into my flesh. I swallowed the screams. The others would worry.

"You were short with him. Rude, even. You didn't smile. I couldn't tell what he saw in you. I thought he deserved better."

I squeezed my eyes shut and grabbed the edge of the sink for support, my jaw as tight as my fist. The metal groaned in my stead.

"My opinion is beginning to change." She knocked on my shoulder armor. "Maybe there's more to you than a suit and a pretty face, too."
"Gee. Thanks."

Her lips curved slightly. As she reached for one of the vacuum packs, I released the buckled sink and slumped down on a bench by the wall behind me. Beads of sweat trickled down my temple as she dabbed the arm dry with the gauze from the first pack, and used another one to wrap the limb.

"Done," she finally said, releasing me. "I'll get your pills."

She was out of the room before I could protest. Not that I would have, given the chance. I could feel my blood pulsing through my arm in swells of pain, radiating up my shoulder and into my skull. I clamped my mouth shut and forced my breathing slower to stay quiet. After an eternity, Cissnei returned with the medication and a glass of water. I spilled some on myself as I gulped the pills down. I was beyond feelings of embarrassment.

"Do you need anything else?" she wondered.

It was bad enough that I had missed one X-potion treatment already, but... I couldn't. I just couldn't.

"Just... a few minutes... to myself," I managed between shaky breaths. "Thank you."

Cissnei nodded and left. I curled up on the bench, waiting for the pain to dull to a bearable level.

Five minutes later I was on the brink of tears. I called Nanaki's name. I hardly raised my voice, but a few moments later, he was by my side.

The throbbing in my arm was insistent enough to force me out of my meager slumber. Like my body, my mind was exhausted and slow to react, and it took me a minute to piece together the previous evening's events. Nanaki had distracted me until the pain relief had kicked in; then I had just collapsed in the nearest cot. I hadn't even checked on Reno.

Guilt and worry dragged me out of bed. The dead weight of my arm, and the deep-seated weariness in my bones, threw off my balance enough that I stumbled into the door frame on my way out.

Cissnei was sitting at one of the mess tables. Nanaki lay by the exit, his single eye half-lidded as he rested his head on his front paws. He said nothing, just greeted me with a flick of his tail, but I noticed his long intake of air and the flare of his nostrils, and the piercing stare that followed.

"How are you doing?" Cissnei wondered, pushing a cup of tea toward me.

"Been worse. Been better. Where are the others?"

"Elena is outside, prepping the chopper. Reno is still asleep."

I turned my head to look where she was pointing. Through the open doorway of another side room, I saw Reno laid out on a cot. The blanket had slipped down, enough for me to see he had found a new t-shirt. The black fabric made his skin look white as paper.

"I'll check on him."

The gnawing in my gut grew stronger as I approached him. Yesterday's misadventure had not done him any favors. The bruises under his eyes were darker, but I couldn't tell whether that was because of his pallor or his lack of rest.

Despite my efforts to be quiet, his eyes drifted open when I squatted down next to him. The rest of him may have looked more dead than alive, but his eyes were alert.
"Don't s'pose that's coffee ya got there?"

"Sorry," I said, raising the mug in my hand. "No such luck out here in 'bo country."

He sighed, but accepted the tea I offered.

"How are you holding up?" I asked as I helped him into a better position with a pillow from the neighboring cot.

Reno gave a half-hearted shrug.

"Eh, ain't dead yet. Might feel better if I was, tho'."

"Well, tough luck. I'm not letting you quit that easily, now that we're on the home stretch."

His smile may have been anemic, but it was genuine.

"Reno?" We both looked up to see Elena had joined us, hovering in the doorway. "I can't take off yet. The fog is thick out there."

"Guess you haven't flown instruments-only before, huh?"

Elena shook her head. "Maybe we should wait? My guess is that it'll clear up in an hour or two."

I had nothing to contribute to the discussion, so I left the Turks to it. When I sat down at the main table, my limp arm thudded against the edge. I gritted my teeth as the pang cut through what was left of my druggy numbness. At this rate, I would batter the damned thing beyond recovery by accident.

"I don't suppose either of you would know how to fix a hazard suit?" I asked once Elena sat down next to me.

My faint hope dwindled as the women exchanged blank looks and shrugs.

"Whaddya need, Fitz?"

I turned my head to look at Reno, who had propped himself up on one elbow on the cot.

"I'd just want someone to take a look at the damage. I want to reactivate the arm, but I'm worried the suit might short-circuit again."

"No prob. I'll do it."

I didn't reply straight away. My hesitation brought a wry grin to his lips.

"Think I just fucked around doin' useless shit in Reeve's workshop all the time? It won't be the first time I've poked around in your suit. I know a thing or two 'bout ol' Sparky, yo."

"Thanks, Reno," I said, and offered him a brittle smile.

After a lackluster breakfast, I helped him into the old workshop in the back. I fetched the tools he named and brought them within reach, then sat down on the stool next to him. My stomach was churning. He had misunderstood earlier. My reluctance wasn't due to doubt in his abilities. It didn't even have much to do with concern about overexerting himself.

"All right, let's get this show on the road. Take off the fucked-up bits."
I started with the left glove. One by one, the pieces piled up on the table. The last to come off was the armor on my torso, which he helped me remove. I felt his fingers probe the torn fabric of the undersuit and squeezed my eyes shut, feeling a lump swell in my throat.

"Unzip this thing, babe. I need to look at the circuitry."

I pulled the zipper down with unsteady fingers, and soon felt the fabric slide back and down. In another second or two he would reach the dressings. I kept my eyes shut tight, but could still picture the red, ragged skin with disgusting clarity, peeking out above bandages that were stained yellow and pink.

Reno went still and sucked in a sharp breath.

"Shit, you got burned! Why didn't ya say anythin'? It's gonna scar if it's just left like that."

I was close to snapping some hurtful comeback at him, but then it occurred to me that he must have been talking about fresh wounds. With a sinking feeling, I remembered the stench of burnt flesh after Sparky short-circuited. At the time I had thought it was the zolom carcass.

"What's a few more," I mumbled.

Reno pulled the fabric farther down and clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"Dammit, this had to sting. You should've told me, Fitz."

I wondered why the suit hadn't detected the injury. The short-circuit must have messed with the user status sensors.

"Honestly, I didn't even notice. I'm snacking on painkillers all the time."

"Don't they warn ya 'bout operatin' heavy machinery with those?"

Reno's teasing caught me off guard, but it wasn't unwelcome.

"Well, they might be on to something, considering how this turned out."

I regretted the joke when his chuckle set off another hacking cough. He needed to get to a hospital as soon as possible. He and I both.

"Ciss!" he shouted once he had recovered. "C'mere for a sec!"

I whipped my head around, nearly colliding with his.

"No! I don't want others in here!"

I tugged on my damaged undersuit, trying to cover up. Reno stopped me with a firm hold on my wrist.

"Stop that, will ya? It's just Ciss."

Just Ciss. Just beautiful, graceful Cissnei with bronze tresses cascading down her back.

"I don't want anyone to see me like this," I hissed.

I tried to pull out of his grip, but he didn't budge.
"Sorry, Fitz, I need her help. There's bits of your undersuit in the burns. Gotta have a steady hand to get 'em out and my hands are fuckin' useless right now." He let go of my arm and held up his trembling fingers. "Sparky here ain't gonna complain if I slip a bit, but I ain't gonna risk hurtin' you."

Just as he finished, Cissnei appeared in the doorway.

"What is it?"

Reno waved her in. I bit down on my protests and wrapped my good arm around my bloated waist. While he explained what he needed from her, I turned away and closed my eyes, trying to ignore the uncomfortable burn behind my eyelids. I kept them shut while a pair of hands, smaller and cooler than Reno's, guided my arm out of the sleeve and peeled back the fabric sticking to my shoulder.

"Sorry, Tess. This might hurt."

It did, but her prodding and tugging was the least of my discomforts. A clattering to my right made me crack my eyes open for a peek. It was the shell covering the back of my suit.

"Huh, this looks different."

Reno was still out of sight behind me, but I guessed he had dug out my suit's ampoule rack.

"Reeve exchanged the hyper for X-potion. Part of my treatment."

"Oh, right. I'm guessin' regular hi-potion will do for this. How's it goin', Ciss?"

"I think I'm done. It's not perfect, but it's as good as it's going to get with this light."

"All right. Scoot over, will ya?"

After assorted shuffling behind me, I felt a hand just below my neck, pushing me forward. Reno's hand.

"Lean forward a bit, Fitz."

The pressure eased when he was satisfied, but his hand remained in place. The reason became clear a few seconds later when cold liquid dropped onto my skin, making me jump. Without him holding me in position, I might have shaken the potion off me.

"'Kay, babe, you know the drill. I fix you up while you squirm and squeal."

I heard a slap and felt Reno flinch.

"Ow, hey! No smackin' the cripple, yo!"

"Who's the one squealing now?" Cissnei taunted.

Throughout the small altercation, his thumb stroked back and forth across the back of my neck. I focused on the sensation, on the comfort it gave. The prickling in my skin spread and intensified as Reno rubbed the potion over my injured skin with his fingertips, but it never reached an unpleasant level.
"Yeah, was a bit late for this. 'Fraid ya got a few lines here now." He traced them with gentle fingers. I shivered, and it was not from the cool air. "Looks pretty cool, actually, all ge-o-metric or whatever the hell it's called. You should have 'em inked, yo."

I glanced over my shoulder, but it wasn't enough to see his face.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, it'd look real good on ya. Then whenever someone asks about it, you can tell 'em all about the time you blew up a frickin' zolom from the inside."

I could hear the grin in his voice. There was a touch of pride, too. Under his hand and his caressing thumb, the skin on my neck flushed.

"What about the bandages? Need 'em changed?"

I stiffened and pulled my injured arm into my lap, out of reach and out of sight.

"No. I'll have them checked out at the hospital when we get back to Edge."

"Suit yourself, Fitz." It was a casual remark, but I felt his thumb go still before he removed the hand from my back. "I'll get on with Sparky, then. Thanks for the help, Ciss."

"No problem."

I mumbled my own thanks as I hurried to pull the undersuit back on.

Reno hooked up the suit's battery to the bunker's power supply to charge, then focused on the damage. I watched him work, and fetched tools and materials when he asked for them. I watched him as well, unable to ignore the labored breaths and the feverish gleam in his eyes. I suggested he take a break. He waved me off. Five minutes later I asked again, only to receive an irritable snap in response. I didn't ask a third time. Instead I brought him more of Elena's restorative tea and made sure he drank it.

Reno's solution involved a bit of rewiring, a lot of neon yellow insulating tape and some kind of dark putty. Reeve was going to have a heart attack. Reno taped up my shoulder, too, and then it was time for testing.

"Chill, Fitz," he drawled as I pulled on the jury-rigged pieces with a skeptical frown. "It ain't pretty, but it'll work. Trust me."

That sounded more like the smug redhead I knew. With a deep breath, I switched on the suit's systems.

"Sparky, enable the left arm."

"Left arm enabled."

I held my breath, but nothing happened. No nasty zaps, no smell of ozone. When I moved my hand, the response was sluggish, but definitely there.

"You did it," I sighed in relief. "You fixed it."

Reno leaned back in his seat and responded to my smile with a satisfied smirk.

"Told ya."
"Cocky as always," I chuckled, and reached for my gloves.

"That's why you love me, baby."

My hand faltered for just a second, but it was a second too long.

"Hey, uh," he said after an awkward silence, "it was just –"

The bunker speakers crackled to life. Our heads snapped up at the urgent yell that came through.

"Incoming! We have incoming!"
Reno hobbled along at my side, one arm slung around my neck. I half dragged, half carried him as we hurried through the bunker on three legs. I soon noticed the tremors. The floor shook with one vibration after another, steady like a giant's heart, growing stronger each time.

Nanaki crouched by the main entrance; his ears flat against his skull, tail whipping back and forth. We hurried to his side, and finally got a look at what was waiting for us outside. My jaw dropped. On the far side of the airfield, a towering figure rose out of the morning fog. It was shaped like a human but stood twice as tall, with a torso like a barrel and thick arms and legs. The chassis was painted blood red, and its clawlike fingers gleamed a ruddy gold. It was lumbering toward us, shedding trails of mist.

I had expected some kind of artillery, or maybe a battering ram trying to bash through the wall. Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected a giant robot.

"One of Shinra's metal monstrosities," Nanaki growled.

"Shinra ain't got things like that," Reno said, his face a shade whiter. "Not anymore. That's one of Scarlet's old prototypes."

As we watched, the robot trampled the chainlink fence that surrounded the airfield, crushing the metal easily under its heavy feet. A nasal cackle rang through the air, impossibly loud. I went cold all over.

"I knew it!" Scarlet's voice boomed. "I knew it was you the second we picked up your fireworks in the swamp."

"Oh fuck," Reno breathed.

"This is personal, darling. No more games, no more tricks. Nothing but blood!"

The robot raised one of its hands. With the whine of a dozen servos, the clawed fingers folded back and its palm split open to expose a whirling cylinder of barrels.

"Shit!"

Reno threw us both behind the wall just as the torrent of bullets tore into the bunker's concrete. I managed to stay on my feet, but he sprawled on the floor with a shout of pain.

"Reno!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he growled, and grabbed Nanaki's mane. "Furball, gimme a lift!"

"What are you doing, Turk!?"

Nanaki bared his teeth and tried to shake Reno off, but the Turk was nothing if not tenacious. He clung to Nanaki and managed to hook an arm around his furred neck.

"What's it look like I'm doin'? I need to get to the chopper and you're the fastest ride around!"

"I am not some chocobo you can ride whenever you wish! I must join the fight!" Nanaki danced to the side, dragging him along the floor.
"The fuck you gonna do, gnaw through three-inch armor plate?" Reno hissed through gritted teeth, struggling to get his good leg under him. "We need big fuckin' guns and the chopper's got 'em!"

Another storm of bullets pelted the bunker. Fist-sized fragments of concrete pattered on the pavement outside.

"He's right, Nanaki!" I yelled. "Help him!"

"Through the back," Cissnei shouted, running in with Elena hot on her heels. As she hustled past us she waved toward another door across the room with a round, spiky weapon of some sort. "I'll take you there, come on!"

Nanaki snarled, but crouched down to let Reno climb up on his back, then bounded out of the room after her.

Elena had started after Cissnei, but changed her mind when she glanced back at me, and took up position by the door they had come through. She gripped her pistol tight in two hands; it looked like the same model as Reno's gun. It was the most poised I had seen her.

"Scarlet didn't show up alone. We've got infantry pressing in on both sides!" She blasted three shots through the door, then ducked back, swearing. " Didn't even slow him down, they're enhanced!"

I ducked across to her doorway and peeked through. Two men in fatigues were advancing on us through the dusty office, kicking over old desks as they came. One of them had a large rose of blood spreading across his shirt. His face was twisted into a grimace of rage, but he moved as if his wound wasn't even there. As I watched, a third soldier rounded the doorway at the far end of the room, then ducked back into cover as another shot rang out. Elena's bullet clipped the wounded man's shoulder in a spray of red, and he staggered but kept on coming. I flung myself out of view when he raised his gun.

Scarlet's ex-SOLDIERs, I realized. No wonder they were shrugging off Elena's pistol. My old rifle might have enough punch to stop a SOLDIER, but with my left arm what it was...

"Elena! Take this! My aim is shot!"

She caught the rifle I tossed her and gave it a quick inspection.

"Four rounds!" I yelled over the sound of gunfire. "Watch out, it's got a kick!"

Elena didn't waste any time. The first shot threw her off balance, but she stayed on her feet and chambered another round with practised ease. I didn't dare check what sort of damage my rifle had done to a human, but Elena had a vicious grin on her face as she fired another shot.

"Yes!" she whooped. "Another one down! The others are falling back!"

Her last word rang out loud and clear in the sudden silence. Elena and I exchanged a puzzled look, before she took a step into the room and hazarded a peek through the main door.

"What the...?"

I looked, too. The robot was on its hands and knees, head lowered at us like an angry bull. Above it was the muzzle of the massive cannon mounted on its back. It gave off a high-pitched hum, building and building as the bands of blue lights cycled faster and faster along the barrel.
"Get the fuck outta there!" Reno bellowed over my radio. "She's gonna fire that thing!"

The next second, the air filled with the rapid staccato of the helicopter's guns. Before I fled, I saw the robot's armor buckle and dent, in a cloud of glittering metal and flecks of paint. The hum kept building.

"Run!"

We bolted across the room and through the door the others had taken to the hangar. We were halfway through the next room when the cannon's whine erupted in a crack of thunder. The shockwave sent us both flying, and smacked us into the opposite wall. The impact left me dazed and disoriented, ears ringing from the blast. When I looked up, the door we had come through was gone. That whole room was nothing but rubble.

By the time I had picked myself up off the floor, Elena was already on her feet and huddled up by the shell of a window. Outside, Scarlet's metal giant had risen again, too. The robot waved its gun arm back and forth in a wide arc, spraying a hail of bullets across the broken wall we hid behind. The concrete pitted and crumbled under the onslaught, but the wall still held. In the background I spotted a second team of infantry, hustling from cover to cover through the hangar, moving up on the helicopter.

Through the insistent ringing in my ears, I began to hear my name.

"Fitz! Fitz! Fuckin' talk to me, will ya!"

"I'm here," I croaked into the radio. "We're alive."

"Fuckin' finally!"

A roaring tongue of flame licked over the robot's torso. Materia, I guessed. Not Reno's; he was still yelling over the radio.

"Keep your head down and outta sight. She's after ya!"

When the flames dissipated, the only harm I could see was scorched paint. Scarlet's robot hadn't so much as paused its relentless barrage. Why was she aiming at us and not the helicopter? Reno was a sitting duck out there, wielding our most powerful weapons. Was Scarlet so far gone that she chose blind hatred over sense?

Unless... she feared an enemy more dangerous than the gunship.

We picked up your fireworks. Sparky's power surge in the swamp. If they'd detected it, they must have figured out what it could do.

I scrambled over and took cover by the window, across from Elena.

"Sparky! Scan fields, electric and magnetic, full range. Report anomalies."

Something moved at the edge of my vision. As I turned my head, a chunk of concrete rolled to a halt at my feet. I looked up. At the top of the rubble a man was crouching down, aiming down through a gap in the broken roof.

"Elena! Above us!"

She spun around, rifle raised, and cracked off a shot. The man's chest erupted in blood. I whipped
my head back around, away from that horrible sight, and fell back against the wall, stomach churning.

"Two left," she growled. "They're trying to pin us down."

From the edge of the window I caught sight of the second team moving up on the helicopter – just in time to watch them engulfed in magical hellfire. I curled up into a ball and squeezed my eyes shut against the afterimage, fighting off nausea. The cacophony of gunfire drowned out their screams, yet I could have sworn I still heard them.

Maybe I was just hearing the memory of my own.

"Scan complete. No anomalies detected."

Cold sweat trickled down my face. It took me a few moments to register Sparky's report; several more to make myself react. No shielding, assuming the sensor range was sufficient. Was it? I had no way to be sure. I had little choice, in any case. That thing would end us before Reno's guns could get through its armor. I could already see sunlight glimmering through the widening cracks in the concrete at my back.

Pressed up against the crumbling wall, I mentally reviewed the robot's anatomy. The limbs were vulnerable and unlikely to house vital systems. My goal had to be the head or the torso – but to reach those, I had to wait for Scarlet to take another shot with the cannon.

Ohh, this was going to suck so hard.

The pounding on the wall ceased. In the silence, I risked a peek through the window. I looked straight into the deep, dark eye of the cannon, as it focused its malevolent gaze on me. The shrill whine began.

As I drew in a startled gasp, I saw a blast of white smack into the robot, freezing it in a glimmering coat of ice. It lasted only a few seconds until the groaning motors of Scarlet's creation broke free; but in that brief window, its armor plating seemed to chip and fracture under the helicopter's barrage like porcelain.

"Reno," I called over the radio, "is that you?"

"Yeah, it's us, and it seems to be workin'!" His voice grew fainter for a moment, as if he had turned away from the mic. "C'mon, Furball, hit it again!"

The ground shook as the metal giant took a step back and to the side. Another blast of ice froze it in place, but I could see what Scarlet was doing. The robot was turning toward the helicopter.

A chill crept over me. The gunship was a much larger target, and helpless on the ground. All Scarlet needed was one clear shot.

I ducked back into cover as Elena fired on a straggler in the hangar. She dropped my rifle and pulled out her pistol.

"If you've got any ideas, now would be a great time!"

"I'm working on it, just keep them off me!"

She swore and popped off several rounds back at the hill of rubble behind us. I couldn't worry about her, though. She had her targets. I had mine.
I looked out as the robot lowered itself down to one knee, facing down the helicopter, untroubled by the gunfire pummeling its head and torso. Fresh fear flooded my insides, sending the blood thundering through my veins. I had to succeed. Reno couldn't dodge the blast.

"Reno," I called over the radio. "On my signal, hold fire."

"FitzEvant!" he roared through my suit's speakers. "What the hell are you up to?"

"No time. Just trust me."

I tensed my muscles, readying myself for the sprint. In the background I heard Elena yell something about taking cover. Reno was shouting, too.

The giant robot dropped down on its hands.

"Hold fire," I barked and jumped out of the window.

The gunship's thundering beat ceased, replaced by Reno's furious cursing over the radio. I didn't listen. I didn't have time to listen. I had to focus on the timing.

The whine of the robot's energy cannon grew louder with every step.

"Sparky," I panted, "blast off!"

The hum of my suit joined the wall of noise, drowning out Reno's shouting. Lightning danced across my body as I dashed in under the robot's head. I stumbled to a halt, right between the massive arms, and stared up at the hulking form above me. The giant's broad chest was only a couple of feet away, furrowed by the gunship's cannons.

Would it crush me when its systems failed?

The crack of the power surge was loud as thunder; the silence that followed was deafening. I forced my eyes back open. Through the spots that danced in my eyes I saw the battered chassis, still looming above me. Its red paint was scorched black, bubbling and peeling off the armor plate.

"Warning. Power at twenty-one percent."

It worked?

With my heart fluttering madly in my chest, I staggered backwards out from under the robot. My gaze reeled back and forth over its bulk, looking for the flashing lights of its cannon, for any signs of movement.

Nothing. The giant was frozen in place, bent down over one knee with its hands on the ground.

It had worked.

"Fitz! You okay?"

I responded with a snort of incredulous laughter.

A sharp hiss drew my attention. Part of the robot's chest detached and fell to the ground. A person followed, landing onto the hatch with a clang. Scarlet's patchwork face glowered up at me, locked in a snarl of fury. As she raised herself up and took a step toward me, I saw the revolver in her hand.
I had no time to run or think. My command was an instinct.

"Sparky, blast off!"

"Warning. Power level--"

"Sparky, no fail-safes! Blast off!"

Scarlet raised the gun as she advanced, aiming at my chest. My suit hummed and crackled, but still she came closer, blind and deaf to everything except me. I saw her thumb pull back the hammer, saw her finger squeeze the trigger. I lunged to the side, right as the hammer snapped down. I saw the smoke billow from the barrel.

The impact knocked me backwards just as the blast went off. I was weightless, just for a moment, and then I smacked into the ground. Agony erupted in my chest, left me blind to the world and unable to breathe. I gasped, but something was pressing down on me, forcing the air out of my lungs.

I couldn't get up. I couldn't even move my head to look down. The suit was dead, the battery depleted. I dragged my good arm off the ground, pawed at the weight on my chest. There was nothing on me, just a massive crater in my armor. The plate had dented in and crushed my ribs.

My arm was too heavy. It rolled off me and hit the ground. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. The air couldn't flow to where it needed to go. Something was coming up instead; a warm, metallic liquid that coated my lips and bubbled with every broken gasp.

My helmet was removed, and the acrid smell of blood and burnt paint flooded in. I saw a face above me, Elena's face. She may have been saying something, but the ringing in my ears drowned out all sound. No, not quite all – I could hear shouting, weak and faint, as if someone was calling my name over a great distance. The ringing was just too loud to make out what they were saying. It was so hard to breathe, too. So hard to think.

I rolled my head to the side and saw the metal arm of the robot, its red and gold paint smeared by something darker. Below it was a blackened, shapeless heap. I watched the smoke rising from it; the dark curls coiled upward and joined the darkness that was spreading from the edges of my vision.

Someone grabbed my chin, turned my head. Aquamarine eyes locked with mine. Such an unusual color. So beautiful.

Reno looked frightened, though. I wanted to reach out and take his hand, but I couldn't move. I couldn't speak, because I couldn't breathe. Why couldn't I breathe?

His face disappeared. The view spun violently as I was pulled off the ground; the pressure on my chest clamped down tight, and the pain became a hundred knives stabbing into my lungs. I screamed; I tried to scream, but all I could hear was that damned ringing, louder and louder and louder...

And then, I no longer heard anything at all.
I was alive. It was the smell that gave it away. No decent afterlife would come with that much antiseptic. I opened my eyes and groaned as the brightness flooded in.

"You're awake!" Elena's voice, on my right. "Oh no, Reno's going to be so disappointed."

"Is he now?"

My raspy chuckle became a choke as invisible claws dug into my chest. Elena's eyes flew open – though her horror seemed to have nothing to do with me going stiff with pain.

"Oh! No, not like that!" She belatedly reached for the buzzer by my bed, more as an afterthought than anything. "He really wanted to get better first, so he could be here when you woke up! That's what I meant!"

Once I could speak again, I wheezed out a question.

"Get better?"

"He has pneumonia. He's on the mend, but he's not allowed to see you yet. A lung infection is the last thing you need right now."

My eyes had adjusted to the light enough to get a better look at Elena. Her hair was brushed into a neat bob and her Turk suit was clean, not covered in swamp muck.

How long had I been out?

"What happened?"

"Well, how much do you remember?"

I stared at the white ceiling, trying to focus on my scattered memories. Bits and pieces came back to me, but I wasn't sure how they fit together, and only one of them was vividly clear.

"Scarlet... with a gun. Guess she shot me."

A giggle threatened to bubble up out of me. It hurt just to stifle it, but letting it out would have hurt even more. Idly I wondered if upping the dose of whatever they were giving me for the pain would make the giggles worse, and if so, would they cancel out the analgesic–

Elena's mouth was moving. I should probably have listened to what she was saying.

"—smashed up when the bullet punched through, and it got lodged in your left lung. I was in the cockpit with Reno, so I didn't see you during the flight, but sounds like it was touch and go there for a bit. Once we got you to Edge, you were wheeled straight into surgery."
"Guess that's why... feels like that robot... caught a foot in my chest."

I snorted through my nose, and had to bite my lip hard. I needed to stop coming up with these mental images before I split my damned torso open.

"You got her, though," Elena said. "Scarlet, I mean. She's dead. Kerrigan was killed when the WRO raided their new hideout two days ago. That rebellion of hers is finished."

I was pretty sure I should've felt something at that, but my emotions felt a long way away. I searched for something to say, but only one thing came into my head.

"Everyone okay?"

"Yes, we're all fine. Well, Reno will be, soon. Or so we all hope. Three days confined to a bed would already be enough to make him impossible, but when he's not allowed to smoke either..." Elena shuddered.

"Yikes," I said with a weak smile.

She smiled too, though her smile faltered as she looked me over.

"He's been worried sick, you know. Whenever I've come to see him, he's sent me here instead. Rude too, even Tseng. He didn't want you to wake up alone."

A nurse strode into the room, saving me from having to come up with a response. He informed us that a doctor was on the way to check on me.

"I'll tell Reno you're awake," Elena said, rising from her chair.

Dr. Uzuki showed up a few minutes later. I kept giggling at my own lame jokes and drifted off before the end of the examination.

The next day brought more lucidity. While I appreciated the return of my wits, it came with the unpleasant awareness of my surroundings. The smell of antiseptic clung to everything, it seemed, even the food. It made me jittery, and I drifted in and out of menacing dreams. It was a relief, then, when my door cracked open to admit a pair of familiar faces.

"Hullo, lass! Finally awake, eh?"

Cait Sith stamped in on his booted feet and placed the pot he had been carrying on the bedside table. It was the plant I had brought from Cosmo Canyon; the one I thought had withered and died. To my delighted surprise, tiny green nubs had appeared on the desiccated stems.

"I don't believe it. It's still alive!"

"It is an apt offering, then," Nanaki rumbled. "I could say the same about you."

The flicking of his tail betrayed some irritation in him, but his ears were pointed forward, so I took it merely as mild reproach. Cait hopped up to sit on the side of the bed, his feet dangling over the edge. The head of the bed was raised, so my face was level with his grin.

"Yeah! You're not a cat in disguise, are ya? Nine lives and all that?"

"Not that I know of," I said, smiling.

"Be that as it may," Nanaki said, "I hope Reeve has the sense to keep your metal skin away from
you for a while. It seems hazardous to your health."

"As much as I'd like to disagree... I think I could use a break from hazards."

A purring chuckle rumbled deep in his throat.

"Perhaps there is some cat in you after all. May your glimpse of wisdom keep you out of trouble while I am gone."

"You're leaving?" Alarmed, I tried to push myself higher on the bed.

"I have a promise to keep. Do not worry. I leave you with this... cat-like creature," he nudged Cait with his nose, "and the red-maned human will heal soon enough. Perhaps between them they will prove a tolerable substitute."

Despite the heaviness sinking onto my heart, I smiled.

"You're willing to leave me with Reno? Wow. You've changed your tune."

His ears swiveled until they pointed straight up. The flaming tail flicked haughtily a couple of times.

"I saw his reaction when you were shot. I will not trust a Turk with my own life, but... It seems I might trust this one with yours."

I didn't know what to say. It was just as well, as a lump had suddenly appeared in my throat.

"Oh, hey!" Cait exclaimed, hopping off the bed. "I've got something for ya!"

He twisted his body to rummage around in the red cape tied around his neck. From some hidden pocket on the inside, he produced a small device and held it out for me. It was a phone, identical to the one I had lost. Once I had taken it from him, Nanaki padded up next to me, raising his chin.

"There is a pouch hanging from my neck. Open it for me, please."

Buried in the longer fur of his mane was a small leather pouch on a string. My eyebrows shot up when opened it to find another phone.

"Wait... *You* have a PHS?"

"Reeve gave it to me a few days ago. Could you add your number? Your human fingers are faster at such things."

"I'd be happy to," I said, unable to keep the grin off my face as I flipped it open and brought up the right menu. "But how do you even use this?"

"I am still figuring out the best way, but dropping it on the ground and using my claws works well enough. So, remember to give me enough time when calling. Answering a call with paws is not a quick procedure."

I slipped the phone back into his pouch and took the chance to stroke his cheek.

"I will."

I couldn't say which had woken me. The caresses, skimming down along my spine and tracing the
contour of my flank as they traveled back up to my shoulder, or the scent; pleasant and familiar and all around me. I suppose it didn't matter. What mattered was that for the first time in weeks, I felt at ease.

It's embarrassing, how long it took me to realize that I was curled up against another human being. I started, pushing myself up on one elbow, and stared at the body beneath me, clad in cornflower blue hospital pajamas.

"Mornin',"

I knew his voice, but I still had to turn my head, crane my neck to look up at his face. A pair of pale blue eyes gazed back at me, framed by red. Reno's eyes. He was lying in my bed, an arm folded under his head. The other arm was wrapped around me.

One corner of his mouth twitched.

"You were havin' bad dreams, but seems I got the magic touch to calm you down." He gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze, then continued his slow stroking. "Thought I'd make myself comfy while I was doin' it. Wasn't expectin' to become a pillow too, but y'know. Anythin' for the ladies."

"How long...?"

"Dunno. Half an hour, maybe?"

Half an hour? I had been wrapped around Reno for half an hour and hadn't even realized it? Was it the pain medication? Ohh, I hoped the meds didn't make me talk in my sleep.

"Hey now, don't get all red in the face, Fitz. It's just me."

He likely intended it as a tease, but he ended up sounding downhearted. I felt a sting of guilt. It wasn't anything he had done; I had just been stunned, flustered. I could think of only one way to prove that to him. I laid my head back down on his chest and closed my eyes.

"I know."

He didn't respond straight away, but his fingers continued their soothing loop, up and down.

"So... How ya doin'?"

"Been better, " I mumbled. "Getting shot really sucks, you know."

Reno's chuckle was comforting. In more ways than one, because even through the shoulder-length glove, I could feel the gentle tremors of his abs under my arm. My sense of touch was improving.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Been there, done that, yo."

For a while I just let myself lay still and soak up his presence. Just he and I, enclosed in a bubble of solace.

Eventually reality crept in on us, in the form of numbing limbs. As I moved my prickly arm so I could push myself off him, it nudged something inside his pajama pants. Something hard. I looked down at the bulge, then up at his face, my eyebrows raised.

"Whoops. Guess I'm real happy to see ya." He grinned and adjusted his pants to hide it better. "Don't worry 'bout it. I'll just rub one out later."
He kept an arm around my shoulders, supporting me until I was able to lie back against the pillow in a half-sitting position. I smiled, my amusement tinged with an odd mix of affection and disbelief. Only Reno could somehow make that sound sweet.

"You really don't have much of a filter, do you?"

"Don't need one 'round you, do I?"

I studied his smiling lips, the teasing warmth in his eyes, and wondered if he would think of me once he found some privacy. I had often thought of him, back when I still had a healthy body and a sex drive. I hoped he would... and then I remembered what I looked like these days.

On an intellectual level, I knew I shouldn't worry about it so much. The arm was what it was, but my hair would grow back and the rest of my body would return to its usual size and shape in time. Right then and there, though, it was slim comfort. How could I believe Reno wanted me, when my body didn't feel like me at all?

He cleared his throat. "Hey, uh... If you're weirded out about it, just say the word and I'll hobble on outta here."

"Of course not, I don't mind," I replied, tugging the covers a little higher regardless. "So... They deemed it safe to let you run free again?"

"Well, won't be doin' much runnin' for a while. Doctors couldn't work on the leg while the pneumonia was fuckin' up my lungs, and now it's too late to just Cure it away. Gotta let it heal the natural way, yo."

I glanced down at his legs, even though I couldn't see anything through his pajamas.

"But you'll be okay, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine."

I smiled. So did he, but the next second it began to waver.

"What about you?" he asked quietly.

"I'll be fine, too."

"Will ya?"

Fine was the automatic reply I had fallen back on over days and weeks of fussing, professional or otherwise. Reno made me think about the question, and about all the events that had to be reckoned with to form a real answer.

I didn't want to go there.

When all I could manage was a small shrug, a frown crept onto his face.

"I know what the freaks in lab coats did to ya... but what about Scarlet's number one asshole, Kotch?"

I hadn't expected to hear that name again. It brought back the memory of the man's bulk pinning me to the wall, his breath on me, his eyes looking at me like I was meat. Bile swelled in the back of my throat.
"I'd... rather not think about any of it," I mumbled.

"Look, I don't need details or nothin', and I won't bring it up again, I promise. But the look on your face just now, the way you've been around me lately... I gotta ask. Did he touch you?"

I looked down, picked at the saggy sleeve of my pajamas. I didn't want to remember any of that, much less come up with the words to describe it.

"He's dead, but before I took him out he said... stuff. About you." Reno huffed and rubbed his eyes. "I knew him, back when he worked for a shitstain called Don Corneo in the slums. A real piece of work, that guy. Would've been happy to zap his ass to a crisp as a favor to the whole fuckin' planet, but the Don had a deal with Shinra. Couldn't mess with his people." He reached out and placed his hand on mine, stilling my restless fingers. "Please, Fitz. I gotta know."

I shifted my hand around to grasp his. It was larger and warmer than mine, its gentle hold soothing. I licked my lips.

"He... tried once, but didn't get far. Scarlet and Kerrigan ordered him off. Didn't want anything interfering with their breeding plans."

Reno let his breath out in a hiss.

"I swear, if the fucker wasn't six feet under already, I'd hunt his ass down and kick it to fuckin' oblivion."

The venom in his voice was reassuring, if nothing else; but I couldn't bear to let the memory of that horrible man sully any more of our time together.

"You'd kick his ass with only one leg?" I teased, trying to lift the mood.

He looked at me. His jaw was taut and his eyes narrow, but as he studied me, a smirk spread across his face and blotted out his anger.

"Hell yeah," he drawled. "I'm a big bad Turk, remember? I don't need two legs to kick ass, yo."

He grinned. I smiled back; a smile that grew wider when he reached up and ran the back of his fingers over my cheek. His other hand was still curled around mine. I gave it a small squeeze.

A rap on the door broke the moment. When it swung open to reveal our new visitor, my mouth fell open. Reno, on the other hand, just threw up a hand in a casual wave.

"Yo, boss man. What brings ya here?"

Tseng stepped up to the foot of the bed and folded his hands behind his back. He regarded us both with an expression that revealed nothing. Suddenly I was very conscious of Reno's hand holding mine, on top of the covers in plain sight.

"Doctor," Tseng greeted with a nod, then shifted his hawkish eyes to his subordinate. "Your room was empty. I thought I might find you here."

"Guess they didn't make ya a Turk for nothin', huh? So, what's up?"

To my amazement, the corners of Tseng's mouth twitched.

"I have something to show you."
He lifted the crisp lapel of his jacket and pulled out a phone. Thumbing a few buttons, he came up beside Reno to show him the screen.

Reno's jaw dropped, and his face went a shade paler.

"Oh, fuck me! I don't fuckin' believe this."

Continuing the trend of surprise, Tseng tilted his phone my way. The screen showed a photo of a plaque, engraved with text, at the foot of a monument, commemorating Meteorfall.

"Keep on rockin' in Midgar," I read out loud.

Reno hid his face in his hands. A long, drawn-out groan emerged from behind them.

"I told 'em they had the wrong guy. I fuckin' told 'em!"

It took me a few seconds to remember and connect the dots. Once I did, I burst into laughter.

"The apostrophe is a nice touch," I choked out. "Really brings the sentiment to life, you know?"

Tseng had given up on his poker face, and was allowing himself a faint smile.

"How does it feel to have your deathless words immortalized for future generations?"

"Glad somethin' of me is gonna be around to see tomorrow," Reno said glumly, "cause the Prez is gonna feed me to a flock of rabid 'bos when he hears about this."

"Oh, the President is already aware of the situation."

Reno groaned again, louder.

"Well, guys, it's been real nice knowin' ya. Give me a nice funeral, will ya?"

"Don't worry, Reno," Tseng said, slipping his phone back into its pocket before his tight-lipped smile transformed to a devious grin. "We will."
Dr. Uzuki had come by every morning for a brief visit. This time, she wanted to listen to my breathing. The front went fine. After she moved around to listen to my back, all I could see of her was a glimpse of a white coat out of the corner of my eye, and a chill came over me. I closed my eyes and squeezed my hands into fists to keep them still.

"Take deep breaths," she said.

I opened my mouth to suck in more air, but it wouldn't go any deeper.

"Deep breaths," she repeated.

I tried, but fighting the urge to huddle up against the wall had to come first. After a few more seconds, the metal of her stethoscope left my skin and she walked back into view.

"Good news," she said. "Your lung has officially healed. Now we can continue with your arm."

I replied with a shaky nod and tugged my pajama top back over my head. As soon as I was dressed, I scooted along the bed and pushed my back flat against the raised mattress. Little by little, my breaths flowed easier.

"Sorry," I mumbled, not exactly sure what I was apologizing for. "I don't like... people behind my back." People in white coats. People with instruments and needles.

Dr. Uzuki stood beside my bed, her hands holding the ends of the bright green stethoscope she had coiled around her neck. I didn't look up, but I could feel her eyes on me.

"I understand you have trouble sleeping."

"I don't need any pills for that. It's happened before. It'll pass."

"It's not pills I'm offering."

I closed my eyes and counted my breaths.

"You have been through some very traumatic experiences," she continued after a few moments. "It might help to talk about them with a professional. I can put you in touch with someone, if you like."

"I'll think about it."

"As you wish."

I had said the same thing when Tyco had suggested it, not so long ago. I was supposed to help him that evening, only he had been the one who ended up comforting me. Since then I had lashed out at him, and at Reno, and at so many others. Even the thought of going back to my familiar lab in Kalm made me break out in a cold sweat. As I was, how would I ever be able to set foot in the new, unfamiliar ones used by Rufus Shinra's team?

"I'll be fine. I'll think about it. Empty phrases."

"Doctor?" I called, stopping Dr. Uzuki just as she put her hand on the door. "I, um..."
I lost my momentum when she turned and looked at me. It would have been so easy to say nothing, or nevermind.

I took a deep breath, and tried again.

"I think... maybe I should talk to someone after all."

The reconstruction of my arm resumed the next day. Many precious days had been lost, but the doctors were hoping to restore more of the nervous system before the window for potion healing closed. The medication kept the pain under control, but it couldn't stop the way my arm tingled, and twitched, and itched. At times it was too hot; at others too cold. I could barely sleep at all.

A psychologist came by for a tentative first meeting that left me both nervous and vaguely hopeful. Reno spent more time in my room than in his own. Cait Sith dropped by every day, too, for some unfathomable reason.

Once, Reeve came to visit me in person. He told me that Scarlet's attempted coup had stirred sweeping changes within the WRO, the biggest of which was that it would evolve into a military force. There was no shortage of recruits; volunteers roused to fear and anger by the depredations of Scarlet's guerillas. The gil for them would come out of the science budget.

"The Kalm office will close," Reeve informed me, standing by my bed in his well-pressed navy suit with his hands clasped behind his back. "The whole branch will be merging with the science team in Edge."

Another piece of the life I had tried to build; gone, just like that. I could imagine Grigori's fury. Chelsea would adapt and Jon would probably be excited about moving to the big city. Tyco, though... I had no idea. Would he take the excuse to quit the WRO now that I was beholden to Shinra? Would Reeve want him to? Would Reeve let him?

Before I got my new phone Tyco had sent me a message – it had passed along a scattered chain of former Turks until it had reached Reno. Tyco was still in Junon, still mopping up what was left of Scarlet's forces. He was fine, it said, and he would come to see me as soon as he could. I hoped both claims were true.

I told Reeve of my deal with Rufus. He took it in his stride, which aroused my suspicions.

"How much have you gone to Rufus Shinra for help?" I wondered.

"Less than I'd need, but more than I'd like."

"And that isn't likely to change any time soon, is it?"

His smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Assuming it doesn't, it would be better to have someone on the inside I can trust, yes?" he replied.

The WRO had taken full credit for Scarlet's defeat. It was better that way, Reeve had told me. Better for me, for my safety, to keep me out of the limelight.

Better for securing funds for his new army, he didn't say. Better for his WRO.

"I imagine it would." I bit off each word.

Reeve's gaze dropped – to the covers, to my arm on top of them. He took a slow breath.
"Look, I know you want change. Something better, brighter. You might have a better chance at that from the inside."

"It didn't seem to work out that well for you."

Only his eyes moved as he looked back up at my face. He smiled his polite smile.

"Well," he said, "let's hope you have what it takes."

He excused himself soon after, leaving me disillusioned and ill at ease.

Reno showed up a little later, bringing more news that stirred up mixed feelings.

"The docs say they've done everythin' they can to fix me up." He patted his right leg, which was stretched out beside me on the bed. "Don't have to stay here anymore. Rude is s'posed to come pick me up soon... I wanted to drop by first, see how you're holdin' up."

"Rude's well enough for that?"

I had heard he had woken up and was stable, but I had assumed a coma had to mean a longer recuperation period before, say, being allowed to drive.

"Good as new, pretty much," Reno grinned. "Bald bastard got all Cured up."

"Lucky for some." I made myself smile. I was happy for Rude; it was the other half of the news that soured it for me.

"Yeah," Reno chuckled, "tell me 'bout it."

Back to the outside world for him; back to reality. Did that mean back to his happy-go-lucky ways?

I would have to face the real world too, soon. What would I return to? Could I return to anything? The path ahead would take me away from Kalm, away from the WRO, away from all I had. It didn't feel like a transition. It felt like a loss.

"So. You're leaving," I said, doing my best to keep my voice even.

"Yeah, but I'll be stayin' at the safehouse down the road, so I'll come visit every day." He paused, and searched my face. "If... you want me to, I mean."

This time, my smile was genuine.

"As long as you smuggle me a burger. I've had enough hospital food for one lifetime."

Chuckling, he rolled onto his side and patted my belly.

"Don't you worry, baby. When it comes to takeout, I'm your man. I can hook you up with all the good shit, yo."

His face had brightened with a joy that banished the clouds lingering from Reeve's visit. I placed my hand on his.

"My hero. I knew I could count on you."

"It's what friends are for, right?"
The look in his eyes didn't line up with the smile he wore. He was watching me, as if waiting for something, but I couldn't tell what he hoped for. Confirmation? Rebuttal?

*Friends.*

We had hugged and held each other since our reunion. Hands on top of our clothes, above our waists. We hadn't kissed a single time.

He was still watching me, still waiting. His hand still rested on my stomach, warming my skin through the fabric. I hadn't thought twice about him placing it there; yet for each moment that passed it felt less and less like a platonic touch. His hand could so easily travel a little up, a little down. A little to the side, and I would be in his arms. Parts of me that had been dormant for weeks began to stir.

Back to reality. What was *our* reality?

"*Great. You again.*"

We both flinched and looked up at the third voice. Once again, the nurse had come to my rescue.

"We're just hangin' out," Reno protested. "What's the big deal?"

The nurse strode up to my bed.

"These beds," he said dryly, patting the metal rail at the foot of it. "I've told you something about them. Three times now, by my count."

"Yeah, yeah," Reno said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "'Ain't meant for two'."

The nurse crossed his arms and gave us a pointed look. "And that means...?"

Reno let out a theatrical sigh, and turned to me.

"Well, I oughta get going anyway. Gotta get outta these fugly things before Rude gets here." He pinched the fabric of his pajamas, pulling it taut, and stuck out his tongue. "I'll see ya soon, all right?"

"I'll be waiting." My voice was surprisingly steady, all things considered.

My breath caught in my throat as he leaned in, but his lips only brushed my cheek. He smiled as he pulled back, then waved the nurse over.

"C'mon, hand me that crutch, will ya? I ain't goin' nowhere if I land on my pretty face as soon as I try to stand up."

Reno kept his promise, coming by every day over the next week. He brought Elena along once, Rude twice. On good days, we joked around and shared the food he brought. On bad days, he would rile me up by being more insufferable than the pain. On really bad days, he would sneak into bed and hold me as I cried.

In some ways, it was just like old times.

Yet that was as far as it went. We didn't talk about *us* again, as if we had each decided that it was neither the time nor place. I sensed that we were both waiting, though, and over those days a certainty took hold in me. When we would find the right time and the place, I knew what I needed
to say.

I just wasn't sure it was what he wanted to hear.
I picked my way down the concrete steps with a tight grip on the railing. This particular stair was not near any of the waterfalls, but a rain had fallen earlier in the day and moisture lingered in crisp autumn weather like this, making the steps slippery. The sun was shining now, though, which was why I had taken the chance to sneak out for a few moments to myself. There couldn't be many beautiful days like this left before autumn started in earnest.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped into a small clearing. The damp grass clung to my slippers; I wished I had worn my boots instead, but doing up the laces was still too much for the crippled fingers of my left hand. The fresh smell of wet grass was pleasant, though. I breathed it in deeply as I approached the tiered waterfall on the other side of the lawn.

I slipped my right hand in between the top two buttons of my cardigan and rubbed the round dot of uneven skin just above my left breast. The bullet wound had healed, leaving nothing but a small memento. My left arm was improving. The fingertips itched; the nails had begun to grow back a couple of weeks ago, right around the time the potion treatment ended. The arm still wasn't pretty to look at – I was told it never would be, after all the complications. I still had to wear a special arm-length glove, to minimize the pain and the infection risk, but mobility was nearing seventy percent. My strict taskmaster of a physiotherapist had made sure of that.

I came to a stop by the edge of the pond beneath the waterfall. The clearing was enclosed by the cliff and suffused with the gentle patter of water descending from above in silver streams. A solitary tree stood near the water; its branches drooped almost far enough to touch the pond's gently rippling surface. A white wooden bench sat at the foot of the gnarled trunk, but I had never seen anyone else use it. The clearing had become my own, my little sanctuary away from prying eyes.

I stood still and soaked up the atmosphere. The sun held little warmth, but its rays made the spray shimmer with the colors of the rainbow. A slight breeze tickled my face, but it would be another month or two before it would tousle my hair again. I sighed as I stroked my good hand over the half-inch of fuzz on my scalp. It made a poor imitation of the sensation.

Seconds later I felt another hand repeat the action. I flinched and twisted sideways, and found myself staring into Reno's face.

"Sorry," he said with a sheepish grin. "Couldn't resist, yo."

I looked him over. He was on extended recovery leave, but my own convalescence had been swallowed up by burn treatment, physiotherapy, counseling and utter exhaustion. We'd had no moments to ourselves for weeks. I hadn't even seen him at all for the past couple of days; a mild fever had put him under strict observation, in case of a relapse of his pneumonia.
It still felt like a novelty to see him dressed in something as casual as gray sweatpants and a t-shirt. A fluffy Cliff Resort bathrobe, its belt fastened around his hips with a careless knot, protected him from the chill. His scuffed boots completed the look, laces undone and tongues flopping over the feet. Maybe I should have thrown caution to the wind and done the same. In his case, I suspected he was averse to bending his right knee. The bones had fused back together just fine, he had told me, but the joints, aggravated already by old injuries, were slow to recover.

Reno looked well, considering. The limp was noticeable as he moved in beside me, but there was a spring in his step and the nip in the air had brought a rosy hue to his cheeks.

"I thought you weren't supposed to be out of bed yet." I tried to keep my voice steady. My heart was racing, from more than just the little scare; I could sense a charge building up in the air between us. Reno had followed me here for a reason.

He shrugged.

"I guess, but my bed has a problem with it."

"What's that?"

The look in his eyes told me the answer before he spoke it.

"You ain't in it."

Finding his gaze too bright, I turned my face toward the waterfall.

"I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to do that yet, either."

"Since when have I done what I'm told?"

I snorted and shook my head, then steeled myself with a deep breath.

"Reno, I... I can't just go back to the way things were. I thought I could do the no-strings thing with you, but I was wrong. I'm sorry."

He said nothing, just averted his face. My heart sank.

"I... like you, a lot, I really do." Such an insufficient word, yet it was the only one I could muster the courage for. "Too much," I added, with a pathetic attempt at a laugh. "I guess that's the problem. The whole weekend lover thing, jumping into bed with you each chance I get because I never know when I might see you again... I can't do that anymore, not when everything in my life has gone upside down. I need to figure out my place in the world, find my feet again. Find something I can hold on to."

The tension didn't fade. I put a stop to my rambling and pulled my sweater tighter, afraid I had said too much in my haste to soften the blow. I didn't want more awkwardness between us.

"Well..." He slid his hands into the pockets of his bathrobe. "Maybe if we added some strings, you could hold on to those."

I froze, and shot him a wary look. A faint smile had appeared on his face. Was he joking? It sounded like one of his jokes.

"Look," Reno continued when the silence stretched on. "I really miss ya, all right? I dunno nothin' about this... relationship stuff. Hell, I got no clue how it's s'posed to be done right, but maybe,
y'know... Maybe you can help me figure that out."

He wasn't joking. The possibility had crossed my mind, of course, but I had never given it much thought. I had just... dismissed it.

Avoided it, perhaps.

"I... miss you too."

"That a yes or a no?"

I flinched as an unpleasant prickling shot through my half-healed thumb. It had reached for my ring finger. Funny that the old habit would remain, so many months – years? – after I had given up the ring.

That unpleasant sensation settled down into my gut.

"It's, um... Are you sure about this?"

Reno was quiet for a while. When he spoke again his voice was subdued, but not indifferent.

"I know I've let ya down. I never meant to, and I wish I could take it all back, but I can't, can I? You said once that what's done is done. Remember that? You're right. We can never go back, none of us can. But that don't mean we can't go forward."

"Learn to let go and move on, huh? Isn't that what you said, once?"

"Yeah, and I also said it ain't easy. Hell, I dunno if I can ever manage it myself, but, y'know, when I'm with you... I feel like I got a reason to try. Somethin' to aim for, instead of just runnin' away from all the bad shit I've done. I wanna try. I know I'll prob'ly fuck it up again, but..." He faltered, then let his head fall back with a frustrated groan. "Ah, fuck, I'm no good at this."

"I wouldn't say that," I mumbled.

"Then what would you say?"

A warmth had blossomed in my heart, spreading farther with every word.

"I'd say that..." I toyed with one of the buttons of my cardigan, twisting it back and forth. My stomach was twisting, too. "...you're not the only one with regrets. I've been an idiot too at times."

His slight smile returned.

"Sometimes, yeah."

"I can forgive. I already have. I think you have, too."

"Why do I get the feelin' there's a 'but' comin' up?"

I took a few moments to phrase my thoughts. It was hard to make them sound right.

"Friends are easier to forgive than lovers."

"Yeah, well... The way I hear it, nothin' worth doin' is ever easy."

"You really think it's been worth it?"
Reno's gaze dropped to the ground, and his smile began to fade.

"Don't get me wrong." I hurried to add. "There have been good times, plenty of them, but... looking back at everything we've been through, everything we've put each other through..." I gave him a wary look. "Do you honestly think we can make it work?"

"Well, I don't think either of us has much faith in happily ever after. That's a start, ain't it?"

His tone was joking, but he gazed out over the pond with a distant look in his eyes.

"Happily ever after." I snorted, shaking my head. "I don't know if we can even manage a happy year."

"We could work our way up to it. Y'know, start with a day, then a week, a month. See how far we get."

"You make it sound so simple."

He shrugged.

"Maybe it is, maybe it ain't. Won't know 'til we give it a go, right?"

After everything life had put him through, after everything he had done and been forced to do, Reno was still an optimist. It never ceased to amaze me.

"Don't you even wanna try?"

The answer to his question was clear: in the way my heart reached for him in his absence, in the way my body awakened in his scent, in the way he could make me lose my train of thought with a single look or touch. It scared me. I was terrified of giving someone that kind of power over me again; yet this man had stolen it before I had even realized what was going on. I didn't know how to get it back.

Reno had lifted his head and was looking up at the waterfall. To think that I had found him unreadable when we first met. His face was carefully blank, but his hands were tight fists and his chest rose and fell quicker with every breath. I could read him now, could see the need in him. The vulnerability.

Reno hadn't stolen anything, I realized with a jolt. It had been a fair trade.

Let go of the past. Move on.

With a shaky breath, I stepped up to him and brushed my fingers across the back of his hand. He glanced down and opened his fist, tilting it toward me. I clasped his hand with both of mine, a shy smile on my lips.

"Well, I do know one thing. It was pretty damn impossible to be happy without you."

He was silent for a while, watching our linked hands.

"That a yes, then?"

When I had first asked him to stay, on that first night in Kalm, it had been for so many wrong reasons. Selfish ones. Fearful ones. Maybe I didn't deserve a chance to choose him for the right reasons, but, well... Life wasn't always fair, was it? My smile grew wider.
"Yes. I want to try."

Reno let out a slow breath. When he raised his face, he showed a timid smile of his own. He cupped my face with his palm, then slid it down to caress the side of my neck. His warm touch sent a tingle down my spine.

"Ain't no one I'd rather be happy with," Reno murmured to me. "We both know it ain't gonna be all rainbows and unicorns. Shit's gonna hit the fan sooner or later, that's just how it goes." He brushed a thumb up along the line of my jaw, drawing a sigh of contentment from my lips. 'And when it does, and we're screamin' at each other, tryin' to deal with the mess... Remember that there's no one I'd rather be unhappy with either. You can hold on to me, Fitz. You can hold on to us."

As he bent down to touch his lips to mine, I decided it was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me.

Chapter End Notes

And so we come to the last chapter.

A huge thank you to everyone who's stuck with Tess on this long journey! We have reached the end, and I do plan for this to be the end of this series... though I won't be surprised if Tess decides to pop into other stories of mine in the future. ;) I've also got a few fluffy one-shots in the works, featuring her and Reno and others, which I'll start posting soon. (If there's something you'd love to see, feel free to drop a comment here or on my tumblr!)

Special thanks to Mr. Stompy, who not only proofread every chapter of this story, but offered never-ending encouragement whenever I fished for it. To fellow ficcer U, who live-blogged reactions from every single chapter of both of Tess's stories. (Whoa!) And to each and every one of you wonderful readers who left a comment or kudos, especially those of you who came back again and again. I won't list names because I'm paranoid I might accidentally leave someone out, but you and I know who you are!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!