

## **0: apocalypse child (in a nuclear field)**

**( 0. )**

Rufus wakes when the rising sun first kisses the steel and glass of his bedroom windows. His apartment -- hard-won from Daddy Dearest, the reward for being top of his class last year, and Daddy had expected him to ask for something else and the fact he hadn't had disconcerted the man for weeks -- faces due east. It's one of four on the sixty-fourth floor of Residential Three, the executive wing and the penthouse floor, and he knows the eastern exposure was supposed to be an insult. Shinra's offices open at sunrise and stay open late into the night, but the movers and shakers, the ones who make the decisions those morning workers need to implement, are rarely in their offices before nine or ten AM. He was supposed to have been forced to choose between being woken too early every morning by the unrelenting glare of unfiltered light through the floor-to-ceiling windows reflecting off Midgar-Above's steel and chrome, or hanging curtains to block away the view. (Insult, so subtle one would have to have been raised to Shinra's manipulations to comprehend it. His father knows what the sight of Midgar means to him.)

His father had never realized he doesn't need the sun to wake him each morning; he wakes before dawn without fail. It isn't his favorite time of day, nor his favorite view of Midgar, but it only escapes being such by the fact that Midgar by starlight and moonlight, the jewels of glowing neon unfolding beneath him sixty-four floors down, transcends beauty and reaches the realm of the sublime. Midgar in the mornings is a different lady: an actress without her stage paint, faintly ashamed to be seen without her protective camouflage but still willing to strip herself naked for the right lover and offer up her secrets. It's one of the earliest things he remembers: his nanny (that year's nanny, and he can't remember her name now, but she had been yet another anonymous and interchangeable thing in a life full of them) coming into his room and opening the curtains, letting the early-morning Midgar sun shine in, and he can't remember a time when he didn't know the city would be his someday. (He can't remember a time when his father hadn't rejoiced in that knowledge and despised it in equally-balanced measure.)

His bedroom has no curtains. It's fitting, he thinks, to sleep every night with his skin bathed in the light of Midgar's glory and wake each morning to the soft glow of the sun peeking almost shyly over the horizon. The twenty minutes between the time the sky first begins to paint the sky grey and violet and the time the first rays of gold reach out their questing fingers to reflect against the metal below is his time to roll over onto his stomach, cradle his pillow in his arms, and watch his city through the bulletproof floor-to-ceiling glass the wall his bed is pushed up against is entirely composed of.

(There are those who say that Midgar is his father's city. That his father built her, that his father made her, that his father owns her. He knows better. He has never seen his father have to pause halfway through a sentence because he turned his head past a window and caught a glimpse of Midgar stretched out below him, waiting for his

hand. His father thinks he owns Midgar, but his father thinks he owns many things, and most of those things won't even give him the time of day.)

Those twenty minutes are his gift to himself, every morning. He takes them no matter where he is: in the dorm room of the expensive boarding school his father calls an investment in his future and he calls prison, or here in the city of his birth, his first and truest love. They are his time to wake slowly, to review the upcoming day, to plan his strategies. To build his worst-case-scenarios and guard against them. Sometimes he looks at the children he goes to school with, those who are technically his peers, and has to laugh at their naïveté. None of them have to spend every morning reviewing their schedules to find openings an assassin could exploit and making plans for how to close those security gaps. None of them have ever had to review every word spoken to them the day before to tease out the undercurrents of what the manipulation attempt is for *this* time; none of them have ever had to carefully plan each conversation they expect to have that day so they will not be caught off guard.

(None of them have ever killed a man. He remembers his first: the second day of Festival two years ago, and he'd ducked his security detail and melted into the crowd that was gathered for his father's speech and enjoyed forty-five minutes of anonymity, exploring the street crowds and holiday merriment, before a group of anti-Shinra rebels that had *somehow* gotten through the security cordon had spotted him and closed in. Tseng had found him after he'd dispatched the first two, and stepped back to watch instead of interceding. Afterwards, with his hands sticky and the skin of his cheeks itching from the arterial spray he'd been unable to duck, Rufus had expected to be sick, but all he felt was a bubbling, effervescent exultation that his training had held up under pressure. He'd asked Tseng why Tseng hadn't intervened, and Tseng had met his eyes and inclined his head and said, *because you had it under control, and you needed to know that you could do it, before adding, and if you slip your detail again, it won't matter, because I'll kill you myself.*

Rufus had gone home that night and brought himself off over and over again, thinking of the curve of Tseng's neck as Tseng bowed it to him, thinking of the look of quiet pride in Tseng's eyes. Thinking of how, when Tseng said *next time, go for the femoral first, not the carotid -- it's easier to reach and fewer people think to defend it*, Tseng really meant *excellent work*. Thinking of how he wouldn't be a child in Tseng's eyes forever, and how he'd seen the first stirrings of the respect Tseng would -- someday, hopefully -- hold for his adult self, and thinking of how much he'd like to see Tseng bend his head to him again.

But it had been too soon then, and if he'd tried he would have ruined everything, and -- despite what so many people think, despite the carefully-cultivated image he's been building for as far back as he can remember, because above all else it's useful when people underestimate you -- he's capable of patience when the end goal is something he wants so fiercely.)

The hushed cathedral of pre-dawn can't last forever. As always, the first rays of true light flare into being, forcing him to squint against them; as always, he slides out of bed and rises to stand,

naked, at his bedside. The windows are treated with too many things to fog up from the temperature differential beneath his hand when he lifts it to press against the glass. It's going to be a scorching day out there once the sun rises a little more, the metal of the plate reflecting radiant heat upwards and concentrating it, but inside the Shinra complex it is perpetually sixty-eight degrees. Sometimes he wishes he could open a window, long enough to at least feel the breeze, but he's too far up. The windows carry too much of this building's load to be anything other than stationary. It's a trade-off he's more than willing to accept. (There are balconies elsewhere in the building for him to step out upon if he truly wants to.)

"Good morning," he says. They are the first words he speaks every morning, when he is here. Even when there is someone else in this bed with him, the words are always for Midgar herself. Sometimes he gets the faintest of feelings that he can feel her smile in response.

His morning routine never varies: first into the bathroom to brush his teeth and use the toilet, then to the kitchen, where his coffee maker obligingly has his first cup of the day waiting for him. (Black, one sugar.) Ten minutes to flick through his email, standing still-naked at the breakfast bar in his kitchen, mug of coffee in one hand and his laptop's mouse in the other, triaging things into what he needs to read before reporting for work and what he can save for later. When he's finished, he rinses out the mug and sets it in the dishwasher -- he refuses to allow the cleaning staff in his space while he is in residence, and keeping his place tidy isn't much of a chore when he is not by nature inclined to material possessions -- and returns to his bedroom. There, he sinks down to the plush and luxurious carpet, stretches his legs out, and begins the series of warmup exercises designed to wake his muscles the same way the coffee wakes his mind.

When he's beginning to feel limber enough, he pulls out a pair of sweatpants and the next ragged t-shirt on the pile of clothing he's stolen from others over the last few years, then begins the laborious process of actually dressing himself. (Clothing has no bearing on whether or not he feels naked; Tseng's had enough of the teaching of him that the center of his shoulderblades itch whenever he steps through the door of his apartment unarmed, for all he has to conceal his weaponry incredibly carefully. Particularly at school.)

The shoulder harness for the Shinra P-225 goes over his undershirt (too hot out there for an undershirt to be truly comfortable, but he learned the hard way that if he doesn't wear one, the straps of the harness *chafe* in places he doesn't want to think about) and under his t-shirt; the ankle holster for the .22 goes under the sweatpants, on his right; the holsters for the brace of ceramic knives (balanced for both throwing and close-quarters fighting) that were Tseng's birthday gift to him last year, when the school started sending students and visitors alike through metal detectors at random intervals, are strapped on both thighs. (The pockets of all his sweatpants have no bottoms. It means he has to keep anything he wants with him in his shoe, but he's willing to sacrifice convenience for a quick draw.)

Thus fortified, he hangs the lanyard of his keycard-holder around his neck and goes to meet Tseng for their morning run.

The battle of the morning run has been hard-fought over the years. Tseng maintains that five miles starting in Upper Central and crossing through three upper sectors before returning might be perfectly safe for *him* -- no one messes with a Turk -- but it's an unnecessary security risk for Rufus in a world where business rivals, slum rebels, and sovereign nations all want to see Shinra's empire tumbled. Rufus maintains that treadmills give him shinsplints, running on them bores him to tears, and he goes out running at school all the time. He won a temporary concession after that afternoon in the alleyway, after he'd proven to Tseng that he could defend himself when attacked and would not quail at killing when killing was called for; the temporary agreement turned permanent the next summer purely by dint of Rufus showing up at Tseng's door at six-thirty AM the first full day of his break. They've compromised on at least varying the route every day, alternating choosing turns at random and by whim. The fact they begin every morning at the same time is a security risk in and of itself, but it's one that can't be mitigated; they both live regimented lives.

Sometimes he has to wait for Tseng -- never more than a few minutes, but it's usually even odds that Tseng has been called out of bed even earlier than Rufus rises on some bit of Turks business or another -- but this morning Tseng is in the lobby when Rufus gets there, in sweatpants and t-shirt with probably twice as much weaponry as Rufus is carrying concealed underneath them. He's leaning casually with one leg up against the pillar that gives him a perfect view of everything in the room, sipping from (as always) a large-sized caramel and white chocolate macchiato whose cup bears the logo of the coffee franchise that pays through the nose for a space in every Shinra building's lobby. (Tseng's hopeless sweet tooth is one of the better-kept secrets of Shinra's upper echelons; Rufus and the Turks are the only ones who know he puts four additional sugars in the coffee each morning, and could probably be bought completely -- or at least temporarily -- for a box of the *good* chocolates that little chocolaterie in Upper Four imports from Mideel.)

Today, Tseng is just finishing his macchiato as Rufus arrives; he salutes Rufus with the cup before drinking the last of it and pitching the cup into the trash can next to him. "Morning, kiddo," he says, the way he does every morning, and like every morning Rufus grits his teeth against protesting the name. He isn't a kid. He hasn't been a kid for at least as long as Tseng has known him, not even for quite a bit before, and Rufus knows full well that at his age Tseng himself had long since been considered a man in his home culture. (*Midgar isn't Wutaj*, Tseng had said, the one time Rufus had made that point, and added -- so softly Rufus thought he might not have known he was speaking -- *thank fuck*.) But raising the issue again not only wouldn't get him anywhere, it would cement his position in Tseng's thinking as someone immature enough to protest more than once in the first place, out of nothing more than misplaced pride.

Rufus has plenty of pride, but none of it is misplaced.

So he nods to Tseng and flashes him the smile he knows Tseng loves to see from him, the one subtly swearing he's nowhere near as fucked up as Tseng sometimes fears he is. "Morning," he says, coming to a stop at Tseng's side. He gives into impulse and laces his fingers together, pushing his arms up over his head and coming up

onto his toes, arching his back so the t-shirt's ripped and frayed hem rides up to show the flat of his belly, the jut of his hip. He carefully hides the smile when Tseng's eyes come to rest on the skin thus made visible. (Tseng would only claim that he was checking to make sure Rufus's weaponry was concealed well enough, anyway.) Finding ways to make Tseng look at him -- to make Tseng touch him -- without it being obvious has been one of his hobbies for a while.

Tseng unwraps the strip of leather from his wrist and ties back his hair back at his nape with a quick, practiced motion. "Happy birthday, by the way," he adds, offhandedly, as they start the process of keycarding themselves out through the building's security stations. (Rufus makes sure to wave to the security guard as they pass the one manned checkpoint. He hadn't needed Tseng to tell him that making friends with the hired help can make the difference between success and failure in the future, but Tseng had been quite emphatic, and so Rufus always makes sure to demonstrate that he paid attention to those lessons. He pays attention to all Tseng's lessons, far more than Tseng will ever realize.)

"Thanks," Rufus says. Tries to ignore the way the fact Tseng remembered makes him feel. (Tseng probably has a reminder programmed into his phone, anyway.) He squints against the sunlight as they pass through the last set of doors, fishes the pair of sunglasses out from the hem of his shirt where he'd tucked them at his throat. (Present from Rude, last year. The Turks and Sephiroth are the only ones who ever mark his birthday with gifts; sometimes, Rufus even likes to pretend it's not because they want to ingratiate themselves to the man who will be signing their orders in the future.)

Tseng waits for him to get the sunglasses settled, then gives him the small smile that always indicates Tseng is truly amused by something. "Stop by the Turks' lounge after your day ends," he says. "Reno was planning to bake you a cake."

Rufus laughs. "Oh, *Ramuh*. If it's edible, it'll probably use ingredients that aren't legal in half the jurisdictions out there." (Still. It's more, far more, than his father will have for him today. Sometimes he thinks he should be worried the closest thing he has to friends are the men his father sends out to do all the dirty work, men a decade and more older than he is, men who do violence for a living. The rest of the time he's just glad to have them, no matter what their true motives are. He might not be able to trust them completely, but he doesn't trust anybody completely -- not even Tseng -- and at least the Turks have never outright betrayed him.)

"Probably," Tseng agrees. "We'll make him try it first." He gives Rufus the same once-over he gives Rufus every morning, his teacher's eye evaluating whether Rufus is prepared enough to begin. Rufus must pass muster -- he always does -- since Tseng adds, "Think you can do an extra mile and a half today?"

*Anything you can do, I can keep up with you.* He knows better than to say it. "Sure thing," he says, and -- just to twist Tseng's tail a bit -- adds, "Old man."

It gets him a whap upside the head, but it's worth it. And then they're running, and Rufus can feel the morning wind in his hair, feel

the firmness of Midgar's sidewalks beneath his sneakers, feel the hum and ebb of his city stretching and yawning her good-mornings as she begins to wake. The sun has already begun to warm the plate; he loves the smell of it, the hot iron-steel tang of sun-kissed metal with just the faintest hint of last night's rain layered atop it. Sometimes he imagines he can feel the Mako surging beneath his feet, drawn up into the reactors, there to be transformed into the energy necessary to keep the city alive.

When they finish their run, Rufus will go to shower and dress for the next day in the series of menial jobs his father has assigned him for summer's duration, thinking it another insult. Thinking it will humiliate him -- the man who will someday own the world -- to sort mail and dispose of garbage and arrange chairs for the petty demands of middle managers who enjoy lording that small power over the heir to the throne.

Sometimes he wonders how his father could have built so much while being so stupid. Sometimes he wishes he'd had the chance to know his mother, to be able to say if his own intelligence and foresight had come from her, or if they had been a fortuitous gift of the gods he still isn't sure he believes in.

He is Rufus Shinra, and today he is sixteen years old, and the whole world knows his name. To more than half of them, it's a curse. It's all right. It isn't that he doesn't mind -- he does -- but he has the rest of his life to repair that.

Everybody starts somewhere.

### **i: where secrets lie (in the border fires)**

#### **( 1. )**

Rufus doesn't belong down here; he never has. It's hard to disguise glory, but Rufus is trying: the man at Tseng's side is as far from the Rufus Shinra the denizens of the slums will have seen on news reports and in the papers as he could get. Instead of neatly-pressed bespoke white linen suits, he's wearing a pair of jeans (Tseng recognizes them from Rufus's high school rebellion days; they've deteriorated even more since then) that are soft and worn to shreds and missing one knee and half a back pocket, and an equally-soft and equally-worn grey t-shirt that reads "Property of Midgar U Athletic Department" in chipped and peeling letters. (Rufus has never attended classes at Midgar U, much less played for one of their athletic teams; Tseng wonders which of his regular lovers he stole the shirt from, as Tseng can think of several who *did*.) Over it all is an oversized black leather biker jacket designed to conceal both the bulk and stretch of Rufus's shoulders and the weaponry Rufus no doubt has stashed everywhere. (He wouldn't be the man Tseng trained if he hadn't.) Instead of the weekday-and-public-appearances take-me-seriously severity of hair gelled back until not even a strand can escape, it's the flyaway freedom of weekends when Rufus doesn't bother with product, his hair curling lightly into his eyes and being blinked or tossed away. He's even taken the time to re-open the sporadically-

appearing and paternally-disapproved-of piercing in his left lobe, and fitted a battered and tarnished silver hoop into it. (Tseng would eat his sidearm if the ring weren't deliberately cosmetically-aged niobium or platinum, not silver or brass. He of all people knows how sensitive Rufus's skin truly is.)

He looks nothing like any of the people around them on the train.

Oh, he's trying. Tseng did well with him; Rufus stood quietly at Tseng's side as they swiped their ID cards through the turnstile at the station in the basement of North One, his eyes roaming over the crowd of people in the late-evening rush. (Early evening is for executives and other high-powered employees. Late evening is for the young ones, the hungry ones, the ones who dream themselves into a windowed office in ten years, five years, three years.) Tseng could see the moment, as they moved past the crowd and slid onto the platform for the circumplate train, where Rufus picked his mark (babyfaced, innocent, wearing mismatched frayed pants and jacket and a tie that looked at least thirty years old, and if Tseng had to guess he could write the kid's life story in three sentences or less). A pause, a breath, and Rufus's body language had *changed*, became a mirror of nerves and exhaustion and *oh Ramuh Mom is going to kill me if I'm late because I stayed to work out after my day ended*. A few stops and they were arriving at University Plaza, and Rufus transferred his template to one of the engineering students who climbed aboard and took a textbook out of his backpack to lose himself in it as the train wended its way downward: a little bit of boredom, a little bit of abstraction, a little bit of *this paper's going to take me all weekend so I'm going to have to start it the minute I get home*. Nobody looks twice at him: he blends. It's good work. It always has been.

There's still no disguising Rufus. There never has been. No matter that Tseng and the boys have trained him into the skills of the somatic chameleon, no matter that his clothing is perfect for his environment (and it isn't a costume -- costumes sit *wrong* on bodies unaccustomed to their weight; it's the easiest tell in the world to someone who knows what they're looking for -- but Rufus's own wardrobe, worn smooth on his body over years and outings), no matter that he's perfected the lean *in* and lean *away* from Tseng, sitting next to him, that a younger, weaker man would have for his older mentor who's a little dangerous (there's no disguising Tseng's wariness and Tseng never tries) and more than a little bit a lover. There's still something sleeping under Rufus's skin that cries out at subterfuge, that shouts of his power and control and deadly grace, that says *you. I own you. I own this*. No matter how hard Rufus works to disguise it.

He's lucky that Tseng is one of the only people who can see it. (Or maybe Rufus saves it for him to begin with.)

Off the train at Lower Seven, through the stinking slum streets, and Rufus's eyes never stop moving through the crowds, seeking out threat and danger, his lone tell and one Tseng and the Turks never tried to train out of him. Tseng can tell the minute Rufus notices the quiet mugging in the alley they go past (only about fifteen seconds later than Tseng himself does): his shoulders go *taut* for half a heartbeat, tight and dangerous, before Rufus breathes out and makes himself relax without so much as twitching his hand towards one of his pieces. Tseng's proud of him. He's explained to Rufus, time and

again, that the rules are different in the slums; when Rufus finally wore him down enough to agree to this outing (when the time came right for Tseng to advance his plan), he'd placed *anonymity* as the only condition. The last thing they need is for Rufus to go swooping in like an avenging angel. There's no doubt he'd win any altercation, but winning draws attention and weapons hold a different meaning down here where Shinra's reach doesn't extend as far as Rufus and his father like to think it does.

(Rufus's father, really. Rufus doesn't hold many illusions about the realities of life in Midgar anymore. The so-very-few his father had left him after childhood had fallen before Tseng's teachings in adolescence. But there's knowing and then there's *knowing*, and as far as Tseng knows -- and Tseng knows everything, including the things Rufus doesn't want him to -- this is the first time Rufus has ever been down in the slums to see things for his own self.)

"Good work," Tseng says in a low voice, tossing Rufus a look out of the corner of his eye. He can see the quiver of overtrained muscles twitching to fire and being held back by nothing more than strength of will, but he knows he's probably the only one who can.

Rufus gives him a *look*, one of those *you may be my teacher but I still own you* looks, the kind that -- when they're Upstairs, when they're alone -- make Tseng roll over and show his fuzzy underbelly. They aren't Upstairs, and they aren't alone. Tseng's on the clock, and his job right now is to make sure that Rufus Shinra gets through this little life lesson undisturbed. He knows Rufus can see the implacability in his face as he stares back at Rufus; Rufus's eyebrows go up and his mouth quirks, once, before he remembers himself and shifts back into his innocent-student seeming.

But that doesn't mean he forgets. "How often does that happen down here?"

It isn't that Rufus is ignorant of what goes on in the slums. He receives the reports from ExSec and SOLDIER (and the ones he doesn't receive, he pilfers from the mainframe later); he listens to Tseng and Reno and Rude while they discuss and debate the best way to handle the anti-Shinra rebels and the slums' drug problem and the Shinra-issue arms that keep hitting the streets from locked and coded army warehouses and that IntSec can't seem to trace. For a man who was raised in the rarefied heights of Upper Central and the high-end boarding schools of Junon built for the sons and daughters of important men, Rufus is shockingly aware of the way life is lived in the strata below him. (Which is to say: not much, but more than any of the rest of them.) But this is the first time he's been here to see it with his own eyes, and Rufus is a man who above all else doesn't trust the perceptions of others.

Now isn't the time for the lesson, though. "Often," Tseng says shortly. "But: later. Just watch, for now." It's a rebuke, for all it's delivered in as gentle a tone as he can conjure, and Rufus's shoulders jerk once before he falls silent. Tseng can feel Rufus's eyes on him for a few more seconds before Rufus goes back to sweeping the streets. He doesn't want to influence Rufus's observations with his own conclusions; he wants to see what Rufus will come up with on his own.



A few more blocks, bathed in bad neon and deep-set grunge, past the people who are living and working and starving and trying to get by the best they can, past the people who are preying on the weak to avoid becoming them, and Tseng is watching for the moment of realization in Rufus's eyes but that doesn't make it any less sweetly vindicating when he sees it. "Wait a second," Rufus says, craning his head behind him, eyes narrowing as he tries to make out the invisible boundary line they've stepped over. "Something's different. We just --"

Tseng smiles at him. No matter how often Rufus does something like this, some feat of observation and knowledge that redeems the decade and more Tseng's been training him, it never gets old to see. "We just crossed over into the territory that belongs to the place we're heading," Tseng tells him, in his very best inscrutable voice. He knows Rufus will hear it as the only answer he'll get. Sure enough, Rufus quiets down, but he doesn't stop watching and he doesn't stop *thinking*, and it's a delight to watch.

The Seventh Heaven sits at the center of a five-block radius of truce. Everyone down here knows Tifa has claimed these streets, has decreed her customers *will* be safe and her neighbors *will* be undisturbed, and if there's something incongruous in a girl barely out of her teens dictating terms to the denizens of the slums, well, that incongruity goes away the first time an observer sees Tifa dislocate the kneecaps of someone who's failed to honor the truce and leaves him for the predators that walk on two legs to find. It makes the streets feel lighter, the air seem sweeter, as though the knowledge of safety writes deeply into the space around them. Tseng isn't surprised Rufus sees it, but he is surprised to watch Rufus's eyes narrow, his head turn, until he points unerringly at the unmarked building they're heading to.

"There," Rufus says. "...A bar?"

"*The* bar," Tseng says. The front door's closed against the early-spring chill, but there are a few patrons nursing drinks out on the pockmarked porch built of recycled wood that Kyle, the bar's previous owner -- a retired Shinra facilities manager -- had hauled in from Outside at great expense. ("A bar floor's supposed to be made of wood and sawdust," Tseng remembers him saying, the few times he'd been teased about the effort he'd gone through.) "Welcome to the Seventh Heaven."

"Mmm," Rufus says. "Bit far to go for a drink."

Tseng looks over to him and sees Rufus smirking back. It's Rufus's *I know you aren't telling me something and I'm waiting to find out what it is* smirk -- Tseng knows it well -- and he has to laugh again. "There's someone I want you to meet," he says.

"One of your informants?"

"Mmm," Tseng echoes back, in his best noncommittal tone. "You'll see."

The door opens to heat and noise, the smell of spilled beer and too many bodies in too small a space, and the floor is sticky underneath Tseng's boot-heels, the same way it is no matter how

much Tifa scrubs it, as though years of alcohol and grunge have changed the very molecular composition of the wood. The first few times Tseng came down here, the entire room would quiet as heads turned and people shifted, ready to flee at the sight of one of Shinra's Turks. By now, he and the boys visit often enough, have established themselves as willing to obey the Truce of the Watering Hole, that only a few people notice: a few conversations still, a few piles of gil are swept off tables and into waiting pockets, and one or two no-doubt-wanted men turn their faces politely away so Tseng won't be forced to take notice of them. (In exchange for their courtesy, Tseng never takes notice of them, until he has to, until circumstances force his hand. And never here. Elsewhere in the slums, where the truce doesn't apply.)

Beside him, Rufus breathes in, once, and falls silent. Tseng knows he can see all the small tells that label this a gathering spot for both sides of Midgar's eternal class struggle, knows he recognizes the few Shinra middle-managers scattered throughout the crowd by body language if not by personal acquaintance and can guess at the few who make the struggle against Shinra's dictates their vocation or avocation. His discipline holds, though, and he turns his head quickly, letting his hair fall into his eyes and hunching his shoulders uncomfortably in the body language of someone trying to make himself smaller than he truly is in the face of attention, and that's enough unlike Rufus Shinra that the few in the bar who could be expected to recognize him turn back to their drinks in dismissal.

Tseng is powerfully possessed of the urge to ruffle that hair, here and now where Rufus couldn't object or fight back without blowing their cover. He resists. Manfully.

"Come on," he says instead, and starts picking his way through the close-packed tables to the one that's always his or theirs when they visit: in the back corner, a stone's throw from cover behind the bar should it become necessary, the one table with perfect sight-lines on the entire room and all the entrances and exits. (Not to mention only a few steps away from refills on the drinks.) It's occupied, but that doesn't matter much; the occupants take one look at him bearing down on them, grab their drinks, mutter an apology, and move. He leaves the seat with the best sightlines for Rufus -- the point is for Rufus to watch everything, after all -- and takes the second-best for himself. *He* knows he doesn't have to be on high alert in here, simply the level of alertness he always carries, even in places of sanctuary; Rufus doesn't know enough yet to say that much.

Just as they're sitting, the swinging doors to the kitchen open on the other side of the bar and Tifa comes through, trays piled high with plates perched on each hand, hip-checking the doors out of the way as she maneuvers. Tseng can see Rufus starting at the movement, can see the instant Rufus notices the way her eyes scan the crowd -- flick, flick -- with the swift and practiced evaluation of someone who's used to being on guard even on home ground. Rufus's eyes narrow, and he lets his own gaze rove over Tifa -- up, down, taking in everything from her sensible shoes to the miniskirt she's wearing to the high-cut but midriff-baring top that's somehow even more revealing than a plunging neckline would be. (Tseng knows precisely why she won't wear low-cut tops. He's one of the few men living who does.) Everything about Tifa, Tseng knows, is calculated to make men

underestimate her. He's immensely proud to see that Rufus's eyes stay narrowed, his face thoughtful, long after most men would dismiss her as harmless.

Tseng knows Tifa spotted them the minute she re-entered the room, but she delivers the snacks and drinks with the thoughtlessly optimized trajectory of the career waitress, managing to circle the room only once, without doubling back, in order to finish emptying the trays she carries. She drops the empty trays on the bar, then swerves to arrive at their table. She leans down to kiss Tseng lightly as she does, and Tseng can feel Rufus's shock -- quickly controlled -- at that, even as Tseng slides his arm around Tifa's waist and tugs her towards his lap. She resists, as she always does. "Oh, no you don't," she says, laughing. (Tseng loves her laugh.) "If I sit down, I'm never getting up again. And we're shorthanded tonight."

He watches her eyes flick over to Rufus, watches her add things up, watches her make (the correct) conclusions and watches her resolve she will not say a word until either of them do. It's as subtle as a heartbeat, and he's pretty sure Rufus missed it. "I should have brought Reno," Tseng says. "Or is he still barred from bartending after the everclear incident?"

Tifa laughs again, bright and free and glorious. "Reno is barred from bartending for the *rest of his natural life*. Or until it's a really busy night, whichever comes first. Seriously, though, it's a madhouse tonight and we haven't even hit dinner rush, and it's just me on bar, running, bussing, and bouncing, with Biggs in the kitchen on grill and dishes. It's been pull-your-own-pint for the last half hour and I've penciled in breathing for one AM or so."

Tseng tugs on her braid until she gets the hint and leans down for another kiss. (She's short enough, and he tall enough, that he can almost kiss her while sitting without her having to lean; she gets grumpy when he does, though, and he's smarter than to get her annoyed at him.) This one's a little more passionate, a little less of a peck. He loves kissing Tifa -- he always loves kissing Tifa -- but his true purpose was to get her to lean in close enough for him to speak softly in her ear, which he does just before she starts to pull away. He uses his native language; he always does when he has something to tell her that he doesn't want overheard. "*We'll wait until after closing. I brought someone for you to meet.*"

"*I noticed, you idiot,*" she says, matching language to language -- her accent *still* execrable and her aspect of speaking still much like a (male) gutter punk, but he's starting to find it cute by now. Her voice is just as low and more than a little bit peeved, pitched to be swallowed up in the general noise of merrymaking before anyone -- before Rufus -- can overhear and wonder why they've switched languages, before she or he has to explain it away as lover's secrets. Then she's pulling back, her smile fixed back into place as though it never left. "Your usual, I'm assuming," she says, then transfers her attention to Rufus. "What can I get for you?"

"Whiskey, two fingers, neat, best bottle you've got," Rufus says. "With a pint of whatever ale you've got on tap as a chaser." He's doing a damn good impression of someone who's just along for the ride, but there's always a note that creeps into his voice when he's

giving orders, the one Tseng privately thinks of as his Brat Prince tone. Rufus must hear the command in his own voice, or sense Tseng's sudden disapproval, because he smiles, then, and it's Rufus's heartstoppingly beautiful smile, the one that can disarm any conflict before it even starts. "Please. And I don't mind waiting, or doing it myself if you just point me in the right direction."

That earns him one of Tifa's looks, the penetrating and assessing one that so unnerved Tseng the first time he was on the receiving end, the one that first convinced him Tifa was far more than she appeared or projected. Then Tifa smiles back at Rufus, and Tseng knows it for her let's-be-friends smile. (The one whose subtext is: *let's be friends, because I don't want to have to fight you.*) "It's okay," she says. "I keep his sake in the back on the special shelf anyway, and I have to warm it. I'll just grab your drinks on the swing-back. You can grab one of those trays and do a bussing run, though, if you really want to help. After you finish your drinks, of course." She runs a hand over Tseng's hair, her touch quick and gentle, then reaches over to remove his hand from her hip and turns away to get back to work. "I'm Tifa, by the way," she says, over her shoulder, before ducking under the pass-through to the bar. She doesn't wait to hear Rufus's response.

Rufus watches her as she goes, observing the swing of her waist and hips and the easy way she moves, the balance of her weight through the hips and thighs and the way she places her feet when she walks, the ball of her foot coming down before the heel does. Then he transfers his attention back to Tseng. "She moves like you do," he says. Tseng knows what he means: the leashed, easy grace of the Wutaian martial artist that he's never been able to shed (and never really tried). Tifa's version of it is a bit less perfect, a bit more improvised -- just as innate, just as powerful, but further away from the classical forms, more personal and syncretic than Tseng's own form, which was trained into him beginning before he could walk. But it's the same framework, underneath.

"Point to you," Tseng says, far more amused than he'd expected to be. He holds his tongue further, waiting to see what else Rufus will say.

Rufus sits back in his chair, drapes one arm over the back and studies the room from under lowered lashes. "So. Girlfriend, not informant." There's amusement, not jealousy, in his tone. Tseng hadn't thought there would be otherwise, but he's still glad to hear it. They've been lovers, or whatever it is that they are to each other, for years: since the summer of Rufus's sixteenth year when Rufus had shown up in the living room of Tseng's on-site apartment, the night before Rufus was scheduled to head back to school for his senior year, and smiled that smile before calmly taking Tseng apart with hands and mouth and obliterating any potential guilt Tseng might have had about the age difference between them, about the fact that Tseng had been near-raising him for years, before it could even take hold. In the time since, Rufus has had more lovers than Tseng could count - - for profit, for information, for affection, for fun -- and even Tseng has taken one or two, here and there, but they always come back to each other sooner or later.

Tseng lifts a hand, palm down, and rocks it back and forth. "Eh.

Maybe so, maybe no. Something like, at least." He doesn't volunteer any more information -- what he and Tifa have between them is only Rufus's business if Rufus makes it be, and only if Rufus picks the right choices in this course of this particular evening. He's Rufus's man, through and through, and he always will be. But what he's doing here, in the slums and with Tifa, can serve Rufus just as well even if Rufus doesn't know the details. He's entitled to a personal life, after all.

"Hm." Rufus's eyes narrow, and he falls silent again. Tseng waits, patiently, his eyes held on Rufus's face. Rufus must take that as a subconscious cue that the room is safe, or safe enough; he lets his eyes linger on Tseng for longer than he would, otherwise, when in hostile territory. Then he looks back over to Tifa just as she disappears into the back again, pursing his lips, and this time his look is far more piercing.

He's nearly got it, Tseng thinks. If he gives Rufus a bit more time, if the right things happen in the bar tonight for Rufus to see, he'll have it figured out -- as much as Tseng's willing to let him see, at least -- by the time Tifa closes up for the night.

Whatever Rufus was going to say -- if Rufus was going to say anything -- is forestalled by Tifa returning, tray in hand. She props it against one hip and begins unloading it: the sake bottle and the tiny ceramic cup in front of Tseng, with a pint of Pilsner to go with it; Rufus's whiskey (Tseng is fairly certain Rufus is steeling himself to drink rotgut, and looks forward to the moment when he realizes it's the same vintage that lives on the sideboard in Rufus's office) and ale go in front of him. Rufus is studying Tifa with a care and depth Tseng is glad to see: it means Rufus is thinking. Rufus is always thinking, but Tseng only knows what Rufus is thinking about half the time, and if Rufus has gone this long without saying anything it means there's a good chance Rufus might be thinking in the directions Tseng needs him to be.

"There you go, gentlemen," Tifa says, brightly. "Tseng, is this coming out of your credit, or are you settling up with me at the end of the night?"

"On me," Rufus says, before Tseng can say anything. It's not what Tseng would have liked for him to say; Tifa's happy-go-lucky cover slips for a minute, cracking and falling away to reveal the steel beneath it as she glances at him. Rufus doesn't move to see it, not even to lift an eyebrow, and Tseng can see Tifa's relief as she summons her mask and presses it back into place, thinking Rufus didn't see. Tseng knows better. Rufus is just better at covering up his reactions than she is. He'd been trained in a far harsher school than she.

"Sounds good to me," she says, and her voice is back to being cheerful. "You're new, so you don't know the deal -- you don't have to help, it's totally optional, but if you do decide to help out, it's one free drink for every hour of work you put in, plus one alcoholic drink while you're working and unlimited soft drinks and water. You have to be sober enough to hit the floor with your hat, or rather, sober enough to *not* hit the floor with my glassware, while you're working, and Ramuh help you if you fuck with my customers or start anything while you're behind the bar. Any tips you get handed are yours to keep; if I catch

you skimming the cashbox or shorting the tickets, you're a dead man. And I *will* catch you."

She smiles, slow and feral, and Tseng sees the instant where Rufus realizes it isn't hyperbole: shock flashes through his eyes, then deepens to a slow, dawning respect. (He knows Rufus hasn't yet figured out that she knows who he is; *he* knows Tifa's figured it out, and he's struck, once again, by the fact that his girlfriend-lover-whatever has *balls of hammered steel* to be delivering this speech, to this man. But Tseng brought Rufus here undercover, without warning her, and that means she's treating him like she would treat any other newcomer brought in by a trusted customer -- probably more so, just to get a bit of revenge on Tseng for failing to warn her in the first place that he was bringing Rufus J. Shinra into her bar on a night like this.)

Then she turns to Tseng. "*You*, I'll order around with impunity. If you two aren't in the middle of something, I need someone on bar for an hour so I can take the grill and Biggs can catch up on dishes, or else everyone will be eating off trays and tabletops and drinking out of their shoes in another twenty minutes or so. I can give you ten minutes or so to finish off the sake before it gets cold, but after that, hop to. I really don't want to put Dai on bar again."

Tseng winces. "Ah, yes. I remember the last time just as well as you do." He pours his own cup of sake -- the drinking habits of home were the first to go, back when he realized no one here knew them -- and toasts the space precisely between her and Rufus. "*Kanpai*," he says, and adds, still in Wutaian, "*Go easy on him. He's delicate.*" Then he downs the cup.

Tifa snorts, as he meant for her to do. Rufus looks between them, his face calm but curious; he has asked Tseng multiple times to teach him Wutaian, and Tseng has refused each time. (It's always good to have a language that one's employer-and-sworn-lord can't understand one in. For swearing and backtalk, even if nothing more, even if Tseng has long since discarded the laws of his former home that would preclude the teaching.) She doesn't respond, though -- wanting to keep her understanding secret, of course, for she could have been laughing at Tseng's behavior just as easily as what he said -- and only adds, "Cheers, gentlemen," before turning again and heading back behind the bar to deal with the slowly-growing field of customers wanting drinks.

"This is a test, isn't it," Rufus says quietly, leaning in so that his voice won't carry past him to the other tables around them. "There's something here I'm supposed to figure out, or do, or not do, and you've brought me here so you can see if I will. Or won't."

"Everything's a test," Tseng agrees, lightly, refilling his cup and downing it just as fast. (He wouldn't drink whiskey so quickly, but he grew up on sake, like mother's milk, and the fact that Kyle -- and now Tifa -- was willing to import it from Wutai, at great expense, was no small factor in his initial selection of the Seventh Heaven as one of his drinking establishments of choice. That had been before there had been other factors to keep him here, of course.) Across the table from him, Rufus takes his first sip of his own whiskey, makes a face before it even hits his tastebuds, then doubletakes and stares at his glass.

Tseng hides the smile. "But: yes. You're right. It is. Final exam, really."

Rufus raises an eyebrow. "For?"

"For the class I've been teaching you for, what, the past thirteen years now," Tseng says. "Don't worry; you're doing fine so far." He sets the ceramic cup atop the sake carafe, where it will help to keep the drink warm, and puts his hands on the table to push his chair back. "And if you'll excuse me, you heard the lady; I'm wanted behind the bar. Enjoy yourself while I'm busy; the pool table in particular is often staffed by excellent opponents, and the permanent poker game in the side room is usually looking for additional players."

He can feel Rufus's eyes on his back as he turns, picking up his drinks to bring with him, and makes his way to the pass-through at the side of the bar, then ducks under it and picks up a bar-towel that he immediately twists up to flick Tifa (who's facing away from him, reaching for something in the depths of the corner chest freezer) on the ass with. She hisses at him and whirls around, hands coming up in the third defense position before falling when she sees it's him. She knew it was him from the moment he ducked the pass, he knows; she always knows when someone enters her field of presence. It's one of the first lessons of the fighting arts. He also knows she'd be perfectly capable of stifling the automatic response to a perceived attack while she's here on her own turf. Which means that her response is a test, or perhaps a show, for Rufus's benefit -- that she wants Rufus to see that she knows the fighting arts, that she wants him to see how good she truly is at them. He wonders what's going on inside that brilliant mind of hers.

Perhaps he should have warned her ahead of time after all. (But it's more fun this way, and Rufus's honest reactions aren't the only ones he's testing here tonight.)

"I'm going to kill you and hide the body," Tifa says, through gritted teeth that pass for a smile if anyone isn't looking too closely. She turns back and grabs the extra bag of ice she'd been seeking, hauling it up and onto the bar like it weighs nothing instead of the thirty pounds he knows it does. Tseng takes a moment to watch the beauty of her muscles rippling beneath her skin; this might be a serious moment, the end stages of a multiplayer game of *go* he's been working on for months if not years, but the day he can't take a moment in the middle of his scheming to admire Tifa's quite-frankly-excellent body is the day they light his funeral pyre. She switches to Wutaian, mindful of the sea of people waiting (patiently enough; Tifa's customers are fairly understanding of minor delays and willing to cut Tifa a great deal of slack) on the other side of the bar: "*Whatever you're up to, you had to pick a Friday night for it?*"

Tseng slings the bar towel over his shoulder and turns on the sink to wash his hands. "*Necessity, this one fears, due to the schedule of the one this one brought with him. And yet, perhaps, a miscalculation. This one offers his humblest and most sincere abject apology.*" She isn't *really* upset -- he knows her moods well enough to know that she's mildly peeved at most -- but a little bit of groveling never hurt anybody.

His ascent into the most formal, most humble register -- used only for those of a station so high above the speaker as to be nearly godly -- makes her roll her eyes, the same way it always does. She learned the language from an outsider, the same man who taught her the fighting arts -- the man who should not have known either, and Tseng is still curious as to how he did -- and not from a native speaker; it still shows in the fact that the only register in which she speaks is the one said outsider learned himself, the coarse and low-class speech of the dock worker. When Tseng slips into the mode of speaking of his birth, it always makes her think he's teasing her, even when he doesn't intend to. "Yeah, yeah," she says, back in Midgar's common language again. "Let me finish pulling the orders I already took, then you can take over here while I go on dish-and-glass patrol. I've been working from the left side of the line, if you want to grab the right." She adds, then, her tone just as brisk and no-nonsense for any listener to hear despite the contents of her words: "*You're lucky I still love you, even if you're a pain in my fucking ass.*"

"*My charm and sterling wit,*" he says, dryly. It earns him a punch in the arm, but he was expecting that, and she generally doesn't punch *too* hard, unless she's far more peeved with him than she is right now.

Once finished drying his hands and stowing the bar-towel back over his shoulder, Tseng starts in on taking orders where Tifa had indicated. He always gets a secret, amused kick out of doing this: there's something about the head of the Turks, feared and respected, slaving behind a bar that never fails to appeal to his sense of universal irony. The first few times he'd taken a bartender's station, half the customers had decided it was time to suddenly dry out lest he poison them right before their eyes, but by now it's just as unremarkable as his presence in the bar itself.

Handing the taps to a regular customer for emergency help during rush time, or when the bar is short-handed, was a custom Kyle started, back in the days when he'd worked with half the people who tended to come in and was neighbors with the other half. Tifa had kept it up over the past two years since assuming sole ownership of the bar due to necessity alone; for all her genial and easygoing nature, she is a boss so demanding as to make Heidegger look sweet, and Tseng has listened to the rant about how impossible it is to find good help that will both live up to her standards and not disappear within a month so many times he could probably deliver it himself.

It's odd, truly odd, how often he has listened to Tifa deliver that rant, and others far more intimate and personal, since the time he'd walked into the Heaven with Reno and Rude and Reeve to discover Kyle had finally hired both the bouncer and extra waitress he'd been thinking of adding, and they were both the same unprepossessing scrap of a girl. ("Bouncer?" Reno had scoffed upon hearing. "Ky, the only things she can bounce are her *tits*." That had been before the night's attempted robbery, where Tifa had broken both the robber's arms, his nose, and his jaw before frog-marching him out of the bar - - without opening the door first, on the first attempt -- with a form and grace so perfect Tseng's teachers would have wept to see, and Reno's jaw had stayed on the floor for the rest of the evening.)

Tseng had known there was something behind the sweet-faced,



heavenly-bodied girl from the beginning, especially when she'd given him that *look* when she thought he wasn't paying attention to her: she'd moved a bit too carefully, looked at Shinra employees with a bit too much control and avoided them far more than could be explained by random chance, and there had been dark circles under her eyes and Tseng had seen the few moments here and there when she'd had to stop and catch her breath after a bit of physical exertion that shouldn't have bothered someone as fit-looking as she was.

None of it had added up, until the night she'd dropped and broken a tray full of glass on the floor in the midst of an *epic* bad day and sworn in Wutaian before panicking when he'd heard. He'd dragged her out to the front porch (she looking as though she was on her way to execution the whole way) to interrogate her about where, precisely, she'd learned. (He'd put her fears at ease first thing, of course. By then he'd known she knew the Wutaian fighting arts, and he'd also begun to suspect that she knew enough of Wutaian culture to know that they, and the language, were *never* taught to *nanbanjin*: to do so without special dispensation was death for the Wutaian who gave up his Empire's secrets and, often, death for the *nanbanjin* who learned. But Tseng had not been a loyal son of the Sun Empire for years, marked for death himself should he ever return -- defecting to one's Empire's mortal enemy generally sufficed to get one on one's family's bad side, even were one's family *not* the Imperial Family itself and one were not second in line to succeed one's father upon his ascension to the heavenly, rather than the celestial, throne -- and he couldn't give a *shit* about where Tifa learned the skills she'd learned. He just wanted to know.)

When he'd pried the place of her birth out of her, though -- the moment the word "Nibelheim" passed her lips and she'd turned her face away, bringing up one palm to press between her breasts in the same habit he'd seen her exhibit whenever she grew short of breath or pained from a long night's work -- Tseng had realized there was more to her story than even he had suspected. And he'd realized that learning that story, the truth behind that terrible night in that tiny town halfway across the globe, had suddenly become urgent.

She wouldn't tell him more than a few bare words, not then, but they were still more than the official story even the most rarefied echelons of Shinra's people had been fed: *Sephiroth came. He went to the reactor, and then spent four days holed up in the mansion outside town, and then he came out from the mansion and set the town on fire and went back to the reactor to ... do something. I don't know what. And I followed him to try to stop him from doing it. It was stupid, and I was an idiot, and I shouldn't be alive right now and I'm not sure how I am.*

Tseng hadn't pressed. He'd known, looking at her by the lights of Lower Seven at night -- pale, shaking, clearly terrified and expecting to have the rug of her life yanked out from beneath her feet again, but still holding her chin high and staring him straight in the eye, daring him to do his worst -- that the secrets she held were connected to the secrets Rufus had been seeking since the moment Rufus had heard of Sephiroth's death, and he'd known that getting her to trust him enough to reveal those secrets to him would take months, if not years, of patient outreach.

Birdseed, he'd thought of it. Birdseed, and Tifa was the bird he was trying to coax to his hand, and her secrets the song he was trying to coax from her throat.

He certainly hadn't expected to find himself falling in love with her as he waited.

But she is beautiful and she is kind, generous to a fault, having somehow lived through -- whatever went on in that reactor in the mountains -- and survived to plant her roots somewhere she'd clearly never expected to find herself and not just live but thrive. She is tough without being hard, steel without being rigid, able to stare down men twice her size and more and courageous enough to not back down when Tseng of the Turks made it clear he was ready to take an interest in her story. She is a woman of *meiyo*, *makoto*, *chūgi*, and *rei*, *gi* and *yū* and *jin*, and one half of Tseng is quietly horrified to find such a perfect example of *bushido* in a woman's body while the other half is horrified to find that example here in the slums of Midgar, but all of him is stunned at the flawlessness with which she reflects the virtues and code he'd thought he'd left long behind him.

(Not completely. But Rufus is a special case, and always will be.)

Tseng enjoys tending bar, when he gets the chance to do so. He hadn't expected to, but there are many things in his life he hadn't expected. It's an easy physicality, requiring all the attention of hands and eyes and little of the attention of mind and thought: more dance than chore, his painstaking footwork necessary to avoid spills and rough spots in the floor rather than avoid an enemy's sword-strike, his reflexes pressed into service to avoid fumbling and dropping a full pint glass or an empty shot glass rather than to guide a blow or dodge an enemy's strike. *Mushin no shin* is easy to achieve under such circumstances; watching Tifa behind the bar at full rush is like watching a line of poetry in motion, like watching the wing of a bird in flight, and she has been known to grab him by the collar and drag him into the back room for a quick fuck up against the boxes of supplies the minute the rush calms down, whenever he's the one at the taps. ("Couldn't resist," she'd claimed, tugging her skirt back down after the first time and giving him her tiny pleased smile. "Now go pick up the empties.")

Tonight is no different, no matter who may be watching him. He does not often get the chance for simple pleasures.

He clears the wait at the bar within his first ten minutes of work and starts catching the shouted-out drink orders after that; the woman who steps up to assume the task of ersatz waitress and bar-runner is familiar to him by face only, not by name. He's never asked her name. He doesn't want to know; he knows she's another one of Tifa's little malcontents, and that's all it's wise for him to hold. They work together well enough, though; all of Tifa's ersatz assistants learned quickly enough that he needs neither scraps of paper nor mnemonic to retain the orders as they are shouted to him. He wonders what Rufus is thinking, to watch his red right hand pulling off his tie and tossing his suit jacket negligently over the end of the bar, rolling up his sleeves before turning back to build a whiskey sour with his right hand and pull a pint of stout with his left. He doesn't look up to see, though. Rufus will tell him later, if Rufus wants him to know.

The ebb and flow of traffic at the bar eases eventually; Tseng consults his time-sense and finds an hour and a half has passed while he was submerged in his work. Tifa surfaces from the kitchen a few minutes later, her face flushed from the heat and her hair curling into tiny wisps around her face where it has escaped from its protective braid. She grabs him by the ears and kisses him thoroughly. (It earns them two hoots and a wolf-whistle from their audience, but is otherwise unremarked upon.) "Ten minute break now that we've got it under control," she says, firmly. "Porch. I'm dying back there and I need a breath of fresh air."

Her motives, as always, are never only that which she speaks, but he doesn't doubt the chill of the early spring outside will feel good on her overheated skin. She grabs two bottles of water from the chest refrigerator under the bar (they're both for her, he knows, having made that mistake the first time and never again) and sets off for the front door without waiting to see if he'll follow, armed with an easy smile and a few kind words for everyone she passes.

Tseng takes a moment to let his eyes sweep the room for Rufus; he's been reserving one tiny fraction of his full attention for tracking Rufus's trajectory and knows Rufus to have been holding down the pool table against all comers for the last half an hour. He looks closer now and sees Rufus in the midst of chalking his cue, teeth flashing white in amusement as he laughs at something one of his opponents has just said to him. (Rufus will look easy, relaxed, to any who take the time to study him. Tseng is the only one who knows it for a pose, an act so flawless because it is more than half truth. But no matter how deeply Rufus buries himself in a role, the mind behind that beautiful patrician face is always ticking away, calculating numbers and odds and running costs and benefits against an eternal balance sheet only he can read the tally of.)

Tseng catches Rufus's eye, pantomimes *going outside, you stay* with nothing more than flick of eyes and twist of mouth, the easy communication they've had for nearly as long as they've known each other. Rufus responds with amusement, assent. Tseng can't see what he's thinking beneath, but that's all right; they're on stage and there'll be time for the debrief later.

Tifa is halfway through her second bottle of water when Tseng slips out onto the porch, her head tilted back and her throat working hungrily as she drinks it down. She is sitting on the railing, her legs twined around two rails -- less to keep her balance on the thin strip of wood, since he knows she's capable of balancing on far worse a perch, and more to dig her aching calves into the edges of the posts for relief -- and her skin is luminous in the late-night shine of neon and chrome reflecting off the plate above in Midgar-below's false-faced substitute of moonlight. As he watches, she lowers the water bottle -- empty -- and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Her lips are still shiny, and it becomes a moral imperative to slide between her knees and kiss her.

"I'm still going to kill you," she says when he brings the kiss to a close, resting her forehead against his while her fingertips play with the skin at his throat set free by lack of tie and two buttons loosed. "While you're sleeping. Don't think that an hour and a half of bartending is going to get you out of death by pissy girlfriend."

"I'll  
start



(illustration by [ilyat](#); [click for full](#))

sleeping with a pistol under my pillow," he assures her, dryly. (He already does. She knows it as well as he does.) His hand slides around her waist, teases the cream and alabaster skin he finds at the small of her back. They're nearly of a height when posed like this; it's almost disconcerting. He's used to her barely clearing his collarbone while projecting the presence of a woman twice her size. She traps his hips between her knees and squeezes. *"I wouldn't have brought him if I didn't have a good reason."*

Tifa sighs, following his language shift with the ease of long practice. *"You always have a good reason. That doesn't mean I have to like it. Or agree."*

Her words are bloodless, lacking any particular heat. She has never objected to his necessities, any more than he objects to hers. Their relationship started as one of manipulator (him) and manipulated (her), and he'd thought his secret safe until she'd tipped her face back up to him, after the first time he'd kissed her, and said, "Don't treat me like I'm as stupid as the people you usually do this with," before kissing him again. That had been the moment he'd realized she knew what he was doing -- some of it, at least -- and had come to him with her eyes wide open and her own agenda behind them. There isn't full truth between them, but it's the closest Tseng has ever come. (Save for Rufus. But Rufus is always and eternally Tseng's exception. In so much.)

*"I have a very good reason,"* Tseng repeats. He stretches out his hand; it nearly spans her back from side to side, and her skin is warm beneath his palm. *"One that, for once, you might even approve of."*

Tifa turns her face away from him so that her eyes are in shadow; she bites her lip. "Don't," she says, quietly. "I'll listen, and I'll consider. But don't taunt me. We both know who we are."

Tseng rests his cheek against hers. She smells of cooking and sweat, stale beer and spilled liquor, but underneath it all she always smells a little bit of fresh air and sunshine. Tifa has never belonged here in Midgar's prison of steel. If they were different people, they could conquer a world together, but if they were different people, they wouldn't fit together like this, jagged edges worn smooth against each other by ease and familiarity, each with their own honor and necessity to guide the way. "We always have," he says, into her hair. Truth: they have. Neither of them has ever lied to the other, and the number of things they do not say are legion.

She sighs, low and shifting. Unhappiness and resignation and a cold, clear determination to see this through, however it ends. He would question how she knows, what cues of his have told her that tonight is the night where it all changes, except she's never needed a map to read him; it's at least half of her appeal. "Is this how it ends, then?" she asks, and it's her middle-of-the-night voice, the one he thinks he's the only one who might get to hear.

He steps back, pulling away from her carefully enough as to not disturb her equilibrium, like smoke wisping away to the heavens. She meets his eyes, and hers are fearless. He lifts his hand, resting his fingertips against her lips in the closest thing to a kiss he knows she will accept from him right now. "Never," he says. It's as close to a promise as he can give.

When he slips back into the warmth of the bar, leaving Tifa outside for a few moments of solitude to compose herself, it's to return to the taps and pull himself another pint. They're in the lull between rushes -- the way orders always come in waves no matter what had been one of the more fascinating things he'd realized, and Rude used it as an example in one of his white papers on chaos theory a year or so back -- and so he bows to impulse and curiosity and takes both himself and the pint over to the pool table. Rufus is bending over, mid-shot, and he watches as Rufus carefully lines up himself and the cue on the 6-ball before letting fly.

The shot misses, which Tseng knows was on purpose -- he's seen Rufus make far more complicated shots while six times as drunk as he is right now -- and Rufus's opponent, an actual student from Midgar U that Tseng has played himself more than a few times, laughs and claps him on the shoulder as Rufus grumbles out loud. "Bad luck, man," the kid (A-something -- Adam, Aiden) says, then transfers his attention to Tseng. "Hey, man, you met Rupert? He's a business major over in the b-school, hoping to get a job with Shinra when he graduates. Don't suppose you could give him a hand with that?"

It's only the ease of long practice that lets Tseng keep a straight face. He queries Rufus with his eyes -- *Rupert? Really?* -- and Rufus flips his hair out of his face with a practiced toss of his head that also has the effect of letting him turn his face to hide the smirk that says *whatcha gonna do*. "We've met," Tseng says, bone-dry, to the kid. (Arthur. That's it.) To Rufus, he says, "I've got a few minutes at least until the next rush starts up. May I claim next game?"

The kid is the one to answer, even as Rufus's raised eyebrow is asking *you really want to do this here?* "I have to get back to the paper I'm writing as soon as we wind this one up, so you two can

have the table." He gestures to a table nearby, where three open books, a notebook, and a laptop computer worth more than a year's wages for most of the people in this neighborhood are sitting unattended. (The Seventh Heaven is the only place in the slums where it's safe to leave one's drink, much less one's belongings, alone for more than the time it takes to turn your head.) "And, man, I'm really sorry, but --"

Three perfect shots later and Rufus is shaking the kid's hand in congratulations and offering to buy him a beer later. ("Sure, thanks. After I finish the conclusion, though, my prof couldn't follow the last one because I was too drunk to summarize my arguments, which is what happens when you're writing your papers in a bar, right?") Tseng accepts the handoff of the cue stick and waits for Rufus to finish his glad-handing while he racks the balls for the next round. "Rupert, hm?" he says, when Rufus turns back, after checking to make sure they won't be overheard.

Rufus only grins. (Tseng has seen Rufus's relaxed-and-happy grin more times tonight than he has in weeks.) "Rupert Soho is very much looking forward to the chance to interview with Shinra once he gets his degree," he says, equally quietly. "Is there anything I could do to convince you that you should give me a good recommendation, sir?"

It's *playful*, is what it is, the sound of Rufus's eternal mockery turned inward instead of brought to bear on the world around him -- Rufus views the world, himself included, through a lens of detachment and dispassion and a healthy dose of unearthly irony, and Tseng would feel more guilty about it were it not for the fact that the odd little man-child he'd first met, a dozen and more years ago, had already possessed those qualities in spades after a childhood spent observing the vagaries of others out of nothing more or less than self-defense. It strikes him then, standing there in the Seventh Heaven with a pool cue in his hands and the scent of spilled beer and unwashed clientele in his nostrils, staring at Rufus laughing back at him: the fact that somehow, above all else, Rufus has managed to hold on to the ability to *play* is perhaps the most perfect miracle he's ever been witness to.

"Your break," he says, his voice rough, and turns away to sip from his pint of beer before his face can give too much away. (He's more than a little fey tonight. Endings and beginnings do that to him; he has thoroughly repudiated so much of his Wutaian heritage, the mysticism inherent in every interaction with the world being one of the first things he jettisoned so long ago, but refusing to acknowledge the universe's personality means nothing when the universe continues to acknowledge you.)

Tifa slips back through the front door, her face once more composed and perfect, when they're on their second game. (Rufus won the first without Tseng taking a single shot, some small quiet joy at having room to not have to pretend to be less than he truly is singing through his skin with every move.) Tseng catches her eyes, jerking his head to the bar in a question -- *do you want me back there?* She shakes her head, gestures *I've got it* in return, and stops at a hail to converse quietly with a patron on her way back to resume her rightful place as mistress of her domain.

He turns back to find that Rufus has been watching the interaction, a thoughtful look on his face. "More than just a girlfriend, then," he says.

Tseng knows what he means; the ability to have a conversation across a crowded room is something that requires intimate knowledge of the other party, something Rufus knows damn well, since Tseng's the one who taught him. The last thing he wants right now is to have a conversation with Rufus about Tifa -- Rufus sees too much in one direction and not enough in the other -- but it's what he brought Rufus here for, and he's going to have to face it sooner or later. "Something like that," he says, bending over the table for the shot he'd been considering before Tifa walked in and missing it by a hair. "What do you see?"

"The reason you've been spending half your time down here lately, if I don't miss my guess," Rufus says, still light and amused, and Tseng suppresses the urge to slap the backs of his thighs with the pool cue in rebuke. Rufus sobers quickly though, sensing (somehow, but Rufus's instincts have always been impeccable when it comes to Tseng's moods) that now is not the time. Rufus picks up the chalk and dusts the tip of his cue, carelessly, using the move as an excuse to stall, to stay close enough to Tseng for their voices not to carry. When Rufus turns serious, brings the force of his focus to bear on a problem, he is magnificent. Rufus's eyes track over to Tifa, behind the bar, laughing at something that someone said to her and drying her hands off on a towel before turning back to the task of passing out drinks. "She's younger than she looks, and younger than she wants people to believe, but she's been hurt -- hurt badly -- by something in the past, and in its way -- whatever it was -- it made her. I'm going to guess, Shinra."

He flicks a look back at Tseng, as though to check his read. Tseng keeps his face impassive. Rufus gives him the *ah, fuck you* face, but there isn't much heat to it. "Yeah, yeah, I know, not your secrets to give, you can neither confirm nor deny, yadda. But you wouldn't have brought me *here*, no matter how much I've been pestering you to bring me down to the slums, if there weren't a very good reason, since this is where you go when you want to stop being who you are for a while, and bringing me in here runs the risk of making the worlds collide and wrecking all the benefit you get from it."

And Tseng *does* have to control his face at that, and probably didn't succeed in doing it fast enough, but fortunately Rufus has gone back to studying Tifa and doesn't see. It's a good thing. He *hates* it when Rufus pulls those moments of stunning insight out of nowhere, no matter that it's a credit to his teachings whole and entire. "Interesting theory," he says, when he's sure he can control his voice again. "Go on."

Rufus throws him another look, this one a bit more smug. (Rufus has never had a problem believing in his own talents.) "So, she's got a secret. And whatever it is, and whether you know it or not, you think it's something I need to hear. She moves like you do -- I already said -- which tells me she knows the Wutaian arts, even though she's not Wutaian -- but she didn't learn them from you, because if she had, you wouldn't let her get away with treating you like that. And the fact that she *does* get away with treating you like that means you're more

fond of her than you'd probably want me to think. Or she's got something on you. I don't think it's that, though. You didn't bring me down here to show me a problem you want me to take care of for you."

"No," Tseng murmurs. That's a read on the situation he hadn't expected at all, but it's the way Rufus thinks, and that this has always been the truth has always saddened him. "No, I didn't."

Rufus nods, once. "Didn't think you had. You like her too much for that to be the case; you can't fake real affection like that, not in front of me." The casual assumption of his ability to read Tseng would sting, did Tseng not know it for the truth. Rufus wavers between being stunningly perceptive and stunningly obtuse when it comes to matters of the heart. It's a relic of his peculiar upbringing, Tseng knows; he grew up without a model of true affection to compare against, true, but children of abuse are often left with a self-defensive ability to read the emotional weather around them that borders on the uncanny, and for all that the abuse Rufus suffered at his father's hands in his youth was quasi-benign neglect rather than malignity, it left its marks nonetheless. "Meanwhile, this place itself is full of all kinds of interesting people. I've been playing for about an hour, and in that time I may have faced off against a few Shinra middle managers and Midgar U students, but I'm pretty damn sure that half my opponents have been people who'd rather like to see me dead. Institutionally, rather than personally, I should say."

Tseng nods. He hadn't expected Rufus to miss that, but it's nice to know Rufus hasn't disappointed. "One or two, yes," he agrees. "At least."

"Mmm." Having milked the pause for all it's worth, Rufus rests the chalk back on the edge of the pool table and squints at the arrangements of the balls on the felt. "I'm guessing that's your real motive," he continues. "That test you mentioned. This is one of the meeting spots for the anti-Shinra movement, isn't it?"

Tseng lets one edge of his lips creep upward, the only sign of approval he'll give Rufus at the moment. (At the bar, Tifa glances over at them and her eyes narrow; when she looks away, he can read the disconcertment on her face, and the lines of her shoulders read *you'd better know what you're doing*. He knows she can't possibly have heard Rufus's conclusion, but he suppresses the shiver nonetheless.) "What makes you say that?" he asks Rufus, instead of answering. He knows Rufus will take it as answer enough.

Rufus pockets the 9-ball and pauses for another set of calculations. "How about the fact that I'm not stupid?" he replies, pleasantly enough. "Or maybe the fact that you've been training me how to look around me, really *look*, since I was eleven. But no, I overheard a few conversations while I was bussing tables." (Tseng starts at that; he hadn't seen Rufus pick up the tray at all, too deep in concentration at the bar. But of course Rufus would have. For all Rufus's faults -- and they are legion -- he has never turned up his nose at honest work no matter what the type, and one lesson Tseng has drilled into him over and over again is that servants are invisible no matter what type of servitude they're offering.) "It's not all that's going on here, but it's part. And you wanted me to notice that, and



you're proud as hell of the fact that I did, which means you've got a plan, and you haven't turned them into ExSec, which means that your plan *isn't* 'kill them all, the gods will know Their own'. And that could have something to do with the fact your girlfriend owns the place and you don't want to bring ExSec down on her like a ton of wet bricks, but, you know, call me crazy, somehow I've got this feeling it's more complicated than that."

Tseng only graces that remark with a raised eyebrow and a cool half-nod. "Your body language is slipping," he adds. (It is. Apparently contemplating the thought that people want to see him dead is enough to rouse Rufus Shinra, child of privilege and command, from behind the mask of 'Rupert Soho' Rufus has been wearing all night. Rufus isn't usually that sloppy; Tseng wonders what else is going on behind those calculating eyes.)

Rufus makes a face at him and starts in on the hundred minor adjustments, each so small and understated that an observer wouldn't catch notice of the man in the corner *changing*, each designed to bring his body language back into alignment with his cover story. (There are ways and ways of disguise, and Tseng has taught them all to Rufus over the years; they all have their time and place. But the most effective disguise there is, and one that can't be taken away by another's actions or revealed due to accident or mishap, is that of misdirection. Ninety percent of recognition is in the intangibles -- the way people move, talk, stand, carry their weight -- and changing those is often all it takes to make someone think you look a little bit like someone they think they ought to know.)

"And *that* was a diversion," Rufus grumbles, but he turns back to the pool table anyway and lines up his shot on the 14-ball. "I'll get it out of you eventually, you know. You can bet on it."

Tseng wouldn't bet even if he weren't planning on laying his cards on the table in another few hours. A smart man never bets against the house, and Rufus Shinra, no matter what else he is, is usually the house. "Closing time is usually around one, one-thirty or so," is all he says. "You'll see then."

That's enough to end the conversation. Or rather, put it on pause, while Rufus studies Tifa (deep in conversation at the bar with someone Tseng knows to be sympathetic to the rebel groups, if not an actual member, her face animated and her hands flying wildly; Tseng tries to read the topic from her reactions, fails) and pieces together Leviathan-knows-what conclusions. Before he can start it back up, though, a pair of older men Tseng vaguely remembers from a raid on Wall Market six months ago come over to the pool table. Tseng shifts his stance subtly, enough to have a good head start if the two have recognized Rufus and are willing to flaunt Tifa's ironclad "no fighting" rule in exchange for a chance at the heir to the Shinra empire, but as it turns out, all they want is ask for a game of two-on-two.

By midnight, the bar is down to nothing but the regulars, from the ones who try to drink themselves into a better place every night to the ones who are here because it's better than being at what passes for home; around one, Tifa puts both her hands on the bar and leans forward, summoning up her best stentorian-publican tone to cut through the crowd, even though the wall-to-wall chaos of earlier has

dulled into nothing more than the soft murmurs of individual conversations. "Last call, folks," she says: not yelling but *projecting*, her voice filling the room and making all heads turn. "I'm locking the doors in twenty minutes, so if you want one for the road, now's the time to put in your orders and settle up your tab."

Half the remaining customers start packing up and leaving at her announcement; the other half (Arthur-the-university-student among them, Tseng notices with amusement) make their way to the bar, some to hand over a pile of gil (which gets tossed carelessly into the strongbox -- about the size of two or three hardcover books stacked atop each other -- that Tifa uses for a cashbox, and Tseng is gratified on her behalf to see that it is overflowing; after the night she's had she more than deserves it) and some to put in a last request. (Tifa keeps disposable cups for the last order of the night, so she can send people on their way with their final drinks; it keeps them from holding down tables for half an hour past the point when she's more than ready to get the night's chores done and get off her feet, she says, and everyone who drinks here knows the to-go option is a privilege that will disappear if Tifa hears one word of drunken patrons causing problems for the neighborhood.)

He and Rufus have moved back to their table, talking of nothing of consequence (it's late enough, and the room is empty enough, that there is no longer enough cover noise to prevent others from overhearing). Tseng takes Tifa's announcement as a cue to stand and grab a tray, start circling the room to pile up empty shot glasses and pint glasses and the dishes that housed the assortment of bar-snacks and light meals Tifa keeps on the menu, to bring in to the sink in the back. Rufus, after a moment, follows suit.

Chasing out the last of the stragglers always takes at least ten minutes more than Tifa expects it to, so in the name of getting to the purpose of this visit sooner rather than later -- and, Tseng will admit, in the name of making sure that Tifa, who is fundamentally and biologically incapable of sleeping past seven or eight AM no matter how late she got to sleep the night before, has a chance of getting at least *some* rest -- Tseng starts in on the end-of-shift checklist once they've gotten all the empties there are to get. He knows the routine fairly well by now -- he's spent enough nights assisting -- so it's the easiest thing in the world to hand Rufus a damp rag and the bottle of ten percent bleach solution and direct him to start wiping down the tables and the bar while Tseng rolls up his sleeves again and starts packing up the perishables in the bar's garnish station for stowing in the cooler overnight. Rufus accepts his instruction without so much as a raised eyebrow. It's interesting, Tseng thinks; somewhere along the way, in these last few years, Rufus has finally learned patience. The child he'd trained would have tried to throttle answers out of Tseng hours ago.

Between the two of them, they very nearly have the place presentable by the time Tifa finishes up her discussion (a discussion Tseng has carefully avoided overhearing; he's almost positive Rufus can't say the same, but he's dead certain Tifa wouldn't say anything she wouldn't also put on a poster and paper the Shinra building with while Rufus is anywhere in the *sector*, much less a dozen feet away) with the slum boy she keeps on as dishwasher and relief cook (Tseng can't quite remember if he's Biggs or Wedge; the two look nothing like

but are firmly intertwined in his mind) and the two flunkies from Wall Market, shooing them all out the door. She locks the door behind them with a flourish, leaning back against it with the air of the righteously exhausted.

"Free at last," she says, her ritual end-of-shift antiphon. "Remind me that I love my job."

"You love your job," Tseng says, looking up from where he's mopping the floor. "It's only the people you despise sometimes."

Tifa laughs. It isn't the glorious, full-throated laugh of hers he loves so much, not at the end of a long and trying day, but it's beautiful nonetheless. "No, no, it's fine. Biggs and Kenny and Carlos just wanted to make sure I'd be all right if they left me alone." She gives him a sly look from underneath lowered lashes. "They wanted to protect my virtue, is all."

"Charming," Tseng says, as dry as he can make it. "They probably should have been more concerned for mine." (From behind the bar, where Rufus is loading fresh water bottles from a pallet into the refrigerator to chill overnight, Tseng can hear a bitten-off sound that sounds half like a laugh, half like a cough of disbelief.) "Sit. We're down to the last of the cleanup; there's just the rest of the dishes and the cashbox to do, still."

"Oh, Shiva bless." Tifa rubs a hand over her forehead, tries several times to shove the increasingly-flyaway strands of hair back into their braid, and finally gives up. She kicks off her shoes, leaves them by the door, bounces twice in place and then rises onto the balls of her feet, linking her fingers together and pushing them up and over her head until her body is one long straight line rising for the heavens.

Tseng watches her -- he can never not watch her; Tifa stretching is a masterwork of art -- but he spares a glance out of the corner of his eye for Rufus, who is watching her without being obvious about it. His eyes are not on her breasts, nor on the way her top rides even further up her midriff until (Tseng knows) it comes dangerously close to revealing the secrets written in her scars; he's watching the way she rises further on her feet, until she is balanced on nothing but her toes, and does not sway at all. Tseng has trained Rufus in all manner of things. Rufus knows damn well how hard that balance is to keep.

"Leave the dishes," Tifa adds, bending at the waist to rest her palms on the floor and then rising back to true, putting her hands on her hips and twisting from side to side. Tseng can hear the soft *pop* of her joints re-setting themselves. "We kept ahead of them for most of the night, thanks to that hour and a half you gave me, and I've got Wedge and Jessie coming in for inventory and weekend prep tomorrow afternoon. We can get the last of them then." She crosses the room on silent feet, ducking under the pass-through to the bar, neither avoiding Rufus nor coming too close to him. She takes out three highball glasses and sets them on a tray, starts the water in the sink running, and then ducks her head beneath it for the equivalent of four long breaths.

She comes up spluttering -- she always does -- and shakes the

loose droplets off her skin, managing -- somehow -- to avoid splashing Rufus as she does. One brisk scrub with a clean towel over her face, and she unbraids her hair with deft fingers, finger-combs through the waves, and re-braids it into something more decorous than the loose, sloppy plait it always turns into by the end of the night. Thus fortified (Tseng loves watching her end-of-shift ritual, and not just for the fact that it always soaks her plain white top just enough that he can see the palest ghosts of her nipples through it), she transfers the glasses to a tray and must stretch on her tip-toes to fetch down a bottle of the bar's best whiskey from the top shelf. The bar is arranged for Tifa's comfort and Tifa's comfort alone, but that's the shelf of liquor she only breaks into for wakes and life-changing decisions. (Endings and beginnings.)

Smart woman. She knows what Tseng has in mind.

"You can leave that," she adds, speaking to Rufus directly. Rufus startles a little at her tone: brisk, direct, more than a touch chilly, nothing at all like the easy affection with which she'd addressed Tseng or the friendly welcome she'd offered him earlier. "Have a seat. I'm sure he'll tell us what he wants sooner or later."

"Let me settle up my tab before you close out for the night," Rufus says, after a moment's silence. Tseng knows that tone: it's Rufus's *I am reserving judgement* voice, the one he deploys for his father's craziest ideas and the odd proposal here and there that bright and eager rising execs love to bring to him in the hopes they will make their names from it.

Tifa looks at him, piercing and steady. "Your money's no good in here," she says. It isn't a compliment. Nor is it a gift, nor an offering. "Not yet. I'll tell you if and when it is."

Rufus keeps a lock on his face; his surprise shows only in his eyes, and only because Tseng's looking for it. He fixes those eyes on Tifa's face, staring her down in the way that tends to make grown men shuffle their feet and avert their eyes like little children. She only looks back at him, solid and unyielding: not a challenge, but not giving an inch, either. Her face, too, is utterly motionless.

Tseng almost wishes he could be between them at that very moment. Not because he's crazy enough to want to get between Tifa Lockheart and Rufus Shinra in the middle of a staring contest -- he's actually quite happy to be on the other side of the building from them, in fact -- but because this is the moment he's been waiting for, the moment where they take each other's measure, and he'd really like to know what is passing between them in that look. He can see there is communication there, but he can't read it. Not in the least.

The thought worries him -- more than it should; he's been building to this moment for at least the last six months, and he would have sworn before any of his fathers' gods that he'd steeled himself for however the pageant might play out. But he keeps his presence as small as he can, applying mop to floor with a singleminded intensity, and he waits for one of them to crack.

Rufus does first. Which surprises Tseng. "So," he says -- voice perfectly neutral, like he's reading the weather -- "how many of you

figured it out? Should I expect the mob, lying in wait outside, when we leave?"

Tifa shakes her head. "Just me," she says. "And only because I know him, and I know the way his mind works." She indicates Tseng, with a lift of her chin, without taking her eyes from Rufus's. "If anyone else had put it together, they would have told me, to make sure I wasn't surprised by whatever might happen. My people look out for me. And you're not going home until morning, anyway -- the circumplate trains stop running at two AM. I'll make up the guest room for you once we're done."

That earns a double blink from Rufus -- both surprise that she would offer the room so unthinkingly (and that she would assume they would be willing to accept it) and a touch of chagrin that he'd forgotten the train schedule. (It isn't a part of his world, and it never has been; the above-plate trains all run twenty-four hours.) He nods, though, with the tilt of the head and the dip of the chin that comprise his very best aristocratic acknowledgement of someone who has just given him something unexpected. "My thanks for the hospitality," he murmurs.

Rufus is the one to finally break their stare; he picks up the tray Tifa had loaded and balances it as easily on one hand as Tifa does. (Tseng can see Tifa blink at that, one quiet whisper of surprise across her face and then gone. He's never told her of all Rufus's summers spent working his way through one department after another, learning menial job after menial job, his father's attempt to humble him that backfired so spectacularly his father will never know the true extent of how badly. What had been intended to humiliate had instead given Rufus the skill to see how all the pieces of the Shinra empire fit together like clockwork, down to the smallest gears and joinery; that he can see those interconnections makes Rufus deadly.) He bows to Tifa, then, deep and sweeping, gesturing with one arm at the pass-through. "After you," he adds.

Tifa keeps her eyes on him for another few seconds, just long enough that Tseng wonders if this is going to end even more badly than the worst of his fears. Then she inclines her head, as regal as Rufus on the best (or worst) of days, and makes her stately and dignified way out from behind the bar and over to the table Rufus and Tseng had been sitting at, the only table Tseng hadn't stacked the chairs on in order to mop the floor around. Tseng can see the way her shoulders tense as she turns her back on Rufus, as though it makes her shoulderblades itch to present him with a target, but he can only see it because he's looking.

"Put the mop down and come have a drink with us, Tseng," Rufus says, perfectly calm, perfectly pleasant. It isn't an invitation.

Tseng sets the mop back down in the bucket and wipes his hands on the towel he'd tucked into his waistband. He reaches the table before Rufus does; Tifa looks up at him from her seat (the one with the best sightlines, of course; Tseng is sourly amused at the thought that if they wind up doing this somewhere Tifa doesn't have the home-court advantage, they're apparently going to have to play rock-paper-scissors for who gets the right to watch the whole room) to regard him with sober eyes. He wonders what she's thinking, to see him

obeying Rufus's orders so readily. She's never seen the two of them together before, of course, and it's one thing for her to know intellectually that he is Rufus's man, but it's another to see it in action.

*Trust me*, he tries to say to her, as he settles in the chair across from her and angles it so his back isn't completely to the door. *I know what I'm doing*.

He hopes like hell that he's right.

Rufus joins them a moment later, having stopped at the refrigerator to take out half a dozen bottles of water and added them to the tray with the whiskey and the glasses. Tifa's jaw clenches to see; Tseng knows why. It's one thing for her regulars to make themselves at home, to help themselves to a drink while they're pitching in; while Rufus was masquerading as just another college student slumming it for the evening, the friend of a man who had already earned Tifa's respect, for Tifa to treat him otherwise would have been cause to elicit comment from anyone who saw. With Rufus's true identity acknowledged, now that they are done pretending, for Rufus to make free of the refrigerator's contents turns from standard behavior and customary hospitality to Rufus Shinra taking what he pleases.

Rufus usually has better manners -- or better sense -- than to be that blatant; for all he was raised to a privilege so profound Tseng knows that Tifa can barely comprehend the extent of it, he is perfectly capable of behaving in any way a situation calls for, and Tseng knows damn well that Rufus noticed the minute the subtext shifted. It's Rufus's form of counter-strike to Tifa's refusal to let him pay his tab: Tifa said *there are some things even you can't buy* and Rufus countered *perhaps, but I already own everything else*. With thrust and parry out of the way, Tseng hopes (would pray, were he a praying man) that honor has been properly satisfied.

Divesting himself of the tray, Rufus busies himself for a few minutes, arranging a glass in front of each of them. Tifa starts to reach for the bottle of whiskey to pour, but Rufus beats her to it, filling each glass with a generous splash, and she diverts the movement smoothly to reach for a bottle of water instead, frowning slightly. It takes Tseng a minute to realize why: he'd slipped back into viewing the world like a Wutaian would. (Dammit.) In the culture of his birth, it is taken for granted that the person with the highest social status pours for the table, as an act of humbling the self and to set the rest of the table at ease. He's never sure how much of his birth culture has rubbed off on Rufus, absorbed with the rest of the lessons he's taught over the years, whether that's something along the lines of what Rufus intends or whether it's another subtle power play. Tifa, no doubt, sees only the power play and nothing more.

"Cards on the table before we go any further," Tifa says, as Rufus caps the whiskey bottle again and takes the seat between Tifa and Tseng with the grace and ease of a man who has never felt awkward and out-of-place once in his life. She wraps her hand around the bottle of water but does not open it or drink, only worries at the label with a thumbnail worn down by hard work and absentminded chewing. Her gaze, when she turns it on Rufus, is flat; if she were a cat, her

ears would be pressed back against her skull. "I don't like you. You have more power than any man should, you use it in the wrong ways, and your responses to having that power challenged are reprehensible. If whatever you --" She transfers her gaze to Tseng, who meets it unflinchingly. "--have in mind involves anything to do with me ever trusting him, with anything, you boys might as well leave right now before you miss the last train."

Balls of hammered steel, Tseng thinks -- not for the first time, and no doubt not for the last. He opens his mouth to say something (anything; he's not sure what). Rufus holds up a hand for his silence, though, and he obeys as unthinkingly as he always does, only realizing what it must look like after a muscle in Tifa's cheek twitches at the sight.

"My turn," Rufus says. "More power than any man should, I'll grant you that one. Using it in the wrong ways?" He smiles, then, his charming little-boy smile that Tseng once thought had been deliberately cultivated to manipulate others and finally decided was simply Rufus being Rufus. "Matter of perspective. You're dating Tseng, after all. There's more blood on his hands than there ever will be on mine."

Tifa is perhaps the only person Tseng has ever met who can resist Rufus's charm; Tseng can see it actively working against him, like Tifa has checked the box in her head marked 'manipulation attempt' and moved on to defending against the next tactic Rufus is likely to try. "Is there?" she asks, and the way she says it, it isn't a rhetorical question at all. "Who's more reprehensible -- the man who's never lied to me once about who and what he is, or the man who sits in his corner office and pretends he's innocent before giving orders no one should ever give?"

"As interesting as this little philosophical exchange is," Tseng interrupts -- before they can each get firmly entrenched in arguing a position from which honor will not let them back down -- "I do, in fact, have a reason for bringing the two of you together, and it isn't for you to dissect my fundamental shortcomings as a human being." He waits until he has both of their attention, then picks up his glass of whiskey and toasts the air between them. It burns going down. "Both of you have spent the last two and a half years trying to figure out the truth about Nibelheim. I'm here to bring you together so that you can pool your efforts."

Across the table, Tifa has gone pale; Tseng can see, under the table, her hand form into a fist to keep herself from reaching for her scars in the familiar gesture she can't help but use whenever she remembers that night halfway across the globe. "I know what happened in Nibelheim," she says. Her voice holds nothing but the sound of betrayal: betrayal of her secrets, betrayal of her trust in him. He wouldn't have done it for anything less than this. "I was there. That's why I'm *here*."

Rufus leans in, all notions of their power-play discarded, in that moment utterly and completely *present* the way Rufus can manage from time to time and that never fails to take Tseng's breath away. "You were there?" he demands. "That's not possible. No one survived Nibelheim. No one *could* have survived Nibelheim."

Tifa's lips twist. It's nothing like a smile. She picks up the glass of whiskey Rufus poured, knocks it back with one sharp flick of the wrist -- liquid courage -- and stands. Tseng has seen the scars before, has touched and tasted and kissed each inch, which is why he is able to keep his face expressionless as she crosses her arms in front of her and takes the hem of her shirt in each hand. She pulls the shirt over her head without a word and holds out her arms, standing barefoot and bare-breasted in front of Rufus's astonished eyes, unconcerned that she is standing half-naked before the second most powerful man in the world.

No matter how many times Tseng sees this sight, it never gets easier to bear. The scar Sephiroth left her starts at the upper corner of her left breast, angry and red and far too wide and deep, and it crosses diagonally along her breastbone like a strap slung over her shoulder to end just above the last of her lower right ribs, widening as it goes, hooked upwards at the end like the weapon that had delivered it had stuck in her bone and been yanked free once the wielder had satisfied himself of her demise.

Tseng is almost certain that's because it had.

Beside her, Rufus is as pale as though he's just seen a ghost. Perhaps he has. He knows as well as Tseng had known when he first looked upon this view: there is only one person in the history of the world who could have given her those wounds, and she should have died of them. "Sephiroth," Rufus whispers, his eyes wide, more shocked than Tseng ever thought he could be. Then, stronger: "How are you even *alive*?"

"A hell of a lot of luck, a fuck of a lot of good timing, and the fact that your great general was too damn *rabid* to notice he hadn't properly finished me off." Tifa waits an extra heartbeat until she's certain she's made her point, then pulls the shirt back over her head. Once she's taken her seat again, Tseng reaches over and claims the bottle of whiskey, re-filling her glass far past the point he knows she would stop on her own, and presses it into her hand. She looks at it for a long minute, like it's something foreign risen to haunt her, and then drinks it down again. Under the table, her other hand is shaking. Tseng places his over it, and is grateful when she doesn't pull away.

"How can -- it's not -- That isn't *possible*," Rufus bursts out. "It's *never* made any sense. This is *Sephiroth* we're talking about. The man wouldn't hurt a fly if it weren't on the battlefield -- he was a damn *vegetarian*, for Ramuh and Ifrit's sake. Tseng, tell her."

Tseng is not going to get into the middle of this debate; he's had that conversation with Rufus too many times. "Rufus was the last person we can find on our side who talked to Sephiroth before Nibelheim burned," he says, to Tifa, instead. "He's spent the last two and a half years trying to reconcile the Sephiroth we knew with the devastation we found there. We didn't even know for sure it was Sephiroth who caused it until you told me what really happened." He takes a deep breath. Now or never. "I brought the two of you together because I'm hoping like hell you can look past ideology so we can try to get at the truth."

Tifa's voice is far too level and controlled. "And why the hell



should I help you?"

For *you* Tseng hears *you people*, the invisible line drawn between them in a way it hasn't been until that very moment; threaded throughout, inaudible rebuke, Tseng hears the spectre of the ending he'd promised Tifa they wouldn't come to. He keeps his eyes on hers and puts sincerity in his every syllable. "Because there's one man in Shinra who freaked the fuck out when he heard that Sephiroth had been assigned a mission to Nibelheim -- *before* we got word of what happened there -- and he still has President Shinra's ear. And if he knows what happened, and he had something to do with it, it could happen again."

Rufus's face twists, turns ugly. "Hojo," he spits. "It has to be him. *Has* to be."

Tifa is staring at Tseng. "No," she says. The calm has leeches out of her voice now; it rises, spikes. "You don't do that. You don't get to do that. You don't get to dump the responsibility for this on my shoulders and tell me it's my problem to make sure it doesn't happen to anybody else. You don't get to make it my problem to help you clean up your fucking messes. That's not how this *works*." She shakes her head, slowly at first and then with growing hysteria. "You don't get to do that. You people have done *enough*."

"I'm sorry," Tseng says softly. The bitch of it is, he really is. What he feels for Tifa is friendship and affection and, on a good day, in the right light, he might even be willing to cop to love. But this is bigger than any of that. It always has been.

"You *bastard*," she hisses. Then, before he can say anything, she stands, so forcefully that her chair skids back behind her, catches a rough spot in the wood, and topples. She turns, her glass still in her hand, and hurls it across the room, as hard as she can. It misses Tseng's head by an inch; Tifa has impeccable aim. Tseng makes himself remain still.

Rufus, at least, has the good sense to stay silent; Tseng simply doesn't know what he can possibly say, what apology he can offer up that would be taken as even in the slightest bit sincere. When the echoes of shattering glass fade, Tifa's shoulders heave, and her rough breathing is the only sound in the room. Other than her chest, rising and falling, she doesn't move.

A minute goes by. Two.

Then she closes her eyes and breathes out, and this time, her hand does come up to press against her chest: the meat of her thumb and the edge of her palm dig into the ridges of her scars, the tips of her fingers resting against her heartbeat. Tseng can see the muscles flex in her forearm as she drives her fingertips into her own skin. She breathes in again, once, twice. Tseng wonders what worlds are burning behind her eyelids.

When she finally speaks, her voice is flat again, but it isn't the flatness of control. Just exhaustion. "Excuse me, gentlemen," she says. "I need to get the dustpan."

She moves like a sleepwalker, and Tseng makes himself watch, to

bear witness to her pain. As soon as she disappears into the back room, Rufus leans over the table; Tseng's eyes are drawn back to him, which tells him his subconscious has identified something in the way Rufus moves as a threat. Rufus is glaring at him, and Rufus is not pleased.

"You didn't tell me," Rufus says. "You should have told me."

Tseng closes his eyes and lifts a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, trying to stem off the inevitable stress headache. "I didn't want to prejudice your reaction. She's the best person I've ever met at spotting inauthenticity, and if she knew I'd told you ahead of time, this would have gone even more badly."

Rufus puts his hands flat against the table and pushes himself up to standing. It means he's looming over Tseng for a minute, and that, too, makes Tseng twitch. "Not good enough," Rufus says, and oh, that sound creeping into Rufus's voice is the sound of Rufus getting ready to throw a temper fit of epic proportions. "You put me in a situation where I was guaranteed to mis-step and make things worse, and where I was bound to make things worse for her no matter what. I'm not all that happy with you at the moment."

"Yeah, well," Tseng snaps. "Join the fucking club. Line forms to the left."

That makes Rufus give him *the look*, and Tseng bites back further protest as Rufus crosses the floor on light feet to kneel next to where Tifa hurled her glass against the wall, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket -- Rufus is the only person Tseng knows who always has a handkerchief on him, no matter what he is wearing -- to pick up the largest pieces and set them into the cloth. Tifa comes back a minute later, dustpan and hand broom dangling from one hand, stopping a good five feet away from Rufus. "I said I would get that," she says, brusque and short, unwilling to let Rufus claim one more bit of her space as his own to tend.

Rufus spares a glance over his shoulder for her, his eyes flicking up and down her frame, before holding out a hand. "You're barefoot. You'll cut yourself. Hand me the dustpan; I'll take care of this."

Tifa grits her teeth. "I walk barefoot over broken glass all the time; my calluses have calluses. I'll be fine."

"That may be so," Rufus agrees, and it makes Tseng blink, because for the first time all night there is no hint of mockery in Rufus's tone. It's *gentle*, almost. "But I will be *fucked* if I allow you to be injured further, no matter how minor it might be, by the further action or inaction of me or the people who look to me. So give me the goddamn dustpan." He straightens up but stays kneeling, spine straight, one hand held out to her. Even on his knees, even though Tseng can barely see his face, his presence fills the room.

Tifa holds herself perfectly still for a full minute, the stillness of someone who's just had a great surprise. Tseng is again struck by the look that passes between them: Tifa, blank-faced with a core of polished steel, Rufus, his shoulders squared, stubbornness written in every line. Another minute goes by, and then Tifa drops the broom and dustpan on the floor, far enough that Rufus will have to either get

up or crawl to retrieve them. An insult, perhaps, or another test. She doesn't watch to see what Rufus does, only turns and returns to the table they're sitting at, picking up one water bottle and drinking from it before sitting back down. She doesn't meet Tseng's eyes, and her body language is telling him he's going to have to do a great bit of groveling before she's willing to forgive.

Rufus ignores the insult, though, and makes quick work of sweeping up the glass shards, going so far as to bend down and press his cheek against the floor to look for any pieces he might have missed before sweeping his hand over the floorboards for a final check. Satisfied the glass is no longer a danger, he tips the fragments from the dustpan into his kerchief and knots it into a bundle for safekeeping, leaving it atop a nearby table. Tifa watches him the whole time, her face still set in that expression of blank contemplation; he's done something to surprise her, and Tifa reacts to surprises by either blowing up or getting very, very quiet and calm. (Come to think of it, Tseng realizes, she's much like Rufus in that respect.)

When Rufus is finished, he returns to the table, but he doesn't sit down. He only picks up his glass of whiskey, then paces away to stand about ten feet away from the table, well within Tifa's line of sight, facing the chalkboard that takes up one entire wall of the room. (Tifa uses one section of it to write the day's specials when she's decided to be creative in the kitchen, but for the most part, it's covered with the scrawls of hundreds of different hands, message board and advertisements and lost and found and gossip and debate all fighting for space on top of each other. Tseng's favorite part is the long-running Hangman tournament in the far corner.) He stands there for a long time, his eyes so unfocused that Tseng knows he isn't reading any of it, just using it as a focus while he sorts through what's going on inside his head.

Then he starts speaking.

"There's a sort of ebb and flow to information in a company the size of Shinra," Rufus begins. His voice is absent, detached, like he's narrating a series of unconnected statements, and yet Tseng knows he's building to a particular conclusion. Tseng just doesn't have any idea what that conclusion might be. "Especially in a company the size of Shinra. Everything gets written down; everything gets put into reports. Those reports get summarized into other reports, and *those* reports get summarized further, and eventually, given enough time, it all winds up pooled together in one giant melange of summaries-of-summaries. On my desk. Or on my father's. I've been reading those reports for as far back as I can remember, and when you've read enough of them, when you've gotten enough practice, you learn to spot the rhythms. There are patterns. There's a *feel* to it. It's nothing I can put my finger on; it's like a symphony where half the instruments are playing the same melody line, and if one of them drops out, you can't hear the absence of that melody but you can sense something isn't right. It's hard to explain past that."

He lifts his tumbler of whiskey, sips from it again, all the while staring at the evidence of a hundred tiny private lives: *lost, one dog, answers to Junior; in search of model 1058 cell phone, blue, will pay any price; for a good time call*. There's a crudely defaced copy of the

Shinra corporate logo chalked above one table. "Everything gets written down," he repeats. "Classified things are still written, they're just hidden and locked away and shared only with people who need to know. Officially, I have access to about ninety percent of the information that flows through the company. Unofficially, I've had full access to the mainframe and the data warehouse since the point I learned how to program and how to defeat network security when I was in my early teens. I don't read all of it; no man could. But I skim most of it. Enough to have the sense of what the normal flow of information sounds like, and enough to be able to spot when something's off."

None of this is a revelation to Tseng. He's known for years that Rufus has broken the mainframe security; he's relied on it at least five times he can remember, and probably others that he can't. He can't see how this relates to anything, but next to him, Tifa is watching Rufus's face, shadowed in profile and staring at her chalkboard, and her own face is thoughtful.

"Sephiroth came to see me, before he left for Nibelheim," Rufus continues. "We were friends -- as much as I can call anyone a friend, and maybe more. We'd talked before, about the information ecology of the company, about things that have gaps or elisions or just plain wrong data. His personal record is -- was -- one of the ones with the problem. Nothing I could put my finger on; nothing he could put his finger on. It was just ... off. Things missing that I know should have been there. Things there that I'd never heard of before. Stuff that doesn't make sense, stuff that didn't add up. It never did. He didn't know anything about his childhood, you see. He was a ward of the company, apprenticed under Hojo's supervision in the science department until he decided that he'd rather join SOLDIER, raised by nannies and babysitters the same way I was. He'd been looking for answers his whole life. All Hojo would tell him was that his mother had been a woman named Jenova, and she died giving birth to him."

At that name, Tseng can feel Tifa go rigid next to him; a small shudder runs through her whole body. Rufus isn't paying any attention to her, lost in his own thoughts, picking through the patterns of potential words to find the ones he should say. Whatever he *has* just said, something has resonated with Tifa.

Or -- no. Not resonated. *Frightened*. If he didn't know better, Tseng would say, terrified.

For Rufus to be this honest, this candid, is unprecedented. For Rufus to hand this much information to someone who has said, to his face, that she opposes him and Shinra and everything they stand for is simply unheard of. If it weren't for the fact Rufus seemed ready to punch him in the face -- or shoot him in the foot -- not ten minutes ago, Tseng would almost speak up to protest. But Rufus has decided this approach is the best to take, and in a dozen years and more, one thing Tseng has learned is when Rufus Shinra makes up his mind, mountains will move sooner than he will budge one inch.

"I looked," Rufus continues. "I couldn't find anything. Neither of us could. The one thing we figured out -- eventually -- was where Seph had been born. It had been expurgated from his official record, shunted into whatever mysterious black-hole gap the rest of the

information that wasn't there had gone -- but we found a reference, after far too much digging in old microfiche archives that had never been scanned and digitized."

He pauses -- for dramatic effect, perhaps, or perhaps because he doesn't want to say what he's about to say -- and sips his whiskey. Just when Tseng is about to prompt him -- this is a part of the story Tseng hasn't heard either -- he adds, "Sephiroth was born in Nibelheim."

"That's not possible," Tifa says. Her voice is low and scratched, like a record needle skipping over dusty grooves. "Nibelheim is -- was -- a tiny town. Everyone knew everyone. If there had been ..."

She stops herself. Her face goes slack, distant; Tseng can see her eyes flicking back and forth, even as she stares off into the distance, like she's reading invisible print off the very air. Rufus has turned his head and is looking at her, finally, his eyebrows furrowed, his face showing far more of his emotions than Tseng would have expected. "Been what?" he prompts, when it's clear Tifa is done speaking.

Tifa shakes her head. "It's nothing. Just remembering something. Go on. I'll tell you later."

*Or I won't*, her tone says, as plainly as though she added it aloud, and Rufus's face contorts, clearly debating the wisdom of pressing her further. He lets it go, though. "I looked into it. We both did. Apparently there was some sort of Shinra outpost, just outside of town, used for engineers who were visiting the reactor for maintenance and upgrades and the like."

"The mansion," Tifa murmurs, as though to herself. "We used to sneak into it to play, when we were children."

Rufus nods. "At one point, there are references to some sort of research project using the place, because there wasn't enough space for them here in Midgar. No word on what it was, or what it was researching. And from there, the paper trail just ... ends. It's as though the project never existed. I can't even find out what department it was attached to. And that's unheard of. Anything that takes company money needs to justify itself seven times over and send in sixteen reference forms before breakfast. In triplicate. And those forms get filed and referenced and summarized and tied into the information ecology, and any project that looks to Shinra in any way, shape, or form stays on record from inception until judgement day, and there is no sign *anywhere* that this ever existed."

His voice is starting to heat up now, grow more and more passionate. "And that *shouldn't be possible*. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd swear it *couldn't* be possible. But it is. And it's connected to all of this, somehow, and I've never been able to figure out why. And when Sephiroth was assigned to a mission in Nibelheim, a SOLDIER general assigned to some pissant little project to clear out some Mako-spawn in the mountains that a wet-nosed private could have handled, I asked him to keep his eyes open for me in case he noticed anything that would explain it. And he *never came back*."

In Rufus's voice is the sound of a child's eternal betrayal -- *why did you leave me? what did I do?* Tseng has known for nearly three

years now that Rufus still feels guilty about Sephiroth's death, but he hasn't known until this very minute, hearing the anguish in that one brief cry, just how much it still weighs on Rufus's shoulders. Rufus would never have told him. And yet he is telling Tifa, and Tifa is sitting and listening, and Tifa folds her hands together (to keep herself from moving otherwise?) and rests her chin on her knuckles, studying Rufus like she's trying to decide how much of his story to believe.

"And that would be bad enough," Rufus adds, after a minute to compose himself. His voice has gone back to being flat, calm, the simple recitation of fact: the sound of Rufus mutating strong emotion into bland nothingness, the defense he's learned a thousand different ways over the years after too many people using his emotions against him. "Except when my father called a full board meeting to announce that Sephiroth was dead -- Sephiroth, who survived three years of war with Wutai without a single injury that wasn't due to someone else's stupidity -- Hojo showed up. And when Heidegger announced that he had assigned Sephiroth on a mission to Nibelheim, Hojo *freaked out*, for half a second, before he got control of himself. Before my father said that Sephiroth was dead. And I never got a satisfactory answer as to why."

He takes a deep breath. "Sephiroth radioed me. Four days before he died, judging from the best timeline our investigators could fit together after the fact. The reception was shit -- you can't get a clear signal from the mountains over here to Midgar, and that was before we put in the repeaters at Corel, the Gold Saucer, and Costa del Sol -- and I only caught one word in ten. He said he was looking into something, and something about Hojo, and I couldn't piece together the rest of it. One word in ten. If that. I caught 'reactor', and 'SOLDIER', and 'Hojo'. He was asking me to check something. And then the signal was lost. As far as any of us can tell, I was the last person to talk to Sephiroth before he died. From our side, at least. From what Tseng just told me, from what *you've* told me, you were the last person to see him alive, period."

He looks down at the glass that's still in his hand as though it belongs to someone else. Then he swallows the rest of the whiskey and turns, fully, to face Tifa. His face is perfectly composed, but his eyes are burning. "So I'm asking you. You don't have any reason to do me a favor, and many reasons -- many *good* reasons -- to tell me to piss up a rope and then hang myself with it. But you may have the key to a mystery that's been haunting my company for anywhere up to thirty years, and I'd really like to know why the gentlest man I've ever known went insane and set a town on fire, and I'd really like to know what the *fuck* is going on with my VP of Science, and I'd really like to know how someone could make information disappear like that, and who, and more than that, *why*, and above all else I'd really like to know *what I have to do to make sure this never happens again*."

His words echo against the stained and scuffed timbers of the bar. His eyes are locked on Tifa's, and hers on his; Tseng can tell, looking at Tifa's face, that she has started to succumb to the hypnotic pull of Rufus's voice, lured in by the rise and fall of Rufus's rhythms. Rufus has been speaking in public for nearly his entire life, and there is nothing he doesn't know about how to hold a crowd. There's always been something about Rufus, some shining force sleeping behind his

eyes, that can turn the heads of everyone in a room and compel the attention of everyone in a hundred-foot radius even when he's doing nothing more than breathing. Rufus is fascinating, in the truest and most original sense of the word: he has the ability to fascinate, to mesmerize, to entrance. In his toolbox are a thousand techniques to captivate an audience.

He isn't using those techniques right now -- not deliberately, at least; Tseng knows the difference, but so many of them are so integral to his mode and manner he can never be truly without them - - which is, perhaps, the most fascinating thing. Tseng has seen Rufus attempt to gain his own way with a hundred different methods of persuasion, from seduction to bribery to threats to simple, rational argument. This is none of them. He's taken off a mask with Tifa that he almost never lets anyone see him without. The pure, naked force of Rufus's honest truth is more compelling than any of the attempts at manipulation, however practiced, however genuine-sounding, could ever be.

Rufus doesn't do that. Period. The only reason he could have to offer up such stunning honesty -- to say nothing of the amount of classified information he has just handed Tifa (gift-wrapped and neatly packaged for maximum use to cause Shinra grief) -- could possibly be because he is attempting to make reparations for a debt that is owed to her. And Tseng knows the way Rufus's mind works -- if Rufus were Wutaian, Tseng would say that he views himself as the *daimyō* of Shinra and all who look to her, responsible for their actions, honor-bound to redeem their faults and failures as though they were his own, and it's what Tseng had been counting on when he brought Rufus here in the first place -- but even that alone would not be cause for such --

*Oh.*

Tseng is possessed of a sudden and hysterical urge to burst out laughing. He wonders if Tifa could possibly have *any* clue that -- somewhere in the depths of Rufus's brain, in the part that neatly divides the world into *mine* and *not-mine* and endlessly calculates the precise weight and measure of that which is owed to the *mine* and owed from the *not-mine* -- Rufus has claimed her as his own, upon the strength of her relationship with Tseng. Rufus has decided -- whether he knows it consciously or not -- that because she is Tseng's lover, and because Tseng is his most trusted lieutenant and the closest thing he has to a true friend, Tifa falls under the umbrella of his protection as well. Whether she likes it or not.

Tseng will have to break it to her very gently. At some point in the unspecified future. (And then probably run, very very quickly.)

Before he can decide what to do with this new realization, Tifa stirs, shaking off Rufus's spell and turning back to her bottle of water. (It has the feel more of her looking for something to do with her hands, something to look at that isn't Rufus, than any real thirst.) "Why are you telling me this?" she asks, her voice still rough and low. "Surely you can't think I'll be so moved by your story that I'll rush to give up secrets I've kept for years to my worst enemy."

If her phrasing bothers Rufus, he doesn't let on. "I'm not your

enemy," he says. When Tifa snorts, clearly preparing to argue, he just shakes her head and keeps talking over her: "You won't believe it right now, and honestly, I wouldn't expect you to. You went through something no one should have to, and it was one of my people who did it to you, and that alone would be cause for you to hate me and mine for the rest of your days -- and then you found yourself here, surrounded by people who have cause to hate Shinra, and you have no doubt been absorbing that hatred, day in and day out, ever since. In your eyes, I'm the face of that enemy. And there's nothing I could say that could convince you otherwise, whether it's true or not. I obviously don't think it is, but then again, no man looks at himself in the mirror and sees a monster. But I bear you no ill will, and I will do my utmost to make reparations for the harm you have suffered at the hands of my own."

Tifa's chin comes up at that. "I'm not the only person Shinra's fucked over. I'm not the only person Shinra's fucking over right now. Are you going to personally make amends to all of *them*, too? If you acknowledge they have cause to hate Shinra, why haven't you done something about it?"

"Because his father would have him killed if he tried," Tseng says, quietly. Rufus throws him an irritated look -- he wouldn't have told her that much, then, despite his honesty in all else; Rufus's standards for which information he will share and which he will jealously guard are impenetrable. Still, it's the truth, and Tifa deserves to know it; if she is considering forming an alliance with Rufus (and the fact she hasn't thrown them out of the bar yet means the possibility is still on the table) it's something she'll need to know. In Tseng's opinion, the possession of that one fact makes nearly everything else about Rufus's life fall into place.

Tifa startles at his words, which tells him she'd forgotten his presence; he's a little bemused by how much trust that displays in him. She turns, transferring her pinpoint stare to him. "That -- you can't be serious," she says, doubt laced through every word. "Can you?"

Rufus barks a laugh, his voice rough and raw the way it always is when the topic comes up. "Oh, he's serious. And he's the person who'd probably be tapped for the job, too. My old man would be on the bottom of the list of contenders for the Father of the Year award. He didn't want a son, he wanted a carbon copy who'd uphold his 'legacy' after he was gone, and when he got me instead, he made it damn clear my continued existence was entirely on his sufferance. The stories I could tell you ... And I will, actually, because at least a few examples of the old man's complete and utter insanity touch on the whole matter of what happened after we found out about Sephiroth's death, and why I haven't been able to get anywhere further in investigating it, but I don't want to overwhelm you completely. Or make you think I'm looking for your pity, or trying to play on your emotions."

He crosses back over to the table, refills his glass. "But I'll give you an example," he says, bringing the glass to his lips but lowering it slightly before he can take another sip, speaking over the rim. Despite the casual and offhanded tone, his eyes are deadly serious, trained on Tifa's face, and Tseng's heart turns over in his chest as he



realizes what Rufus is about to say. "Because you deserve to know. When the old man found out Nibelheim had burned, and Sephiroth was likely responsible, do you know what the first thing he ordered was? Not that we find all the people in the company who came from Nibelheim and let them know the news as gently as possible. Not that we send a team of engineers out to the reactor to safety-test it and make sure that whatever had happened hadn't damaged it. Not that we send a team of forensic specialists out to dissect the scene and reconstruct the sequence of events of what really happened."

He does drink, then, and the momentary pause is clearly for him to compose himself, because his tone has started to turn vicious again, and this isn't the sort of news that deserves to be spit out with venom. (It's the sort of news that doesn't deserve to be spoken at all, because it *shouldn't have happened*. But the world goes as it will, Tseng thinks, and *should* and *shouldn't* bear no resemblance to reality.) Next to Tseng, Tifa has gone pale and still again; she senses the depths of what Rufus is about to say. Tseng slides one hand across the table to settle it over hers, and it's a sign of how unnerved she is by the gravity with which they're both treating the situation, sensing the weight of the news about to be delivered, that she doesn't pull hers away.

"No," Rufus says, once he's composed himself, and his tone is as gentle as he can make it. "No, his first orders were that we send a team of the finest minds in Shinra to clear away the bodies, clear away the houses, raze what remained of the town to the ground, and then spend millions of gil to reconstruct the scene as note-perfect as possible. 'I want a native of that town to be able to walk into the reconstruction and never tell the difference,' he said. And I asked him why, and he said, 'Because we can't afford to let anyone think we can't control our people.'"

Tifa blinks. Then blinks again. Underneath Tseng's hand, her hand flexes, her fingernails digging into the wooden boards of the table until Tseng thinks she must be driving splinters under her nails. "He *what?*" she breathes. It isn't even anger, the way it otherwise could have been. It's simply disbelief, like the words Rufus is speaking refuse to fit together into sentences, into meaning, inside her ears.

Rufus's jaw clenches; it's the only sign of his anger Tseng can see. Tseng remembers that anger, remembers the vicious, pointed battle Rufus and his father had fought in the boardroom over that order. Rufus had fought back with a vigor he didn't usually allow himself to use in challenging his father's orders, but he'd lost. He always did. And his father had sent him out to Junon as punishment for questioning the plan, ordering him to the contingency site -- to provide 'much-needed executive supervision', the president had said -- and no one with the eyes to see what *really* went on in the upper echelons of Shinra's board of directors had doubted it was anything other than punishment.

(Not just punishment, Rufus maintains. Junon is Shinra's failover site, staffed by a skeleton crew ready to pick up the reins of the company's functions in an instant in the event of Midgar-based disaster, but Junon is isolated from the ebb and flow of the main thrust of day to day operations, completely outside the information ecology Rufus had so vividly described earlier; it isn't even connected

to the main company network regularly, since the old man had never approved the cost of laying trans-mountainous cables. Data transfer to Junon is only twice a week via radio link, to synchronize the most mission-critical databases and to send and receive the backed-up email; cell phone reception out there is next to nil, prone to cutting out entirely at the slightest hint of weather or even when too many devices are powered on nearby. Rufus's exile to Junon wasn't just a sign that he had displeased his father; it had been an act of isolation, cutting Rufus so neatly out of the web of power and information Shinra runs upon that Rufus insists it had been the old man's true purpose all along. Tseng isn't *entirely* convinced, but Rufus does at least have a point; when his father had finally relented four months ago and allowed Rufus to return home, Rufus had holed himself up in his office for a full two weeks, leaving to neither eat nor -- as far as Tseng could tell -- sleep, until he had satisfied himself he'd caught up on everything he'd missed, and Tseng knows he is still finding gaps in his understanding even now.)

"I'm sorry," Rufus says, when the silence extends too long between them. "There is nothing I can offer right now to make this any less of a violation. But you needed to know, because until people know the truth -- and sometimes after -- they persist in thinking of my father as sane and rational. And he isn't. Not in the least. He hasn't been for a very long time."

"My father --" Tifa says. Her eyes mist over, and she blinks several times in rapid succession; her voice wavers, the tremor subtle enough to be missed if Tseng weren't looking for it but still there. Tseng can tell that she hadn't thought about the realities of what post-disaster Nibelheim must have been like until that very moment, wouldn't have thought of the details of the recovery of bodies and the razing of fire-husked buildings while she was struggling so hard to cling to life. "His -- his body. What was --"

She can't make herself finish the question. Rufus winces, ever so faintly. "I --"

"The bodies were given a decent burial, with all respect possible in the situation," Tseng says, as quietly as he can. He doesn't think Tifa needs to know, not while suffering from such a shock to the system, that he and the Turks were the ones to lead the reconstruction team, under Hojo's supervision. (*He lived there for years*, the president had said, and at the time Tseng hadn't thought to question -- too many other urgent disaster grenades to throw oneself atop of -- and once he'd calmed down enough to think, it had been yet another suspicious thing about Hojo on a list that was already longer than his arm.) He isn't sure if Tifa will ever be ready to hear that news.

But he can offer her this much, no matter that it is cold comfort. As far as Rufus knows, the bodies recovered from the wreckage had been simply destroyed; Tseng had never found the right time to tell him, fearing to set off another explosion of Rufus's temper at the raising of the topic. Hojo had protested the time "wasted" on such "unnecessary sentimentality", but Rude and Reno had backed up Tseng's order, and despite the fact those graves can never be marked or honored, Tseng had made sure flowers would always bloom there.

Tifa frees her hand from under Tseng's, drags it over her face and scrubs, hard, at her eyes with the heel. "All right," she says, abruptly, and her resolve is adamant. "All right. I can't have the rest of this conversation right now. I can't make any decisions about what to do with the information you've just handed me -- all of it --" Her voice quivers again, but she catches herself before it can break. "Not without having slept and thought about it some more. I --"

She seems to run out of words, hitting a verbal wall composed of her mind's sheer inability to process the depths of what this evening has turned into. Tseng can tell she's reached her capacity to absorb any new information; if she were to try, she would simply shut down. That's the last thing he wants, and so he slides back his chair and stands. "I'll show Rufus where the spare bedroom and the towels are," he says. Then, daring, he rests a hand on her shoulder, squeezes lightly. "If you'd like me to sleep in there instead of --"

"No," Tifa says, quickly, and her voice is more than a little desperate. She turns her head to rest her cheek against his hand and breathes out, roughly. "Shiva, no. Please."

Tseng is more grateful than he would have suspected to hear those words. He'd gone into this night knowing he might be doing irreparable damage to his relationship with Tifa, had been willing to sacrifice it in the name of the greater good and for a higher purpose. But even if she only wants a warm body to cling to in the night, to keep her from being alone while she grieves anew -- even if she decides in the cold light of day she cannot countenance his further presence, knowing what she knows now -- he is grateful for the chance to be the body thus clung to. "Of course," he says, and beckons Rufus with nothing more than a jerk of his chin to follow him as he leads Rufus up to the apartment over the bar.

"That poor woman," Rufus says in an undertone as they climb the stairs. "Sweet suffering Shiva. Every time I think I've come to terms with all my father's shit ..."

He trails off, sighing. Tseng wonders if Rufus can even hear himself, wonders if Rufus recognizes how his concern for Tifa's well-being is indicative of a commitment Rufus would otherwise never make. It isn't as though Rufus is incapable of empathy; Tseng has seen him produce acts of stunning sensitivity to others' emotions over the years. It's just that Rufus's form of empathy is saved only for the people who become real to him, and gaining the status of 'real' in Rufus Shinra's eyes generally takes years and miracles. Tseng hadn't consciously thought of how much help it would be in the game he's been setting up for months, to have Rufus look at Tifa and see Tseng's lover, someone Tseng owed loyalty to, and thus accept responsibility for her through Rufus's commutative property of connection. But he won't deny how much it helps.

He doesn't say any of what he's thinking, though. Instead, he ushers Rufus into the spare bedroom Tifa keeps made up for regulars who wind up spending the night, for reasons ranging from drunkenness to exhaustion to heartbreak to simply an early volunteer shift in the winter when the sun wouldn't have reached past the Wall yet at the times they'd need to leave an apartment that was located outside of Tifa's safe zone in order to be present on time. He shows

Rufus the bathroom, and the stack of towels that are always kept on hand, and the stash of secondhand clothing stacked and folded neatly in the drawers so unexpected guests can have a chance of finding something they can wear to sleep in, and throughout the whole process, Rufus doesn't say a word, lost in thought.

Tseng has turned to go back to Tifa, the door already half-open, when Rufus breaks that silence. "You really care about her, don't you." It isn't a question.

Tseng stills, his hand on the doorframe, and turns slowly. "What makes you say that?" he asks, careful to keep his voice neat and even. He can't read what's behind Rufus's voice, can't see any clues on Rufus's face, and while he doesn't want to believe Rufus's statement stems from jealousy, he can't be positive. Rufus has never placed a high level of importance on sexual fidelity even as he builds his life around the bedrock of emotional fidelity from the few people around him he can count on to provide it. If Rufus thinks Tseng is no longer his man through and through, Tseng doesn't know what it will do to him.

Rufus only smiles, sitting on the edge of the bed, bathed in the light of the single weak lamp on the bedside table, looking utterly unearthly. "You spent that entire conversation sitting next to her, looking like you were ready to leap up and throw yourself in between her and the world in order to shield her. I've never seen you look like that with someone else before." *Other than me*, are the words lurking beneath the surface of Rufus's words, but Tseng can sense no bitterness or recrimination lurking there with them. "It's all right, you know," Rufus adds, apparently sensing Tseng's apprehension. "I've always thought you needed somebody who wasn't a part of the rat race. She seems like what I would have picked for you, if you'd asked me to try."

Sometimes, Tseng despairs of ever understanding this man.

But now isn't the time to get into any of the complicated questions of what he is to Rufus, or Rufus to him. So he only inclines his head. "Goodnight, kiddo," he says, the years-old nickname leaping to his lips the way it always does.

Rufus's answering smile is even more incandescent than the last. "Goodnight, old man. Sleep well."

Back in the hallway, the stairs and the bar downstairs have been plunged into shadows, lit only by the small night-light Tifa keeps on all night behind the bar in the event something she hears down there wakes her enough to feel the need to investigate. As Tseng moves through the hallway with the ease of long familiarity, towards the light spilling out from under the door of Tifa's bedroom, he hears the water of the sink running; it clicks off just as he enters Tifa's room without bothering to knock. A minute later, she comes out from the en-suite bathroom, clad in only a black tank top and a pair of heather-grey panties. She is rubbing her wet face vigorously with a towel, moving with the thoughtless grace of someone who both knows the layout of the room and has enough sense of the world around her to sense any obstacle before running into it, even without the benefit of sight.

When she lowers the towel and tosses it into her laundry hamper, Tseng almost expects to see eyes reddened from a quick bout of weeping, but he can see no sign of it if she did indulge. He opens his mouth to say something -- an apology; an explanation -- but before he can, her head whips around fast enough that her braid slides over her shoulder and encircles her throat. "Don't," she says. "Just -- don't. You're trying to work out the best way to make me believe you're sorry for bringing him here, for putting me through that. But don't. You've been working up to tonight from the first moment I told you where I was born. I told you from the very beginning: don't assume I'm as stupid as the people you usually do this with."

There's no heat in her voice, no anger. Just a calm, clear acceptance with a touch of sadness layered atop it, and not for the first time Tseng wonders at her reasons for beginning this relationship. Tonight is not the night to get into those questions, though, and so all he says, shrugging out of his pistols' holsters before unbuttoning his shirt and tossing it carelessly on the floor, is, "I never assumed you were stupid." He pops the clip of his .45 and checks the chamber before setting it on the nightstand, then slides his 9mm under the pillow and begins to divest himself of his combat knives. "And I don't actually do 'this' with anywhere near the frequency you've always seemed to think I do -- and never with stupid people."

Her lips curve up a little -- self-deprecating amusement, even as the sadness grows -- as she moves over to the side of the bed she sleeps on, when Tseng sleeps here with her, and begins folding the covers down. (The first time he saw this room, he'd noted that of *course* Tifa makes her bed every morning.) Tseng unbuttons his pants and slides them off as well, pausing to unsnap his ankle holster and add his .22 and his brace of throwing knives to the ever-growing pile of weaponry on the nightstand. (Aside from Rufus, Tifa is the only person he lets see him disarm himself like this, piece by piece, step by step.) "You'd be foolish not to," she says. "Seduction is a time-honored technique for acquiring information. After all, it worked on me, didn't it?"

Tseng turns at that, knowing that shock and budding anger is written on every line of his face and his body. She has climbed into the bed, sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, watching him carefully while the same sad smile lingers on her lips. "You don't -- I didn't --" Hearing himself, inarticulate and fumbling in a way he never is, he stops and makes himself take a deep breath, closing his eyes and wishing for patience. When he opens his eyes again, Tifa is still watching him, but the sadness on her face has mutated into confusion.

He would be upset she would think so little of him, upset she would believe him capable of seducing her strictly to gain her trust and for access to the information that she could give him, except he knows: no. It's what he intended at the very beginning, after all, and -- all protests aside -- he certainly *has* used seduction as a tool in his arsenal before, talking his way into the beds of men and women and slipping back out again with the information he needed. The fact he's never turned any of those one-night seductions into a *relationship*, not like the relationship he has with Tifa, doesn't redeem him. He can't protest the accusation on grounds it could never be true, not without being a liar, and he has promised himself he will never lie to Tifa

through anything other than omission.

And it's late enough that he's starting to feel the need for sleep himself, and the glass and a half of whiskey he'd drunk, atop the sake and beer from earlier, has started to swim through the edges of his brain, and they've all had a very trying evening. (Rufus has always appreciated his gift for tactful understatement.) So instead he just says, "This hasn't been about 'information' for a very long time. And it's never been only about me trying to use you. There's a limit to how far I'll whore myself out for the job. And this --" His tiny hand gesture encompasses the room, her, the whole situation. "This is so far over that line it's like the line is back in Sector Three."

Her face doesn't change at his words, but he gets the impression he's managed to shock her nonetheless. She keeps her eyes on him for a long minute, trying to read his sincerity from the scraps and pieces his face and his body will show, and all he can do is try to keep that body from lying to her (he lies for a living; his body knows the moves of the dance and adopts them even when his mind isn't involved) and know that she knows he's capable of reflecting any truth he might want her to see. After long enough that he's starting to get chilly standing there in nothing more than his boxers (Tifa keeps the building as a whole at temperatures that would make Shiva Herself feel at home in the winter and early spring; she says it's because the mass of bodies in the bar generates enough heat on its own, but Tseng privately thinks it's to minimize the amount of Shinra's electricity she uses), Tifa finally says, "Turn out the light and come to bed, Tseng."

Tseng does. The heavy blackout curtains filter the neon from outside when the room is plunged into darkness; he slides between the cool sheets, contrasting (as he always does) their rough cotton with Rufus's expensive silk. In the darkness, he can sense the motions of Tifa unbraiding her hair and starting to comb it out with her fingers; she dislikes sleeping with it bound, even though it inevitably tangles in the night. "Here," Tseng says, his voice a bare breath in the room, the cathedral of darkness summoning the need to speak softly. He props himself up on one elbow. "Let me."

Tifa sighs and moves so he can reach. He sits up and fits himself behind her, works his fingers through the glorious mane of her hair, patiently undoing the few knots he finds. He loves Tifa's hair. She holds herself stiff for a moment, then sighs again and leans back against him. This close, he can feel the exhaustion thrumming through her body like a live wire.

"I wasn't going to apologize for what I've done," Tseng finally says, when he judges the moment is ripe for him to speak. "Because I'm not sorry. It was necessary. You said it yourself: we both know precisely who and what we are." Finished with his ministrations, he sweeps the weight of her hair aside and presses a kiss against the nape of her neck. It makes her shiver, the same way it always does. "But you should know this: I am pleased that who I am includes your lover, and this will be true until such time as you tell me it is no longer."

It would sound better in Wutaian, but such a sentiment would require the mode of the highest formality, and he doesn't want her to

think she is being mocked.

Tifa is quiet for another long minute, so long he thinks she might have decided not to respond at all. (Part of the reason he finds spending time with Tifa so soothing is she, alone of all the people he has met in Midgar in the years of his exile save Rufus, understands the value of stillness and silence.) "I'm pretty sure I'll start to find that reassuring come morning," she finally says, and Tseng thinks he might be able hear the sound of her faint smile in her voice.

Then she pulls away, and Tseng starts to fear the worst. But it's only so she can stretch out in the bed, and when he does so as well, she rolls over to drape her body over his the same way she always does, burying her face against his chest and tucking her head under his chin. He thinks, then, he might lie awake for a long time, staring into the blackness of the room around him; but he lets his hand rove over her hair, stroking its silky lengths and breathing in the sunshine smell of her, and the next thing he knows, he is asleep.

## ( 2. )

Tifa wakes once for a screaming argument in the alleyway to the side of her imperfectly-sealed bedroom window, again for Tseng sliding carefully out from underneath her and padding to the bathroom, the third time because she is dreaming that she is making dinner and laughing with her father only to look down and realize she's leaving bloody footprints on the floor of a windowless room ringed round with rows of pods hooked into a glowing green tube, and when she wakes the fourth time for no good reason except it being dawn she opens her eyes and stares at the ceiling and tries to figure out what time it is by the patterns made by the light seeping in around the edges of her blackout curtains before sighing and gently extracting herself from under Tseng's comforting arm.

He makes a soft noise of protest when she moves; she rests two fingertips on the curve of his temple. "Shh," she says, in her dawn-voice, her voice of reassurance and comfortable lies. "Just me. It's all right. Sleep; you're safe here."

Meaningless platitudes -- they always are -- but he murmurs again and subsides, rolling over onto his back in one economical motion and throwing his arm over his eyes. He's asleep again within seconds, breath evening back into the soft patterns she is so familiar with. She thinks -- not for the first time -- how ironic it is that he should sleep so deeply in her bed and quiet at the sound of her voice when he does wake, and how easy it would be for her to fit one hand over his nose and mouth and *hold*, and she leans over (as she always does) to press a light kiss against his forehead before climbing out of the bed to gather her clothes in the dark.

In the bathroom, she brushes her teeth and uses the toilet, combs through her hair and braids it back, then pulls on her sweatpants and laces up her running shoes. It's still early spring outside, and no matter how much the plate Above traps heat down Below and no matter that she grew up in a mountain town, it will be too chilly at

first outside for her liking if she ventures out wearing only the tank top she slept in. She always warms up quickly once she gets moving, though, and it's more trouble than it's worth to bring a jacket and have to stop just as soon as she hits her stride to struggle out of it again. She'll just pick up the pace at the beginning until she warms through.

When she lets herself out of the bathroom and through the bedroom, she can see a light coming from downstairs where there was no light when she went to sleep. Her heartrate spikes for half a second, adrenaline coursing through her veins (better at cutting through the morning fog than the cup of coffee she always has before starting on her run, although probably less good for the heart) before she remembers her other, far more unwanted visitor. The door to the guest room is open, and the bed has either been re-made or was never slept in to begin with; the jeans and t-shirt Rufus (*Rufus fucking Shinra*) was wearing the night before are folded into one tidy pile on the foot of the bed, and there's a damp towel neatly folded in half and draped over the bedframe.

He must have found something in the spare-clothes drawer to fit him, Tifa thinks, and has to press the back of one hand against her mouth to stifle the hysterical laughter threatening to bubble up from her throat. She isn't even sure what's so funny. Maybe that's the funniest part.

The clock on the bedside table of the guest room says it's 6:45AM. She never keeps a clock in her own bedroom. She hates knowing what time it is when she first wakes, because the answer is always "too fucking early". She is far, far too much of a morning person to be the owner of a business that stays open well past midnight each night without fail, but everyone knows she shuts down for an afternoon nap between lunch and dinner, and she can't think of anything else she could be doing down here that would give her anywhere near the number of chances this does to serve her cause. She doesn't hate her life here -- far from it; it has its moments of stunning reward -- but it's a harder life than she'd expected, and a harder one than she'd ever wanted.

(*Enough. It is what it is. Don't dwell.* The refrain of self-correction is long-familiar by now. She's learned which things she can't let herself think about too closely if she doesn't want to put herself into a snit for days, and the subject of what her life might have been is close to the top of that list.)

Tifa makes her way down the staircase leading to the bar, moving as silently as she can in her rubber-soled running shoes. (Which is pretty damn silently. Tseng claims she's the only person who can regularly sneak up on him, and while she doesn't know if he's exaggerating to flatter her, there's no way he could fake the genuine surprise when she touches him when he thought she was across the room -- something she learned quickly not to do, at least not without making sufficient noise, after the second time he'd drawn his gun on her.) She doesn't doubt Rufus (*Rufus fucking Shinra*) has similar startle responses; Tseng almost never talks about the man, but she's overheard enough discussions among Tseng and the other Turks to know Tseng was the one who taught him self-defense and more, and Tseng believes paranoia is a sacrament. She knows what she's



risking, trying to surprise her unwanted guest.

But this is her bar and her building, owned free and clear between her and Kyle as she pays down the debt (so much more than monetary) she owes him, and this is her life, the life she built with her own two hands out of the ashes of Nibelheim and beyond. She will not let Rufus (Rufus fucking *Shinra*) waltz in and commandeer it with nothing more than pretty empty words about responsibility and reparations, and she knows, *knows*, just from looking at him, that Rufus fucking Shinra is a black hole whose gravity sucks in everything around him to crush it into nothing more than a ball of stardust to be scattered for his own purposes. If she gives him an inch, he'll take a continent.

Besides. Knowing what he does when he's startled may be useful, somehow. Someday.

Rufus isn't sitting at the bar as she expected him to be when she descends the last few steps of the curving staircase to reach the point where the bar is visible. The lights are on in the kitchen, though, and she can hear the low murmur of stickey voices from the radio she keeps back there to keep her ears and mind busy throughout long involved prep work, and over it all she can hear a cheerful sort of whistling.

He's very faintly flat, Tifa notices. She has a good enough ear for pitch that usually it would set her teeth on edge, but she's startled to realize that from him, it's almost charming. Evidence he's human after all.

When she comes over to stand so she can see over the saloon doors -- she'd had to drop them six inches when she'd bought out Kyle; Kyle had been much taller than she is -- all she can do is close her eyes and pray for patience. The countertop they use to stack dishes in need of washing -- which had been about three-quarters full when she'd closed and locked the doors last night -- is now empty and gleaming. The dishwashing sink itself, which had been piled high with pots and pans -- many in need of more than a little elbow grease -- is empty as well. The plates are neatly stacked in their proper order and arrangement at the finishing counter; the pots and pans are racked as well, their handles all facing outward and turned forty-five degrees to the right, perfectly placed for a quickly-moving hand to grab them. The grill, which had been two days overdue for a good holystoning, is spotless. It looks like the oil in the fryer is even new.

He's going step-by-step down the Saturday prep list tacked to the door of the walk-in refrigerator, she realizes. She certainly hopes he doesn't view bar labor as some kind of bizarre penance. For one, indentured servants are inconvenient to deal with; for another, a few hours or days of labor can never even approach the point of redeeming Nibelheim and after, and to think it could is an insult so profound that if it is a proposition he is advancing, wordlessly or explicitly, she may very well be obliged to murder him and bury him in the backyard.

The whistling comes from where Rufus is standing at the prep counter, knife in hand, methodically dismantling the hundred-pound bag of potatoes next to him into julienne strips for potato fries. He's

wearing a pair of black sweatpants, two sizes too big, and a t-shirt advertising Wall Market's pharmacy, from the series printed ten years ago (well before Tifa's time, but a good advertising campaign never dies) with the cartoon-pink moogles mascot cavorting through bottles of pills across the faded grey front. His hair is damp, and it curls even more strongly than it had the night before. He is nothing like his public image; she doesn't blame any of last night's patrons for failing to recognize the vice president of the Shinra Electric Power Company in this man. She likes to think *she* would have, even if Tseng hadn't been the one to bring him and thus predispose her to looking, but she's honest enough with herself to admit she can't ever know for sure.

He's about halfway finished with the potatoes, she thinks, squinting at the way the top of the sack slumps over. Whether through coincidence, native intelligence, or just plain dumb luck, the oversized bucket full of water he's tossing the finished product into is the one she always uses for the proto-fries before their first frying and subsequent freezing for later. (She wonders how he knows that soaking the potato strips before frying them is one of the keys to perfect fries. *Stick that in the same category as wondering why he could haul a tray like a pro last night*, she tells herself: *completely fucking useless.*)

Tifa is a bit surprised that it only takes a few minutes of watching him before he can feel the weight of her eyes on the back of his neck. The untamed ape living in the back of humanity's mind always knows when it's being closely watched, sooner or later, but most people take far longer for the ape's warning signal to get through to them. She was wrong about the dramatic startle response: she's looking, carefully, but she doesn't spot any cue, no tensing of muscles or shifting of weight, when he moves. He just turns his head, swift and smooth, to meet her eyes. The motion is so natural it takes her a full four seconds to realize his grip on the knife in his hand has effortlessly flipped from the loose overhand hammer grip used for chopping to the underhanded reverse grip favored by those who fight with knives in close quarters.

Then he smiles, and the moment passes. "Good morning," he says. His hand moves again, and if she hadn't been trained to look, she would have called it nothing more than a minor adjustment; but when he turns his whole body to face her more fully, he is back to holding the knife as though the most dangerous thing he's ever faced in his life is a pile of potatoes and an angry chef with a deadline. Against her will, she's forced to respect the competence that implies, both in the easy familiarity with the weapon he had to hand and the control and judgement displayed in not using it. Whatever else, it's clear he has trained, long and hard, in how to protect himself from people who wish Shinra ill.

(Part of her, buried behind her eyes, is coolly taking notes. She sits in the center of a web of people from all Midgar's walks of life, and she *abhors* the violence espoused by so many of the slums' anti-Shinra fighters, but she has no doubt this is closer than any of them will ever get to Rufus Shinra, and the chance to gather knowledge on his skills and capabilities may not arise again.)

"Good morning," she says, keeping her voice as neutral as she

can. She pushes the swinging saloon doors out of the way, slipping into the kitchen. She can't help but check his work, taking a quick tour of grill to fryer to counters to stacks of dishes; she isn't sure whether to be grateful or annoyed that everything is precisely as she would have done it herself. Rufus has left off his chopping, watching her circuit with an expression that manages to be both amused and -- vaguely -- fond. "You didn't have to do this," she says, abruptly, turning back to face him. His expression doesn't change when she does.

Rufus inclines his head. "I know," he says. "I -- don't sleep well in strange places. At all. Rather than tossing and turning, I decided to make myself useful. I used the list marked 'Saturday prep' on the refrigerator; I just started at the top and worked my way down. As you can see, I've hit the potato portion of the program."

Tifa grits her teeth. There is something about this man, his calm equanimity and subtle dignity, his stupid little jokes and the light tone of mockery that infuses everything he says, that makes her want to jump up and down like a two-year-old, throwing things and screaming. She overrides the impulse. *Hard*. "Fine," she says. "Do whatever you want; I certainly can't stop you. I'm taking my morning run. If Wedge and Jessie get here before I get back, you're a friend of Tseng's from Costa del Sol who just started up at Midgar U, I put you up last night because you two outstayed the circumplate train, you *won't* be making a habit of it so they don't have to rearrange the standard Saturday morning prep chores permanently, and they should start in on the inventory. Which you will *not* be touching."

She can hear her voice getting more and more clipped as she runs down the list, but hey. At least it isn't getting *louder* and more clipped. The last thing she needs is to wake Tseng up so it's two-against-one again, the way it was last night; if he's left to his own devices he'll sleep for another two hours at least, and that way she'll only have to defend herself against *one* of them instead of both at the same time.

(Unfair. Unfair, and even mostly untrue -- Tseng hadn't placed himself between her and Rufus last night, had in fact gone out of his way to avoid making it into a conflict between Shinra and slum rat, and she had known what she was getting into the minute she'd first smiled at him and leaned in a little closer instead of leaning away, had known all the way back to the night she'd taken a deep breath and given him the barest hint she held the answers that he was clearly seeking about what had happened on *that night*. He'd never pretended to be something he wasn't, never played disaffected and disgruntled to win her trust and consideration, had made no apologies and offered no excuses. *We both know who we are*, she'd said last night, not for the first time, and it's true: they always have. He knows her sympathies have always tended closer to activist than status quo, knows she disapproves of Shinra from the top on down, knows she thinks his job is abhorrent and the company he does it for is criminally negligent at best and actively malevolent at worst, and he has never once attempted to change her mind or expressed disapproval about her convictions. It's unfair of her to draw the battle lines now, when they have both so scrupulously avoided drawing them for so long even as they each hold out against the possibility, the certainty, that someday they will be forced to use each other. But she

is, and she can't stop herself from doing it, and she's looking straight at the reason why.)

But Rufus is only nodding, as though what she has just said is the most reasonable thing in the world, and she thinks, actually, she would very much like to drive her knuckles into that perfectly proportioned face right now. "What should I do when I finish the potatoes?" he asks.

Tifa bares her teeth at him. It isn't a smile. Not even close. "Cheese graters in the third drawer over from the left. Take one out, lube it up, and fuck yourself bloody with it."

As exit lines go, it's a pretty good one. If she does say so herself.

She grabs a bottle of water and sticks it in the waistband at the small of her back as she goes through the bar itself. Behind her, she hears Rufus laughing. Genuine amusement, she would say, if she were forced to characterize it, and when he goes back to whistling, the melody line shakes a few times from voiceless laughter as his amusement continues. It's good to know he can laugh at people telling him to go fuck himself, she thinks. (Oh, God, she's going to kill him. She can see, objectively speaking, how his actions might be taken as charming, or helpful, and she certainly isn't going to dispute that he is worlds away from the perception of Vice President Shinra she would have put together three days ago if asked. His confidence and self-possession is still like nails down a chalkboard.)

Fuck it, she decides, abruptly. She can cope without her pre-run coffee, today. Anything to keep from extending the amount of time she's stuck here. (*Her bar. Her refuge. And today it isn't safe, and it isn't secure, and she knows precisely why Tseng did this and can't fault him for the act even as she wishes it didn't have to be like this. Dammit.*)

Her breath puffs out in giant clouds as she steps out onto the porch and begins her warm-up stretches, and the chill makes her throat and lungs hurt. The air down here always feels heavy, dense, full of invisible particulates that weigh down her lungs; she imagines she can feel the smog reaching down her throat, spreading through her chest, choking her bit by bit. She will never again be able to take a deep breath without feeling it catching on her scars; she will never again be able to breathe without thinking of everything she's lost.

(Enough. *Stop.* She knows better, *knows better*, and yet it's been a morning full of endlessly stubbing her mental toes against things she can usually set aside.)

Around her, Lower Seven is starting to whisper to life: Saidy next door is out walking her son to the school Mrs. Miller runs out of her attic; Bai is stumbling home from his boyfriend's apartment still wearing the clothes he was in last night, his eyeliner smeared across his face; the working boys and girls are starting to pack up from their corners and make their way to the cafés and bakeries just starting to open their doors to pick up breakfast-cum-dinner before falling into bed and sleeping the day away. Tifa greets them all with a wave, a smile. They're good people, all of them. Her people, in a way. There are thousands of stories down here, and all of them unique. Shocking

at first for a small-town girl who'd never met anyone so far out of her experience, but she's come to appreciate each and every one of them for who they are and what they can offer.

Strange to think she wouldn't have met any of them, if it hadn't been for *that night*. She wonders, sometimes, who she'd be if she were still Tifa Lockheart of Nibelheim instead of Tifa of the Seventh Heaven. For all Midgar's a prison (well then is the world one) and life here is hard, there are moments of shocking beauty and great reward as well, and she never stops finding it odd how much she loves her life here even as she wishes she hadn't been forced to build it.

*Enough*, she tells herself, yet again, and launches into her morning route before she gets even more maudlin than she already is.

She's gasping for breath before she even hits the train station, pushing herself harder than she usually does. Dr. Ellis had warned her, when he'd finally proclaimed her as cured as he could get her, that she would always suffer from shortness of breath when exercising; he'd cautioned her against trying to push too far, too hard, too soon. She'd listened and nodded and agreed with him sweetly, and they'd both known she was going to ignore him completely the minute he discharged her. Sure enough she had, and it had landed her straight back in Ellis's care a day later, and he'd muttered under his breath and put the oxygen mask back on her face and twenty minutes later dumped a workout plan hastily scrawled on scrap paper in front of her. "That's the furthest and fastest you can push it," he'd said. "It will take years for you to get back to your previous condition. If ever. If you rush it, you will do permanent damage. More so than has already been done to you. And this is the last time I'm rescuing you from your own stupidity."

The pace she's driving today is far past what it should be, and her throat is burning, her chest is burning, the cut-glass sharpness of the near-freezing air slicing through her like Sephiroth's sword sliced through her; she can feel the edges of each rib that had been struck through. She can't make herself stop. Even her body isn't her own anymore; it's been colonized by Shinra as thoroughly as half the world has, and this is her one last chance to rebel and say *this is mine*. No matter how much she'll pay for it when she stops.

She's all the way to Lower Four -- well out of her usual circuit -- by the time the endorphins burn the last of the anger and protest out of her, and their absence (drained away like water out of a cracked and broken cup) leaves her weak in the arms and knees. (Or maybe it's the oxygen deprivation; she's gulping for air so hard her throat is dry and sore, and there are spots and greyness at the edges of her field of vision.) Halfway across the city from her usual haunts, she doesn't recognize any of the people around her, and despite it being early morning (the worst of the predators don't come out until after dark) she's getting more than a few assessing stares.

She bares her teeth at the most obvious, a gang of men sitting on a pile of crates at the mouth of an alleyway smoking and drinking out of a flask they keep passing around, projecting *you really don't want to do that* as fiercely as she can. It works, at least a little; the amount of misogynist commentary increases (*bitch looks like she needs*

someone to teach her her place; why are they *always* so unimaginative?) but their body language eases out, projecting far less of a threat, and that's what she always looks at anyway. Still, she jogs another two blocks before finally sitting down on the edge of a planter clogged with dead weeds (there are still people who try to grow flowers down here; she admires their dedication) to pull out her water bottle and drink. It takes a good ten minutes before she can breathe without gulping for air, and as she starts to cool down, the chilly air blowing over her sweat-damp skin makes her start to shiver.

It's a different world over here, so far from the enclave of sanity against the wider world she's always tried to maintain in Lower Seventh. Sometimes she starts to wonder if she's even accomplishing anything, if her patient and stubborn insistence on trying to keep order and civiliation around her is having any effect at all. Next time she starts to doubt, she should just head on over here again and see what it could be without her.

Still, this city has two faces; it always has. Next to Tifa, an old woman steps out onto the porch of her rowhouse and starts sweeping soot and dust off the stones. She gives Tifa a hard look, clearly trying to decide if Tifa is a working girl. (That euphemism has always amused the hell out of Tifa; she works her ass off, of course, but not in the way they mean.) Tifa smiles at her and salutes her with the water bottle before taking the last sip, and that's apparently enough to ease the woman's suspicions, at least somewhat. (Looking around her, Tifa can see the reason for the woman's suspicion; this doesn't seem like the type of neighborhood to often get joggers.) "Morning," she calls, imbuing her voice with a bit of extra cheer. "Would you like a hand?"

Her motive is more giving herself some extra time to recover before making her way back to the bar -- she really *shouldn't* have driven herself that hard -- and less altruism or neighborly sentiment, but the woman's look turns harder before she grudgingly nods. The work doesn't take long, and by the end of it, Tifa's breathing has evened out completely and the old woman -- Lilah -- has unbent enough to tell Tifa a bit of her story. Husband and son dead in two wars with Wutai twenty years apart, a grandson living Upstairs and too ashamed to come back to visit, but at least he sends money when he can; Lilah takes in mending for the families nearby and made just enough to get by, up until the recent Shinra energy rate hike, and now she's chewing through her savings and her husband's miniscule pension faster than she ever wanted and isn't quite sure how she'll make ends meet when the last of her savings runs out in six months or so.

Tifa resolves to gather up the pile of mending she's been putting off for months and months and have Biggs or Wedge bring it over later this week. She can't save everyone, for all she's no doubt one of the richest individuals in the slums aside from Don Corneo himself. But she can do what she can, where she can, and it's enough to salve her conscience. (Mostly.)

Lilah invites her in for a drink and some breakfast when she's finished sweeping Lilah's stoop and that of her neighbors to either side and weeding out the planters (leaving nothing behind save a few pale mis-shapen shoots, starved for sunlight). Tifa demurs -- not only does

she not want to take food out of Lilah's mouth, she *really* needs to get back to the bar; Shiva alone knows what's going on in her absence -- but she does accept Lilah's offer to at least re-fill her water bottle. (Shinra owns the water supply the same way as they own the electric supply, but rates are far lower. For now, at least; she's heard some muttering about a potential hike *there*, too. She should ask her unwanted guest. It might be interesting to see him splutter.)

Midgar Below is filled with hundreds of thousands of stories like Lilah's, Tifa thinks, as she re-laces her shoes at the foot of Lilah's stoop before taking off again, this time at a far more sedate pace. The only ones who are making a living down here, the only ones who are doing more than just getting by, are almost always the ones who have taken to preying on others. Law and common decency are usually the first things to go when people are starving. The miracle of the slums is that they haven't slid even further than they have.

Meanwhile, Above, Rufus fucking Shinra wears suits that cost more than what Lilah could make from a decade of work, to parties where enough food to feed an entire sector is thrown out at the end of the night, and has the nerve -- the absolute sheer *gall* -- to tell her he will do anything he can to make reparations to her for the harm she's suffered at Shinra's hands.

Tifa catches herself speeding up again when her chest starts burning, her rage transmuting itself into speed, and she forces herself to slow back down to nothing more taxing than a jog. She has until she arrives back at the bar to decide what to do about this whole mess; the minute she walks back through her front door, she'll be confronted with the reality of what her life has turned into, and if she goes in blind and reacts out of nothing more than emotion, she'll make mistakes. (Although she will maintain until her dying day telling Rufus fucking Shinra to fuck himself with a cheese grater wasn't a mistake.) *All right, Tifa*, she tells herself. *Work through this rationally. Start at the beginning.*

The problem is, the beginning is in Nibelheim, in that night of blood and pain and fire.

And she doesn't actually know the things they want to know.

Oh, she can tell them more than what they know already. Over weeks and months she's given Tseng a bare-bones outline of what she remembers from that night, fed to him in bits and pieces to pique his curiosity and see what information he would provide her in return. (None, at first. She hadn't expected there to be. Playing Tseng of the Turks in a long-term game of chess is either the bravest or stupidest thing she's ever done.) From what Rufus told her last night -- and she's still not sure what was his motive for baring his soul in such a fashion, and she doesn't believe him in the *least* when he says he's not trying to create a sense of obligation in her in return -- she can even say with certainty she has information they don't.

But the majority of that day is drowned in blood and death, written over in her memory by the heat of the flames, the stench of burning flesh and the pain (oh, *Shiva*, the *pain*) and try as she might to piece the facts together, she can't make them make sense.

(She remembers lying on the floor of the reactor, drowning at seventy-five hundred feet while her lungs filled with her own blood, thinking *Cloud isn't here, and he promised he would be*. She remembers closing her eyes and thinking it would be the last time, only to open them again, realizing the cool soft green light surrounding her was the light of a high-level Restore materia, and Cloud had been leaning over her and looking panicked and she'd thought *oh, there he is*. She can't reconcile the two. No matter how much she tries. And if her memory is unreliable on that so-central detail, what else is she wrong about? What else is she missing?)

And it isn't that she objects to sharing what she knows with Tseng (and, she supposes, by extension, with Rufus; she knew from the start that what Tseng knew, Rufus would know, sooner or later) on principle. She *likes* Tseng. She shouldn't; others call him Shinra's hired killer and he's called himself far worse with neither shame nor pride, simply plain fact. He neither apologizes for himself nor makes excuses. At least, he never has in her hearing, and for all they tend to avoid the topic of what he does for a living the same way they avoid the topic of her political views (which is to say, both creep into their discussions because both are so pervasively tied into everything else they are, but they back away as soon as they realize they've strayed into an area marked *here be dragons*) she thinks she's heard enough of his feelings on the subject to say with confidence he views his work as a job, nothing more.

He does reprehensible things, and he does them for pay, and he does them without a hint of guilt or apology. But she can't help remember one night over a year ago, when he'd come to her with bloodstains imperfectly scrubbed out from under his fingernails and between the creases of his knuckles, when he'd drunk more than he'd meant to and clung to her tightly when she'd put him to bed, when he'd confessed to her he does those things because if he didn't, someone else would. And when it's him, he can at least make sure the people he kills are given a clean and painless death.

(She remembers his words, last night: *the bodies were given a decent burial, with all respect possible in the situation*. She doesn't doubt they were, and she doesn't doubt he was the one who made it happen, and she doesn't doubt he fought hard and long, in his own way, for the right to make it happen. She doesn't doubt if she goes back to Nibelheim, the burial fields will be unmarked, but Tseng would be able to lead her straight to where her father's body lies.)

(Oh, Shiva, *her father*.)

Tifa lifts her hand to wipe away the tears burning in her eyes and tells herself to think. *Think*. They've come to the point she's always feared, where she has to decide whether to cooperate with him -- with them -- the rest of the way or to back away now, and for all she thought she was ready for this moment, she keeps having second thoughts now she's standing on its shores. If she works with them, if she gives up her secrets, in return she might get the answers she's been pursuing since the moment Nibelheim burned. (Why it happened. What really happened. What there was in that reactor, in that mansion, to make Sephiroth angry enough to murder a town and powerful enough to pull it off. Why he'd been sent there, and why *there*, and who was behind all the death and destruction and *what*



*they'd all done to deserve it.* Knowing those answers won't bring back the dead. But knowing those answers may help them sleep more soundly in the worlds beyond until they can be born again, and might tell her what she can do to avenge those deaths until her own conscience is satisfied.)

If she works with them, she may be in a place to learn things other than the truth of Nibelheim. That thought has motivated her since the moment she first took over from Kyle, has been the reason she's so adamant her bar will be refuge for Shinra and slum-dweller alike, the reason the Turks (and others) have always been welcome to step foot inside her doors. (That and a ruthless practicality -- she knows she couldn't have stopped them, once they'd decided to patronize the bar -- but just as every good barkeep knows how to make a guest feel welcome, every good barkeep knows how to drive unwanted customers away, so subtly they'd feel it their own choice not to return, and she'd learned those lessons at her parents' knees. She could have driven them away without them ever realizing. She never has.)

The coin of her decision has two faces: on the lighter face, she's hoped since the beginning that by providing a space for the 'sides' of Midgar's eternal class war to mingle freely, to learn each others' faces and voices and lives and history, she could get both sides talking in a way that could lead to positive, meaningful change. She's seen it happen before, where putting a face to a nameless *they* changed hearts and minds, and she knows that in her own way, she is creating a small but measurable change among the lower echelons of Shinra. The ones who will be in charge, someday. If she can influence policy in some small way, if she can motivate the man or woman who will be making decisions in another five or ten years to think of the people who live in the slums as *people* instead of walking wallets, she will have succeeded.

On the darker face, she has spent the two and a half years since her recovery keeping her ears open and the drinks flowing, and she has taken each scrap of knowledge dropped from a beer-loosened tongue and filed it away behind her eyes against the day when she finds an anti-Shinra group whose methods and ethics she doesn't find utterly repugnant.

If she buries her misgivings behind a cool smile and gives Rufus fucking Shinra what he wants from her lips and from her memories, she will have a chance to spin out some of that influence into the ears of the man who will someday be the *de facto* ruler of the world. He would be willing to listen, she thinks. She hasn't yet gotten the full measure of the man -- doesn't think she *can* get the full measure of him; she already can tell he's the type who lives his whole life in a carnival of funhouse mirrors and has learned to reflect back any face he thinks his watcher wants to see. But even in the few hours she's seen them together, she can already tell she was right in assuming Tseng has given Rufus his unconditional allegiance. Tseng may take orders from Rufus's father, but it's *Rufus* he follows, and from the things Tseng has let slip over the years, she thinks it always has been.

And she knows Tseng -- better, perhaps, than Tseng might think -  
- and she knows Tseng's values, bred into him at an early age in a

school far harsher than the one in which she herself learned the Wutaian fighting arts and the philosophy and ethics so deeply intertwined with them. For all Tseng defected to Midgar when she was still a child, she knows those values are graven into him so deeply he couldn't undo them, even if he tried. If Rufus were the inveterate monster slum gossip paints him, Tseng would obey him, but Tseng would never respect him.

And it's as clear as a Nibelheim mountain lake Tseng respects Rufus.

If Tifa takes that respect as a sign, if Tifa gives in and compromises her distaste for working with the enemy (but she's been sleeping with the enemy for a long damn time, now hasn't she?) and gives them what they want, she might be able to open Rufus's eyes to the realities of life in the slums and convince him things have to change. And bloodless revolution is far, far better than the guns and bombs and endless chances for disaster Johnny and his crowd of wannabe-revolutionaries have been trying to sell to her for years. She'll have a chance to listen to what Rufus and Tseng say, store up information on the inner workings of Shinra, information that could spell the difference between victory and defeat in some nebulous future war, should Johnny ever change his tune or if she should finally get fed up and start the revolutionary cabal she's been flirting with the idea of starting. (Last night alone had been more information than any of the slums' assorted rebellions have managed to put together in all the time she's known of them, and Rufus had offered that information freely, with no strings attached and no hint he knew the value of what he was providing.)

If she does this, she could change the face of the world.

Then again, they could decide she knows too much and have her killed once they're done. (*His father would have him killed if he tried, Tseng's voice whispers in her memory, followed by Rufus: and he's the person who'd probably be tapped for the job, too.*) She'd like to think Tseng would quail at carrying out her assassination, were it to be ordered. But she has no illusions about him. She never has. He'd look her in the eye and tell her what he'd been ordered to do, and he'd give her as long as she needed to make peace with herself and with him, and he'd make her death quick and painless, and he'd mourn for her after. But he would do it, no matter how much he would hate himself for the deed. And if she agrees to this madness, she may be placing him -- and herself -- in a position where, somewhere down the line, he will have to.

Can she do that? (Can she *not*?)

She doesn't have an answer. *Can't* have an answer, not without information she doesn't have, not without being able to see the future or see into the hearts of men. She's almost certain she can read Tseng well enough to say with confidence she has all the information she needs to make a decision, but Tseng isn't the only player in this game, and Rufus fucking Shinra is a complete unknown. She is conditionally willing to trust Tseng's read on him, but there's nothing to say Tseng's read on him is built from information any more comprehensive than she has herself; she doesn't doubt Rufus would be just as capable of lying to Tseng as he would be of lying to her and

for all she knows Tseng has been one of Rufus's teachers since Rufus wasn't even in his teens, she doesn't know how well Rufus had learned to lie for his own purposes by the time they'd met.

All her decision-paths keep coming back to Rufus. Trusting him is out of the question -- she would as soon trust a chocobo to tend bar -- and the most annoying thing is how he *knows that*, how every word of his speech last night had been carefully calculated to say *I know you won't trust me* on the surface while underneath he built the case for her to do that very thing. *I'm not trying to manipulate you*, he'd said, all the while manipulating the *fuck* out of her, playing on her emotions and her rationality both, like a stage magician who tells you precisely how the illusion is built while pointing to the trick but your eyes can't help being fooled anyway.

She can't evaluate his sincerity. Is literally *incapable* of evaluating his sincerity, because the man (if he and Tseng are to be believed) has been manipulator and manipulated since before he could even walk, and she has no idea if he even knows what sincerity *is*. Oh, it's clear he believes he does; looking at him last night, even through the haze of wretched memory and emotional overload his words had conjured, she hadn't doubted for a moment he believed what he was saying. But believing one's own words and actually being sincere are two different things, and it's terrifyingly possible Rufus's life up until this point has left him broken into a thousand shards, each facet capable of being summoned to the fore of him and imbued with enough life to pass for the whole. She can't say. There is no way for her to tell.

She has maybe twenty minutes left to her before she needs to make a decision, one way or the other.

Everyone in this entire clusterfuck is manipulating everyone, and she can't help thinking she's far over her head, in waters full of sharks scenting blood and rocks she'll break against if -- when -- she hits them, and she started this whole mess knowing she'd have to see it through or else things would turn out worse than they'd been when she'd started and knowing that *doesn't help*. And the worst part is (they are all worst parts) she knows she could tell Tseng everything she has just thought, from beginning to end, leaving nothing out, and he would nod and go away and never bring up the topic again, and it *wouldn't change anything*.

She doesn't know what to do. (Lie. She knows what she's going to do. She's known what she's going to do since the moment Rufus fucking Shinra walked into her bar. She's known what she's going to do since the moment Tseng pulled her onto her porch and rather than excoriating her for knowing the secret teachings of his people, had -- rather gently, all told -- corrected her grammar and then asked her about that night in Nibelheim once she'd stammered out the truth of the place of her birth. She simply isn't ready to believe it. Not yet.)

Tifa has reached the fringes of her territory, and she realizes -- as she tunes back in to the world around her, as she replays her mind's recording of the last few moments -- that she's answered more than a few hails and greetings as she's been jogging through neighborhoods and niches reclaimed from the lawlessness and anarchy so prevalent here in the slums by the people who've been

taking her example and starting to fight back. It's tempting, too tempting, to slow down, to get lured into conversation after conversation, to postpone the moment of reckoning as long as she can. She squashes the impulse as firmly as possible and schools her face as she turns left at the trainyard to make her way over to the market she uses for most of her supplies. (The people who live here look to her for their cues, and if they see her unhappy or frightened about something, they will know something is wrong. She doesn't want any of them to start looking too closely, because they might find something she didn't intend for them to know. This is Midgar: knowing too much is often a death sentence.)

Kenji, the market's owner, has set aside the three bags of her usual order -- mostly produce, brought in over the mountains at great expense from the Grasslands farms that supply Midgar-Above and "lost" by an enterprising trucker or stockboy to be sold to slum grocers at an exorbitant markup -- and she goes through the motions of their typical morning banter, negotiating price and bewailing his "highway robbery", as though someone or something else is possessing her. He doesn't seem to see anything wrong with her, at least. It's good to know she can play normal when she needs to.

She 'wins' the haggling to everyone's satisfaction -- she never tries *too* hard, since she has the resources to even pay Kenji's original prices and Kenji's trying to raise a family of seven children and a wife too ill to work much, but Kenji would be insulted if she didn't make at least a token effort to bargain, thinking it charity. (Pride is the only meal many slum denizens have, too many nights out of the week.) He throws in an extra loaf of the bread his wife used to bake in batches of hundreds daily and now can only provide for Kenji's most loyal customers. Tifa bites her lip against the useless protest. She, due to the regular order the Seventh Heaven places, is his biggest customer, and he tries his best to keep her happy. She doesn't have the heart to tell him she'd pay twice what he asks.

*(You can't save everyone, Tifa, she tells herself. You shouldn't even try. But she does what she can, and she always will, and the day she stops trying is the day she'll borrow Tseng's gun to put a bullet in her brain, because the day she stops trying is the day she will have lost the last of the humanity she's been desperately clinging to, here in the Midgar slums.)*

The bar's front door is still closed when she returns. She transfers the straps of all the grocery bags into one hand and pushes it open. The radio's still playing, having transitioned from the morning news to a collection of the pop and rock hits she remembers from her childhood. In the kitchen, Rufus is singing along, half under his breath, dropping into humming along when he can't quite remember the words. Unlike his whistling, he's perfectly on key.

Tifa takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders, then (after a brief but vicious argument with herself, in which she tries to think of any reason why she should turn around and go back out) makes her way across the bar and into the kitchen. She's careful to step a little more heavily than she might otherwise. Rufus turns from the prep counter as she hip-checks the saloon doors open; seeing her, he puts down the knife (he is nearing the end of the bag of potatoes) and comes to help her with the bags.

She grits her teeth and surrenders them into his keeping. "Produce," she says. "Stick them in the walk-in. There'll be an invoice tucked in one of the bags; make sure that gets tacked up on the front of the fridge for me to pay later."

Rufus nods absently, nudging each bag open in turn to glance briefly inside as he turns to the walk-in refrigerator. He pulls out the invoice before he even opens the door to the fridge; she can tell, watching him, he doesn't *intend* to look more closely, but he is apparently one of those people who are literally incapable of letting the written word pass by them unread. "That's ludicrous," he says, looking at the line-item prices, the total. "That's ten times what I'd pay for this Upstairs. At least."

The only thing that keeps her from snarling at him is that his tone isn't accusatory: it's genuinely, honestly baffled. "I know," she says, feeling too worn and weary to think about how her words might be received. "They're Shinra's policies: priority on fresh food goes to Upstairs first. The only way we get anything fresh at all down here is when somebody 'liberates' a crate or two and smuggles it down for resale, or buys in bulk and transports down here to be marked up for quadruple what they paid. If I want lettuce that isn't brown soup or cheese that isn't moldy, I have to pay through the nose for it, or find someone who lives or works Upstairs and is willing to bring me down a bag or two regularly -- but I can't count on that coming when I need it. That's why my markup on top-shelf liquor and premium beer is so high; it subsidizes the food, so people who live down here can at least get fresh fruit and vegetables in a meal every now and then without having to pay a week's wages for them." She carefully, so carefully, does not add: *your people do this to us; why are you so surprised?*

Rufus stands there, every inch radiating utter disbelief. "I hadn't realized," he says. He sounds completely shocked, and more than a bit angry.

She knows she should be angry in turn at this display of thoughtless privilege, but something about the outrage she can see building behind his eyes makes her rein in her temper. "Where did you think we got our food from?" she asks. She is careful to keep the accusation out of her voice; it comes out, instead, as curious. She's been operating under the belief all Shinra's top executives knew the company's policies and the conditions in the slums and simply didn't care, or couldn't get support to change things if they did. If that isn't true...

Rufus shakes his head and drags one hand through his hair. "We have whole departments devoted to the logistics of provisioning the city," he says. "I get their reports every week. Reeve has been riding my ass for the past six months about freeing up some money to revamp the supply chain to make it more efficient, but he never said a *word* about any of this. And if he knew about it, he would have."

Tifa recognizes the name -- Reeve Tuesti, VP of Urban Development, a quiet and unassuming man who accompanies Tseng and the Turks from time to time; he drinks ale, tips generously, busses his own table, never fails to stay late to help with the cleanup if he's there at closing and never gives the impression manual labor is beneath him, and always asks Tifa questions about the experience of

living in the slums in gentle and non-judgemental tones. She likes him; he's always seemed too good a man to be working for Shinra. She's mentioned a few of the worst problems to him from time to time, and he's done what little he could to make those problems better. She'd never thought to tell him about the problem of getting fresh food down here; she'd assumed it was an ironclad Shinra policy, another example of saving the best for the chosen few, and Reeve's response if she'd mentioned anything would have been a sad smile and the careful not-apology he uses for when he knows whatever she's talking about is a battle he can't win. "He probably doesn't know," she says. "Or he thought it was the way things were supposed to be."

"No." Rufus shakes his head, still staring at the invoice. "No, it's not how things are supposed to be. And believe me, I'm going to have *words* with a few people about it when I get back Upstairs."

Cool resolve suffuses his tone, anger transmuted into a soft and deadly determination, and watching him Tifa is suddenly sorry for whomever it is Rufus intends to have those words with. He seems to have forgotten she's watching him; his eyes rove over the paper he's holding, and the more he looks at it, the more locked-down his face becomes. She is virtually certain she is seeing his true, genuine, unmediated reaction. It leaves her more than a bit shaken. It isn't anything like what she would have predicted.

"Is it all right if I keep this?" Rufus finally says, looking back up at her. "Or a copy of this. And any other invoices you can spare from past purchases. It would help to have evidence in my hands when I start knocking heads together."

In that moment, standing in her kitchen still filthy with sweat from her morning run, watching the man who very nearly owns this city become outraged over the price she pays for lettuce, Tifa comes closer to actually not hating him than she ever did while he was actively trying to win her approval. "I need that one," she says. "It stays on the fridge until I pay it off, and then I need to keep it to reconcile my books and do up my taxes. But I have all of last year's invoices on file, and I can spare you those, if you think those would help."

"Yes," Rufus says. "Yes, they would." He pauses, eyes going back to the invoice, until he seems to remember his manners: "Thank you," he adds, and tacks the invoice to the fridge, next to the others Tifa has to pay. (Sundays are for bookkeeping. Assuming she's still *here* tomorrow, and not dead in an alley somewhere.)

Tifa bites her lip. "I need to finish my workout and cool-down before I totally cramp up," she says. "I'll dig through my records when I get back."

Rufus nods. He opens the walk-in and stows the bags on three separate shelves (precisely where she would have stowed them herself; she still can't decide if those flashes of near-telepathy are annoying or amusing). "Do you mind if I join you?" he asks, the absent-mindedness in his voice indicating he's probably still deep in thought. "I'm assuming you have a gym somewhere I just haven't seen yet, given the shape you're in, but I didn't want to be nosy and

go looking."

*He comes from an entirely different world than you do, Tifa reminds herself. She shouldn't get angry. In all likelihood, he literally does not know what it is to want something and be unable to have it. To him, she and her lifestyle are as unfamiliar as a space alien would be. There's no point in yelling; it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.*

So instead she decides to go for the olive branch, thinking of the shock on his face when he saw her invoices, thinking (again) of the potential for change inherent in having this man's ear even for the few hours she may have it. "I don't, actually. I do my *kata* in the backyard." Which is actually a strip of dead and dying grass about ten feet by twenty feet, about a quarter of which is given over to the tangled bed of choked, dead weeds that was Kyle's (failed) attempt at growing fresh produce for the bar. She's been meaning to attack it with rake and hoe one of these days, or send one of the volunteers who keep offering their time and effort, but she hasn't been able to find the time as of yet. Maybe one of these weekends she'll organize a work party of regulars, free beer and pizza in exchange for back-breaking labor. She bites her lip and adds, against her better judgement: "If you want, you can join me."

That earns her a smile. She notes, objectively, that Rufus Shinra's smile is beautiful. "Yeah. Yeah, thanks. I get a bit antsy if I can't get moving in the morning. I can give you a sparring match or two, if you want." His smile transmutes into something a bit more rueful, self-deprecating. "Tseng calls my form abominable and my reaction speed slower than a snail on barbituates, which means you might find sparring with me more annoying than helpful, but still."

Tifa snorts. "Tseng has ridiculous standards," she says. The response is purely in order to give herself time to think. On the one hand, she doesn't necessarily want to let him see just how good she really is, on the chance that having him underestimate her could be beneficial in the future. On the other hand, she *doesn't* get a chance to test herself against a partner very often -- Tseng is always willing to be her opponent when their schedules align and she has time that isn't claimed by her duties to the bar, but that rarely happens any more frequently than once a month or so -- and even if he is as bad as he claims to be (and she doubts any student of Tseng's could be as bad as Rufus claims to be, especially given the way he moves) it will give her valuable practice time. Sparring against a less-skilled opponent can in some ways be more useful than sparring against someone with whom she is matched in ability.

On the gripping hand, testing herself against him would give her the chance to evaluate *his* skills, which she's already seen the faintest fragment of, and even if he tries to hold back against her at first, she's realistic enough about her talent to say with confidence she can push him into revealing what he's capable of. If not at first, then at least after a round or two.

So be it. "I don't know how well our skills will match up," she says. "But we'll go a round or two, and we can see."

His smile blossoms further, and she thinks: if she knew nothing

about him and had just seen his expression change into that smile, she would believe she'd just made his day. "Great," he says. "Let me just finish the last of the potatoes first, and then I'll join you. Shouldn't take me more than ten, fifteen minutes, tops."

It's almost endearing, how seriously he's taking the task of turning potatoes into strips for her to fry up and serve. (She wonders, suddenly, if she is seeing an echo of his work ethic, if he would treat any task he'd set his mind and hand to with the same commitment. The thought feels strange. She wonders if she's trying to talk herself into seeing the best in him because she wants to believe Tseng's trust isn't misplaced.) "All right," she agrees. "Back door's over there."

She doesn't wait for a response, only lets herself out the door, grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge as she goes. She takes her gloves and athletic tape off the shelf by the door, pulling the gloves on and taping up her wrists with the same deft motion she's been using her whole life. Outside, she toes off her shoes -- she *can* fight in anything from high heels to workboots, but she prefers barefoot when given a choice, for just about everything, and she goes to great effort to keep the backyard free from trash and debris that might endanger her -- and starts in on the set of stretches designed to keep her from pulling a muscle during her training. She keeps a dummy bolted to a pole out here -- a busted-up store mannequin, salvaged from Wall Market's clothing shop that Jessie painted clothing on in garish colors and drew a ridiculous face on, one slow afternoon. (It's the third of its kind; the first two had been stolen. This one's been double-chained to the pole.) When she's finished with her stretches, she bows to it (feeling the usual ridiculousness, but Zangan taught her customs and philosophy in addition to raw technique, and she feels naked if she doesn't follow them) and begins the first of her *kata*.

As always, the sheer joy of motion chases away any other thought that might be haunting her. She starts slow and steady, the way she always does, with the first training *kata* designed to further loosen her muscles and begin to focus her mind. Step, strike, turn, strike, turn, kick and kick again; the steady *thud* of impact after impact vibrates through her until she can think of nothing more. She's been studying these moves for nearly three-quarters of her life. If her body has betrayed her since -- and it has -- at least it has left her this.

She's breathing hard by the time she reaches the tenth *kata* in the series. She shouldn't be -- she's in excellent physical shape by now, perhaps the best of her life. But the air at sea level is thick and heavy with the chill of early spring, and the air in Midgar's slums is thick with things she doesn't want to think about. Her lungs protest the exertion just as much as they protest being asked to run. (She will blame the air, and not her lungs. It's more comforting that way.)

When she finishes the twelfth set (step, punch, slide, leap, kick, step, punch) and lets her motions flow to their natural close, stepping back and bowing to her plastic opponent, she's startled to hear soft and understated applause drift over to her ears. She turns her head to see Rufus sitting on the tangled grass, his legs splayed out in the V of someone who had been stretching. He's smiling at her. Again. Still. "Beautiful," he says, showing all evidence of complete sincerity. "You really are going to kick my ass."



Tifa wishes, suddenly and sharply, that she didn't have to examine everything this man said to her for evidence of duplicity or deceit. That wish surprises her, and surprise makes her cranky. She does her best to keep it out of her voice. "I don't have an extra pair of gloves," she says instead. "The tape's over by the door, though."

Rufus nods. "Give me five to finish warming up." He bends forward, sliding each hand down one leg until he's gripping his ankles; the motion is swift and graceful, and he moves as though he's long familiar with the routine. Tifa leans one shoulder against the practice dummy and uncaps the bottle of water she'd set beside it, using the drink as an excuse to watch him. He moves through each stretch like water flowing downhill, until he's lying on his back pulling both knees to his chest, and by that time she's watched him long enough that when he plants his palms on the grass on either side of his ears and rolls backwards into a handstand instead of forward to his feet, she is not surprised in the least.

He holds the handstand for a good twenty seconds; she can see his biceps standing out, trembling in sharp relief, but he is as solid and steady as a tree's trunk, and just as motionless. When he comes out of the pose, it's to arch himself backwards yet again, one leg touching down a full second before the other until he is in a perfect back-bend, which he holds for a slow count of five before flowing up to his feet.

He happens to be facing her, and she can see his face for the first time in a good five minutes. His eyes are closed. If she had to pick a word to describe the expression he's wearing, it would be *rapture*.

Every time she thinks she has figured out so much as one small part of him, something comes along to destroy the mental model she's built, sending her scurrying back to step one. It's exhausting. It's infuriating. It's a puzzle she can't help but want to solve, and she wonders if this is what Tseng intended, in bringing Rufus here, in apparently-deliberately leaving them time to interact without his presence as buffer and mediator. (He knows she rises with the sun each morning; he would know Rufus doesn't sleep well, or at all, in strange beds. It would be far too much like him to have arranged an overnight stay, just to give them this chance for unmediated time together. She wonders what else he might have intended, and whether or not she'll ever know.)

"There," Rufus says, opening his eyes and fixing them on her. He doesn't smile this time, but the quiet, radiant joy he clearly takes in having a body that does what he asks of it is still lurking around his eyes and mouth. She *knows* that feeling. It's the first point of commonality she can consciously identify as having with him. He turns to the door and the table she keeps there, finding the tape and winding it around his wrists and palms, tearing it with his teeth once he's gotten it arranged to his satisfaction. "Rules?" he asks.

Unsettled by the directions her thoughts are taking, Tifa takes refuge in the formality of reciting the rules of engagement. "No blows to the face or head, no blows to the groin; I don't own padding. When Tseng and I do this, elbows and knees and other delicate joints are fair game, because we both know we're good enough to keep from inflicting permanent damage, but since you and I haven't found each

others' measure yet, it's probably safer to call those out of bounds for now. I won't fuss if you aim there by accident or out of instinct, but try to avoid it. We fight to takedown and tap out as soon as the sequence would result in immobilization if followed to its logical conclusion. If you can't tap out, say 'yield', and I will."

Rufus smiles at that. "It could be me pinning you," he points out.

"It could," Tifa agrees. The dryness of her voice should tell him how likely she finds that possibility.

Sure enough, he laughs, and his laugh is free and unfettered. "Yeah, okay. Three out of five? Five out of seven?"

"Three of five is good for now," Tifa says. She shifts her weight into ready stance, waiting until he takes up his position across from her. She's unsurprised to see him bow to her at the same moment she bows to him.

Then they're fighting, and all her thoughts are focused on answering his moves with ones of her own, with no time to analyze anything beyond her next step.

He launches the first attack, hand flashing out for a punch she blocks as easily as breathing. (More easily.) She can see, immediately, the truth of Tseng's evaluation: if Rufus isn't holding back -- and he probably is, just as she will be, but still -- his speed is half of what she's capable of on a good day. (Which is to say, faster than anyone who hadn't been training since their age had been in single digits would be capable of, but still slow enough for her to see and counter any move even as he begins to make it.) His form is just as sloppy as he'd claimed, but not from lack of effort or from not caring; it's the sloppiness stemming from having learned multiple fighting disciplines all at once instead of adding the others on later, once his form had already codified. He has the instincts of a fighter, and the ability to move without telegraphing his movement. She has seen far, far worse.

She can see Tseng's handiwork in every move Rufus makes, from the kick he snaps at her torso to the way he flows with the motion as she blocks the attack with her forearm and turns his momentum against him; instead of fighting her throw, he goes down in a controlled fall and bounces back up before she can take advantage of his momentary weakness. He presses her hard for a few minutes, blows coming fast and furious as he tries to discern her reach and her skill level, and she notes that he *does* speed up as he goes; he *had* been holding back, then. That pretense is forgotten, or at least eased back on, as he tries again and again to land a true blow that she can't block and fails, over and over.

"Alexander's *balls*, woman," he finally says -- not quite breathing hard, but not quite easily either -- as she fends off a one-two combination punch deftly enough to nearly unbalance him, then steps neatly back instead of pressing the opening. "Don't just stand there and defend. *Fight me.*"

The last two words are an angry snarl; in them she can hear years of pent-up frustration, and even if she can't fully pinpoint its source, she can guess at least part. How hard must it be, to find

sparring partners willing to press you honestly, when you control every aspect of their lives from employment to housing and beyond? She wonders, suddenly, if he has as much trouble finding someone to practice with as she does. She can tell from the way he moves, from the single-mindedness with which he throws himself into the physicality of their bout, that he takes this seriously; it isn't a whim or a rich boy's lark, isn't his attempt to imitate his teacher and mentor in the hopes of gaining approval or praise. No matter what his reason for learning to fight in the first place, he glories in the motions, in having skill hard-won and the chance to use it. Whatever started him on the warrior's path, his feet found a home there once they had stepped upon it.

So she discards her plan of letting him wear himself out against her defense to grin back at him -- he blinks twice, seeing the expression on her face, the first real smile she's given him, but in that moment she can't *not* -- and steps back to regroup. "Okay," she says.

It's the only warning she gives him.

She has him on the ground in another thirty seconds, his arm twisted up behind his back, her knee in his kidneys. He taps out with no shame or pause the minute she settles her weight against him, and he's actually laughing as he follows with the verbal "Yield!" She rolls off him as soon as he does, coming up to her feet in a loose ready position, and he's grinning like a maniac when he bounces back up to match it. They bow to each other again, eyes locked on each others' chests -- she's gratified to see he knows as well as she does where to watch for signs of one's opponent's next move -- and his laughter is damn infectious as they circle each other slowly and wait to see who'll make the first move.

She's the aggressor this time, feinting neatly to the right -- he moves to block, checks himself as soon as he realizes it *was* a feint -- and striking left. He blocks that one, and the one after, and by then she's laughing too, part out of joy (she *loves doing this*) and part out of sheer, unrelenting *surreality*. Step, strike, block, whirl, snap-kick that brings her back foot off the ground, and he hollers in triumph as he manages to block what most men would have fallen from. "*Nice,*" she calls to him, and then it's back to block, push, feint, *strike*, speeding up as she goes, pressing him harder and harder until he's retreating backwards with each move. Another man might be furious with himself. Rufus Shinra only keeps laughing.

She wins that bout too, taking him down when he rushes for an all-or-nothing charge (one she will admit would have worked with almost any opponent other than her) and she exploits the weakness he had left unguarded. He's calling the yield even before they roll to a stop, he on his back and her hand on his throat, and he looks more alive than she thinks he may have felt in months.

Roll, stand, step back, *bow*, and he's breathing hard (as hard as she is) but he doesn't let it stop him. They are suddenly in mutual, wordless accord, deciding through nothing more than tilt of head and twist of mouth this bout is for trading blows back and forth, passing the role of aggressor from hand to hand as they work over the full expanse of the yard available to them. She can see, on one pass, that Saidu and Hidetoshi from next door have popped their heads over the

fence that separates their property from hers, probably having dragged over chairs to stand on so they can watch the spectacle. She doesn't blame them. She's holding back -- fighting at what she'd guess is sixty-five percent of her full capacity -- and she thinks Rufus might be holding back too, but the end result is nearly perfectly matched, and they both seem content to let it be. It must be stunning to watch.

Tifa has hit the strange, glorious meditative state she's fallen into a few times before -- bouts with Zangan; bouts with Tseng -- where the world seems crisp and edged around her, where she feels as though she's caught in slow-motion and each second takes five seconds to go by. From the way Rufus is moving, with her and around her, she thinks he might have as well. By this point, they're very nearly *playing*; she pulls out a kick she'd never dream of trying in actual combat, half front-flip and half thumbing her nose at gravity, and he answers with arms crossed to trap her foot and a controlled fall backwards that leaves them both sprawled in the grass. She's laughing as she rolls backwards and body-flips back to standing, and he answers with a whoop that's half admiration, half delight.

Step, strike, kick-kick-kick, around and around they go, and by now neither of them is trying to win. They both know she will in the end -- it's plainly clear she's the better fighter, and Rufus's movements acknowledge as much, with no shame or anger, even as he throws himself fully into testing himself against her. They've slipped out of the perfect forms they've both been drilled in: she throws a punch that quotes the street fighting Biggs keeps trying to teach her; he closes in and answers with a throw that's three-quarters classical wrestling and one-quarter pure Tseng dirty trick.

They've gone beyond sparring and into the realm of dance; they've gone beyond dance and into the realm of conversation. Their bodies are speaking to each other, call and answer, question and response: here, see, *this* is what I mean, *this* is how you answer, and his body, pressed up against hers as his hands close on her arm and he ducks to throw her over his shoulder, is singing a radiant and exultant note of wonder, loudly enough that she can *feel* it even as her body is echoing it back to him.

In that instant, she feels like she knows him. (In that instant, she truly does. No one can fight a bout like this and still be strangers at the end, whether enemy or not; it is as intimate as love-making, in its own strange way.)

All perfect moments come to a close, and this is no different; she can feel him start to falter after innumerable measures of their dance, feel his fierce and open energy start to flag, and she herself is breathing hard enough for her throat to hold deserts and razors again. She's astonished he's managed to match her this far, but it's time to end it, and end it she does: "Close it down," she rasps, and "yeah," he husks back, and -- warning thus delivered and honor thus satisfied -- she has him in the grass again in another minute.

She doesn't bother waiting for his formal concession, just rolls off him even as he's tapping out to sprawl, boneless and exhausted, into the grass herself. Rufus slumps next to her, utterly wrung out, looking like she's used him for a cleaning rag. She feels about the same. "*Ramuh*," Rufus says, laughter threaded through his voice. "*Told* you

you'd kick my ass."

Tifa turns her head so she can look at him. The grass feels good against her cheek even though it's almost completely dead, cool and still damp with the morning dew. He's looking back at her, and his face is open and unguarded, and in that instant she can see the traces of the boy he used to be.

She wants to say something to re-establish their antagonism, to put them firmly back on the footing of Shinra and slum-rat, to cut off the conduit that has sprung to life between them. She doesn't. Maybe it's the little boy she can see in his eyes, the open and unmediated glimpse at what she thinks might very well be the real Rufus Shinra peeking through the mask he's been wearing (more or less, yes and no) since the minute she met him. "You put up a damn good fight," she says instead. His grin gets even wider, and in that moment she can feel the first stirrings of being at peace with the decision she knows she's already made.

"You flatter me," Rufus says. He lets his head loll back until he's staring up at the plate. "Ramuh and Ifrit. I need to get up. I know I need to get up, or else I'm going to die, right here. Please tell my legs I'd like them to check in with me when they're done with their little vacation."

The self-deprecating humor is actually funny this time; something to do with the way that he isn't using it as a weapon, and it isn't actually mocking her even as he purports to be mocking himself. He uses humor as another type of shield, she realizes, one flash of insight that slides in through her exhausted neurons and slides away again. If he mocks himself first, no one else can get the drop on him; if he seems like he's taking nothing at all seriously, it will hide those things he is deathly serious about. "Tseng's going to be upset that he missed the show," she says.

Rufus snorts. "Tseng was watching from the bedroom the whole time, or I'll eat my leather jacket." He lifts one arm, groans again, and lets it flop back down in the grass. "I just saw the curtain move. He's trying to decide if he wants to come down here and risk interrupting whatever truce we've declared in order to give us a hand up. Or just to mock us for being lazy bums who are sprawling in the dirt instead of doing useful work."

"I'll put my money on the mockery," Tifa says. And then, since he's the one who brought it up: "I still don't trust you, you know."

"I know." Rufus's face, despite being calm and still, is somehow just as open as it had been while they were sparring, and she does not sense one bit of duplicity from him. He could be posing, could have summoned one of his faces and fitted it atop the true-self she'd seen, so smoothly she'd miss the change. But she doesn't think he has. "I told you last night. I *know*. And I don't blame you. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't trust me either. Hell, if I were you, I'd have thrown me out of the bar last night so hard I'd still be bouncing this morning. You have no idea how much I respect the fact you haven't."

There is nothing but truth in his voice or in his face; he's not saying what he wants her to hear. For the first time since he stepped

through the doors of her bar last night, she thinks she's hearing his true thoughts, without censor, without an attempt (conscious or not) at manipulation, without a hidden agenda and without trying to hold sixteen layers of shifting goals and desires silently behind his eyes. He sounds a little sad, and a little tired, and a little regretful, and a little in awe. She wonders if this is the Rufus Shinra Tseng gets to see, to have won his fealty so strongly.

"I can't give you back what you've lost," Rufus says. His face twisting, pure contempt flashing across it for one instant before sliding back to neutrality, he adds, "And I don't mean the way my father, that fuckhead, tried. I can't fix everything Shinra's done wrong. Hell, we saw not an hour ago, I don't even *know* everything Shinra's doing wrong. I can't bring your family back to you. All I can do is try to solve the mystery and go from there, and I need your help to do it. If we work together, I'm going to piss you off more times than you can count. I'm going to tempt you to the point of murder at least once. I'm a proud man, and I'm a stubborn man, and I'm an angry man, and Tseng tells me ten times a day that I have absolutely no concept of how anybody lives any further down than the sixtieth floor."

He turns his head, then, to look directly at her. His face is calm, but his eyes are burning. "But I can offer you one thing. When I'm working to redeem a slight upon my honor, or upon my name, I am relentless. And what happened to you and yours is a slight upon my name that will take years to wash clean. I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to find out what really happened in Nibelheim that night. I will not stop until I am satisfied. With or without you, I will not give up until my honor has been redeemed."

In his voice, Tifa hears death for whomever he determines bears the fault of that night. It isn't the death of fire and steel that Nibelheim died; it's the slow death of ice closing over the top of one's head, as patient as a glacier. His voice, his words, should be melodramatic, like the villain (or the hero) in an overwrought radio play. Nobody talks like that. Nobody *thinks* like that. But he isn't overacting. He isn't acting at all. He is simply telling her the way he views the world, and although she despairs of ever, *ever* understanding one fraction of the whole that is this man, she thinks she's seen enough of him by now to at least say he's offering her naked honesty in this moment. No masks thrown up between them. Not anymore.

"But it would be easier with you," Rufus finishes, and as suddenly as that, he's back to being the carefree young man with whom she's just spent half an hour dancing. He even smiles, just a little. "If you need more incentive, I'll even give you this: when this is over, once we've finished our work, I'll give you a week, for you to show me anything you think I need to know about the realities of life Underneath. Because this is *my* city, and I love her, and nobody should go hungry or homeless within her borders. I can't guarantee I can change anything. Not yet. You heard Tseng last night: my father holds the leash tightly, and every time I try tugging on it a little, I get exiled to Junon and I'm only allowed back once Daddy dearest thinks I'm ready to go back to toeing the company line. But I'll do what I can. And someday the company will be mine, and when that happens, I'll listen to anything you tell me and fix anything I agree needs to

change. My word of honor on that. And hopefully, by then you'll have come to realize what it truly means to me."

Tifa notices that he doesn't promise to *fix* things. Only listen. Strangely, that makes her more likely to believe it's a promise he actually intends to keep. She finds her voice, somehow. "If I'm still alive."

Rufus's smile grows sad, and he rolls back over to stare up at the plate again. "If we're still alive, yes," he agrees. (She notices his change of pronoun and does him the favor of not commenting upon it.)

Tifa closes her eyes. Behind them, she can see flames. *I'm sorry, Daddy. Please tell me I'm doing the right thing.* But it's time to roll the dice, gamble everything on one single throw, and this will either be the best decision she's ever made or the moment she threw her life away, and she almost certainly won't know which for months. Years, even.

*Now or never.*

She opens her eyes, and pushes herself up: to her seat, to her knees, and from there she just keeps going until she's standing. Rufus turns his head to look at her. She can read unleashed curiosity in his face, and she wonders how much of it is real and how much of it is what he wants to show her. (What she wants to see.)

She holds a hand down to him. "Come on," she says. "I need a quart of water, a shower, and a change of clothes. Then I'll make breakfast -- I'm thinking waffles, maybe."

She takes a deep breath. Her ribs ache, and her lungs still burn, and she thinks she can feel every fraction of her scars. But it's time, and more than time, and Tifa Lockheart of the Seventh Heaven is many things, but she will not let herself be a coward.

"And then," Tifa says, and she sees the raw, naked hope leap into being on Rufus's face: "then, we'll talk."

### ( 3. )

Tseng never fails to find it interesting how well he sleeps in Tifa's bed. By all rights, he shouldn't; Tifa is lover and enemy all at once, even if they have silently and wordlessly agreed that they will not formally declare themselves as enemies until the day when it becomes absolutely necessary. And unless the world changes beyond all recognition, that day is coming, even as he wishes it didn't have to; Tifa is too compassionate, too egalitarian, to ever let the yoke of Shinra's actions lie lightly upon her shoulders even if she didn't have a personal reason to despise Shinra and all it stands for. Tseng knows it's only due to the fact that every anti-Shinra rebel group in the slums is far too violent, far too lacking in long-term thinking, that Tifa hasn't joined up with one of them already. The day when she sees or experiences something to cross her personal line drawn in the sand is coming, and old man Shinra seems to be doing all he can do to hasten

that day along, and when that day arrives there will be nothing Tseng can do to stop her from claiming her rightful place at the head of the rebellion.

(She will be a magnificent leader, when it happens. He'd almost like to live in a world that follows her rule. But he's given his allegiance already, and he knows the saying about a man once forsworn never again being trustworthy, but he's never allowed it to apply to him.)

Still. In the meantime, until that (hopefully) distant day, Tseng sleeps like a baby in Tifa's attic apartment, and only wakes when the tiny piece of his mind that never stops being on watch tells him that the noise he has been hearing, steadily, for the past ten minutes is the sound of combat in the yard outside. Punctuated by laughter, the sound of approval and approbation, encouragement shouted and returned. Not a danger -- he would have woken earlier, had it been.

When his conscious mind wakes enough to realize it must be Tifa and Rufus sparring, he is out of bed before he realizes he is moving.

It isn't that he's worried. (Much.) Even if the sounds of battle drifting in through the cracks around the windows weren't lighthearted enough to clearly be a practice match, he knows both their capabilities, perhaps as well as he knows his own. Tifa's skill level is barely one step below his own, her natural grace and the benefit of good, though mysterious, teaching having been combined with a dedication and work ethic his own teachers back home would have burned offerings daily to Leviathan to see. (He hopes he'll be able to see what she grows into when she has another decade or two to refine her style.) Rufus isn't as good as she is -- may never be; he doesn't have enough time to devote to the study and he can't afford to be locked into a single school of combat in a world where he may be called upon to defend himself against anything and everything with no notice at all -- but he's more than capable of holding his own, especially if they aren't fighting with formal rules.

They won't hurt each other. (Much.) Even if Tifa had woken to dawning anger and decided today was the day she would begin her fight against Shinra in earnest, in the person of Rufus Shinra himself, Rufus would have been able to fend her off for long enough to get away, and he would have been smart enough to holler for Tseng. He hasn't; his hollering is the sound of a man who is enjoying himself more than he has in months. (Years.)

The curiosity is enough to draw Tseng to the window, move aside the curtain (habit, nothing more, keeping him standing to the side and just barely twitching the curtain's edge enough to see out of). What he sees is ... unexpected.

Tifa and Rufus are *playing*.

Tseng knows the signs: both of them have hit the stage of *mushin no shin* where the world seems bright and sharp and flowing, where the body moves through the air around it like a sword cleaving through yielding flesh, where the enemy is not enemy but honored partner. He knows a moment of jealousy: he has never seen Rufus achieve that state when sparring with him, always too worried about



pleasing Tseng or impressing him or just not letting him down too much. But as Tseng watches, he sees the moment where Rufus *lets go*, surrenders himself to the glory of movement and the joy of no-self, and in that moment he and Tifa are not opponents but working together to hold themselves in that state for as long as possible.

It's beautiful. No, Tseng thinks, watching a moment where Tifa bypasses an opening to end the match quickly and decisively and instead leaps sideways and -- nearly horizontal in midair -- snaps a kick that is as perfect as a line of poetry calligraphed against the blankness of a fresh scroll with her body arching through the air as beautifully as the song of a bird on the first day of spring, only for Rufus to ignore the opening she has left him and instead *catch* her, throwing them both backwards like a tumbler setting his partner up for her next gravity-defying feat. What Tseng is watching is beautiful, yes, but beauty is the wrong word to encapsulate it; beauty does not come close to describing what is being created beneath him. What he is seeing is art, plain and simple and most profound.

They are both physical perfection: Rufus's body, lean and muscled, always surprisingly solid whenever he lets himself out of the suits he's had tailored to draw the eye away from his power and grace; Tifa's body, compact and efficient, her glorious musculature always on plain display and always disregarded by those who do not have the eye to see. Their contrast could not be more sharp: one dark, one fair; one tall, one short; one curved, one angular. But in that moment, watching the two of them push their bodies to their limits and reveling in the sheer joy of it all, Tseng stands in the window looking down upon them and cannot decide which one he finds more beautiful.

There's no doubt Tifa is the stronger fighter of the two. Rufus is good -- when Tseng had been given the task of his teaching, he'd pushed Rufus as hard as he'd dared and as firmly as he could, and the man-child Rufus had been had soaked up the learning like it was the first time he'd ever found something he'd truly enjoyed -- but Rufus had been nearly twelve years old when he'd started learning, and they hadn't had as much time as Tseng would have liked, and he'd been constrained by the constant knowledge that he was teaching Rufus, not the pure classical forms he himself had learned, but the skills that might someday save his life. Their training had been hinged around the elephant in the room: Tseng had never explicitly told Rufus he was equipping Rufus with the skills to survive an assassination attempt, but he hadn't had to, because Rufus had known from the very beginning. And Rufus had bent his neck to the learning, bowed his head and thrown himself into everything Tseng had to offer, and Tseng knows that even now Rufus doesn't consider a day complete unless he spends half an hour in the gym testing himself against Tseng or the training dummy.

Rufus is good -- damn good. But Tifa is better.

The first time he'd seen Tifa fight had been an attempted mugging in the Heaven, back when she'd been nothing more than the waitress and the bouncer Kyle had just hired, and he knows now that she'd been six months out from an injury that should have killed her. He'd still seen, watching her disarm and remove the threat, that she was that rarest of creatures, the natural talent. His teachers back home

would weep to see the skill and grace she commands. (Would no doubt weep to see such skill and grace in the form of a woman, too; his brother's daughter might be the only child left to the family after Tseng's defection, might have been accepted into the temple and taught the arts because custom dictates that the one who will rule Wutai must know all her secrets, but Tseng knows his former masters well enough to say that collective apoplexy must have been had when they'd all realized young Yuffie would be the one to one day sit what is left of the throne.)

Tseng is better than she is -- something he says not out of pride or vanity; she agrees -- but there's no doubt in his mind that he, who was once the pride of an entire generation of Wutaian adepts, will not be better than she is for long. He has the advantage of experience and practice, of having started his training earlier and having received his training from the hands of masters, but since coming to Midgar, he has let his form slip and his practice fall by the wayside far too often. Give Tifa another decade of working as hard as she works herself now, and she will be able to walk into the temple of Leviathan and put any of the adepts she finds there on the floor without breaking a sweat.

In his darker moments, Tseng occasionally ponders financing a trip back to Wutai for her, just so he can see it.

There are bits of dead grass on Rufus's face and in his hair, wordless testimony that this is not their first match, that Tifa has bested him at least once, but Tseng can see no bruised ego in Rufus's movements. That's one thing Rufus lacks completely, and Tseng had been surprised to discover: once Rufus acknowledges that you are better than he is, in whatever field he has chosen to measure himself against you upon, he holds it against neither you nor himself. He simply challenges himself to rise to your skill, always looking for what he can learn from you. Tseng can see, watching the way Rufus and Tifa parry and thrust across the reach of the backyard, that despite the clear and crystal no-mind of the perfect match, there is a deeply-buried part of Rufus watching each of Tifa's movements, hungrily soaking up her example. Rufus respects competence, in all its forms. He always has. (He sees so little of it.) When the match is over, Tseng would not be surprised to see Rufus asking her for lessons.

And over it is, soon enough; Tseng can see the balance between them falter and flag, can see Tifa's lips moving and Rufus's answering nod, and in the flash between one heartbeat and the next their dance alters from cooperative back to competitive again. They're both exhausted, that much is clear, but Tifa reaches for her reserves of strength and Rufus matches her, and the battle lasts longer than Tseng would have expected before Tifa has him on the grass again.

Rufus taps out, Tifa rolls over, and they both sprawl, exhausted, in the grass. (Tseng doesn't blame them; he's been watching their dance for at least fifteen minutes, and he knows they must have been at it for at least that long before he woke. He's not sure *he* could keep up a match that long anymore; battles like those are the province of the young.) After a few minutes of panting and gasping, Tseng sees Rufus turn his head, sees his lips moving. Tseng steps closer, without thinking, hoping that either Rufus's voice will carry or a better view will give him a better vantage to read Rufus's lips. He's deathly

curious as to what they might say to each other; after a match like the match Tseng just witnessed, he knows the two of them will have learned each other more thoroughly than a month's worth of talking could produce.

But he's too far away, and he can't make out Rufus's words. Whatever they are, Tifa's face is a study in contradiction, the need to pull away warring with the sense that she *knows* him now, and whatever she says back to him makes Rufus laugh loudly enough that Tseng can hear the faintest stirring of it through the window. It's Rufus's real laugh, the one he saves for intimates. He wonders if Tifa knows how rare it is to hear.

Whatever they're saying to each other down there, it's clear they've reached some sort of accord. Rufus is speaking, and Tifa is listening, and even though both of them are lying limp and drained in the dead grass of Tifa's backyard, Rufus looks like he is standing at the head of the boardroom table and laying out the way the world will be, and Tifa bites her lip and closes her eyes before pushing herself up to stand.

Tseng's heart leaps into his throat when he sees her reach her hand down to Rufus. It isn't the hand you offer an honored enemy after having defeated him. It's the hand up you offer someone you are almost, perhaps, starting to respect.

Rufus pushes himself up to sitting, his hands bracing himself against the ground, and looks up at her. (Rufus is the only person Tseng knows who can look like the conqueror of worlds while he is at another person's feet.) Tifa speaks again. Rufus's posture and carriage *changes* to hear it, and suddenly his entire body is one long line of desperate hope. He reaches up and wraps his hand around her wrist, and she mirrors the gesture and pulls him up to standing, and once Rufus is towering over her again (Tseng *always* forgets how small Tifa truly is until he is confronted with empirical evidence yet again) it takes a long moment for them to release their grip on each other. They stand there, staring each other down, and it isn't the assessing gaze of last night as they tried to take each other's measure and see whether or not they would have to fight each other. It's the cautious, tentative look of two people who have decided that they will try to find a way to work together, even if they aren't exactly sure how.

Then they both turn for the door back into the building, and Tseng lets the curtain fall back against the window and heads for the bathroom before he can be caught spying on such an intimate moment.

He's in the shower when he feels the draft of the bathroom door opening and then closing again. "Me," Tifa says -- unnecessarily; Rufus would have used the guest bathroom and besides, Tifa's shower curtain is lacy enough to see the door through, which Tseng knows damn well is by design. He rinses the last of the shampoo out of his hair and turns just in time to see her dropping the last of her clothing on the floor. "Shove over," she says. "I'm all over filthy."

He moves away from the spray of the showerhead to give her room to submerge herself. "Did you have a pleasant run?" he asks.

"Mm," Tifa says. She's facing Tseng, away from the streaming water; as he watches, she tilts her head and lets the water cascade down her hair, her back. Most men of Midgar would fantasize about Tifa's breasts, he knows, and they are indeed lovely, but Tseng's hands always itch to bury themselves in her hair instead. It's a cultural thing, he supposes. "Good enough. But don't play stupid; it doesn't suit you. You were watching us from the window."

"Busted," Tseng agrees, lightly. He decides to indulge himself, if she will let him; he reaches for the bottle of shampoo and gestures for her to turn. She does, with alacrity -- he's not sure why her being willing to turn her back on him always feels like more of an expression of trust than even allowing herself to sleep at his side does, but she loves it when he washes her hair for her. Tifa uses plain shampoo, nearly scentless. It's a good thing, or else just catching a whiff of it throughout the day would probably leave him hard. He rubs his hands together to work up a lather. "The dance was lovely," he adds. "Which you well know."

"Mm," Tifa says again, as he begins to work his hands -- and, incidentally, the shampoo -- through the thickness of her hair. This time, the sound is less assent than appreciation. They're the same sounds she makes when they're fucking; Tifa has never been shy of letting her pleasure be known. He can feel, more than hear, her exhale, and she leans back against him as far as she can without impeding his reach. He digs his fingertips into her scalp and works his thumbs into the knots of tension at the base of her skull. The sound she makes this time is more of a whimper than a moan. "Oh, God, you've got about six years to stop doing that. I've had this headache since Wednesday or so." In precisely the same tone, she adds, "He's very good. You taught him, didn't you."

It isn't a question. "I taught him a lot of things," Tseng says. It's the truth. Or it's what he hopes is the truth, at least; he's trained Rufus in a thousand different skills over the years, from self-defense to disguise to manipulation to how to fold an origami crane, but he's never been sure how much of his worldview and ethics he's managed to teach Rufus alongside the skills themselves. (His detractors would say he has no ethics. He has never allowed the accusations to bother him; he knows himself, and he is a far harsher judge of his actions than any ignorant observer would be.)

Tifa's voice is quiet when she asks, "How many of them took?"

She isn't asking about the self-defense. (Or the origami.) Tseng knows, suddenly and without needing to be told, that Tifa has made her decision, and Tifa has decided she will tell them what it is they want to know -- what he's been hoping to hear from her lips for two years now -- and Tifa is asking him now for reassurance that she is not about to make the most crucial mistake of her life.

He hopes like hell she isn't.

"It's impossible to say," Tseng says, after a moment to consider how honest he wants to be. (He is always honest with Tifa, but he is almost never entirely truthful, with anyone. But Rufus had set aside all his lies of commission *and* omission last night and given Tifa more truth than he'd ever handed anyone, all at once or in pieces, and

Tseng can do no less.) "And the question's been bothering me for thirteen years now. When I first met him he was eleven years old and more mature and self-possessed than some men four times his age. Sometimes I think I understand him completely, and sometimes I think he's an impenetrable mystery."

She sighs at the non-answer. Or perhaps at the way his thumbs are stroking down the lines of her neck, easing away the tension he finds there. He knows what she's asking. She's asking him if he trusts Rufus, if *she* can trust Rufus, and he's not sure when she became willing to take his assessment of another's character as enough of a base upon which to build her own, but she is perhaps the only person, in this world or any other, who would. "For what it's worth," he adds, "I have never seen him act in a manner inconsistent with any of the things he said to you last night. It isn't much. But it's all I have to offer."

"It's all any of you ever get, isn't it." That isn't a question either, and in it Tseng hears the same division he'd heard last night, *you* as in *you people*, other, set apart. *Shinra*. There's much less bitterness behind it this morning, though. That, at least, is a start.

Tseng transfers his hands from Tifa's neck back to her hair, going back to the task of getting it clean, feeling perhaps she'd feel more comfortable without his hands so close to her spine. She makes a tiny unhappy noise at the loss of his massage, though, and he is once more struck by the amount of trust she places in him. (She shouldn't. But she knows she shouldn't, and she does it anyway, because she knows she can, and not have it misplaced.) "It is," he agrees. "Shinra is not a place where trust is easily won. Nor often a good idea."

"I don't know how you live like that," Tifa says. "I don't know how you *could* live like that." It isn't a statement needing an answer, though, so Tseng doesn't provide one. After another moment of silence, in which he wonders what is going through her mind, she adds, "I told him I would tell him what you want to know. After breakfast."

The sudden rush of relief washing through him leaves Tseng dizzy. "Thank you," he says. It isn't -- quite -- the acknowledgement her bravery deserves, but he isn't sure she would know the words in Wutaian he wants to use.

"Don't thank me yet." Tifa turns around -- giving him just enough warning of her motion for him to untangle his hands from her hair and avoid pulling it -- and regards him with sober eyes. "It might not be enough. It might not be anything."

"Anything you can tell us will be something more than what we have." Tseng brushes the back of his hand over her forehead, chasing away a rivulet of shampoo-laden water before it can reach her eyes. "Anything might be the piece that unlocks the puzzle. Rufus has been trying to crack it for years."

Tifa closes her eyes and takes half a step backwards. For a second Tseng thinks she might have seen something in his face or heard something underneath his words to frighten her, to make her want to pull away, but all she does is tip her head back under the

shower's spray to begin rinsing the shampoo from her hair. "I spent a lot of that day dying," Tifa says, quietly enough for the sound of the water running, the pipes banging, to be nearly enough to drown her words. "I'm not sure how much of what I remember is real."

Tseng's eyes are drawn to the scar standing out from the cream and roses of her skin. He'd known it was there by inference before he'd known it was there by her own words; he'd known it was there by her own words long before he had been permitted to see. The first time they'd fucked, Tifa had stripped out of her skirt but left her shirt on, and when he'd reached for the hem to pull it off her, she'd slapped his hands away. (*You touch that again and you won't be touching me anymore* she'd said, all angry pride and prickly self-defense, and Tseng had let it go, because it wasn't worth the energy the battle would take to fight it. Patience. Patience is all.)

Afterwards, she had sprawled out in the bed beside him, her back to him, and he had debated the matter for a few minutes before rolling over to fit himself against her, stroking her skin, careful to keep his hand to the swell of her belly, the curve of her hip, the plane of her thigh. She'd sighed. *Thank you for not pushing it*, she'd said, and *scars are a way of life in my profession*, he'd said -- he certainly has more than a few of his own, though none of them quite as emphatic -- and she'd sighed again and taken his hand in hers and drawn it up underneath the shirt she was still wearing to let it rest against her breastbone.

He remembers, now, the way her hair smelled as he tucked his face against her neck and shoulder to keep himself from trying to look, the way his fingers had trailed along her skin, learning the spread and reach and depth of the hard and angry rope of flesh beneath them. He remembers tracing the edges, feeling the familiar spongy *give* at the edges of the scar, mute testimony to the fact it was treated with materia -- a mastered Restore, if he didn't miss his professional guess -- instead of being allowed to heal naturally. He remembers adding up the cues and realizing if it had been anything less than a mastered Restore, she would have died; he remembers thinking that even with the materia, it was likely a close call. (He remembers weighing the evidence against what scant few scraps she'd told him, trying to decide whether those scraps had been the truth.)

They hadn't spoken of Nibelheim or Sephiroth again, and the next time they'd fucked, she'd stripped naked without an instant of hesitation, her eyes daring him to make an issue of it, and he'd kissed the line between her breasts and let it go.

He reaches up now to rest his hand between her breasts, his touch far more gentle than the way she always presses her hand against her scars (for surcease, for a reminder). "I'm listening," he says, with as much comfort as he can. He knows she will hear what he is truly offering: he knows she will find stripping herself verbally bare for Rufus excruciating, and he is offering her the chance to work out what she will say before she is forced to throw herself into painful confessions in front of someone she doesn't trust. (The fact she trusts him will never fail to bewilder him. She *can* trust him -- up to a point, and she knows where that point lies as well as he does -- but so few people ever realize.)

But all Tifa does is pause a moment, her eyes still closed as though praying for strength, before squaring her shoulders and lifting her hands to squeeze the excess water out of her hair, stripping one hand down its length with practiced competence. "I know," she says. "And you have no idea how tempting it is to tell everything to you and let *you* figure out what it is he needs to hear. But that would be running away, and there's always the chance that he would know to ask a question you wouldn't, and I only want to do this once. Well. I don't want to do it at all, but you know what I mean."

"I do," Tseng says. He leans forward and kisses the scar, right between her breasts. Her hand comes up to cradle the back of his head briefly, then falls away. "*And I honor your courage.*" The word he uses is one that will not translate fully to an outsider, he knows, but he thinks Tifa may understand it anyway.

When he looks up again, she is smiling at him, the barest quirk of her lips, aimed at herself and not at him. "It's less '*courage*' and more complete fucking insanity." The smile falls off her face as she adds, "Promise me something."

His ears sharpen. She has never asked him to promise her anything; the only thing they have promised each other is that they will make no promises. He doesn't know if she knows how much his word is worth to him, once he gives it. He would venture that she does, but he isn't sure. "If I can," he says.

Her lips quirk again, less from amusement this time than from acknowledgement of his words, and he knows, seeing her face, that yes, she does know what his word means to him, and she is relying upon it. "Swear to me that whatever happens, whatever you discover and whatever actions the two of you take, no matter what you might - - might have to do, however the story ends, you will tell me the ending before -- before whatever happens, happens."

Tseng blinks, twice. It's the only reaction he allows himself; he's fairly certain he's just heard Tifa absolve him, freely and in advance, for whatever actions he might need to perform, whether upon Rufus's orders or the old man's or simply out of his own personal necessity. He thinks back to his words of last night, to her reactions to learning that Jonathan Shinra truly is mad enough (rabid enough) to have his own son killed if Rufus became too inconvenient -- to how she has never once flinched away from the blood that is on his hands, sometimes literally -- and finds himself having to turn to fetch her the soap, lest his face give too much away. She is preparing herself for the necessity of her death, for being eliminated because she knows too many of Shinra's secrets, and there's a part of him that knows she had been prepared for him to kill her on that night when she first confessed to being the survivor of Nibelheim (to knowing what Shinra was capable of) but he hadn't realized she still held the thought.

Weighed against the courage of that absolution, his response is unquestionable. "*This I swear, upon my family's name and honor.*" (No one in Midgar knows his family's name, and his family would hold he has long since violated their honor. But it's what you swear by, when you are making a vow you must not break, and he is an exile by choice as well as by fiat, but he is still Wutai's child in all the ways in which it matters.)

When he turns back around, she is watching him, with the penetrating, assessing gaze that always makes him wonder what she sees. "Then let's go do this," she says. "Get out of the shower and let me finish getting clean."

He gets.

Tseng keeps a few spare changes of clothes down here in Tifa's drawers, everything from casual enough to blend into the neighborhood (as well as he can; the clothes themselves come from the secondhand shop in Lower Four but he refuses to wear anything other than his own shoes, which are clearly well-made enough to cost half a year's slum labor) to a full suit hanging in the corner of Tifa's closet for days (nights) in which he stays over and goes straight in to work. Today he picks out a pair of SOLDIER BDU pants and a plain black long-sleeved t-shirt. He bypasses the .45 and the .22 on the nightstand and secures the 9mm into the holster built into the pants at the small of his back, then slides one of his throwing knives into the outer pocket on each thigh. (For him, it's practically going naked.) He can hear the creak of footsteps in the hallway, entering the guest bathroom, which tells him Rufus is taking the chance to shower as well. He wonders, again, what passed between them out there, other than the obvious.

The shower clicks off in the bathroom behind him by the time he has finished toweling out his hair, dressing, and stowing the rest of his weaponry and the suit he was wearing last night in the backpack he keeps down here for carrying things home in. (Their dry-cleaner will, no doubt, lecture him yet again about not wadding up his suit jackets in the bottom of a bag. He can practically recite the lecture along with the man by now.) Tifa emerges a moment later, her hair bundled up in a towel but otherwise naked. Despite her nudity, the bits of vulnerability he'd seen in the shower have burned completely away; her mouth is set in a firm line, and she looks determined.

"Come here," Tseng says, after she's picked out her clothing and gotten dressed. When she hesitates, he brandishes the comb he'd taken from the top of her dresser.

Her face softens. "You don't have to," she says, but she comes over to sit on the edge of the bed anyway, undoing the wrap of the towel around her head and using it to rub more water out of her hair before tossing it aside to hang on the bedpost.

Tseng moves it to the side and kisses the nape of her neck again, planting one knee on the bed behind her and beginning, as he always does, to untangle the knots of her hair at the ends. "I know," he says. "I keep telling you: I enjoy it. And you find it relaxing, as do I, and with the day we are likely to be having, a moment of relaxation would not go amiss."

"True," Tifa says, on a sigh. She falls silent, save for the tiny noises of pleasure whenever he strokes his hand over her hair to smooth out a section after he has finished detangling it with the comb. Eventually -- just when he's beginning to think that they will spend the entire task in silence -- she adds, "Tell me something that nobody else knows about him."



There's only one 'him' she could mean, of course. (Rufus exerts his own gravitational pull; he becomes the center of any conversation that so much as touches upon his edges before you know what has happened.) She must sense his reticence, because she adds, "Nothing that he would consider a secret. Just -- something that will help me see the Rufus Shinra you see, instead of the one he's been trying like hell to show me."

Tseng lets the silence build between them again, working through the knots of an entire section of her hair, picking through the entirety of his and Rufus's history before deciding what to offer. "He attended a boarding school in Junon -- that part is in his official bio. It was a school for the children of old money, the ones who view Shinra as vulgar, new-money upstarts." He can feel her surprise at that; that not everyone Above worships at the altar of Shinra is a view that doesn't much make it to the slums. "He skipped two grades, and still wound up at the top of his class. That was his father's influence; his father told him when he was sent away that he expected his son to excel in everything, and for all that his father is a monster, it took years for Rufus to realize trying to please him was a lost cause. None of those things won him any friends; the people who were inclined to ignore the fact his family wasn't old-Plains aristocracy hated him because of his success, and the ones who didn't hate him because of his success found him --"

He considers his words carefully. It's been years since he's been forced to struggle for a concept in Midgar's common language; he sounds now like a native, having long since trained himself out of the Wutaian accent he'd had upon his arrival and worked to mostly lose the stilted, formal phrasings of one who first learned to speak the language from books and non-fluent tutors. But for this, it is important to be precise. "Unnerving," he finally decides. It's as close as he can get to the concept he is trying to convey, the odd and slightly fey *intensity* Rufus has always held. "Rufus was never a child; he was never allowed to be a child. He attended his first board meeting when he was eight. All of us found him a little disconcerting when he was younger, but those who were supposed to be his peers felt it the worst."

Coming to the end of his self-appointed task, he draws the comb through her hair one more time, then picks the towel back up to blot out the excess water freed by the combing before sectioning her hair into parts for braiding. (Impulse and whim has him choosing many parts, rather than three; it isn't often he gets a chance to indulge in some of the gentler arts here in Midgar, but he had learned the complex braids of a Wutaian imperial wife's hairstyle when he had been a child, to provide his mother assistance when she couldn't bear the touch of a maid, and Tifa will look stunning in them.)

"The summer before he returned for his final year," Tseng continues -- and *oh*, he will not tell her the whole of what happened that summer; he's certain she already knows that he and Rufus are, or have been, intimate, but it would be simply *tacky* to speak the details aloud -- "he decided he was sixteen, and well past the point where he should be considered an adult and allowed to make his own decisions. His father didn't agree, of course, but Rufus resolved that since his father wasn't likely to allow him to attend university -- his father hadn't; he put far more stock in on-the-job training -- and since

it was likely to be the last year of relative freedom he would have before assuming his position in the company, he would take advantage of it." In so many ways, but *those* details are one of Rufus's secrets, and one that no one living will hear from Tseng's lips without Rufus's leave. "He kept up the academics. But he decided he'd give himself room to play, as well. He joined the drama club. And was promptly cast as the lead of everything they produced that year."

Tifa stifles a laugh. Tseng can see it running through her shoulders. "That sounds -- unexpected," she says. (Tactful as ever.)

Tseng finishes the first lace braid, arching up and over her hairline and flowing down the side, then ties it off with one of the elastics she keeps to hand and uses the comb to clip it out of the way while he begins on the next. (Once he has done three, he will braid the rest into a crown braid and pin it up, then weave the ends of the lace braids through and around it. The work is thoughtful, meditative. Her hair is lovely. Tifa's slightly-battered bedroom is nothing like his mother's perfumed bower, but when he does this, it reminds him of home.) "The battle, once his father heard of it, most likely could have been heard back in Wutai," he says, dryly. "He won it by pointing out drama training could be useful in business negotiations -- learning how to present the face he wanted to show. We all gave him credit for coming up with good bullshit, at least."

"We'?" Tifa asks. "And what are you doing to my hair?" She twists her neck, trying (furtively, of course) to be able to get a view of the work he's doing.

Tseng puts his other hand on top of her head and holds. She subsides, grumbling. (If any of the other Turks could see them now, they would laugh themselves stupid.) "Braiding it. Hold still, or I'll have to start over. And yes, 'we'. At that point, the Turks were serving as his bodyguards whenever he left the school premises. Or Sephiroth, or a few other members of SOLDIER, if we were -- otherwise occupied. We were ... the closest thing he had to a continuity of personal interactions, at the time." *The closest thing he had to friends*, he thinks, but does not say; those too would be secrets Rufus would object to the telling of. He still remembers the look on Rufus's face, when he'd seen Tseng and Sephiroth standing in the hallway outside the dressing rooms to congratulate him on his success after his first production, and not his father: disappointment at his father's absence warring with the resignation of not having expected his presence in the first place, all overlaid with a fierce pride that Tseng and Sephiroth at least had been there to see.

Tifa's shoulders stiffen at the mention of Sephiroth's name, though, and he wordlessly curses himself. He hadn't quite put two and two together. Even now, he finds it difficult to reconcile the Sephiroth he knew -- the Sephiroth they all knew -- with what happened to Nibelheim. Easy, too easy, to fit *that* Sephiroth into the category of *ikiryō*, living ghost, Sephiroth's spirit turned vengeful after his departure, and remember Sephiroth-the-man as the friend he had been. But Tifa would have only seen the *ikiryō*, and not the man he had been, once upon a time.

"He said that -- Sephiroth was his friend. Last night. I ..." Tseng only hears the fractional hesitation in Tifa's voice before she speaks

the name because he's listening for it. "I don't *want* to hear about that," she adds, suddenly, viciously. "I don't want S-Sephiroth to become real to me. I don't want him to become human."

"I don't blame you," Tseng murmurs. He doesn't. He does not doubt Tifa has spent the past two and a half years hating Sephiroth with every inch of her being, the same hatred she bears for Shinra writ even larger. He also knows Tifa's heart: she is someone who is only capable of hating that which she does not understand, cannot sympathize with.

She stirs, beneath his hands. He debates letting go of her hair, letting her get up and pace the way she so clearly itches to be doing, but before he can make a decision she subsides again. "But it's what you knew, isn't it?" she says, her voice little more than a bare breath. "You knew the man, not the monster. That's why Rufus is trying so hard to figure out what happened -- because you all want to know what happened to your friend."

There are many, many reasons why he admires Tifa. Her ability to view the world as it is, not the way she would like it to be, is one of them; her ability to place herself in the shoes of another and view the world the way they would see it may top it. "Yes," Tseng agrees. He could add more, could explain the ties Rufus considers to bind him and Sephiroth -- both children of Shinra, of Shinra's neglect and Shinra's control, in a way no outsider could ever know -- but he holds his tongue. If she asks, he will answer, but he does not want to offer the information, lest she not want to hear.

Tifa's sigh is unhappy. "Which means I'm going to have to know who that man was, if I'm going to be at all useful in telling you how the man who -- the man I saw differs from the man you knew."

She falls silent again. Tseng finishes the second lace braid, ties it off, and leans to the side, reaching out to take her chin in his hand. She submits to the motion as he turns her face towards his, but her eyes stay fixed on a spot across the room for a long moment before she sighs again and lifts them to his.

"Asking you to re-live the destruction of everything you knew is cruel enough of me," Tseng says, putting sincerity into his every word. ('Us' would be more the right word, but he doesn't want to bring Rufus back into the equation, not when Tifa is unsettled already, not when she still isn't sure what to think of him. Not when he doesn't want her thinking of how much sway Rufus holds over him.) "I will not ask you to sympathize with the man who was that destruction's hands."

Her lips twist. It isn't amusement. "You might not have any choice."

Too much to hope, that she wouldn't see. Rufus has owned him, whole and entire, since the moment he stepped into the room at Verdot's heels and met the man-child whose fate would be so tightly intertwined with his. (He still remembers the moment Rufus had looked up from his economics textbook and those ice-blue eyes had met his own: the shock of *knowing*, the click of *recognition*, and the slow sinking realization that every action he'd taken up until that

point, every action he'd viewed as stemming from his own decisions and not from the notion of destiny his people preached and he hadn't believed in, had all been geared to bring him to that moment and beyond. He *really* fucking hates mysticism.)

"That may be so," he allows. Tifa gives him a look that he can only interpret as *no fucking shit*. "But I will do all that I can."

"Finish braiding my hair, if you're going to," Tifa says, instead of responding. "I need to go start breakfast." He recognizes it as her way of telling him the conversation is over, or at least that point of discussion put on hold, and so he does; he has finished the third lace braid and is halfway through the crown before she adds, "Does he know?"

Try as he might, Tseng can't figure out what she means by the question. 'He' could only be Rufus, but what Rufus might or might not be expected to know, he cannot guess. "Know what?" he finally resorts to asking.

The tiny hand gesture Tifa makes is frustration -- at making her put it into words? perhaps -- and her voice is more vicious than he's ever heard it be, outside the discussion of the night before. "What he has. In you."

The implications of the question are stunning; Tseng's hands still. He cannot remember anyone ever defending his honor in such sharp tones before. In her words, he can hear how highly she values him, how much she regrets the vagaries of fate and fortune that have dictated they be on opposite sides of a divide he knows it would take miracles to cross, how much she wishes either he or she could be one inch less committed, less dedicated to honor, as they are. (But then they would not be who they are; for both of them, that honor has made them.)

In the hallway, in the guest bathroom, the shower clicks off, and Tseng can hear the creaking of floorboards as Rufus moves.

"He knows," Tseng says. In truth, he isn't sure. He knows what Tifa means, knows she sees the full weight and measure of the coin of his honor, willing to be spent. That Rufus appreciates him, he is certain; that Rufus relies upon him, likewise; that Rufus trusts him, he is less certain, but nearly so. (Rufus trusts him as much as Rufus is capable of trusting anybody.) But he's never actually been certain how much of his honor Rufus can see. Rufus has an incredibly strong sense of ethics of his own, one Tseng has been mapping the edges and valleys of for years, and by now Tseng is fairly confident he could predict Rufus's necessities of honor about as well as he could predict his own. But he's never been able to tell how much of that honor comes from his own teachings, and he's never been able to tell how far deeply into his own honor Rufus can see in return.

Still. It's what he likes to believe. Needs to believe. No blade wishes to think its master does not appreciate its keen edge, and he and his Turks are Rufus's blades, even as they follow his father's orders and await the day Rufus will stretch out his hand and gather them up.

"He'd better," Tifa says, low and fierce. Tseng finishes the last of

his work and turns to her dresser for the pins to hold his artistry in place, and when Tifa looks up at him from under the crown of her hair, giving him the fierce look of a mother lioness defending her cubs, it takes his breath away.

Then she stands, and the moment is over, and she cracks her knuckles and links her fingers and stretches to the sky. "Come on. I'm hungry."

She does not look at herself in the mirror to see his work as she strides out into the hall. He would be offended, did he not know that Tifa never looks in a mirror if she can help it.

The first time he was invited up to Tifa's apartment he'd been vaguely surprised to find it had a kitchen, small and cramped and a fraction of the size of the one below, appliances creaky and old. She'd set him to rights soon enough: the bar's kitchen requires careful cleaning after each use, and to fire it up for a single meal would be inefficient. (*No matter how much nicer it is to cook down there, she'd added, a minute later, when she'd had to bang on the top of the stove to get the burner to light properly.*) He follows Tifa down the hallway in the direction of the kitchen, stopping when he sees Rufus stepping out of the guest bedroom, freshly-showered and dressed once again in last night's clothes, albeit without the body-language overlay to turn them into someone else's.

"Morning," Rufus says. He looks disgustingly alert, like he's been awake for hours. (He likely has, if he slept at all. Tseng hadn't consciously remembered Rufus's problems with falling asleep somewhere he doesn't know well enough to trust, well enough to have internalized all the noises and motions likely to manifest around him properly enough for his subconscious sentries to discard what is normal activity, well enough for him to feel confident he will wake for anything out of the ordinary. But it would not be the first time Rufus has spent a sleepless night, and it likely won't be the last; Rufus is young enough, resilient enough, that a single night's missed sleep won't leave him scrambling to keep up.)

Tseng nods in return. "Morning, kiddo," he says, the same greeting he's given Rufus every morning for as long as he has known the man.

The greeting makes Rufus roll his eyes, the way it has ever since Rufus grew into his own self-confidence. (Tracing Rufus's reactions to the nickname over the years has been a useful exercise in comparison; at first Rufus had bristled at the mode of address, thinking it mockery; once satisfied it was not, as the years went by, he had begun to object to the nomenclature, feeling he'd outgrown it; by now, he has grown to believe it affectionate, a reminder of their shared history. Tseng has never confessed he uses it solely because no one else has ever dared to address Rufus Shinra by a love-name, and there is something in Rufus that cries out for tangible expressions of affection.) "Sure thing, old man," Rufus replies, the same response he's been giving for years, cementing Tseng's position as one of the few people in the world Rufus Shinra is willing to tease. "You saw the sparring match, I take it."

There's a hungry undercurrent in Rufus's words, the way there

always is when he's looking for Tseng's approval -- well-hidden, the way Rufus's weaknesses always are (Tseng has trained him far too well for the situation to be otherwise), but painfully present for those who have eyes to see. So he nods. "I did," he says. "Holding your own against Tifa for as long as you did is pretty damn impressive."

Honor thus satisfied (and Rufus knows Tseng meant it, can see the sincerity lurking beneath Tseng's flippant tone), Rufus is free to demur. "She had me on my ass in a minute or less in the first two falls. The last one was more for a workout than any real attempt at sparring." Which is truth, but still downplays Rufus's achievements; Tseng has never met anyone with a more curious blend of humility and arrogance. "The lady is quite impressive."

"The lady will outdo me in a year or two, most likely," Tseng says, dryly. (He knows Tifa is probably in the kitchen with ears cocked, despite the banging of pots and pans as she assembles her workspace for breakfast. He doesn't mind speaking the truth out loud, though; she should know how highly he esteems her skills. Rufus is not the only one who needs a healthy dose of approval from time to time.) "Especially if you keep me on my ass behind a desk as much as you have lately."

Rufus flashes him a quick grin. "Blame my father and Heidegger," he says, and oh, butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "I think you should at least get out every now and then. *They* want the reports done by yesterday. Not that either of them reads them."

"That would require them to know how to read," Tseng says. "I trust you've had a sufficient workout to let me off the hook for our run this morning?" Not that he would allow Rufus out in the slums to *do* that run -- even after years of habit and history without incident, even though he has long since had demonstrated to him that Rufus is capable of defending himself without mercy and without hesitation, his shoulderblades still itch every time he and Rufus take to the streets each morning. A sniper's bullet is hard to defend against. He dislikes Tifa taking her morning run through the slums each day, and enough of the slum denizens know her position and place as the queen of Sector 7 for her to have been placed on the list of untouchables. To allow Rufus into that environment would be unthinkable.

Rufus laughs, though, as Tseng intended for both halves of his statement to make him do. "If I so much as tried to do a quarter mile right now, I'd keel over dead. The shower's the only thing that's keeping me from falling over and declaring myself out of commission for the day. Come on. I heard rumor of waffles."

"And one of you had better get your ass in here and help me slice and sugar these strawberries," Tifa hollers -- letting them know she's listening, before either of them can say something they shouldn't, even though they both know full well that she is. "Kenji had just enough for one meal, not enough for me to use on the menu for tonight's dessert."

"Coming," Tseng calls, before he can think twice. The look Rufus passes him is highly amused, and Tseng has no doubts that if they were alone, he would be hearing choice comments on his willingness to follow orders when those orders are given by a pretty girl.

The expression on Rufus's face when he sees Tifa's hairstyle is priceless. Tseng hadn't been thinking of Rufus's reaction when he'd decided to braid Tifa's hair in the styles of home, but now he's seen, he realizes it can only help. If Rufus is off balance, even a little, it may help to mitigate some of the uncanny self-possession so many people find disturbing. (Less so than when Rufus was a child, but even as a man of twenty-four, Rufus can unnerve; his manner will sit oddly on his shoulders at least until his hair begins to grey -- although with Rufus's coloring it will be difficult to tell when that point truly is -- and his face can acquire more of the outer proofs of his inner landscape.)

When Tifa sees Rufus's expression, tracks his gaze to realize what his eyes must be fixed on, she lifts one hand to her head to pat at her hair, fingers questing to determine the truth of what Tseng's ministrations produced. (It's a curious reaction, and one Tseng hadn't expected: artless, unthinking, the instinctive motion of a woman trying to determine why a man is looking at her so oddly. He's never seen Tifa exhibit those behaviors before.) She catches herself only a second later, letting her hand fall again and reaching for the door of the tiny refrigerator, taking out a small plastic basket of the aforementioned strawberries and handing them to Tseng. They are small, and more than a little bruised; Tseng wonders, not for the first time, why she uses a slum grocer instead of paying to have better produce brought down from Above, decides (as he decides every time) she wants her money, and the Heaven's, to stay Below where it will do the most good.

"Slices," she says, then points at two of the cabinets behind him in quick succession. "Bowl. Sugar." She opens the drawer next to the sink and pulls out a chef's knife (taking care, but not exaggerated care, to make sure they both see her holding it; she remembers as well as he does the time he hadn't realized she had a knife in her hand and reacted ... poorly ... when she'd gestured at him with it). "Knife."

"What's my job?" Rufus asks. Tseng lets his eyes flick over to see what Rufus's expression might give away; his tone sounds nothing like Tseng might have expected. It's very nearly *affectionate*, is what it is, and given the way Tifa had been reacting to him last night, something *epic* must have happened between them before Tseng woke up, for Rufus to be so open with her.

And given Tifa's reactions last night to Rufus's attempts to step up and take control over even the smallest piece of her surroundings, her response is just as astonishing. She brandishes the knife at him, pointing it at the center of his chest to emphasize her point, and part of Tseng is quietly cheering her audacity and part of him is stunned at how Rufus's body language, loose and relaxed, changes not one inch. (He can get away with waving a knife at Rufus without Rufus so much as tensing up nearly all the time; Reno and Rude, about half the time; if anyone else tries it, the knife would very shortly thereafter be removed from that person's grip, with no particular care for whether or not fingers were broken in said removal, before Rufus had even consciously begun moving. That there is six feet and a counter between them makes little difference to Rufus's instincts; Rufus knows damn well how quickly a trained fighter can close that distance.) Then she hands the knife to Tseng. "Your job is to get the hell out of the kitchen," she says. "There isn't enough room in here for three."

The edge of Rufus's mouth quirks up; Tseng wonders if Tifa knows it for one of the signs of Rufus's true amusement. "Is the hallway far enough?" he asks. "Or shall I go downstairs and attempt to puzzle out the coffee maker?"

Tseng barely dares to breathe. Watching the two of them dance around each other in combat wasn't half as potentially deadly as this moment here is. But Tifa doesn't seem to realize that if she says the wrong thing, if she gives the wrong words, Rufus's good mood will evaporate as though it never had been. "I leave it set up overnight for the first run in the morning," Tifa says. "Push the button in the center, you can't miss it, it's the one I painted bright red with nailpolish because people kept asking me how the fuck to turn on the coffee maker. Mugs are under the counter, creamer's in the deli fridge under the mugs, trays are stacked under the bar on the rightmost side. Mine's one milk, two sugars, his is --"

"Enough sugar to make the spoon stand up with a little bit of coffee poured over it," Rufus says. Tifa laughs. Rufus sketches a salute, loose and sloppy, and Tseng can't quite decide if he's ready to start breathing again. (The look Rufus gives him tells him Rufus is doing at least part of it on purpose, to fuck with his head.) Rufus slides by Tseng with an exaggerated hip-swing -- the kitchen really *is* too small for three; Tifa was right on that much -- and disappears down the hallway, whistling. A minute later, Tseng can hear the stairs creaking under his weight.

Tifa is watching him from under lowered lashes when he turns away from watching the door Rufus disappeared through, even as she measures flour and pours milk and begins to whisk the batter for the waffles. "You look disconcerted," she says.

"Thinking," Tseng says. The strawberries, beneath the tips of his fingers, are beginning to stain his skin red. (He hopes it isn't an omen.)

"About?" From anyone else it would be a trap. From Tifa it is merely a desire to know.

Habit, nothing more, has him deciding to be honest. "Whether or not the two of you are capable of being in a room together without a constant, low-grade struggle for dominance."

Her smile, when it comes, is a quick flash, there and gone. It isn't quite the reaction he expected. "For now? No. He's letting me win, because this is my territory and he needs me too much to challenge me for rights to it. I'm using the opportunity to score as many points as I can to save them up. Wait until we're on neutral ground, and we'll see how it plays out then."

He hadn't -- quite -- expected her to be able to see with that much clarity. But then again, Tifa is exceptional at clarity. "I find myself possessed of equally conflicting desires to engage ringside seats, or to book transport to a different continent."

Tifa sets the spoon down, sticking her pinky finger into the batter and lifting it to her lips to lick it away. "Should have thought of that before you started all this, then," she says, and her tone is playful, but her eyes speak nothing but the truth.



Tseng has nearly finished slicing the strawberries -- and Tifa has finished the first two waffles, transferred them onto a baking sheet, and put them into the oven to keep warm while she continues to work -- when Tifa's head comes up. Tseng hears the sound of voices drifting in from downstairs half a second later. (He has often suspected her hearing is sharper than his is.) She points at him, then at the waffle maker. "Three minutes, crack it, check if it's brown," and she strides out of the kitchen, grabbing a towel to wipe her hands clean as she goes.

Only the fact she'd mentioned several of her part-timers were coming in this morning keeps him from following. (The urge to defend Rufus, even when Rufus is more than capable of defending himself, is one he will never lose.) But he's met all of Tifa's staff, here and there, and though he would not be surprised to find them forming the core of Tifa's rebellion -- when Tifa reaches the point where it becomes necessary for her to form her rebellion -- he knows they will not do anything without Tifa's leave and Tifa's grace. Which Tifa would not give. The truce of the watering-hole binds her as well, and she has given both him and Rufus implicit sanctuary in her domain. She would not allow harm to come to either of them, not without explicitly withdrawing her pledge of sanctuary first.

So he watches the wafflemaker.

He can't hear what's going on downstairs, but just as he's checking the waffle for doneness (and, finding it nicely browned, he takes it out and adds it to the growing stack inside the oven) he hears the creak of footsteps up the stairs. He's spent enough of his life listening for it, so he knows the tread to be Rufus's. A minute later, Rufus pokes his head in. "Coffee delivery," he says.

Tseng pours the batter for the next waffle and takes the mug Rufus holds out. "Any trouble down there?"

Rufus shakes his head. As Tseng watches, he wanders over to the tiny window set into the equally-tiny free bit of wall and looks out; it faces over the street. At this time of morning, the slums are quieter than they will be later, but there are still enough people out and about for Rufus to get a chance to see what life is like down here. Tseng wonders what he's thinking. "The lady had a cover story all ready," Rufus says, absently. "I'm a friend of yours from Costa del Sol, just starting the U. We overstayed the train last night." He pauses. "What time *does* the circumplate start running in the mornings, anyway?"

"Nine on weekends, eight on weekdays," Tseng says. (He finds it so fascinating that Rufus has apparently decided Tifa is to be 'the lady' in reference, rather than her name. He isn't sure what that means; were Rufus Wutaian, Tseng would call it a sign of high respect, but Rufus has never shown any sign of having adopted that behavior in Tseng's hearing before.)

It takes a second for his answer to sink in, and then Rufus turns from the window and frowns. "And the train takes -- oh, from here it would be what, an hour fifteen to get to the CBD?"

"At least," Tseng says. "They often run late." He knows where Rufus is going with this. It's fascinating to watch his mind work, see

the way he immediately leaps to the systemic conclusions but never loses sight of the individual connections.

The line between Rufus's eyebrows grows sharper. "That's why we can't keep employees who live in the slums, isn't it. They keep getting written up for being late." When Tseng makes a small noise of assent, Rufus shakes his head. "Why doesn't the old man just push the trains' start time back another two hours?" He holds up a hand. "No, don't answer that. Money."

"Money," Tseng agrees. (And yet another way people in the slums are kept in artificial poverty, but he knows better than to say so outright. Rufus will make the connection eventually, anyway.)

Rufus shakes his head. His attention is drawn back to the window, and Tseng wonders what he's seeing out there. "Did you know about the groceries thing?" he asks.

Tseng frowns. "What groceries thing?"

"Someone's gotta be diverting the supply trains that are supposed to get down here. Those strawberries?" Rufus nods his chin to where the sliced strawberries are sitting in sugar to make syrup while the waffles cook. "She paid sixty gil for them. I saw the invoice. And she says they're the best quality she can get down here, period."

Tseng blinks. Then blinks again. "No," he says, truthfully. He'd known the difficulty Tifa has in obtaining fresh produce, but thought it her insistence on using the grocers nearby rather than seeking out the best suppliers the slums had to offer. He hadn't known what she pays for her supplies, nor that they are all she can get. He has been scrupulously careful to avoid looking into the finances of her business. "I had known she had difficulty. I didn't know it was ... endemic."

Rufus rests his forehead against the window and sighs. "So now, on top of the rest of this shit, I have to go back Upstairs and knock heads until I figure out where in the line the rot starts. It's not Reeve, which is all I know. And that's going to be so much fun when we're also busy trying to figure out the rest of this mess." He turns his head, and his ice-blue eyes pin Tseng in place. "How in the name of Bahamut's left wing did it get this bad down here, Tseng?"

"Your father," Tseng says. (Rufus already knows the answer.)

But the look Rufus is giving him is hard and uncompromising. "Why didn't you tell me how bad it was down here?" he asks.

And yeah, that's probably the question he meant in the first place. Tseng sighs. (Checks the waffle.) "Part of it I've told you, and you didn't have enough experience to hear what I was truly saying. Part of it I kept from you, because if you knew the full extent of the problem, you would have confronted your father about it, the wrong way, and he would have exiled you to Junon again, from whence it is not possible to fix anything. Part of it I'm certain I simply don't know. We spend more time down here than many, but I won't pretend we know the entirety."

He waits to see if that answer will be acceptable to Rufus, or if he will be in further hot water than he no doubt already will be, when

Rufus is ready to deal with his displeasure from the night before. But all Rufus does is breathe out, heavily, and turn back to look out the window again. "I have to fix this," he says. "I have to fix this somehow."

"Yes," Tseng says. "But you can do nothing from Junon or the grave." He lets the warning stand there. It will suffice for Rufus, where it might not suffice for another. But Rufus, even when he throws himself into a project, does so in the most planned and calculated fashion possible.

Tseng occupies himself in transferring waffle to oven, pouring another, while Rufus thinks. It doesn't take him long; it never does. "I want to bring her back Upstairs with us when we go back up tonight," Rufus says, finally. "If you think she'll come. It doesn't have to be the complex, assuming we can use your place or one of your safehouses, as long as it's on the network. I want her to read through all the information we have on Nibelheim, and tell me where they're lying through their teeth."

It's not entirely unexpected. Tseng turns the thought over in his head for a few moments, examining it from each facet. "It's possible," he finally says. "If you allow me to do the asking, I believe I could make the case. However, it is Saturday, which is her busiest night, and while her employees are capable, she is ... possessive of what is hers."

Rufus makes a face. "Right. Right, I'd forgotten. Well, I would be too." He falls quiet again, turning things over. "Think she'd go for it if I call in a few favors? I could call down one of my department's project managers. If you give me twenty minutes I could probably get Beatrice to find one who has some bar experience. And if absolutely necessary, I could probably get Reeve down here to watch things, if I told him what it was for, and probably Reno and Rude, too."

"Reno is banned from tending bar for the rest of his natural life, or until he apologizes and I believe he really means it," comes the voice from the door. Tseng doesn't jump, but only because he's trained himself out of showing too much surprise; he only stops himself from drawing one of his knives by the fact he knows Tifa's voice well enough for his subconscious to stand down before his conscious mind gets the memo. Rufus isn't as lucky; he's pulled his P-225 from the holster at the small of his back before he can stop himself, and his expression as he re-holsters it is half anger, half chagrin. Tseng hadn't thought to tell him that, like any child of Wutai's arts, Tifa is capable of moving silently enough to startle even him when she wants to. She usually makes it a point of walking more heavily when he is present, but if she had wanted to listen in on their conversation, of course she would have slid into stealth. (She's barefoot, he notices. He tries to remember if she had put shoes back on when she dressed after her shower, or if she'd taken them off downstairs to walk more quietly.)

Tseng turns, slowly, first making sure that his body language is controlled and his face will not show anything. Tifa is leaning her shoulder against the doorframe, her arms folded across her chest, every line of her body the perfect, calculated picture of relaxation and not-a-threat. She is looking, not at him, but at Rufus. He can't read

anything from her face.

He wonders how much she heard.

Rufus lets his hands fall from his handgun, although from the way his fingertips twitch, Tseng is vitally certain the mock-casual pose is to bring him within reach of one of his other holdouts. (Tseng doesn't know the location of all of them; what he doesn't know, he can't be forced to divulge. He knows most of what Rufus regularly carries, but Rufus varies the specifics from day to day, and Tseng has never let Rufus tell him all the details.) It isn't that he thinks Rufus thinks Tifa is a threat; it's more that when Rufus is startled, when Rufus feels he has lost face, Rufus feels better if he can have a weapon in hand in less than a second. "The question as a whole stands, even if the individual details must still be negotiated," Rufus says. (Never apologize; never back down. Rufus learned those lessons early.)

Tifa's eyes are locked on Rufus's. "I could have afforded an entry permit for Upstairs a long time ago if I'd wanted one. I was never willing to let them put me in their database." (*Them*, not *you*. Tseng wonders at the significance of her choice of pronoun. Tifa is a woman who chooses her words carefully.)

From his face, Rufus is wondering too. But his chin comes up the slight fraction that is Rufus, preparing to argue down all objections. "If you're with us, you won't need a permit."

Tseng realizes the slightly scorched smell wafting past him is the waffle, starting to singe. He lets it burn. The last thing he wants to do right now is remind either of them he is here.

"I will to return." Tifa's version of the preparing-to-argue look is her chin tilting downward, not upward. She's doing it now. "Assuming you intend to allow me to return."

Rufus closes his eyes for a fraction of a second longer than a blink, and Tseng thinks he might be praying for patience. When he opens them again, his face is resolute. "I will swear to you upon anything you feel will hold my oath that the minute we are Above or before, I will have Tseng or one of his lieutenants bring you an identity card authorized for unlimited travel, with your picture upon it and a name that is upon none of our watchlists. I will swear to you it will be yours to keep, free and clear, with no monitoring and no tripwires placed upon it, then or for the duration of its life."

Tseng has to stop himself from choking. Half of Shinra's *employees* don't have unlimiteds, and all it would take would be for one unlimited card to make its way into the slums, where Rufus knows damn well the technology exists to clone the RFID chips used for scans and identification, in the hands of someone more sympathetic to the rebellion than to Shinra. It would be a disaster. It would destroy every single one of their security provisions; they would have to invalidate and re-issue every single card in existence, and possibly re-engineer the system from scratch. If Tifa leaves this uneasy alliance with the conviction it is time for her to act against Shinra, Rufus will have handed her a materia bomb and taught her precisely how to arm it.

Tifa tilts her head to one side, studying Rufus's face. "You do

realize how foolish that would be."

"You do realize how desperate I am," Rufus says, mimicking her tone and delivery precisely.

Tifa's look turns thoughtful. "I'm beginning to," she says. The silence between them spins out, and Tifa and Rufus stare at each other, and Tseng tries to remember to breathe. "Swear, then," she finally says.

Rufus exhales, sharp and heavy. "What shall I swear by?" he asks. His words have the light hitch and skip indicating he's quoting something; it takes a second for Tseng to place it, and then his memory supplies the woman's reply: *do not swear at all, or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, which is the god of my idolatry, and I'll believe thee.*

He somehow doesn't expect that to be Tifa's response, even if she recognizes the play.

He's expecting her to ask Rufus to swear by his name or by his honor, the two things he thinks Tifa would (rightly) identify as capable of holding Rufus's word. But Tifa's eyes, still locked on Rufus's, narrow slightly. "Swear by your city," she says, her voice sounding hollow and full of weight, the words feeling more like a ritual than anything else. Tseng can *feel* it when Rufus breaks their gaze to look over to Tseng, quickly, fury embedded deeply: *did you tell her?* He shakes his head; he hadn't. But Tifa sees more than most people give her credit for. "Because if you break your word, you will have handed me the power to destroy it, and I will not hesitate to use that power."

For a minute, Tseng thinks Tifa may have asked too much. But as he watches, Rufus swallows down his nascent fury, closes his eyes and fights down his anger until it is transmuted into nothing more than calm. "Thus shall she stand the hostage for your safety," he says, and that's a quote too, but Tseng doesn't know it. Rufus's voice is dark and cold, but he holds up his hand, palm facing Tifa. "It shall be as I have said. I do swear this, by my name and by my word, and by my city's blood and breath."

When Tifa nods, accepting his oath, Rufus's hand slowly closes into a fist before he lets it drop. Tseng can *feel* the currents of the world's energies moving around them, that strange othersense he learned to listen for in childhood, telling him this is a moment no less significant for his fate and for the fate of the world than the first time he looked into Rufus's eyes and knew he'd found his life's work.

Then Tifa looks over at Tseng, and the heavy, edged grace of the moment breaks and drains away. "The waffle's burning," she says. It takes a second for Tseng, caught up once more in destiny's tides, to realize what she means, and then he swears and reaches for the wafflemaker to dump the charred remains into the sink.

"If not Reno, then whom?" he can hear Rufus saying behind him as he scrapes out blackened bits of batter from the appliance's surface. There's still a hint of fury running through Rufus's voice -- fury at having been forced to give so much up in exchange for the assistance he knows he needs, fury for a world where Tifa so mistrusts Shinra as to have required such a vow, fury at having had

to endanger Midgar herself in order to save her -- but Rufus is long experienced in muting that fury for others' ears, and Tseng thinks Tifa might not hear it. (He wouldn't swear to it. Tifa has reminded him how much she is capable of hearing.)

The noise he hears behind him is Tifa sighing, then padding across the floor -- no longer trying to silence her steps -- to run water over the burned mass of dough in the sink and then dump it into the garbage. Their negotiations over, her voice is back to being the same calm, sweet tone it always is. "Reeve knows what he's doing. Or Rude, if you can't spare Reeve. Or you mentioned some of your people have experience in a bar; I'll take one of them, if you can't spare Reeve or Rude. Assuming they're trustworthy enough to be allowed to work unsupervised, and assuming they wouldn't mind if I put one of my people in charge overall."

"They're loyal enough to me that they will be trustworthy," Rufus says, quietly. "They know that if they aren't, there will be consequences. And I will make good any losses you might experience."

"Then we have a deal," Tifa says. "I won't go into the Shinra complex, and I won't sleep anywhere that anyone other than Tseng has the key for. With those limits understood, it probably makes sense for you to plan for at least a week." Tseng looks up at that, startled. Rufus is giving her a similar look. She shrugs. "You mentioned the company runs on information. If there's half as much on the -- on what happened as you say there is on everything else, it won't be the work of a single day. Especially if you're going to listen to my version of the story as well."

"Yes," Rufus says, quietly. In that single syllable, Tseng hears a dawning understanding, and he thinks Rufus is beginning to realize the courage it will take for Tifa to put herself in Shinra's hands; that she is willing to do it at all, even with such a guarantee, is an act roughly the equivalent of the courage it took for Rufus to offer his city's safety as hostage. (He would not have expected it of either of them.) A moment, while Rufus thinks, and then Rufus nods again. "I'll go make the calls. Give me two hours to see what I can set up, and how quickly."

"Yes," Tifa agrees. Rufus bows to her -- from the waist, not from the shoulders, a mannerism he adopted from Tseng -- and strides out of the kitchen, heading for the guest room where he must have left his cell phone. Tifa waits until she hears the door closing behind him to put her hands down on the edge of the counter and lean over them, her body bent in two, breathing out sharply as though she's been punched in the gut. As though she's just run a marathon. (In a way, she has.)

Tseng waits a minute for her to catch her breath, then rests his hand on the small of her back, making sure she can see him moving well enough out of the corner of her eye that his touch isn't a surprise. She doesn't lean into his hand, but she doesn't pull away, either. She just stands there, looking small and exhausted, as though she doesn't know what comes next. "I hope you know what you're doing," he says, softly, making sure to keep any possible note of censure out of his voice. (He doesn't disapprove of her actions. He

just thinks they're *fucking mad*.)

"I do, too," she says, to her hands. A moment, another breath, and then she's pulling herself together, straightening up and breathing deeply. (Tseng is honored she was willing to show him that moment of weakness, of uncertainty.) "I'll go break the news to Wedge and Jessie. And try to convince them I'm not being taken off to a dark basement somewhere to be shot in the head." Pause. "If I can convince myself first."

"He swore by his city," Tseng says. (And he would like to know how Tifa knew enough to demand that oath. Does it have its roots in whatever they said to each other, in the backyard, lying in the grass, exhausted from having tested each other nearly to breaking? It must.) "It is an oath he will keep."

The corners of Tifa's lips turn up. It's not quite a smile. It may be the most heartbreaking expression he's ever seen on her face. "It's not him I'm worried about," she says. She lifts her fingertips to brush them across his lips, then turns and leaves the kitchen as well.

A minute later, he can hear her footsteps on the stairs, and then voices drift upwards: calm at first, then growing more vehement. They mix with the sound of Rufus's distant cadences barking out orders into his cell phone. Tseng stands in Tifa's kitchen, listening for voices holding conversations he can hear but not well enough to understand, with Tifa's fingerprints burning against his lips, and prays to Leviathan this will not end as badly as he fears it might.

#### ( 4. )

Two hours later, Tifa is breaking down the coffee maker and cleaning it, while Wedge and Jessie are working together to inventory the walk-in fridge and the booze storage room so that Tifa knows what she'll need to reorder from her main distributor on Monday. (What she'll need to tell whomever takes over for the week to reorder from her main alcohol distributor on Monday. She hasn't quite yet come to terms with the thought that she won't be here. It won't be a vacation, she knows, but it will be the first time she's gone more than a day without being behind her bar, and the thought is unnerving.) Tseng is unpacking and loading pallets of beer into the chest refrigerator. They haven't said a word to each other since breakfast finished. Rufus is in the kitchen; having finished whatever mysterious alchemy of the telephone he'd excused himself to perform, he is now frying the potato strips he'd cut earlier in batches and flash-freezing them. She'd watched him through the first, and found nothing she could fault in his work.

Her life, she thinks, applying scrub brush to the inside well of the coffee machine, is more than a little bit surreal.

The door opens just as she's finishing up, and she has to stop herself from twitching towards the sawed-off shotgun she keeps well-hidden behind the bar for problems that can't be solved with fists and feet alone. She's on edge today.

Reno steps through the door first. He's not wearing the suit that marks him as one of the Turks (although trying to disguise Reno's hair, his tattoos, is a losing proposition) but has on a pair of SOLDIER BDUs and a plain grey t-shirt instead. Reeve, behind him, is wearing jeans and a well-worn light blue t-shirt with the Midgar University Architecture Department's logo over a stylized skyline of Midgar, done in a draftsman's hand. Tifa doesn't know the woman who follows Reeve: she's slight and blonde, wearing jeans and a faded black t-shirt with the logo of a band Tifa doesn't recognize. Rude is last, in BDUs and a plain grey t-shirt identical to Reno's, with the addition of his ever-present sunglasses. Reno is the only one of the four who isn't wearing an overstuffed backpack; Reeve is juggling, in addition to the backpack, a briefcase, a messenger bag, and four long cardboard tubes tucked under one arm.

"Hey, Tif'," Reno says, giving her that sweet smile of his Tifa has always been slightly wary of. "Nice hair. Brought you some help."

"Reno," Tseng says, softly, at Tifa's side. Tifa doesn't jump to hear his voice coming from right behind her, but only because she doesn't want to show weaknesses. "I don't recall asking for your presence."

Reno shrugs. "The chief pressed me into service as an errand boy." His hands move, just a little; Tifa controls the impulse to flinch. (Reno is excellent at sleight of hand.) When he holds them up, there's a small plastic rectangle tucked between the index and middle fingers of his right hand. The other three new arrivals (and Tifa suddenly realizes how badly she's outnumbered, and doesn't let it bother her) stay near the door as Reno crosses the room. When he holds the card out to her, she realizes what it must be.

Reno's face is more solemn than she ever remembers seeing it. Looking back, she doesn't think she's ever seen him on duty before. There's no doubt in her mind he's here in his professional capacity, functioning as Rufus's hands, an agent by which Rufus will redeem his promise to her.

Her hand reaches out for the card without her quite telling it to do so, and when she looks down at the card, her own face looks back up at her. She wonders how they found a suitable picture to use. The name on the face of the ID reads 'Miki Walker'. The corner of the card has a stamp she's never seen in person before, except the few times she's seen Tseng's ID thrown casually on her bedside table overnight. It's the unlimited travel card Rufus promised her.

Or rather, it is if the card is properly coded and doesn't simply claim to be, and she *hates* that she has to think that, but she does. She looks up to Reno, intending to ask how she can be certain it isn't a trap. Reno holds up a hand before she can, though, and she can't tell if her face is that transparent or if Reno is just that used to dealing with the details. A little of both, perhaps. He takes a tiny handheld gizmo out of one of his pants pockets; it takes her a minute to recognize it as an ID card reader, the kind Shinra security guards carry at the train stations when preparing to let people board a circumplute train.

"Boss," Reno says, holding out his other hand. Tseng must know what he's asking for; he reaches into the pocket of his own BDUs and



produces his ID card. Reno takes it gingerly, holding it between nothing more than two fingertips, moving slowly enough that Tifa thinks he's trying to show her he hasn't switched the cards without her noticing. (She's pretty sure Reno could switch them anyway. But she has to take *something* on faith.) Reno swipes the card through the reader, then turns the reader to face her. She looks down at it to see Tseng's face looking back up at her, his personal information scrolling by on the screen faster than she can read. Above his ID picture is the same unlimited-travel stamp the card Reno has brought for her bears.

She expects Reno to run her card next, to demonstrate that hers, too, is coded for unlimited travel. He doesn't. Without taking his eyes from hers, he holds his hand out and to the side. "Lena," he says. It's an order, somehow, even though it doesn't sound like one. The woman who accompanied them crosses the bar on hesitant feet; she gives Tifa a tiny smile, one Tifa thinks is supposed to be reassuring. Her face is sweet and open. She fumbles in the front pocket of her jeans for a minute before pulling out her own card, and instead of taking it, Reno holds out the cardreader for her to swipe her card through it herself.

She does, fumbling the card twice before getting a clear read, and Reno turns the cardreader to face Tifa again. The ID picture is clearly the woman Tifa is looking at; she can just catch her first name (Elena) before the information starts scrolling. The section above her ID photo is coded "travel, limited, Above all sectors, Below restricted commercial".

Reno holds out both the cardreader and Tseng's ID card for Tifa to take; when she does, he pulls out his own ID and hands it over as well. "Here," he says. His eyes are still fixed on Tifa's face, and the look she can see there almost makes her shiver. She's known for a while that Reno is Tseng's second-in-command in the Turks, and she's wondered, every time she's reminded, why Tseng puts up with the insubordinate, sloppy, casual, outrageous attitude Reno has always shown every time he darkens the doorstep of the Heaven. If this is the person Reno is while on duty, she can understand a little better now. "Lena, give Tifa your card. Tifa, run those three however many times you need to feel comfortable that I haven't rigged the reader, then run yours. If it makes you more comfortable, any of the rest of us will hand over ours for you to run, too."

Tifa looks down at the piece of electronics she's holding, at the three Shinra employee ID cards Reno has handed her. At the card Reno has given her with her own face and a stranger's name. Reno only watches her. His face is patient; his body language says he's willing to wait all day for her to be satisfied.

A part of her is tempted to simply hand back the reader and tell him she'll take his word for it. It would serve to set him (them) off balance, and she is certain having them off balance would serve her well in the hours and days to come. But trust comes hard to her, and harder when the person she is facing is one of Shinra's own, and so she runs Tseng's card twice, Elena's once, and Reno's twice before running her own. Then she runs all three of the others again, to make sure nothing has changed. The results are precisely what the face of each card proclaims.

When she hands the reader back to Reno, it's as though a switch has been flipped. The professional demeanor Reno is wearing slides off his face as though it never were as he replaces the reader in his pocket and sprawls across the bar stool he was standing in front of. "Hey, Tif', hey, boss," he says, as though the last five minutes hadn't happened at all. "Tif', I want you to meet Elena. She came down with Reeve and Rude to give you a hand, that's okay with you, yeah?"

By the door, Reeve and Rude start moving as well; Rude shuts the door behind them, while Reeve awkwardly dumps his briefcase, his messenger bag, and the cardboard tubes he's holding across a nearby table. Both of them come across the room as well to take stools of their own. Rude gives her a nod as he sits (she's always suspected he has a crush on her; he never says more than three words in a row to her, or maybe it's just his nature); Reeve gives her a little half-wave. Elena, meanwhile, stands up on the railing at the foot of the bar, and Tifa thinks she's preparing to sit down as well, but instead she leans over the bar and holds out a hand.

"Hi," Elena says, smiling. Tifa likes her smile immediately, and has to caution herself against accepting that snap judgement (no matter how good her snap judgements usually are). She takes Elena's offered hand and shakes it; her grip is firm, and Tifa can feel calluses on her palm. "You probably don't know of me, it was before your time, but I put myself through college running the Down and Dirty over in Wall Market. I'm out of practice, and from everything I've heard, this is a *much* classier place, but I can be trained."

Tifa can sense the presence of someone else in the room a few seconds before Rufus says, from the pass-through to the kitchen, "Will they do?"

The atmosphere of the room alters subtly. Elena's eyes grow wide as she sits down onto the barstool; Rude's spine straightens a little; Reno slouches a little more; Reeve just glances over, his face a question. Tseng, still standing two steps behind Tifa and at her left, doesn't move.

Tifa closes her eyes, counts to three, and takes a deep breath. "I find it hard to believe that you're willing to lend me a company director, one of the Turks, and another one of your people for a week or so, just to run a bar in the slums."

"I'm in Corel on an emergency reactor visit right now," Reeve says, cheerfully enough. His smile is as friendly as it always is, without any hints or undercurrents behind it. Tifa has often thought that Reeve is one of the most open and honest people she's ever met; she's wondered, more than once, what he's doing with Shinra. "I think Rude is -- where was it, Rude?"

"Junon," Rude rumbles. "Training exercise."

Rufus's eyes flick over to Elena, and Tifa has no problems reading the message there: not in front of her. "I gave you my word," he says. "It is best backed by people capable of being trusted."

Tifa notices that he doesn't say *people I trust*. She closes her eyes again, pinches the bridge of her nose against the headache that is threatening to return. "All right," she says; hearing her own voice, the

tight and snippy sound to it, she nearly winces. She opens her eyes again and sweeps over Reeve, Elena, and Rude. If Rufus is going to up the stakes like this, she can play the game too. "Come on. I'll introduce you to Wedge and Jessie. Biggs isn't in on Saturdays, but he'll be in tomorrow, and you can meet him then. Then I'll give you the rundown of what needs to be done."

She wonders what reason Rufus gave them for why they're all here. She wonders what sort of leader Rufus is, for his people to be willing to drop everything and head to the slums to do a job that has nothing to do with their job descriptions, at nothing more than Rufus's bare word. She wonders what they think is going on, and whether they're going to ask her, and if they do, what she can say.

At the bar, Reno puts his feet up on the stool next to him. "What d'you want me to do?" he asks.

Nerves, more than anything, make her voice come out snappish. "Sit right there and don't touch anything," she says, gesturing the other three to the kitchen. (As they follow her, she can hear Rude leaning over and muttering in Reno's ear: "Told you she was still pissed.")

Jessie and Wedge are nakedly curious about what the *fuck* is going on as Tifa walks her ersatz employees through the process of running the bar, but they don't ask. (Know better than to ask.) They've all had more than one conversation, over the past year, about political sympathies and where theirs lie. All her employees know she sympathizes more with the anti-Shinra faction than not. Wedge has questioned, more than once, her habit of allowing Shinra employees - - and more than that, Shinra's elite -- to not only drink in her bar but help run it as well; he's never said a word about her relationship with Tseng, but she's been able to tell he's been controlling himself rigorously from mentioning. (Wedge's brother is part of Johnny's rebellion, Tifa knows. She hopes none of the Turks do.) When she'd finally explained her theories of slum/Shinra interaction, he'd looked thoughtful, then nodded and never asked again. She hopes to all the gods he won't ask now, because she doesn't think she can explain without screaming.

Like most of her regular customers, both Rude and Reeve have filled in behind the bar here and there before; it doesn't take long to get them up to speed in the kitchen as well. (Jessie will handle the administrative end of things while Tifa is gone; she's been working for Tifa long enough that she'll know what needs to be done, and Tifa has built up enough goodwill with her various suppliers that if things get missed, she can recover easily enough later.) Elena, meanwhile, is clearly delighted with everything she sees; she holds out her arms and twirls in circles to take everything in. "This is *sweet*," she finally declares, her eyes shining. "At the D&D, I had one microwave and a single stove burner. I could do *anything* in here."

Tifa wonders, again, what Elena thinks is going on, why she's willing to drop everything and return to her bar-running days at nothing more than a phone call. Does Rufus hold that much sway over his employees? Does Shinra worship him that much?

It's early afternoon by the time Tifa has finished taking them

through everything and shown them where they can sleep and leave their things upstairs. (Both Reeve and Rude insist Elena take Tifa's bedroom, and say they'll flip a coin for who gets the guest bedroom and who is relegated to the tiny couch in the tiny living room. Tifa won't say as much, but she's desperately grateful; of the three of them she's far more comfortable with Elena in her personal space than either of the men.) She shoos them back downstairs, telling them she'll be down shortly to start lunch, intending to hang back and pack a bag with clothes and supplies for a week (and the most private of her belongings, the things she wouldn't want an outsider to see -- not that she thinks Elena will necessarily snoop, but precautions are only sensible).

Elena doesn't leave the room, though, and Tifa looks up from her dresser to see the woman standing in the center of the room and looking incredibly serious. "Look," she says. "I don't know what's going on here, or why Vice-President Shinra wants us to do this, or what you're going to go do instead that you need somebody -- somebody from Shinra, even -- to come and take over for a bit. And I am absolutely not asking. But --" She bites her lip. "I'm probably totally out of line here. But I remember my days down in Wall Market pretty well, and I still keep in touch with a bunch of people down here when I can, and I've heard a few things about this place. I think you've been damn careful for the past two years to make sure this is a place where *anybody* can come and be safe, no matter who they are or who they work for or -- what they believe. And I want you to know that we'll -- I'll be careful with it. I promise."

Tifa lifts her head to meet Elena's eyes. It's almost a relief to realize Elena has none of the training in self-control that Tseng has, that Rufus has; her sincerity shines through in every line. Tifa can see an incredible curiosity there, and all the things Elena isn't saying (and she realizes, in one sudden rush, that yes, Elena *can* see there's at least some small measure of sympathizing with the rebels here, and she wonders if Elena thinks she's joining forces with Tseng and Rufus to go do something to *stop* the rebellion, and the thought makes her squirm). But Elena stands there in her bedroom and looks back at her, her eyes wide and serious, willing Tifa to believe her. In that minute, Tifa feels a rush of solidarity with this woman she met for the first time only a few hours ago, and she thinks it just might be okay to leave her bar in this woman's hands.

"Thank you," she says, and her voice is rough, and Elena does her the favor of not saying anything to call attention to it.

Elena bows her head a little, awkwardly, and Tifa likes her a little more for how out-of-place she seems, how she isn't as perfectly polished and presented and self-composed as Tseng and Rufus (and even Reno and Rude and, to some extent, Reeve). That awkwardness soothes something in Tifa's soul she hadn't even been aware of; she hadn't realized until right that minute how much she'd been resenting that control. Elena's awkwardness is *real*, not a face she's fronting, and Tifa thinks what she sees is what she'll get from Elena. It's reassuring.

"I'll just ..." Elena trails off and makes a face (involuntary, Tifa thinks), waving a hand in the direction of the downstairs.

"Wait a second," Tifa says, as she turns to go. Elena turns back to her. Tifa makes herself smile at the girl. (Girl, hell; she's likely older than Tifa is. But sometimes Tifa feels so, so old.) "I'm sorry. I'm being incredibly rude here."

Elena winces. (The expression says *yeah, you kind of are, but it's understandable.*) "You've got a lot on your mind --" she starts.

Tifa holds up a hand to stop her; Elena falls silent. "Still. I --" She considers, debates with herself, finally says *fuck it* and throws caution to the wayside. "I have *no idea* if I'm doing the right thing here. With any of this. I slammed head-first into things that are way bigger than I am a while back, and I've been trying to run away from them and hide for a few years now, and it's time for me to stop running and hiding now. And you being willing to come down and help take care of the bar for a week is part of what's letting me be able to do that, and I appreciate it -- I mean, I don't *want* to turn my bar over to strangers, and I don't appreciate the fact that I have to, but I appreciate that you were willing to disrupt your life and come and handle it, and I appreciate how hard you've been working to learn enough to make sure that everything will be okay while I'm gone, and I ..." She runs out of words. "Thank you," she repeats. This time she means it a hell of a lot more.

Elena's expression turns rueful as Tifa speaks. "You're welcome," she says. "I'll do my best to keep the home fires burning." She pauses, and just when Tifa thinks she might turn and go back downstairs, she adds, "This is probably just as inappropriate for me to say --"

Tifa can feel herself smiling. "It's okay," she says. "I serve drinks to Reno. I'm used to inappropriate."

It makes Elena laugh. "Yeah, okay. Um. Is it okay if I say that whatever it is you're doing, I hope you get through it okay? 'Cause I just met you, but I *really* like you, and when you get back from whatever, I really want to sit down with you and have a beer and get to know you better."

Tifa is struck with a rush of ... something. Comradeship, she supposes, or fellow-feeling, or sisterhood. "Yeah," she says, and her voice is getting rough again, but this time it's more okay. "Yeah. Thanks. I hope so too." She crosses the room, intending to hold out her hand to shake Elena's, and changes her mind when she gets there; instead she holds out her arms for a hug, and Elena blinks once and then delivers it. She smells nice, Tifa thinks; fancy soap and lotion, and her shampoo smells like flowers. Tifa holds on for a minute longer than she'd been intending to. The simple human contact, from someone whom Tifa can be reasonably certain isn't carrying an agenda, makes her want to hold on and soak it in against whatever is to come.

Then she makes herself pull back, before she can give away too much more. "Come on," she says. "I promised them lunch, and I don't want Reno to decide I'm not going to deliver and start trying to eat the bar."

When they go back downstairs, Reeve has moved his things from

the table by the door to one closer to the bar, and has taken out his laptop and turned it on; he's frowning at it and tapping the space bar in syncopated rhythm. Reno and Rude are both sitting at the bar, beers in hand (she'd told them to help themselves; she squashes the little hint of annoyance that they took her at her word), talking to Tseng (who is behind the bar) in low voices. She can't see Rufus, and thinks he's probably in the kitchen working, and wonders (again) whether Jessie or Wedge have figured out who he really is, and if so, what they think is going on. (Rufus isn't trying to disguise himself this morning. He's wearing the exact same clothes as he did last night, but last night he'd been different somehow, some difference in carriage or in body language, that she can't put her finger on but she knows would have kept her patrons from looking twice at him. Today, he's holding himself like he rules the world.)

Elena, following behind her, looks to her for permission and then heads for behind the bar, clearly intending to start a pot of coffee. (She gives Tseng a wide berth, Tifa notices, but not at all like someone who is afraid of him, or someone who doesn't know him by anything other than reputation. She wonders what Elena does for Shinra. Perhaps she'll ask later.)

Tseng looks over to her as she walks by on her route from stairs to kitchen. His expression is as calm and controlled as it always is, but she can see the question in his eyes: *are you all right?* She shrugs at him, just one shoulder, rising and falling: *I don't know, but I'm trying to be.* He doesn't press the issue.

The kitchen contains one Rufus Shinra, and no Jessie or Wedge. (She can hear noises coming from the stockroom; they must have gone back to the interrupted inventory.) Rufus is standing at the stove, lifting the lid of the pot bubbling there and stirring; from the smell, she can tell it's the tomato sauce she serves with the fried cheese and the garlic breadsticks. He looks up and nods to her. She glances over to the prep counter; if he's still following the list, and he's gotten to the sauce portion, he should also be grating cheese and slicing the tomatoes and onions for that night's service. Sure enough, there are three neatly-stacked plastic containers waiting to be returned to the walk-in, and a half-sliced tomato sitting next to the chef's knife he was clearly using.

It says something about the adaptability of the human mind, she thinks, that she has ceased to find it surprising that Rufus fucking Shinra is standing in her kitchen, having blown through her entire weekend prep list in half the time it would take anybody but her.

Still, she gives in to impulse and asks the question that's been bothering her all day. "Where did you learn how to do all of this?" she asks. "I mean, call me crazy, but running a commercial kitchen doesn't seem like the sort of skill that's necessary in -- in your position." (She censors herself halfway through; if Wedge and Jessie haven't figured out who he is yet, she won't be the one to tell them, and while the conversation she can hear drifting in from the stockroom doesn't falter as though they're listening when she speaks and while it's hard to hear what's going on in the kitchen from the stockroom even with the door open, she doesn't want to push her luck.)

She's expecting Rufus to bristle at the implied insult to his competence, but all he does is shrug. "Your prep sheets are incredibly thorough; anybody could follow them. But I spent the summer I was fifteen working half-time in Building Catering," he says. He sets the wooden spoon down on the rest next to the stove, then grabs a tasting spoon and gathers up a bit of the sauce to blow cool and check for flavor. Apparently satisfied, he replaces the lid; rather than returning to the prep counter, he leans a hip against the counter next to the stove and studies her. "And the other half in the mailroom. I know it's not what you might expect, but --" He shrugs. "I like cooking. I don't get to do it often enough. There's something satisfying in *making* things."

Tifa shakes her head. "It isn't what I would expect," she says. *Expect of you*, is the undercurrent. She's seen more sides of Rufus Shinra today than most people ever get to, she knows.

Rufus only smiles. It is, she notes again, a surprisingly sweet expression. "I enjoy confounding expectations," he says, and it's probably the most honest sentence she's heard from him yet. "Are the arrangements I've made satisfactory, or is there anything else that needs to be done for you to be comfortable your empire is in good hands?"

There isn't a hint of impatience in his question. She remembers what she'd overheard, earlier that morning, creeping upstairs on silent feet more out of habit than out of desire to eavesdrop before she'd realized he and Tseng had been discussing her: *She is possessive of what is hers*, Tseng had said, and Rufus had answered *well, I would be too*. She wonders, abruptly, how much of his labor on her behalf today, how much of his quite frankly over-the-top arranging of coverage for her while she is away, stems from the respect of one business owner to another, no matter how different the scale upon which they operate might be.

"It's fine," she says. Manners, nothing more, force her to add: "Thank you." She crosses the kitchen -- dammit, forgot to put on shoes, and she knows from experience cooking barefoot is a bad idea, but she doesn't feel like going to find where she last left her shoes. Oh well. Dropping a kitchen knife onto her bare toes is the least of her worries today, anyway, and her reflexes are usually good enough. Opening the freezer, she takes out a pack of the hamburger patties she made up last week and froze, along with a bag of fries. (It's the last of the batches from last week's prep work, not one of the ones Rufus did this morning. She's almost tempted to put them back and take one of the new ones, to check their quality and to satisfy her curiosity, but she's pretty sure he would consider it an insult, and besides, they haven't had long enough to freeze for proper results anyway.)

When she turns to fire up the grill and realizes both it and the fryer is already on and starting to warm -- Rufus must have flipped them both on when he'd returned to the kitchen -- she finds Rufus still watching her. "I'm pretty sure Elena will be willing to call you however often you'd like to provide you with status updates," he says.

Tifa puts the bag of fries down on the counter next to the fryer a little more forcefully than they truly deserve. "It's *fine*," she repeats,

a little more of an edge creeping into her voice. "Look. I am cooperating with you. I am cooperating with you against my better judgement, against every little voice in the back of my head that is telling me that this is quite frankly ridiculous, and against every instinct that I have, because Shiva help me, you've managed to convince me I've been running away from what happened in -- what happened back then for too damn long and it's time to step up and do what I can to help fix it. And I appreciate the fact you're trying to make this as easy as possible for me. I truly do. But for the love of anything you might find holy, *stop* trying to arrange my life for me. Just stop. All it's doing is reminding me constantly of who and what you are, and it *isn't helping*."

Even as she's speaking, even as she hears her own words, there's a voice in the back of her head screaming at her, telling her to *stop fucking talking*. Telling her this is Rufus fucking Shinra, who *does* rule the world, or close enough at least, and who is capable of making her life as difficult for her as he is trying to make it easy right now.

Wildly, she thinks, looking at the way Rufus's face shutters over at her words, that she may have actually *hurt his fucking feelings*.

"My apologies," Rufus says after a few minutes, taking refuge in formality. "It is ... habit, nothing more."

*Tseng tells me ten times a day I have no concept of how anybody lives further down than the sixtieth floor*, she remembers him saying - - oh, Shiva, it was only this morning, even though it feels like a week. Tifa realizes, before he can say anything else, this is his way of trying to show her -- respect, perhaps, or maybe just his way of trying to prove to her he is telling her the truth. That if she goes with them, she will be safe, or as safe enough as she can possibly be, and when she returns, she will not have cause to regret having cooperated with them in the first place. Her worldview shifts a little, and she looks at him and suddenly sees a young man with far too much power for his own good, trying to give a gift in any way he knows how.

She still can't quite manage to make herself feel gratitude.

"Look," she says. "You and I don't only come from different worlds; we come from different *universes*. Just ... it's okay. Stop trying so hard." She smiles a little. (Makes herself smile.) "Just go and sit at the bar with Tseng and Rude and Reno and relax a bit. You've been working since before I was awake."

Rufus nods, once. "Tell me when there's something more I can do," he says, and she grits her teeth at the way it's an order.

Alone in her kitchen -- alone for the first time since her run this morning, really -- Tifa takes a minute to close her eyes and fight off the urge to scream. When she thinks she can control herself well enough that she won't put her fist through the wall or something, she heads for the stockroom to pick up the hamburger buns while the grill and the fryer finish warming.

Both Jessie and Wedge look up as she enters; the way their conversation stops tells her they've been talking about her. Or at least saying something they don't want her to hear. She wonders how many bridges she'll have to mend when she's done with ... whatever it is



she's going to do. "Hamburger buns," she says, shortly, with an undercurrent of *and I don't want to talk about anything while I get them*.

Jessie reaches up and pulls down the box of hamburger and hot dog buns, pulls a bag out and tosses them in Tifa's direction. Then she takes a deep breath. "Look, Tif' --"

"Don't say it," Tifa says, before Jessie can get any further. "Please. Just ... don't."

"We're worried about you, Miss Tifa," Wedge says, softly, putting his clipboard down and taking half a step closer. "Those are the *Turks* out there. And you say you're going with them. I mean, I know that you and Tseng -- but still -- you know a lot of --"

At least that answers the question of whether or not Jessie and Wedge have figured out who Rufus is. If they had, they'd surely be even more worried. Tifa reaches for her reserves of strength and summons up a smile; Wedge's worried expression doesn't change, though, and she knows her attempt's probably not at all convincing. "It's okay, guys," Tifa says. Orders. (If she can say it enough times, maybe it will be true.) "It doesn't have anything to do with any of you. And it doesn't have anything to do with anything that happens here, or any of the people who come in here." Wedge opens his mouth to say something else. She overrides him before he can get a word in edgewise. "I *would* tell you, if it did. You're my people, and it's my job to protect you. This is about something that happened before I came to Midgar. Long before I came to the Heaven. I have some information they need to know, and there's something I can do to help make things better for *everyone*, and they're doing everything they can to make me feel safe while I do it and make sure nothing happens to the Heaven while I'm gone. I'm fine. You'll be fine. Everything is *fine*."

She can tell they don't quite believe her, but Wedge only drops his eyes and toes the floor, unhappily, before picking up the clipboard again and going back to counting bottles of vodka and gin. Jessie looks at Tifa, then at Wedge, then back to Tifa. "I hope you don't regret this," she says, finally.

*I hope so too*, Tifa thinks. But all she says is, "I won't. And I'll tell you everything I can, once it's over. All I can say now is, this is the right thing to do."

Jessie sighs. "I'll make sure everyone knows you went with them willingly, because of something you felt you had to do," she finally says, and Tifa knows that by 'everyone' she means 'everyone who hates Shinra as much as we do'. "It might help ... avoid some unpleasantness."

Tifa realizes what she means, in one sudden rush: if certain of Midgar-Below's people thought Shinra had taken her away, because of something she'd done or something she knew, it would have the potential to spark a war she can barely imagine. She's been doing her level best for the past two years to ease the tensions that would lead to that war, but she's only one woman and there's only so much influence she can have. She's been careful (so careful) to maintain the

Seventh Heaven as a place of neutrality, but her personal sympathies have always fallen more on the rebel side of the equation, and she knows there are enough people down here who are only waiting for her to decide it's time to start a rebellion of her own. To many who are opposed to Shinra but who, like her, disagree with the tactics of many of the existing anti-Shinra groups, she's something akin to a figurehead. An inspiration. A leader, no matter how much she tries not to be.

Her blood runs cold at the thought of what those people might do if they thought their leader had been taken away.

"Yes," Tifa manages, through suddenly-dry throat. "Please. If anyone asks, tell them -- tell them I've gone to redeem a promise, and to right a wrong." She is carefully vague about whose promise, and whose wrong. "And I'll be back as soon as I can be, and ... I'm acting out of necessity, and honor, and doing all I can to serve the best interests of everyone down here."

"I hope it's worth it," Jessie says, and Tifa doesn't dare agree out loud, but inwardly she prays that Jessie is right.

Lunch is painfully awkward. Which is a step up from the "utterly miserable" that Tifa had been fearing, at least. Once they're done eating and Tifa has wasted as much time as she thinks she can get away with in cleaning up afterwards, she excuses herself and goes to finish packing her bag. Tseng looks up from his conversation with Reeve, and she can see him arguing with himself; a few seconds later, he excuses himself as well and follows her.

"I'll leave you alone in a minute," he says, once they're on the stairs, before she can get a chance to protest. "But not only did I leave some things in your room, you're going to need to change before we leave, and it would be best if I took a look through your closet first to tell you what's best to bring."

Tifa bites back the first three things that spring to her lips. He's right, and she knows he's right; she dresses better than most of the people who live Below, but fashion Above is much different. She's expecting him to say something else once they reach her bedroom, something supportive or insightful, but he doesn't. All he does is go straight for her closet and begin picking briskly through her clothes, tossing things on her bed next to her open backpack.

She wonders, watching him hold up shirts and skirts and eye them thoughtfully, whether he'd done her hair so formally that morning because he'd suspected, consciously or unconsciously, that they would be arriving at this moment before the day was through.

"There," Tseng finally says, turning from her closet with one of her least shabby miniskirts in his hands. (He is smart enough, or observant enough -- or both -- to have only selected outfits in which she can have full range of movement. She rarely wears anything other than skirts for that reason; it's nearly impossible to find jeans or pants that give her enough range of motion through the thighs and the crotch without having them custom-tailored, and she doesn't know of anyone in the slums who'd know what she meant when she asked.) "The shirt's all right. Put this on instead, though, and add this on top -

- " He adds a loose button-down shirt, plain white cotton, that's at least three sizes too big for her. She doesn't recognize it; it's probably his. "Your shoes might be a problem, but we'll hope nobody notices."

"I'm not one of your assignments," Tifa says, quietly, taking the shirt and skirt from his hands. She throws the shirt onto the bed, then hooks her thumbs into the skirt she's wearing and pushes it down to change into the one he'd handed her. (There's no point in worrying about modesty, not with Tseng.)

When Tseng doesn't reply immediately, she looks up. He's studying her, and she can't read his face. "No," he says. "No, you're not. I'll meet you downstairs once you're ready." He picks up his own backpack and walks out without another word.

Something in his voice, in his words, makes her want to shiver. She gets the sense he wasn't necessarily agreeing with the same thing she meant when she'd said it, or he meant something utterly unlike what she had, and she can't decide if that's a good thing or not.

She puts returning downstairs off for as long as she thinks she can once she's finished stuffing the clothes Tseng chose for her into her shabby and disreputable backpack, but she's pretty sure the clock started ticking the minute they finished eating. She struggles into Tseng's shirt (it's far too big, uncomfortably so; she eventually unbuttons it again and ties the tails in a knot under her breasts the way she remembers seeing a woman from Shinra about her age having done in the bar last month), then goes into the bathroom to pack her toiletries. While there, she catches a look at the mirror. For half a second, she wonders who that woman is, with her too-old eyes looking out from underneath a hairstyle that would not look out of place at a formal banquet, and then she realizes she's looking at herself.

When she comes back down the stairs, the backpack slung over her shoulders, four pairs of eyes look up and give her a once-over: Tseng's, Rufus's, Rude's, and Reno's. All four have identical looks of professional evaluation. Tseng is the one to nod. "You'll do," he says, then kicks the legs of the stool Reno is leaning back in. "Saddle up, Reno. You're coming back with us."

Tifa squares her shoulders and descends the last two stairs. Reeve, returning from the bar with a fresh bottle of water, rests his hand briefly on her arm as he passes by her and gives her a reassuring smile. "You'll be fine," he says, his voice low enough to only reach her ears. "You can trust him. And -- *thank* you." His control slips for one brief second, and she can hear relief and gratitude in equal measure.

So. Rufus did tell them what was going on, why they were doing all of this. Or told Reeve, at least. It's a useful data point, if nothing more.

As she watches, Rude produces a baseball cap from the depths of his backpack and tosses it at Tseng, who hands it to Rufus. Rufus makes a face. "Yeah, yeah," Tseng says -- Tifa nearly chokes at how unsympathetic he sounds; she'd've sworn Tseng would rather chew off his own arm than speak to Rufus in that tone. "Three PM has different

rules than nine PM. Be lucky I don't insist on the vest, too."

"Bite me," Rufus mutters, but he puts on the baseball cap anyway, tugging it down low over his eyes. As Tifa watches, Rufus takes a deep breath; as he lets it out, he rocks back on his heels, swings his arms back and forth and shakes his shoulders out, and then -- *changes*, somehow. She watches in pure fascination as his shoulders hunch over, one slightly higher than the other, and his hips turn out slightly and back slightly more. When he's finished, he looks precisely like the Midgar U student her cover story for him named him, down to the slight jitter of one leg as though he's been drinking endless cups of coffee all afternoon.

Tseng looks to Tifa, and she realizes even though Rufus is Tseng's boss, something has changed enough for Tseng to be in charge now. "Say goodbye," Tseng says to her, jerking his chin at the back room where Wedge and Jessie have gone back to work, with Elena joining them.

Tifa shakes her head, tucking one thumb under the strap of her backpack, more to have something to do with her hands than anything else. "It's okay," she says. "I've never been big on goodbye."

Tseng studies her face for a few seconds, then shrugs and slings his own backpack over his shoulder. "Your choice." He looks at Rude. "Standard call-in schedule. I'll text you if anything changes." Rude nods, not bothering to verbally agree. Tseng transfers his attention to Reno. "Reno, you're on point. Rufus, *stay* in the Leviathan-damned rocking chair this time, or I'll make you regret it later. Go."

Uncertain of what she's supposed to do -- or why, precisely, Tseng is treating a walk to the train station like the invasion of Wutai, although she's pretty sure it has something to do with Rufus Shinra being about to walk out of her bar and into the Sector 7 slums -- Tifa looks at Tseng. His face softens a bit. "Just follow Reno," he says. "Rufus and I will be right behind you."

Next to her, Reno offers his arm, crooked so that she can place her hand in the curve of his elbow. "C'mon, Tif'," he says, genial as always. "Nice day for a stroll, yeah?"

Tifa takes a deep breath, shoves her feet into the shoes she'd left by the door last night, and rests her hand in the crook of Reno's arm in a perfect parody of manners Above. "Yeah," she says. "Let's go."

Reno keeps up a cheerful line of patter as they make their way through the six blocks to the train station. She does her best to tune him out for the first block, until he looks down at her and hisses, through his smile, his lips barely moving, "Look like you want to be with me, for fuck's sweet sake."

Startled, she looks up at him and realizes the chronic slouch and the loose and sloppy movements she's so used to seeing from him are still there, but right now they're layered deliberately over a tense and wired alertness. She remembers Jessie's words, earlier, and realizes if the wrong people see her leaving on Reno's arm and looking like she's marching to her own execution, it will not end well. She takes a deep breath, steels herself, and gives him the best smile she can, making herself relax her shoulders and lean in as though she's

hanging on his every word. It must work; nobody they pass gives them a second look.

Rufus comes strolling up to where they're waiting on the platform a few minutes after she and Reno finish buying their tickets. (At this time of day, the security checks are automated; she'd fished her newly-minted ID out of her bra where she'd stashed it and run it through the turnstile with the ticket, forcing herself not to look over her shoulder like she was waiting for security to rain down on them both.) He hasn't dropped his university-student body language, but Tifa realizes, looking closely at his face, something has left him utterly furious.

Reno sees it too. "You all right, chief?" he asks, voice low, body language incredibly casual. "Something happen I missed?"

"I'm fine," Rufus says, and oh, if anyone were close enough to overhear him, their disguise would be done for; he sounds like he's about to start breathing fire. Rufus's eyes flick to Tifa, then across the platform, taking in everyone around them with a single glance. "Just noticing a few more things Daddy dearest has been trying to keep from me, that's all."

Reno winces. "Ah. Yeah. Gotcha." He doesn't press the matter further. There's a part of Tifa wishing he had; she wants to know just how much Rufus Shinra knows and doesn't know about what happens down here in the slums. She wants to know how much he would change, if he knew. (But she will, won't she? He gave her his word, this morning, that in exchange for her help, he'll listen to the litany of her grievances. She should probably begin composing the presentation now.)

Tseng joins them a minute later. "We're clear," he says, just as quietly. "Next train's in five. If they're not running late again."

"Mmm," Rufus says. "How likely is it that they're running late?" He pauses, considering something. "And why the fuck doesn't the station down here have the same information boards that the stations Above have? No, I know, don't answer that."

"Keep your voice down," Tseng says, and even though his body language and his expression are completely neutral, if not downright pleasant, his voice is a whip cracking. Rufus makes a face at him in return. "And it's the same answer I gave you this morning: money."

Tifa keeps her mouth shut. If she is careful, if she is quiet, they may forget she is here, and she may hear more information that might lead to getting some of the answers she so desperately wants.

But all Rufus does is snort, as though Tseng has just fed him the punchline to a bad joke. He slides a hand into the inside pocket of the leather jacket he's wearing; Tifa forces herself to not tense up, but all he brings out is a slightly-battered pack of cigarettes, opening it to take one out and fish out the disposable lighter shoved into the half-full pack. Reno perks up to see them and holds out a hand. Rufus rolls his eyes, but shakes out another cigarette and hands it to Reno. Then he flicks the pack back and forth between Tifa and Tseng. "Anybody else?" he inquires, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Tifa shakes her head. She doesn't smoke; with her lungs, it would be a death sentence. She hadn't realized that Rufus did, either -- she knows Reno does; she's banished him to the porch countless times -- but of course, he had been in her space, and the bar has clearly posted No Smoking signs.

Tseng, who comes to her smelling of cigarette smoke occasionally and of clove cigarettes far more often, shakes his head as well. "The platform *is* a nonsmoking zone," he says, dryly.

"Sure is," Reno says, filching Rufus's lighter to light his cigarette and taking a deep drag. "Same as it was the last ten times you bitched me out for smoking on it."

Well, Tifa supposes, it's not as though anyone is going to stop and tell Reno of the Turks that he has to put his cigarette out. (She's probably the only one in the slums who would dare to.)

The wait goes by quickly enough; the train is late, but by no more than five minutes, which makes it practically on time for this time of day. There are only two seats left in the car they get onto. Tseng waves her to one and Rufus to the other, while he and Reno take up positions hanging on straps immediately in front of them both. Reno launches into some outrageous story as soon as they're settled, starting halfway through as though he's been telling it all along, holding onto the strap with both hands and leaning forward like he's hanging his whole body weight from it. He looks like any one of the overly exuberant transit riders, haranguing his fellow travelers, and Tifa wonders how many people completely miss the way his eyes are constantly sweeping the car around them.

Tseng's fingers flick twice at them when the garbled announcement proclaims the next stop to be Upper Three, Twenty-First Street. Tifa lifts her backpack from where she'd stowed it on the floor between her feet. Reno holds down his hand to help her up; she bites back the protest that she doesn't need the assistance, and doesn't miss the way he deftly folds her hand back into the crook of his elbow again as they join the crush of people getting off the train. The way he's holding his arm means her hand is squeezed tightly in between his forearm and his upper arm. She could get free if she wanted, but it would take her more than a single motion, and he'd know she was trying the minute she moved.

She doesn't object. Doesn't struggle, either. The station they've gotten off at is nothing like any of the stations down Below; it's underground, for one, and she realizes they're in one of the sectors Above where the train runs *under* the plate, not above it. Even on the weekend, the push and crush of people flowing from one platform to the next, from the platform area to the turnstiles for the exit, is enough to be almost dizzying. Tifa is a small-town girl at heart, and Sector 7 is the smallest of the sectors Below. This is more people than she sees in an average week, and they all seem to want to push her off her feet.

Tifa is suddenly, sharply aware of how the balance of power in their little party has shifted. Drastically.

She's expecting Tseng to be more relaxed about Rufus's presence

now they're back Above, but if anything, he's more on edge; she wouldn't be surprised to see him draw his weapon and sweep a security corridor between the platform and the exit. He doesn't, but when she glances behind her to check that he and Rufus are still behind them, she can see in his face (drawn and tight, his eyes moving constantly over the crowd) how unhappy he is. (Rufus catches her looking, and rolls his eyes. She has to choke back a laugh at the exasperation on his face.)

"Eyes front," Reno says, glancing down at her. She bites her lip and complies.

Scanning her ID card at the turnstile to exit produces the same lack of alarm as scanning it for entrance did. A minute later, they're on an escalator heading upwards. A minute after that, Tifa catches a hint of breeze, carrying air that is very nearly fresh and clean, and when the escalator disgorges them on the street level of the plate, she quite frankly has to *gape*.

Night began to fall while they were in transit, and the sky above them holds only the faintest remnants of sunset, glorious fingers of red and purple streaking across the grey and dusky sky. It smells like clean air here; she can catch the very slight hint of the tang of people and garbage and misery the slums always reek of, but only a hint, and the air is much, much clearer without the plate to hold in the smog. Above her head, buildings tower so high as to look as though they're reaching for the heavens. She can see the main Shinra complex, something she's only seen on television before, in front of them and slightly to the right; it looks to be about half a mile away. It's bigger than it is on TV. As she watches, more lights begin to wink on in the buildings around them, everything from neon to incandescent white.

It's stunning. It's very nearly beautiful.

She realizes, a few minutes too late, that she's gaping. It's all right, though; Reno has gently steered her over to the edge of the sidewalk nearest the building they're standing in front of, out of the crowd's push and press, and all three of the men she's with are watching her crane her neck and inspect her surroundings. Reno looks bored; Tseng looks tolerant. Rufus --

Rufus is smiling at her. It's a crooked smile, one edge of his mouth higher than the other, and he's watching her like a proud parent watches someone else admiring his child. As she meets his eyes, he inclines his head to her, the smile deepening. *See?* that smile says. *This is what you had me swear by. Now do you see its worth?*

She can't decide whether she's falling in love with Midgar-Above, or whether she's *utterly furious* that its beauty comes at the expense of Midgar Below. (Probably a little bit of both.)

"I don't suppose you'll let me hail a taxi," Tseng says, to Rufus. The sound of his voice tells Tifa he knows full well Rufus won't.

Rufus snorts. "Five blocks, Tseng. The day I call a taxi for five blocks is the day they put me in my grave." His eyes don't leave Tifa. "Besides. I'd like to show the lady my city when she's wearing her

best face."

Tseng only sighs. "Yes, *sir*," he says -- the honorific more than a little bit sarcastic. "If you get killed, I'll be sure they put that on your tombstone. 'He was an excellent tour guide.'"

Rufus flips a rude gesture at him, then turns back to Tifa. "Come on," he says. "We're heading this way." He holds out his arm, and Reno drops his, losing Tifa's hand along with it, as smoothly as though they'd rehearsed it. Tifa only hesitates for a minute before resting her hand on the sleeve of Rufus's jacket. He gestures with the other hand. "If you see anything you want to stop and look at, just let me know."

Tifa doesn't, but only because she's too busy looking at all the people. She's relieved to notice at least four other women wearing the same thing she is, or close enough; it means she won't stand out too badly. They pass a tiny park, halfway down the second block they walk down. It's the first growing grass she can remember seeing in two years. She wonders how they do it, and how much painstaking care it must take to keep the grass from dying. The plate below the grass carpet means the park is one giant planter.

The building Rufus leads her to is the tallest for at least a few blocks' radius. There's a doorman on duty; he opens the door for them, bowing slightly. The building has a front desk, the same way every building has in every movie and soap opera she's ever seen about the life of the rich and famous, *Above*. The uniformed man on duty there calls out, "Evening, sir. Been a while since we've seen you."

She's expecting Rufus to answer, but to her surprise, it's Tseng who does. "Been busy," he says. "I'll come down for my mail in a few hours, or send one of my men."

This is where Tseng lives, she realizes. Or one of the places. (She thinks she remembers him telling her, once, that he has two apartments: one in the Shinra residential complex, and one he keeps for when he needs to get away.)

Once they're in the elevator, Tseng produces a keycard -- not his Shinra ID -- from the pocket of his BDUs and swipes it, then pushes the button for the fortieth, topmost floor. The elevator opens on a tiny hallway, no more than a few feet long, with a door at the other end. He unlocks that with the same keycard and pushes it open, and Tifa recognizes the way his eyes sweep the hallway beyond as his professional paranoia at work again. Once he's satisfied there are no assassins in wait, he steps through and holds the door for the rest of them. "Welcome to my home," he says, directly to Tifa.

She steps inside, looking around her, trying to disguise her naked curiosity and knowing she's doing a bad job of it. The door opens onto a medium-sized room, walled with screens of paper and wood; she knows there's a word for them in Wutaian, just as she knows there's a word for the reed mats that start just past a few-foot-wide entrance hallway of light-colored wood, but she can't remember them off the top of her head. There's a rack next to the door, with a few sets of shoes stacked neatly in it; on the other side of the door is another



rack with about a dozen pairs of slippers. Rufus and Reno, behind her, are already taking off their shoes. She starts and leans over to follow suit.

Tseng has already taken off his shoes and exchanged them for a pair of slippers; he gestures for Tifa to leave her backpack next to the shoe-rack, then waves her into the main area of the apartment, one step up and onto the reed mats. She can smell fresh flowers coming from somewhere; it isn't until he walks over to one of the screen-walls and slides it out of the way to make the room larger that she realizes each of the walls is movable. The screen he moved reveals a nook with wooden shelving, upon which rest several vases of flowers, on either side of a sword in ornate scabbard hanging on the wall. There are neatly-framed sheets of rough paper with Wutaian characters painted on them above each vase. Tifa squints at them, but her ability to *read* Wutaian has always been iffy; iffy turns to hopeless when there's any calligraphy involved. She wonders who did the brushwork, and where he got them, or if he did them himself. (She wonders what they mean.)

There's a futon-style wooden-framed couch and two wood-framed chairs, both padded with extra cushions, in the area of room that Tseng has revealed; they're both more Midgar in style than Wutaian, but they have the hint of Wutai to them that Midgar popular culture picked up after the Second Wutai War. It makes them blend, at least a little. Tseng waves one hand towards them. "Have a seat," he says. "Who wants a drink?"

"A bottle of water. And a glass of whiskey, if you have it," Tifa says, softly. She's pretty sure she's going to want something to drink when they reach the true reason she's here.

"Whiskey sounds good, yeah," Reno agrees. He's already thrown himself onto the couch and put his feet up on the low table in front of it. Rufus hesitates for a second, looking at Tifa, then joins Reno on the couch, although he leaves his feet where they belong. (She gets the feeling it's not his usual seat -- she doesn't doubt he is a frequent visitor here -- but she also gets the feeling he's deliberately leaving the two freestanding chairs for her, so she isn't forced to sit next to one of them.)

Tseng looks at Rufus. "Rufus?"

"Just water for me," Rufus says. Something passes between the two of them, but try as she might, Tifa can't tell what it is.

Tseng nods. Turns to Tifa. His voice drops, becomes quiet enough that Tifa doesn't think it will carry across the room to the other two. "Be at home here. I only regret the circumstances that allow me to offer you the hospitality of my home are so unpleasant."

Then he is walking through another gap in the screen/walls, looking perfectly at home -- of course -- and Tifa is left standing in the doorway, looking at Reno and Rufus making themselves comfortable, and thinking this is *not* how she expected her day to end when she woke up.

She chooses the one of the two chairs with its back to the wall, rather than the one with its back to the rest of the apartment, and she

can see Rufus's lips quirking in a quickly-hidden smile when she settles herself into it and curls her feet up under her and to the side. (The better to propel herself *out* of it quickly, if she should need to.) She's almost expecting Reno to keep going with the last story he'd been telling on the train, but all Reno does is pull his phone out of his pocket and turn his full attention to it, thumbs moving over the built-in keyboard quickly. She feels incredibly awkward and out of place here, but she fixes her eyes on the calligraphy scrolls and occupies herself in trying to puzzle out what they mean.

She's almost decided the *kanji* on the left means 'virtue' and the one on the right means 'courage' when Tseng returns, carrying a lacquered tray upon which rest four bottles of water, a bottle of whiskey, and three delicate crystal glasses. He sets the tray down on the table, knocking Reno's feet off with a practiced (and annoyed) motion that says he's used to doing it, and Tifa has to blink when he doesn't sit in the remaining free chair but instead sinks down onto his knees with a grace and beauty she's never quite seen him display in the same form before.

His gestures, as he pours, are just as graceful; he moves like a line of song. He serves Tifa first, passing her the whiskey before following it up with a bottle of water; Reno is next, and she expects Rufus to follow, but Tseng pours a third whiskey and sets it and a bottle of water aside for himself before uncapping the last bottle of water and handing it to Rufus. The motions have the feel of ritual, the sense of something Tseng has done a thousand times before, and she thinks she might be seeing one of the touches of Wutai that still live in him. She touches the whiskey glass to her lips, changing her mind as soon as she feels the burn and taking nothing more than the tiniest of sips before setting it down on the wooden arm of the chair. (And reminding herself it's there, and she must watch how she moves, or else she'll knock it over.)

"If you wish it," Tseng says to her, picking up the last glass of whiskey and the last bottle of water and rising to his feet with as much grace as he had gone to his knees, "we can order food before ... speaking of anything of consequence. It is purely up to you."

She has the feeling he's telling the truth, too. She has the feeling she could say yes, and he would order dinner, and they would talk of anything but Nibelheim while they ate, and none of them would so much as hint that she should be getting on with it. "I'd rather get it over with," she says. Her voice sounds harsh and rough in her own ears, particularly against the grace and peace of the room.

Reno flips his phone shut and focuses in on her. "That's my cue, then," he says. He picks up the whiskey glass that Tseng poured for him and salutes her with it before knocking it back with a single flip of the wrist. Setting it back down on the table, he picks up one of the throw pillows off the couch and the bottle of water Tseng handed to him. "Lemme know when we decide what we're ordering, yeah?" he says, to Tseng. Tifa blinks. Reno, pillow and water bottle in hand, heads across the room, kicking off his slippers at the door but not reclaiming his shoes. The front door of the apartment clicks softly shut behind him. She imagines him tossing the cushion on the floor in the hallway and settling down on it.

...Does he intend to stay there the entire time she's here?

Tseng sees her look, interprets it correctly. "He's just there to make sure we aren't interrupted. It's a secured floor, but we wanted to be absolutely certain. And I didn't think you'd want him listening in."

"No," Tifa says. She looks down at her hand. It looks like someone else's as she watches it reach for the bottle of water, open it, drink.

Tseng takes the place where Reno had been sitting. She watches as Rufus adjusts himself next to Tseng, until their legs are pressed together from thigh to knee; it has the feel of something they've done a thousand times before. "Whenever you're ready," Tseng says, softly. "However you'd like to start. Or -- if it would be easier, I could ask --"

"No," Tifa says, again. She watches her hands cap the water bottle and set it aside. Watches them pick up the glass of whiskey and cradle it between them. Then she takes a deep breath and looks up, meeting Tseng's eyes. "Just -- don't interrupt. That's all I ask."

Rufus is the one to nod. "We won't," he says. Tifa glances at Tseng, trying to see if he will object to that 'we' -- object to Rufus speaking for him -- but of course he won't and doesn't. He must be used to it by now.

"All right," Tifa says. Her voice feels thin and reedy. She looks down at the glass of whiskey in her hands again, then -- acting before she can change her mind again -- slides back out of the chair and paces over to stand in front of the nook, so close she could bury her face in the spray of lilacs without having to crane her neck. She can feel two sets of eyes on her back, but it's easier, somehow, when she doesn't have to watch them watching her.

The flowers smell beautiful. (She'd forgotten how much she loves the smell of lilacs.)

She takes a deep breath. Tries to think of where to start. "It was early summer. The mayor of Nibelheim sent to Shinra. The creatures in the mountains had always been dangerous, but that spring -- We'd lost three children from the families who lived at the town's edge, further away from the lights and the people, and there was always some kind of -- ichor or slime around where they found the bodies." Partly eaten bodies. She leaves that detail out; it probably isn't necessary, and she doesn't want to remember them any more than she already does. "You -- they -- Shinra said they'd send help. I was old enough that my father and the mayor wouldn't let me stay in the room when they were talking, like they did when I was much younger, but I wasn't above listening at keyholes, and I remember Papa saying he thought the monsters were coming from the reactor. That he'd seen it happen before, about twenty-five or thirty years ago, and Shinra had fixed it then. I remember thinking, if Shinra could fix it then, why couldn't they fix it so it wouldn't happen again, period? Why did it have to wait until three children died?"

The quality of the silence from behind her is expectant. Listening. She lifts her eyes to the calligraphed scroll on the wall, the one she

thinks says 'courage'. *Courage*, she tells herself. "I'm going to tell it all out of order," she says, abruptly. "I know I am. I don't -- I don't remember as much as I'd like. I don't know if what I remember is what really happened, or if I'm just remembering things I was hallucinating while I was dying. I still don't know how I survived. And -- I'm sorry, but I can't -- I can't be careful about how I'm saying it. I can't be careful to make sure I don't insult you while I'm telling it."

There's a stirring behind her, the sound of Tseng and Rufus having a conversation with eyes and faces. A moment goes by, and then Rufus speaks. His voice is soft. Gentle. (The tone he'd use to a spooked chocobo, trying to lure it back to its pen.) "It's all right. I understand. Just keep talking, and don't worry about insult. I will take no insult from your words."

Tifa laughs, hollowly. She picks up the hand that isn't holding the glass of whiskey and scrubs it over her face. "Yeah," she says, her voice wild. "Yeah, okay. I -- They sent a crew of four. Two men I never saw without their helmets on, wearing -- some kind of uniform, all blue and fancy. I think they were from the regular army, or from the guards. I'm not sure. I haven't seen that uniform since -- since I came here."

She pauses a second, to see if either of them will fill in the answer, but they both seem to have taken her request for no interruptions to heart. "Then there were two from SOLDIER. Or -- one SOLDIER, and General S-Sephiroth." She hears the catch in her voice when she says his name, and hates herself for it. (Hates that she thinks of the SOLDIER, and remembers black hair and an easy grin, and remembers thinking, *Cloud, Cloud* --)

She wasn't planning to tell them anything about that, but she opens her mouth to keep going, and it's as though something else takes over her voice. "I remember -- This is the part I can't remember. This is the part that makes me think I might have hallucinated what happened. There was this boy. I grew up with him, and when we were seventeen, he decided to go to Midgar and take the SOLDIER entrance exams. We didn't hear from him again, but when we heard they were sending a SOLDIER, I thought maybe -- maybe he would --"

Hearing the hitch-skip-hesitation in her voice, she stops herself. Makes herself take a deep breath. "It's stupid," she says. "Hearing it now, I know that it's stupid. But before he left, I made him promise me that -- that if he became a SOLDIER, he would -- if I ever needed him, he would -- he'd come back and save me. I was young, and it seemed so romantic, and I --" She stops herself again, before she can make a fool of herself even more. "Anyway. It wasn't him. It was somebody else. I remember that. I *know* I remember that, because I remember sitting out on the well in the middle of town and waiting for the SOLDIERS to get there, and I remember being so disappointed it wasn't him. But later on, when I was dying, he was there. He was the one to help save me. You need to know that. You need to know I can't tell you when this stops being real and starts being something I made up to comfort me while I was dying."

"I understand," Rufus says, again, and she can't decide whether to love him a little or hate him a little that there is neither pity nor

comfort in his voice.

Tifa scrubs her hand over her face again. "Okay. Okay. I -- The team got there. None of them was from Nibelheim; none of them knew the area. They needed a guide. They hired me. I'd been playing in those mountains since I was young." Her lips curve, without her conscious decision, thinking of her mother, thinking of arguments she'd fought and won over the years. Even despite the pain of her mother's death, those memories are still fond. "My father ran the inn -- he'd inherited it from his father, and it had been in our family for generations -- and I knew I'd take it over from him one day, but he wasn't anywhere near ready to retire, so I needed something to do. I spent summers hiring out as a guide for the mountains, both for travel and climbing. Mt. Nibel was a popular target for recreational climbers, and there were always people who wanted to get from Nibelheim to --" She brings her hand down, slashing the air, gesturing sharply. "That isn't important. I'm trying to -- I'm putting it off. Okay. Yeah."

She takes another deep breath, lets it out slowly enough that by the end, she's seeing spots in front of her eyes and feeling the burn of lungs that won't ever work fully again. "They hired me. I remember thinking -- S-Sephiroth was this distant, mystical figure for us. We knew him as a name, as reports on the TV, in the papers. I remember, before they got there, once we heard it was going to be Sephiroth himself who came, wondering what he'd be like. What he really was like, when there weren't any reporters around or anything."

Tseng's words from earlier that day echo in her memory, and her corresponding promise. She knows she needs to be as honest, as forthcoming, as she possibly can. She knows she is the last person (the last person alive) to have seen Sephiroth before his death, and she knows she is the only one who could possibly tell them enough to help them figure out what had been the precipitating incident to send Sephiroth over the edge. She knows.

It is a *fucking gods-be-damned bitch* to have a sense of responsibility. But she's said she'll do this, and so she will.

"He struck me as cold," she says. Turns the word over in her mind, decides it isn't *quite* the right one, corrects: "No. More ... reserved. But cold, too. The little boys of the village lined up to get a look at him, and they begged him for pictures, autographs -- he posed, he signed, but there was this -- this feeling to him, like he was wishing the whole time he was anywhere but there." She closes her eyes, conjures up memories she's been trying her best to forget for two years. "I remember thinking he looked -- tired. Exhausted, really. Like he hadn't slept in a few days. Or a few weeks. I remember thinking, I wonder if they sent him here *because* it was such an easy mission, so that he'd get a chance to get a little rest."

"He --" Rufus catches himself before he can say more than that one syllable. "May I ask a question?" he asks, carefully. (Still trying to obey her request for silence while she speaks.)

Tifa opens her eyes, makes herself turn around. Rufus is leaning forward, his hands twined together and dangling between his knees, his elbows propped on his thighs. He looks as though he's listening to

her with his whole body, with a fierce and focused concentration; the intensity on his face makes her head swim. "Go ahead," she says.

Rufus nods a thank-you. When he speaks, his voice is careful, neutral. "He left Midgar after a week of vacation. I saw him the day before he left; he'd been pushing himself hard, but he always pushed himself hard, and he looked as good as he ever did after a week of rest. Better, maybe. Was it the sort of tiredness that comes from one or two nights of not sleeping well, or did it look more systemic?"

Tifa frowns. It's a good question, she supposes; she closes her eyes again and thinks, summoning up the picture of that night and fixing it in her mind's eye, weighing it against another two years' worth of experience in evaluating men and women for drunkenness, exhaustion, and how close they are to wanting to snap and blow up half the slums. She isn't sure, but -- "It looked recent," she finds herself saying, before she realizes she's going to speak. "It looked like -- There was something bothering him. Something about being in Nibelheim, or -- Didn't you say he was born there?" She still can't decide how much faith she puts in that report.

"He was," Rufus says.

She opens her eyes again. Makes herself look at Rufus. "He didn't seem like a man who was curious about the place he'd been born," she says. "He didn't seem like someone coming back to someplace he remembered, but he wasn't looking around him like -- like he wanted to learn what the town was like, either. He just seemed tired, and a bit cranky, and like --" She closes her eyes, summons the mental image again, builds it up in her mind's eye until she can feel her elbows and knees starting to tremble from the adrenaline those memories summon. "He looked like something hurt," she blurts out. "He kept rubbing his head, like this --" She gestures, lifting her hand to her forehead, fitting her thumb against one temple and her little finger against the other, mirroring the gesture she remembers as closely as she can.

"Hm." Rufus chews on his bottom lip, but he doesn't say anything more. "Go on."

Rufus is thinking something; she can tell, but she doesn't know what it is. She turns back away from them -- she still doesn't think she can stand to be watching their faces as she speaks -- and takes a sip of the whiskey before she keeps going, more for something to clear her thoughts than out of any need for chemical assistance. Her throat, tight and closed, protests. "They stayed in my father's inn that night," she says. "We -- my mother and I, mostly, because my father usually wound up staying at the inn overnight in case there was a problem, except my mother had already died before that -- before everything happened, so it was mostly just me, but anyway. We lived in a house nearby, not in the inn itself. But I was always there at the inn late at night, helping -- by that point I was usually the one who cooked for the people who were staying there, it was how I learned to cook for a commercial kitchen, so I'd be there until pretty late, every night."

She hears herself babbling, makes herself stop, takes a deep breath. Takes another sip of whiskey while she's at it. "I knew we

would be leaving at dawn -- Sephiroth was very clear about needing to get an early start." It's getting easier to say his name. (*Things only terrify you until you can call their name*, she hears Zangan saying, in her memory.) "So I left the cleanup to the rest of the kitchen staff that night. But I wound up not being able to get to sleep, so I went down to the well around midnight or so, to sit on the edge and watch the stars. I used to do that a lot, it was --"

She stops herself again. Shiva damn it; *focus*. Both Tseng and Rufus are listening, quietly, and she can't sense any impatience radiating from behind her. But she can hear herself, the way she sounds like a babbling *child*, and she knows she's just putting off telling the worst of it, and she knows both of them are carefully observing all the things she's talking around, taking mental notes on the things that make her babble and the things she can say without flinching, and she knows Tseng, at least, will be cataloging all her reactions and storing them up against the day when he may be forced to exploit those weaknesses.

So she takes another deep breath. Brings her hand up to the scar between her breasts, which started aching (in memory, in sympathy, in reminder) at least ten minutes ago, and when she takes another deep breath she imagines she can feel the sword cleaving her ribs in two. "I went down to the well around midnight," she says, forcing her voice back to neutrality, or as close as she can make it. "It was habit, by then. Whenever I went out, I'd check the windows of the inn, to see what was going on. See if anybody was awake, or if I should stop in and check to see if there were any problems, or -- I looked up that night, too. I always did. Sephiroth was at the window, on the second floor. We had a little lounge area there, with a windowseat, and I'd always leave some cookies and an urn of hot water for tea, in case someone couldn't sleep and wanted to relax a bit. But he was just standing there, staring down at the main square. I couldn't see his face. I wasn't close enough. But when I woke up in the morning and got dressed to go meet the rest of them at the gates, I looked out the window first thing, the way I always did, and he was still standing there. Like he hadn't moved all night. I was -- I remember being creeped out by that. I remember thinking, they always said that the Great General Sephiroth didn't need to eat or sleep, and there he was, standing exactly where he'd been standing the night before, and when I met up with them all an hour later he didn't look any different than he had the night before."

But no. She stops herself. Rewinds. *Remembers*. "Except -- We were the first people there that morning. I always wake up at the crack of dawn anyway, and he looked like he just hadn't slept, and we were waiting for -- for the other SOLDIER and the two guards to finish breakfast and come down. He didn't say anything to me. I remember thinking, he's not much for small talk, is he? But all he did was keep ... looking over his shoulder, like he kept waiting for something. I remember thinking he was getting impatient at the others for making us wait. Except -- he wasn't. He wasn't looking at the inn, the way he would have been if he'd been waiting for them. He was looking back behind him." She pauses. Thinks. "Over to where the mansion was," she adds, slowly. (Holy Alexander and all his knights, it is *astounding* her how much she's remembering.) "He looked -- Haunted, almost. The way people get when they keep feeling like something's breathing down their neck, except every time they turn around there's nothing

there."

Behind her, she can hear Rufus stirring again. "Can I --"

"Just ask," she says, closing her eyes again, breathing against the sudden surge of weariness. (The process of remembering, of conjuring those memories in her mind's eye until they are real enough to see, to live again, is causing her adrenal glands to keep trying to tell her that disaster is about to strike.) "You don't have to ask if you can. Just ... try to wait until I'm done talking before you do."

"All right," Rufus says, softly. She can hear something lurking in his voice, something underneath the careful calm neutrality he's clearly trying to summon to match her own efforts. She almost wants to turn around again, to look him in the eye and see whether the hidden emotion is respect or reluctance, but she squashes the impulse. "You said, last night, that you used to play in the mansion when you were children. Did you ever see anything there that might explain anything about why Sephiroth kept looking at it?"

Tifa shakes her head, sharply. She remembers, when she doesn't feel the swing and heft of her hair moving with her, that Tseng had braided it for her this morning; that might have something to do with how awkward she's feeling in her own body right now. Or it might just be because she's remembering being the Tifa Lockheart of two years ago, gangly and uncertain and not quite yet at home in her adult body. "Nothing," she says. "It was mostly abandoned and run-down. There were a few books scattered here and there, mostly science textbooks."

She pauses, frowning, as something occurs to her. "Although," she says, slowly, casting her mind back, trying to cudgel her memory into producing a conversation that happened longer ago than she cares to think about. The pause draws out until she's quite frankly impressed by Rufus's self-control. She finally shakes her head. "I can't -- I can't remember exactly. My father said something once or twice about how there were hidden rooms in there. I think he was trying to scare us out of playing there -- you know, there are things in the hidden rooms that are going to come eat you. But we never saw anything like that. The stories worked, I guess; we were usually too scared to go anywhere past the front entryway and the front parlor."

She sneaks a glance over her shoulder. Rufus is looking at her, face intent. So is Tseng, but Tseng has the good graces to drop his eyes the minute he sees her looking. "Hm," Rufus says. "Tseng?"

Tseng shakes his head. "The blueprints have been 'lost'," he says, the quotemarks of scorn plainly audible. "It's one of the things we checked while you were in Junon."

The sound Rufus makes can only be described as a growl. "Why am I not fucking surprised? Okay. Put a trip out to Nibelheim on the list." (Tifa blinks to realize that he means it literally; Tseng has caused a notebook to spontaneously appear sometime in between the last time she looked and now. Or maybe he had it before and she hadn't noticed, too intent upon Rufus.) She must make a noise, or her face must change, because Rufus looks back at her, quickly. "Not you," he hastens to assure her. (Whatever's showing on her face must



be particularly revealing.) "You don't have to --"

"I want to," Tifa hears someone saying. She only realizes it was her when Tseng's head snaps up and he stares at her. She blinks, once, twice, and realizes the stranger who'd used her voice was speaking nothing but the truth. "If -- if it's at all possible, I want to. I want to see it. I want to see what they did to it. I want to see what's there now." (Wants to see the common grave, and lay a flower there for her father's memory.)

Rufus stares at her for a long minute. He doesn't blink. He barely even *breathes*. Then, just when Tifa is ready to back off, to say something to defuse the situation, he nods, once, slowly. "Yes," he says: just that, nothing more. His eyes are locked on hers, and in them, she sees a moment of pure understanding.

Next to him, Tseng stirs. "Rufus --"

"Shut up, Tseng," Rufus says, pleasantly enough. He doesn't take his eyes from hers. "If I want your opinion, I'll beat it out of you."

Tseng subsides, muttering under his breath. "Thank you," Tifa says, her voice barely above a whisper; she feels the way her lips shape the words more than hears herself say them.

"It's what I would do, too," Rufus says. Looking at him, at the way he is looking at her, she is reminded of those few moments while they were sparring when they fell into perfect accord. This moment feels exactly like those. She believes him when he says he would want the same, and she believes he understands every inch of the necessities driving her.

The insight into him -- his insight into her -- sweeps straight through her, and she suddenly feels like she needs to sit down, and she thinks, looking at him, that for the first time, she's beginning to understand what Tseng sees in him. She turns back to face the flowers before her face can give too much more away. (Lost cause, undoubtedly. But if she can't cling to her pride, she has nothing left.) She clears her throat. The prospect of revisiting her memories has suddenly become more of a refuge than the conversation of present day.

"We didn't say anything to each other while we were waiting," she says, closing her eyes again and summoning back the moment she's narrating. "But the other SOLDIER and the two guards showed up eventually, and we left for the reactor."

She pauses again, picking through her memories, trying to remember what happened in what order. Taking her pause as permission to speak, now that she's lifted the blanket prohibition on interruption, Rufus is saying to Tseng in a low voice, "Check on who those other three were. If you can't find it, tell me, I'll try to hit up the mainframe mail spool, maybe hit the old offsite backups, see if anybody's still got the emails about that mission hanging around in their inbox." She lets the sound wash over her, nothing more than background detail.

In her mind, Tifa can feel the mountain sunlight on her face. Can remember how it felt to lead the Great General Sephiroth and his

party out of the town gates, through the foothills, into the mountains proper. (Can remember how it felt to be young, and strong, and free.) "Someone stopped us as we were leaving," she remembers. "Joey. He lived three doors down from us. He wanted to take a picture of us all. For -- for the newspaper, I think. Or maybe just for him. He said he'd give us all a copy once he got it developed." She'd forgotten until that very moment. And out of nowhere, it hits her: Joey is dead. Joey is dead, and that roll of film never got developed, and her home is gone, and her father is dead, and she can never see any of the people she grew up with again.

She brings her fist up to her mouth. Behind her, she hears Rufus swearing, soft and vicious. The smell of the whiskey she'd been holding gets suddenly sharper, more demanding, and she realizes, a minute too late, the hand she's pressing against her lips to hold back the sound trying to struggle free is the hand that had been holding the glass. The glass is on the mat right now, and so is the whiskey. (Tatami. That's the word for it.) She wraps the other arm across her stomach, because she thinks she can feel the blood pouring out of it again. The room's swimming. She can't decide if it's her head or her eyes causing the problem.

Tseng's hands are on her shoulders a minute later, strong and reassuring. "This way," he says. "Come here, darling. It's all right. Come on." She stumbles, but he's there to catch her. A minute later, she's sitting in the nearest chair -- not the one she'd sat in before, and part of her is watching and thinking, *no, not this one, it's out in the open* -- and Tseng's hand is warm on the back of her neck, holding her head down between her knees. "Breathe," he says. "Just breathe. It's all right, darling. It's all right."

He keeps talking to her, a steady stream of nonsense words in Midgar common and Wutaian both, kneeling beside her chair (not in front of her, thank *fuck* not in front of her) with one hand on the back of her neck and the other on her shoulder. She doesn't know how much time passes before she can feel -- air currents, the sound of footsteps, *something* -- another person beside her. Rufus. She flinches, then flinches at having flinched, but all Rufus does is say, soft warning, "I've got a cold towel. I'm putting it on your neck." He does, right below Tseng's hand. It feels good.

It's another long, long eternity before she sits up (Tseng's hands fall away, immediately), gasping for breath. The towel slides down her back. Tseng rescues it and presses it into her hands. She clutches it for a minute, then presses it against her eyes. The cool dampness feels good.

"I'm sorry," she says, shuddering, chest heaving. (Oh, Holy Alexander, she can't *breathe*, can't breathe at all, and it brings back too many memories.) "I'm *sorry* --"

"It's all right," Tseng says, sitting back on his heels. "Physical reaction. Nothing you can do to stop it. Nothing you can do to predict what'll set it off, either. Don't worry about it. You lasted longer than I was expecting, actually." His eyes, when he looks at her, are brutally kind. "Come on. I'll show you where the bathroom is, and then I'll tell Rufus it's safe to come back in."

Rufus isn't in the room, she realizes, only after Tseng has pointed it out to her. Dimly, she can remember the sound of a door shutting, in the depths of her -- her whatever. She looks around her. The whiskey she spilled has been cleaned up, as has the glass, and the mat has been lifted from its place on the floor and propped against the screen to air out and dry. It must have been Rufus; Tseng has been with her the whole way. She lets Tseng lead her to the bathroom, bending over the sink and running the insides of her wrists under the cold water until she can barely feel them anymore before washing her face, then pooling cold water in her palms and pressing it against her eyes.

When she looks up and catches sight of herself in the mirror, she looks less like she's been dragged backwards through a thicket of branches than she was expecting. More than anything else, she looks tired. Tired, and old.

The bathroom is paneled in a dark-stained wood (all the wood in here must have cost *millions* of gil, she catches herself thinking); there's a bath in the corner, hip-high and also wooden, that reminds her of the Wutaian baths Zangan used to describe. This whole penthouse suite feels more Wutaian than anything else, an oasis of elsewhere in the heart of Midgar. She wonders why Tseng went to such pains to recreate the styles of his native country here. Up until today, she would have said she knew him well enough to predict him, well enough to say he'd left Wutai behind him as thoroughly as he could. The fact she was so wrong makes her wonder what else she's been wrong about.

But she's committed now, and second-guessing herself will lead to nothing more than an ulcer. She makes a face at herself in the mirror, then reaches for one of the towels that are hanging on the rack. (It's softer and more plush than anything she's ever touched before.) She dries herself off: wrists, hands, face. Once she's done, she straightens the towel and makes herself leave the bathroom before she can delay any further. *Rip the bandage off cleanly*, she thinks.

Tifa moves as silently as she can, pausing in the hallway made by the shifting screens to see what's happened in her absence before she's willing to risk re-entering the living area. The penthouse's front door is open, and Rufus is standing in it, facing out into the hallway; she can just barely hear his low voice conversing with Reno, and there's a hazy but distinct cloud of smoke around him. Tseng is sitting on the couch again, looking down at the notebook he was holding earlier, frowning and scribbling down notes. He's taken another pencil and used it to twist up his hair, shoving the pencil through the knot to hold it; a few strands are falling around his cheeks. As she watches, he blows one of them out of his face with the annoyed look of a man who does the same thing a thousand times a day.

*Courage*, she tells herself, and clears her throat.

Rufus turns at the sound. (Tseng doesn't look up; Tifa thinks he probably knew she was there the whole time.) His eyes lock on hers, and Tifa feels as though she'd rather like to sit back down and put her head between her knees again, because the look on his face is terrible, compassionate fury.

As she watches, he turns back again, stabs out the cigarette he's holding in the ashtray he must have carried out with him, and leans down to hand the ashtray to Reno. He steps back inside the apartment and shuts the door so deftly she doesn't have a chance to catch sight of Reno, and she thinks he might have done it so Reno couldn't catch sight of her. Another of those shocking and unexpected moments of courtesy she's seen from him. Once the door's closed, he crosses the room to stand in front of her, leaving her about twice as much space as she'd need in order to not feel crowded. His voice, when he speaks, is utterly formal; she thinks he's using the formality as a refuge. "If you wish, we can postpone --"

"No," Tifa says, before she realizes she's interrupting. She bites her lip, but Rufus doesn't look annoyed, only calm. "I haven't gotten to anything you need to know yet."

Tseng looks up at that; she notices, out of the corner of her eyes, that his face is one unmediated mass of held-back protest. She doesn't have attention to spare for him, though; her eyes are on Rufus. He's studying her, fierce and sharp and edged, and she'd thought the blade of his attention was sharp enough to cut her earlier today, but now it's so honed she wouldn't even feel it sliding into her skin before it gutted her completely.

All her metaphors right now feel like blades or fire.

"All right," Rufus finally says. He takes three steps back, without looking where he's going. Giving her space. "But you are owed this apology: I would not ask this, were circumstances less dire than they are. I am sorry."

Tifa doesn't quite know how to handle his statement, so all she does is nod. Rufus turns slightly, clearly intending to return to the living area; he stops himself before he can complete the turn and instead gestures to her, waving for her to precede him, to choose her seat before he chooses his. She holds back the twitch at the thought she'll be turning her back on him, but when she takes a deep breath and returns to the living room, she realizes he'd placed himself so it was trivially easy for her to keep him in her sights as she did.

(For a minute, she is possessed of warring urges to laugh hysterically or to scream, that Rufus fucking Shinra is taking such care with her.)

Tseng hasn't looked back down to the notepad in his lap; he's watching her, his face calm, his dark eyes sober and serious. Tifa takes a deep breath. She knows herself; she knows she *could* hold herself aloof and controlled throughout the rest of the story she still has to tell, but trying to would drain so much more of her energy than letting herself lean on someone would, and right now, the choices she has of people she can lean on are limited. (Maybe she could haul Reno in and use him as a teddy bear. Ha. *Ha.*)

So she crosses the room on silent feet and sits down on the couch next to Tseng. He relaxes the minute she does, suddenly and sharply, and in that instant he goes from being the leader of the Turks to being the man who shares her bed. (She can't help but glance quickly over at Rufus, to see what he might make of the transformation, but Rufus

is settling himself into the chair Tifa had first chosen, and she can't see his face.) Carefully, giving her plenty of time to object with voice or body, Tseng slides his hand over to rest atop her thigh. She puts her hand on top of his, squeezing -- hard -- and lets herself put her head on his shoulder.

He rests his cheek against the top of her head, pressing a light kiss into her hair. She lets herself soak up the regard of his affection for a heartbeat -- two -- before making herself sit back up and pull away. There's a fresh glass of whiskey sitting on the coffee table; she reaches forward and takes it, cradling it between her hands, but she keeps her thigh pressed against Tseng's and he keeps his hand on her thigh. (She's very close to mirroring the position Rufus had taken earlier, she realizes, and has to fight the wild laughter again.)

"All right," she says, into the silence that feels comfortable and expectant rather than pressuring. (They'd wait all night for her to keep talking, she thinks. She'd expect that patience from Tseng, but from Rufus it is merely another proof her concept of the man is so incredibly flawed.) "So." She lifts one hand, rubs at eyes that still itch from her weeping. Another deep breath, and she lets it out slowly, and she tries to summon as much emotional distance as she possibly can while still retaining the memory of what happened.

"Take your time," Tseng says softly. He picks his notebook up out of his lap and balances it on the arm of the couch to get it out of the way. (She glances over at it, more out of habit than out of a true desire to snoop -- she, too, is one of those people who can't help but read things sitting under her nose -- but he apparently takes notes in Wutaian, or at least in the Wutaian alphabet, and she can't read Wutaian in a glance even when it *isn't* the flowing, graceful script of someone who's more used to calligraphy than stenography. All she can tell is it looks like a list, or maybe just a bullet-point series of notes and reminders.)

"I'm just going to tell it," Tifa says, in a sudden rush. "Because otherwise I'll be putting it off all night. I'm sorry if -- if I start reacting again." She'd have preferred for her body not to betray her with its reactions in the first place, but she knows Tseng's words were the truth: her reaction was purely physical, her body's response to a trauma it doesn't know what to do with or how to integrate. (She's avoided thinking about these things for over two years.) She takes a deep breath. Then another, and the first few words are agony, but after that they start to get easier. "We -- the group -- we kept going from there. About, oh, forty-five minutes out of town -- The path up to the reactor, through the mountains, is pretty treacherous. The Shinra engineers who came in and out of town kept doing what they could to shore it up, but there was a rope bridge across a canyon -- I'm pretty sure it had been a riverbed at one point, back in the depths of time -- I knew from hearing them talk there just wasn't the money to replace it the way they wanted to. We all knew it was going to go someday. It happened to go while we were walking across it."

She finds herself shrugging her shoulders, rocking them in their sockets, hunching herself over against the remembered pain of that fall; finds herself rubbing at one knee, remembering the skin, torn and bloody. (It's odd. She'd forgotten how it felt until that very moment, drowned in the greater blood and pain that was the week's

ending.) "We lost one of the guards, in the fall," she says. "I -- I thought we'd look for him. But S-Sephiroth said we couldn't spare the time."

She frowns at hearing the hitch returning to her voice when she speaks Sephiroth's name. "I think -- I remember how he said it," she adds, slowly. She'd thought it would take her a moment to return to that state of heightened recall she'd reached before her body had decided to force her to stop, but the detail slots into place, seamlessly. "It might seem cold, but we can't spare the time to search for him'. He seemed -- regretful, almost. Like he really wished it weren't the case, but there was something really important he had to do instead."

Next to her, Tseng keeps still -- the only sign he's there at all is the way his thumb keeps sweeping endless circles over her thigh -- but Rufus, who has been watching his own drink and not her face, looks up at that. She nearly shrinks back at the passion she sees burning there, until he makes a face -- at himself, she thinks -- and does ... *something*, and the mask (and it *is* a mask) of calm coolness settles down over his features again. He isn't trying to pretend it's anything other than a mask this time, but she can't bring herself to mind, not when it means he isn't looking at her as though he wants to grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she gives him the answers he wants.

"What makes you say that?" Rufus asks. His voice is low and hypnotic, almost as soothing as Tseng's reassuring touch. "And do you have any idea what it was?"

Tifa shakes her head, more to buy herself time to think (to remember) than as an answer. "He didn't -- I don't know. It was how he kept moving, kept looking around him, like -- This is going to sound stupid, but." She gropes for words, eventually decides she's seen enough of how Rufus views the world to know he'll know what she means. "You know the way that someone who's watching for danger moves?" (Rufus nods, understanding perfectly. She'd thought he would.) "It wasn't that. It wasn't anything even close to that. He wasn't looking out for the monsters, or watching for what might attack us, and it wasn't the kind of -- situational awareness you get, when you've been trained to divide the world into threat and not-threat. It was ..."

She closes her eyes, summoning the memory, putting herself *into* the memory, and this time she's so caught up in the puzzle she's trying to find the words to explain that the memory of Sephiroth doesn't start her trembling anywhere near as much as it had before. "It was like he had somewhere to be," she says, replaying those endless uncomfortable moments again and again, examining them through the lens of distance and nearly three years' more experience. "Like he had a very important appointment to keep, and he couldn't afford to stop for anything that might make him late."

She pauses again, frowns, tries (Holy Alexander and all His knights *does her head hurt*) to cudgel memory into some semblance of order. "I'd never been down in that canyon," she says suddenly, realizing what's been bugging her even as she speaks, the nagging sense of *off* coalescing into something she can actually describe. "I

had no idea where we were. I remember thinking, I was hired to guide for them, and fat lot of good I'm doing, here. But Sephiroth had absolutely no doubt where he was going. He just ... took over. I didn't -- it didn't seem odd at the time, but now ..."

When she opens her eyes again, Rufus is watching her, and he's frowning, thoughtfully. (The frown smooths off his face the minute he realizes she's looking at him; she almost wants to tell him it's all right, he doesn't have to control himself so fiercely, but there's a part of her that's grateful for the effort. She doesn't think she could face down the full weight of that sharp regard right now. Not when she's this vulnerable.) "And he led you straight to the reactor?"

"Yeah," Tifa says. But -- "No. We were -- we went through this cave, first, and came out on this -- Sephiroth called it a Mako fountain. It was..." She remembers the sight, crystalline and glittering in the early-morning sun. "It was beautiful," she says, and the awe she'd felt at the time is right there, in her voice. "He said it was because of the excess Mako energy in the region, and it was why Shinra had chosen Mt. Nibel to put in the reactor. The SOLDIER who was there with us --" *not Cloud not Cloud*-- "Sephiroth said something about how rare it was to see materia in its natural state, and the SOLDIER didn't know what he meant. Sephiroth said materia is condensed Mako, and the Planet creates materia out of Mako to interface between it and us. He said ..."

She thinks, *thinks*, tries to remember the cool and distant sound of Sephiroth's voice telling things she'd known even then were Shinra secrets she shouldn't be privy to. The whole thing had been a lark, then. She'd been captivated by the Mako fountain, and she'd listened to what Sephiroth had to say out of curiosity more than anything else. She'd known even then she would never see any materia other than the single low-level Restore materia the town kept for emergencies, would never have a chance to use one. At the time, she'd listened for no other reason than than the knowledge she was hearing things she shouldn't, and the secret delight in having information others wouldn't. "He said..." She tries to remember his exact words. Something singing in the back of her mind is telling her they might be important, and she's learned to listen to that voice. "'The knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients are held in materia'. He sounded like -- like one of Ramuh's priests at Festival, trying to get others to believe."

"The Ancients." Rufus leans forward a bit further. "You're *sure* that's what he said?"

Tifa nods. "Positive," she says. Next to her, Tseng is scribbling notes again, his pen moving so quickly she can hear it scratching across the paper. She forces herself to ignore it, watches Rufus instead. Tries to decide what the little frown on Rufus's face could mean, stores away the memory of what parts of her story he chooses to question for her to go over later, to see if she can wrest any meaning from what he finds interesting enough to ask for clarification on. "He was -- it was like he was in some kind of trance, staring at the fountain. And then the SOLDIER said something about magic -- I can't remember exactly what it was -- and Sephiroth..."

She bites her lip; the memory burns. "He got angry," she says, her voice dropping down into a bare whisper. "I remember that. I

remember how angry he was. It terrified me, and in that minute I could see why he was the Great General Sephiroth, why he could win all those wars, why everyone said he was so dangerous. It was like -- for that minute, he wanted to *hurt* something. And then he started laughing, and the moment passed, and the SOLDIER asked what was so funny, and Sephiroth said --" She tries, again, to recall his exact words, but all she can remember is standing there, knees weak, and trying to decide if she should run before she saw that anger again. (How little she'd known.) "He said, a man once told him there was no such thing as magic, and not to use such -- such 'unscientific words'. And ..." She looks up again -- remembering the conversation, remembering last night -- fixing her eyes on Rufus, and she knows that her own eyes are wide. "The SOLDIER asked who that man was, and Sephiroth said, it was Hojo. He called him -- a mediocre mind following in the footsteps of his betters."

Rufus's eyes skid away from her face and over to Tseng's, just as she can feel Tseng, beside her, go tense and taut at her words. She remembers Rufus's words of last night: *And when -- some name she can't remember -- announced he had assigned Sephiroth on a mission to Nibelheim, Hojo freaked out, for half a second, before he got control of himself.* She'd thought, at the time, she'd never heard the name before -- the names of Shinra's elite are not very well known down in the slums -- but there had still been a little nagging *itch*. Now she knows what it is.

"You know something," she says, abruptly, watching them have conversations with their eyes she can't read. "And you're not just holding back because you don't want to interrupt me. There's something else going on. Tell me what it is."

Rufus winces, just a little -- just enough for her to see it -- before he catches control of himself again. "It's long and complicated," he says, and right as she opens her mouth to protest, holds up a hand. "That doesn't mean I won't tell you, just that now's probably not the best time for all of it. But you're right, you should probably know it, in case it connects with something and proves to be useful. I told you last night, I think, that Seph was an orphan, raised by the company, a lot like I was." She notices that, even now, even after everything, the nickname trips off Rufus's lips with the ease of long familiarity. "We were friends -- well, as much as we could be, with a six-year age gap between us, but still. By the time I was really ready to start noticing things, Seph was a teenager, interning with the science department. Under Hojo. I asked him once, why Hojo, and he said, he had to spend enough time in the science department, he might as well do something useful while he was there."

Rufus pauses. She can watch him turning over his words before he speaks them. "This is the hard part, because here's where it gets into the things that will take a week to explain. I *will* explain them, it'll just take time. And probably some diagrams. But, Seph was..." He trails off. There's so obviously something he doesn't want to tell her, but all he does is look at her, sober and reluctant. "Look, you know about SOLDIER, right? You know they're ... different from other people. Stronger, better, faster."

Tifa nods, slowly. She doesn't know what Rufus is trying to tell her.



Rufus's lips twist, and his voice is bitter. "Yeah, well. The reason is, they're stronger and better and faster because of a whole series of experiments Hojo and his department has been running for a long damn time. I don't know all the details -- I don't know any of the details; Hojo's files are the *one* set of files in the entire company I can't get into. And let me tell you, the fact a *molecular fucking biologist* can come up with crypto that I can't crack has been driving me fucking nuts for years, but that's another story. But whatever he does to enhance those boys, Seph had it start on him young. Very young. He spent a lot of time in Hojo's lab because Hojo wanted to keep an eye on him. Their relationship wasn't the most affectionate thing in the world, and Seph got to resenting Hojo pretty strongly by the time he got out of his teenage years, but in a lot of ways Hojo was the closest to a ... not quite parent, but *mentor*, really, that Seph ever had."

Tifa is staring at him; she knows she's staring at him. "You do *what?*" she whispers, through bloodless lips. (She's heard all the rumors about SOLDIER -- they take only the best, the training is grueling, half of those who enter the training don't make it. But she's never heard *that*.)

Rufus shuts his eyes for a second. When he opens them again, they're cool and composed, but she thinks it's taking him a great deal of effort to keep them that way. "My father gives Hojo a lot of leeway," he says. It isn't an answer. Except that it is.

"You --" But no, it's not 'you', now is it? The way Rufus is looking at her is the same way he was looking at her last night when he told her the truth of what happened to Nibelheim after she was carried, dying, from its wreckage: one part rage at what is being done in his name, one part sick acceptance of responsibility, all layered over with a grim determination to face whatever judgement she might pass on him. He hates this as much as she does, she thinks, suddenly, looking at the way his hands -- his only tell -- are endlessly turning his glass of whiskey around and around. He might not even know he's doing it.

The little voice in the back of her head is shouting at her again. "What does the enhancement consist of?" she asks. Hearing herself, she wonders *who the fuck it is using her voice*, and how that stranger dares to ask this, of this man, right now. (But she remembers -- in the reactor, while Nibelheim was burning, there was -- something --)

But Rufus only breaks her gaze and looks down at his drink. "Yeah," he says, and it's a total *non sequitur*, until she realizes he's saying he doesn't know either, and would very much like to. "That's the six million gil question. Because I want to know, too. Seph was the first person to get the SOLDIER treatments, that I know of at least. If whatever Hojo does to them takes time to manifest into an utter and complete breakdown..." He trails off. "I tried to work it out. I think -- if that's the case -- we have about another four or five years before the first of the others start showing signs."

There's a stark, bleak terror, lurking underneath his words. Tifa thinks about all the SOLDIERS who fought the war with Wutai, who even now guard Shinra's interests across the globe. She's never known how many there are. Nobody in the slums does. Rufus might. And if he's this afraid of what might happen if those SOLDIERS start

going insane ...

She remembers Cloud, so eagerly convinced that he would go to Midgar and become a SOLDIER, one of so many boys who soaked up Shinra's stories of fortune and glory until his life's dream became to pursue, to belong. (She remembers a scene out of her nightmares, rows upon rows of pods, or coffins, and if what Rufus is saying is true, if what he thinks Shinra has been doing is real -- oh, Ramuh, what if they were *people*, SOLDIERS being grown, scant miles from her hometown --)

She doesn't realize how badly she's trembling until Tseng, next to her, bites off a low Wutaian curse and tosses his notepad onto the coffee table, turning on the couch to take her into his arms and tuck her under his chin. She doesn't fight it, but she doesn't relax into it, either.

"How can you *live* with yourself?" she asks. She's too upset to try to soften her words. "How can you look at yourself in the mirror every morning?"

But that's not fair, is it, not when Tseng -- when Rufus himself -- has already told her Rufus is sharply limited in what he can do, what he can accomplish, without risking his own life in the process. And that alone should have told her all she needed to know, because what father threatens his son's life over nothing more than a disagreement? Is that what Rufus grew up with? Knowing what was being done, helpless to stop it, helpless to even *say* anything, spending years and years storing every last atrocity being committed in Shinra's name, in *his* name, upon his personal balance-sheet against the day when he *could* begin to act? Is that why he hasn't noticed all the things that are going wrong in the slums -- because he has other things occupying him?

She opens her mouth again to retract her words, to apologize, but Rufus has sagged back in his chair, tipping his head back so he's looking at the ceiling, and he starts speaking before she can. "Sometimes I don't," he says. "Believe me when I say, that's one of the least of Shinra's dirty little secrets lurking in the darkness, waiting to pounce." He lets his head drop, stares at her, and in that instant she can see utter and complete *exhaustion* written across his face. It makes him look ancient. "I've been trying to uncover them for years, so at least I can *know* what I'm up against. I haven't had much luck. You see, now, why I'm pushing you so hard. Why Tseng is pushing you so hard. I already know just from listening to what you've told me so far: you have the key to unlock at least *one* of those secrets. And it might very well be the thing that gives us the knowledge and information we need in order to act to *stop this*."

Tifa stares at him. Behind her, above her, Tseng is cradling her against his chest, his hands moving briskly up and down her arms. She thinks, with the portion of her mind that isn't occupied in running in circles and screaming, that he's trying to keep her blood flowing against the possibility of this news sending her back into shock again. *Tseng knows too*, she thinks; *Tseng knows just as much as Rufus knows*, not knowing how she knows Rufus tells Tseng everything but knowing he *does*, and even the certainty that the sword over Tseng's head is no less sharp -- probably more so -- than the sword over

Rufus's doesn't help the crawling, fetid feeling that washes over her skin.

She's off the couch before she realizes she's moving, out of Tseng's arms, and she only stops because she realizes she doesn't have anywhere she can go. (If she were back home, back in the Heaven, she would go out on the porch, or into the backyard, and tip her head back and stare up at the plate and run through her litany of curses against Shinra, over and over, until she felt better for having vented them. She can't do that here, and everything comes crashing in on her again, *just how much* she has put herself into their hands and taken them at their word.)

Behind her, she hears a rustling, knows it for the sound of Tseng preparing to rise from the couch as well. Half a heartbeat later, she hears Rufus hissing, the sharp and sibilant correction you use for a cat that just tried to jump up on your counter. The sound stops.

When Rufus speaks, she can hear death in his voice, and the death she hears isn't her own. "I was seventeen years old the first time I vowed I would someday undo every barbarity my father condoned if not outright ordered. I've spent the past seven years maneuvering myself into a position where I could someday hold him accountable for every single life destroyed in the name of the holy Gods of profit. I'm not there yet. I won't be for quite some time. But I will be someday. I can't protect you past a certain point. I can't undo anything that's been done to you. I can't guarantee this all won't come crashing in on your head like a house of cards in a high wind. But I'm closer than I've ever been before, and I will get closer and closer until there is nothing in this world or any other that could stop me, and I am begging you. *Help me.*"

His voice is one long, naked plea. She suddenly knows she has to see his face, read what's written there -- if he isn't controlling it again, the way he's been controlling himself so assiduously throughout this whole clusterfuck -- and she turns, as fast as she can, hoping to spot the answers she needs before he can lock his face back down again. He doesn't, though. He is staring at her, and his eyes are burning, and his whole body radiates a fierce and elemental fury.

She should find it terrifying. Instead, she realizes, it only matches her own, the fury that's been sleeping unheeded in her chest (beneath her scars, beneath her secrets) for the past two years.

With that look, one thing comes clear: Rufus Shinra is even more invested in the idea of overthrowing the Shinra Electric Power Company than she is.

Tifa stands in the center of Tseng's living room, looking at the second most powerful man in the world, and her fists clench at her side, and all she wants to do is laugh. (Or scream. Or punch something.)

"I told this story once before," she says, abruptly, before she can decide whether or not it's wise to admit. (Truth calls truth. It always has, to her.) "When I came here. When I recovered enough to get out of the clinic I'd been taken to and start looking for the other people from Nibelheim who'd moved here. Before. I had to tell them. I had to

tell them what happened. One of them was --" She flicks her eyes over to Tseng, trying to gauge how much she can afford to say, but Tseng isn't looking at her; he's looking at Rufus, and his face is a stone mask. No help there.

She rolls the dice and prays for guidance, prays she's doing the right thing, but Rufus has just handed her a shitload of information that's far more damaging and done it with (she thinks) full belief she would hear him and decide she would withhold even her tentative and embryonic cooperation. She owes him the same.

(Hadn't she, just this morning, vowed she wouldn't let Rufus's honesty force her into honesty in return? Lost cause. It always had been.)

"One of them was part of the rebellion," Tifa says, hoping they couldn't hear her pause, hoping they won't press her, hoping they'll take the past tense in her words as a sign that Johnny has already been captured and dealt with. She's expecting some kind of reaction, but neither of them so much as flinch; Tseng turns his head to look at her, steady regard, and she fights back the implications of the realization Tseng *already knew*. (And hasn't acted on it. ...Because he wasn't given explicit orders?) "He tried to recruit me. Tried to get me to agree to tell the story over and over again, to fire people up, to get them to act against Shinra. I didn't like his methods. I didn't like how willing he was to hurt innocent people just for a chance to get to his real target."

She closes her eyes and laughs, hearing the faint note of mania creeping into her voice again. "You're telling me Shinra doesn't care about hurting innocent people even more than Johnny's group doesn't. That they *thrive* on it. And -- You know, call me crazy here if you want, but I want to make sure I'm hearing things right. Did you or did you not just tell me you've been planning your own anti-Shinra rebellion for years?"

There's a pause. Then, astonishingly, she hears both Tseng and Rufus laughing too. "You know," Rufus says, sounding contemplative, laughter threaded through his every syllable, "I really think I did," and suddenly Tifa finds her laughter has lost the manic edge, become honest, become *real*, because he sounds like he's never had the thought before and has discovered he kind of likes it.

It takes a few minutes for the laughter to die down, and when it does, the air feels lighter in the wake of its passing. This time, when she looks at Rufus, she doesn't see the too-controlled executive or the man who thinks he owns every room he walks into or the man who was born to rule a world and *knows it*. She sees a man who's too young to bear the lines written across his face, too young for the dignity and self-control he's been forced to learn, too young for the burden resting on his shoulders but all too aware of its weight and his responsibility.

She sees a man who's trying his best to right the wrongs he inherited (or will inherit) and who's *terrified* his best might not be good enough. She blinks -- twice -- but the sight doesn't go away, and she knows -- *knows* -- that *this* is what Tseng sees in him, is why Tseng has given Rufus his fealty, and she understands, down to her

bones: everything Rufus has told her since the moment they dropped all their pretenses is the absolute honest truth.

"I've spent the last two years hearing a lot of people tell me they've been just waiting for me to get my act together and start my own rebel movement," Tifa blurts out. (And then looks at Tseng, feeling a bit guilty -- they've never dared to declare their sides as openly as that -- but the edge of his mouth is tipped up, rueful amusement, and she knows her suspicion is correct: he's known. He's known for a while.) "I didn't think I could yet. It was almost there, but it wasn't practical, or possible, and there was never a strong enough reason to overcome those concerns. If I'd known any of this..." She trails off, watching Rufus nod along with her words, watching Rufus fucking *Shinra* agreeing with her that his company -- his father's company -- needs to fall. "But every single rebel group down there is *fucking idiotic* about things. They have no concept of how the world works, or what strategy or tactics even *are*, or what's possible and what will get them killed faster than you can say 'bullet to the head'."

Too late, she winces, realizing that Tseng is listening, realizing Tseng would probably be the one holding the gun that bullet came from, but he doesn't seem to mind. "I know," Tseng says, calmly. "None of what you've just said is a surprise to me." His lips quirk a bit more. "And I've often thought that on the day when you decide it is time to begin your rebellion and we must by necessity then become enemies, that at least it will be pleasant to have an adversary who *thinks*. You will be a better leader than the slums have ever seen." There's regret in his voice, and respect, and the sound of doors shutting and worlds ending.

Tifa opens her mouth -- not sure what she's going to say to that revelation -- but Rufus is leaning forward, all of his laughter gone as though it never were. "Don't be an idiot, Tseng," Rufus says. The blade is back in his voice, subtle and keen. Tseng looks over at him, expression sharp and annoyed, but Rufus is looking at Tifa, and Tifa has no words for the look on his face. "She isn't saying she's walking out of here and going back Downstairs and calling up her people and declaring war."

Rufus's voice is so confident, so self-assured, that it takes Tifa a minute to realize the contents of what he's saying; she can feel her face flushing, casting her mind back over what she's said and realizing *of course* that's what Tseng would believe. They've been so careful to avoid ever speaking of matters such as this, both of them knowing that the day the cards hit the table would be the day honor required them to part. Both of them have been trying so hard to postpone the day of reckoning as long as possible, and if her words have convinced him today is that day --

And indeed, Tseng's voice is cool and controlled, but Tifa knows it -- from long familiarity -- as the control he uses to cover up true anger. (Or fear.) "What is she saying, then, Rufus, if you're such an expert all of a sudden?"

Rufus looks back at her. In that look, in that instant, it's as though they've fallen back into the connection -- the communion -- they had in the backyard of her bar that morning, where they could read each other so thoroughly each of them knew what the other was about to

do before it happened, on a level so basic and elemental as to be nearly unconscious. She meets those ice-blue eyes fearlessly, and she *can* read him, and she knows he can read her, and there's a part of her that's screaming but the rest doesn't mind it at all.

He's asking her for permission, asking her to let him be the one to break the news to Tseng -- telling her, wordlessly, things will go over so much more smoothly if he is the one to break her news to Tseng, to spell out explicitly the decisions she's been making implicit for at least the last five minutes. Tifa nods, slowly. "Go ahead," she tells him. "I'll tell you if you get it wrong."

Rufus inclines his head to her, one grave and earnest salute, before transferring his attention back to Tseng. "The lady didn't just tell us she was starting the rebellion you've been waiting for her to start," Rufus says. "The lady just told us she wants in on ours."

Hearing it said out loud like that, Tifa realizes a weight on her chest -- a weight that's been on her chest for a long, long time -- has just taken wings and flown away. Because: yes. That's exactly what she's saying, and if anyone had told her, two days ago, she would be saying anything even remotely like it she would have called them deluded. Or worse. But for two years she has carried the weight, the knowledge she alone holds truth and proof of Shinra's perfidy, sleeping underneath her heart like a stone, and for years she's known she's honor-bound to *do something about it* someday, and for years she's been telling herself *not yet, not now, not ready, not until* -- and hating herself for it. (*Not brave enough, not strong enough, not committed enough* --)

It's out in the open now. And for all that Rufus Shinra is the *last person in the world* whom she'd expect to ease her conscience, it doesn't change the fact that for the first time in two years, she honestly believes she's stopped running away from the truth. She's being given the chance to help set things right. She isn't naïve enough to believe it will be easy, or there'll be no danger, or that Rufus's idea of what the world should look like is anywhere even remotely in the same neighborhood as her own. But she believes he's honest and genuine about wanting things to change, and she believes he's just as sickened by Shinra's abuses as she is, and even though he's offered her no guarantees -- has been scrupulously careful *not* to -- she believes he'll move heaven and earth to keep her from being hurt further.

Tseng is staring at her. She wonders what her face must look like right now. "Tifa --"

Tifa crosses the living room on jubilant feet, taking his face between her palms and leaning down to kiss him. (He's stiff and shocked beneath her lips for a heartbeat -- two -- before softening. She can hear, behind her, Rufus chuckling.) "Yes," she says, pulling back but not releasing him, meeting his eyes and putting every scrap of sincerity she can summon in her gaze.

Tseng breathes out, hard and heavy. His eyes search her face. "If you -- if we --"

She lifts one hand to rest her fingers on his lips, the same gesture

she always uses when they stray too close to topics best left undisturbed. "I know," she says. "No promises. It's all right."

Then she lets go of him entirely, turns around, and settles herself back down on the couch at his side. "Okay," she says. "I've got the rest of a story to tell. And then you two can brief me on everything you can."

## ( 5. )

A little over two years ago, Tseng had sat on the porch of the Seventh Heaven, smoking a clove cigarette and building and discarding plans until he'd found one he thought might have a chance of succeeding, and today -- tonight -- is the culmination and vindication of all those plans. And right now, all he really wants to do is go *hide on the balcony*, lest Rufus pull another surprise out of nowhere on him. (Or, possibly, throw Rufus *off* the balcony. Or himself. Or both, and Tifa can fend for herself.)

This is not how he expected any of this to go. (But then again, since when has Rufus done anything expected?)

He's still cranky from misplaced adrenaline, still grumpy about being led to think Tifa had finally heard enough to tip her over the line to declaring her war, still pissy about the way Rufus had chosen to correct his assumptions. (Still annoyed Rufus had been able to hear what Tifa had truly been saying, and he had not, when he is the one who has been Tifa's lover for nearly two years now and Rufus met her just under twenty-four hours prior. It has always been betting against the house to be annoyed at Rufus demonstrating skill at people, though; Rufus knows people like Tseng knows swordplay, bred down deep into his bones and honed by circumstance and necessity, and Rufus works as hard for his skill with people as Tseng worked for his skill with the blade.)

But Tifa is sitting next to him, warm and soft and *relaxed*, light of spirit in a way he has never seen her before. The weight lying on her shoulders for as long as he's known her has been -- Not lost. Never lost. But picked up and set aside, put somewhere else for the duration, and it's been replaced with a sharp eagerness and an almost-fanatical dedication. He's seen Tifa concentrate before, seen her devote herself wholly to a task, seen her throw herself into things both with reluctance and eagerness. None of those times has been like this. She is looking at Rufus like she *believes* him, believes *in* him, and Tseng is the one who told her, this morning, that she could, but he can't stop the superstitious part of him fearing (knowing) the whole world will change, now that Rufus has won her cooperation.

He's still not entirely sure how Rufus *did*. Ten minutes ago, Tifa had been unable to so much as bear his touch, the touch of someone tainted by Shinra's evils, after having heard of the truth of SOLDIER and Hojo's labs. Ten minutes ago, Tseng had been mortally certain Tifa was about to stalk out of the apartment -- and he and Rufus had given Reno orders not to prevent her from going, if she did -- and the next he'd see of her would be the day he came knocking on her door

to redeem his word to her before having to arrange her death. Sometime between that moment and now, she has apparently decided that she and Rufus are on the same side, for now at least. And he knows Rufus has not spoken one word of untruth, has not so much as *exaggerated*, but sometime between that moment and now, the two of them have apparently declared war. Together. Not on each other.

He has seen Rufus accomplish a dozen incredible things before breakfast many times before, but this may be the first time Rufus has accomplished something Tseng would have called flat-out impossible.

Tifa is *here*, leaning back against him, relaxed and calm, and the emotion he can read from her skin against his is nothing more than quiet relief. "All right," she says, and even her voice has changed now. The past hour has been an exercise in agony for him, watching Tifa throw herself, over and over, against the shoals of memory, watching her shoulders (tight and taut) hunching over themselves and her voice remaining still and small and quiet like she was trying to hide from being discovered. (Being caught out, being *hunted* again.) Now, she sounds calm -- true calm, not the artificial overlay she was trying to hold over herself -- and resolute. "Let me get through this quickly. Interrupt me whenever you have questions, it's probably easier that way, rather than you trying to remember them and hold them for later."

*And I won't have as much of a problem with being interrupted, now*, she is saying, without actually saying it, and Tseng knows Rufus can hear it as well as he can. Rufus leans back in his chair, hooks one leg up and over the arm of the chair, braces his elbows further back on the arms of the chair, steeples his fingers in front of his mouth, and rests his chin on his thumbs. Tseng blinks. It's one of Rufus's relaxed-thinking positions, one he only adopts among intimates. In those jeans, it's about an inch and a half, and a few threads, shy of showing off parts of him only his intimates should see.

(He'd hoped Tifa and Rufus would find common ground, but this is a little beyond even his best expectations.)

"Before you start," Rufus says, thoughtfully, tapping his index fingers against his lips, "I'll take advantage of that. Let me back us up a bit. Did Seph ever say anything about *why* you couldn't spare the time to go looking for the other guard?"

Tifa shakes her head, swift and sure. "No. Never. I thought the other SOLDIER might object, but he didn't. We just kept going."

"Hm." Tap, tap, tap. Rufus glances over at Tseng again. "Tseng?"

Tseng knows precisely what Rufus is asking. "Nope. Not that I've been able to find, at least."

"And for the people in the room who *don't* have a direct connection into your brain?" Tifa says, sweetness layered over steel.

Rufus chokes back laughter, clears his throat. "Ah. Yes. Sorry; we've worked together for too long. I was asking him if the mission brief specified any sort of orders about what to do if there were injuries or casualties. It's not standard to abandon casualties in the field, unless the unit is taking heavy fire and recovering the fallen



would be too much of a danger to those who remain. The only time units are given the abandon-casualties order is generally if a rescue operation would inherently compromise the mission itself. And I can't think of any reason why an eradicate-and-contain mission *would* have been operating under those parameters. Which means, since Tseng just told me they *weren't*, it was Seph's choice, not orders he received." He manages to make the explanation neutral, not at all condescending; anyone with experience with Shinra's policies would know, but of course Tifa is not one of them, and Rufus is excellent at imparting information. When he chooses to be.

Tifa nods, slowly; Tseng can feel the bumps and ridges of the braids he plaited into her hair this morning, rasping against his bicep. (He resists the urge to rest his chin on the crown of her head again, to curl his arm around her waist as she leans against him -- it would distract them from the conversation they're having -- but oh, he wants to. He has been given the precious gift of more time before he and Tifa must part ways, and he wants to savor every minute of it.)

"My turn to ask, then," she says, and her tone is slow and thoughtful. "Since from what you say, you knew him better than anyone else might have." Tseng can imagine what it costs her to ask, after having said just this morning she doesn't want to know Sephiroth as anything other than the monster that nearly ended her life -- but no; the slowness in her tone isn't reluctance. She's picking through something in her head, fitting fact against memory, trying to piece together some of the answers she's promised them. "Was that out of character for him? Leaving someone behind like that?"

Rufus's tapping fingers still, and he blinks twice, regarding her steadily. The expression on his face is one Tseng finds quite familiar; Tifa has managed to surprise him. "Yes," Rufus says, without hesitation. "That's what was bothering me about it when you said; I just didn't want to interrupt. I once pinned a medal on his chest that he was given for saving the lives of five NCOs who were in a convoy with him while it was bombed. He pried them out of the burning wreckage with his bare hands. Anyone who hadn't had the SOLDIER treatments would've lost the hands; as it was, he needed skin grafts and a week in Hojo's lab, after."

The noise Tifa makes is a thoughtful hum; she twists in place to look up at Tseng, her face sober. "I need to get up and pace," she says to him, and he thinks it's an apology. He nods (she is trying, in her own way, to make up for having had that one moment where she couldn't bear to let him touch her; they both know it) and her smile flashes, lightning-quick but no less beautiful, before she pushes herself up from the couch.

Pace she does, back and forth, ten steps in either direction; he's seen her do this dozens of times before when trying to work out the optimal solution to a problem she's facing. Tifa thinks best when she is in motion. (He doesn't doubt that if she thought they could afford the time, she would ask to go out running.) "I didn't recognize it then," she says, after a few about-faces, slowing but not stopping. "I don't think I had enough information *to* recognize it then." There's regret in her voice, lurking under the surface, and Tseng hopes she isn't tormenting herself with thoughts of what she could have done if she'd known then what she knows now; she couldn't have. "But what I

saw of him, from the moment he entered Nibelheim's gates, is easily consistent with what happened -- later -- and it differs only in degree. I -- The man, the friend, you've both described to me is someone I never met. Never saw. Which means whatever happened to him, whatever started this whole thing, happened sometime in between his leaving Midgar and his arriving in Nibelheim."

"The beginning pieces of it, at least," Rufus says. His voice is just as thoughtful; Tseng looks over to notice his foot, the one swinging in mid-air, is jiggling slightly, and his fingers are tapping against his lips again in the way that usually means Rufus is craving a cigarette. (And that's another proof they've crossed some indescribable line; Rufus does not fidget in front of people he does not trust, in whole or in part, and Rufus trusts far too few people. It's Rufus's equivalent of Tseng's being willing to tie up his hair and bare the nape of his neck.) "If he were as bad as -- he was by the end --"

Tifa interrupts, with an impatient gesture. "Say it. I've been dancing around it because it still hurts too much. If you say it enough, sooner or later it will become just another fact."

Tseng doubts that, but Rufus only nods, showing no impatience for the interruption. "All right, then. If he were as bad as he was when he destroyed Nibelheim, at the beginning, he never would have made it up to the reactor at all. So whatever happened, it started before he got to Nibelheim, but it got worse once he got there." Pause: tap, tap, fidget, fidget. "Father called the board meeting to brief us on what happened on the ninth day after Sephiroth left Midgar. At that time of year, for that kind of mission, it would have been ground transport over the mountains to Junon, helicopter from Junon to Costa del Sol, ground transport from Costa del Sol across Corel and the Corel desert up to the mountains of Nibelheim. I make it ..."

He squints, looks off into the distance; Tseng can see him adding up the figures. Tseng's already done the math, though, a long time ago. "Two days, give or take," he says. Both Rufus and Tifa focus in on him. "Depending on when they left Midgar, and whether they overnighted in Junon or Costa del Sol. Or Corel. We've tried to backtrace it, and haven't been able to."

"They arrived late," Tifa says. Her eyes unfocus; she's doing math in her head too. "So, probably evening of the second day. One night in the inn, we went up to the reactor the next day --" Her voice wavers, just a tiny fraction. Tseng wonders if Rufus can hear it. "I wasn't allowed in, then. Just Sephiroth and the SOLDIER with him; he ordered the guard to stay outside with me. Shinra secrets, he said. I don't know what happened in there, and Shiva damn it, I wish I did, because when they came out again, General Sephiroth looked --" She takes a deep breath, blows it out, slowly. "He looked *furious*. Like whatever happened in there had -- had wrecked him, really, and the only way he could deal with it was to get angry."

She glances over at Rufus, waiting to see if he has any other questions, but Rufus only nods, slowly, making a negligent "go on" hand gesture; Rufus may have decided to take her at her word about allowing interruptions now as much as he had refrained previously, but Rufus has observed enough interrogations over the years to know that when a witness is talking freely, the best thing to do is to let

them keep talking.

Tifa's pacing has speed up, slightly; she wraps her arms across her chest, hugging herself tightly, and changes her route from a simple back-and-forth to instead turning circuits around the room. "That was the third day," she says, and Tseng can tell she's using the questions of timelines to help distract her from the truth of what happened. "He didn't say a word to any of us on our way back. We had to detour pretty heavily, since the bridge was down, but I knew another route back from the reactor that didn't use the bridge, although we didn't use it often because it washed out every time it rained more than an inch --"

She stops herself -- both words and pacing -- suddenly, and Tseng turns to see why; she's standing right behind the couch, staring off at nothing. Remembering. "But he didn't need me there," she says, her eyes fixed on something across the room and across the years. "Any more than he'd needed me to get there, once we fell. I didn't notice it at the time, because --" She starts a little in place, bites her lip, and her eyes refocus back in on the here-and-now. "Well, to be honest, because it was late, I was tired, I was hungry, I was still aching from the tumble we'd taken off the side of the bridge, and I wanted to get home, get a good meal, a good night's sleep, and get some liniment on the shoulder I'd wrenched. And -- there was something about Sephiroth, right then, that scared the shit out of me. I didn't want to look at him too closely. I *didn't* look at him too closely. He ... he wasn't quite all there, really. But he was like a needle on a compass, straight back to town. I didn't notice, because I was on point most of the time and he was ... thinking about something, maybe? Hanging back. And I was trying really hard not to look at him, because he was creeping me the fuck out. But ..."

She's gone back to staring at nothing; as Tseng watches, she shivers again and resumes her pacing. "Stupid question --" she starts.

"No such thing," Rufus says. "You're the one who was there. You're the one who saw him. Anything you ask can only serve to give you more information to compare against, and anything might be the thing to jog your memory -- and give us the one thing we need."

"Yeah, okay," Tifa says. "You mentioned -- Those SOLDIER enhancements you were talking about. You said you don't know what they consist of, but -- did you ever see any kind of evidence that Sephiroth had a compass in his head? I've known some people who do, naturally --"

Tseng is one of those people; he's never been lost a moment in his life, a fact Rufus knows all too well. Being as such, he knows damn well what it looks like in others. "Sephiroth once got lost trying to get from HQ to here," Tseng says. "It's three stops on the train line and a straight shot on both ends."

Rufus nods, slowly. "It was a running joke in the army. Heidegger used to threaten to assign Seph an aide-de-camp whose sole duty would be to read the compass."

"Yeah." Tifa breathes in, slowly, shakily. "I was afraid of that." She is still pacing, but as Tseng watches, she rubs her hands up and

down her arms, as though she's cold. (Tseng keeps it warm enough in here that visitors often complain of the heat.) "Put that on the list," she says, abruptly, to Tseng. "Because -- you don't get that overnight. You don't get that from having been in the mountains once, or from having gotten yourself *to* somewhere and thinking you remember the way back. There's a *reason* I made thousands of gil each year once the spring rains stopped. You can get lost in those mountains even if you've been there a thousand times before, even if you're not actually attempting the summit, even if you're just taking what you think are the well-worn paths, and they're deadly enough that if you don't know where you are or what you're doing, you're not going to make it back to town."

Tseng leans forward, picks up his notepad, and flips back to the list he's been keeping, of the questions Tifa's story raises and the things they will need to pursue. He brackets off a sidebar, starts noting down all the changes in Sephiroth's behavior between the man they'd known and the man Tifa's describing. "You think there was something ... drawing him?" Rufus asks, while Tseng is writing. "First to the reactor, and then back to town?"

Tifa nods. "I didn't notice it then. But looking back, now ... Yeah. Yeah, I do. Because we got back to town -- that was the night of the third day, if you're right about how long it took them to get there -- and I went straight home and into the bathtub like I'd promised myself, and the rest of them went back to the inn, except the next morning -- day four -- when I went in to help handle breakfast -- we were full up that week -- the other SOLDIER was there, but neither the surviving guard nor General Sephiroth was at breakfast. The guard was in and out -- I never did find out where he was going when he wasn't in the inn -- but Sephiroth wasn't anywhere to be found. We all expected them to leave that morning. The SOLDIER said they'd taken care of what was causing the monsters. But the next day came along, and the next, and they were still there, except nobody had seen General Sephiroth."

She stops her pacing in front of Tseng's *tokonoma* this time, staring up again at the flowers and the two scrolls that are the only examples of Tseng's calligraphy he allows himself to display, even in his private refuge. From this angle, he can't see her face, but the lines of her shoulders aren't quite as miserable as they were the last time she was using the flowers as a focus. "They were there for three days," she says, then stops herself. "No, wait. Four. From the morning of the fourth day, the day after we came back from the reactor -- it was a Tuesday that we went to the reactor, I remember, because Tuesdays were the days we always aired out mattresses in the unoccupied rooms, during the spring and summer, and I was so glad when I picked up the guide job, because it meant I would miss it."

She stops, thinks some more; Tseng watches her fingers twitch (thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger) and concludes she is counting days. He's deathly certain he knows what she's counting up to. "Four days," she repeats, finally, with a bit more confidence. "We - Sephiroth didn't show his face once, during any of them. I think he was staying in the mansion the whole time. I don't know what he was doing up there. I don't know what brought him there. But he spent four days there, and on the third day, I -- I asked the SOLDIER how long he thought they'd be there, because I knew my father wouldn't

say anything, not to Shinra, but we had a hunting party booked to use the rooms we'd put them in, and they'd be arriving the next Monday, and I wanted to know whether we were going to have to juggle around the reservations. He just laughed and said that they'd be staying as long as the General wanted to stay, and they didn't pay him enough to make the big decisions like that, and he was enjoying the vacation in the meantime."

Tseng numbers a quick timeline in the margins of his notebook, scribbles in the days and dates he knows and can extrapolate. "If you visited the reactor on Tuesday," he says -- thinking aloud, more than anything else -- "that would have been ..." He knows the dates involved, has calculated them endless times since the news of Nibelheim first broke, but it still takes him a few seconds; he covers by filling in dates, days, as he calculates. "Tuesday the 14th. Which actually gives us a way to say for certain how long it took for them to get out there; Heidegger sent out that mission on Sunday the 12th."

"I remember," Rufus says. "Seph bitched at me about it. 'It's not enough he has to try to humiliate me by sending me out on this mission in the first place; he has to kill the rest of my weekend on something that could damn well wait until Monday, too?'" He drops, as he always has, into his closest approximation of Sephiroth's voice; Rufus has always been an excellent mimic. Across the room, Tifa's head snaps up like she's heard a ghost. Rufus winces, realizing his mistake too late, but charges onward without apologizing, knowing she would be humiliated by his calling attention to her reaction. "Sunday and Monday in transit, arrive late Monday, reactor visit on Tuesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, Seph's in the mansion, doing ... something. We'll try to figure it out when we get out there. If the cleanup crew hasn't destroyed all the evidence, of course." His voice turns bitter on the last sentence.

Tseng shakes his head. "We never entered the mansion," he says, realizing -- too late -- he'd decided the night before that Tifa shouldn't have to know he and the Turks were assigned to that mission. She only glances over at him, though, and the look on her face tells him she already figured that much out, so all he can do is keep going as though he intended the reveal. "There were too many of us; we camped out in the backyard. The mansion looked like it would fall down if we so much as breathed on it. We rode herd pretty hard on the rest of the workers, too; the old man gave us a tight deadline." He stops, though, and thinks. "Hojo might have," he's forced to add, reluctantly. "I can't account for all his time. Most of it -- we were watching *him* pretty closely, too --" He breaks into his own narrative, explains to Tifa: "Rufus managed to catch us after the board meeting, before we were sent out --"

"After I'd been given my marching orders," Rufus says, and his tone is flippant but there's anger underneath it, an anger that will take years to cool. "I was given a grand total of two hours to pack; I used one of them to set up what I could."

Tifa nods, slowly; Tseng thinks she's trying to imagine the scene inside Shinra, that night, and knows that whatever she imagines, she will fail to imbue it with the proper levels of distress and paranoia. That night is *not* one of his favorites to remember. He continues, "We -- the Turks and I -- knew we were being sent out with the

reconstruction team by then, and we knew we were going to have to do everything we could to document anything we could get our hands on, for later analysis, as fast as we could. We *also* knew Hojo was going to be breathing down our necks the whole time."

"I told them to keep an eye on him," Rufus adds. "He'd already tripped my suspicious-bastard alarms."

Tifa is watching the byplay, her eyes flicking back and forth as both of them speak. Whatever reaction Tseng is expecting, it isn't the one he gets; she snorts at Rufus's words, her face flickering into *amused* for one brief second. "Somehow, I think *those* get a pretty constant workout," she says, as dry as the rice paper of Tseng's *shōji* screens.

Tseng transmutes his laughter into a cough. Rufus blinks, twice, as though he can't quite process what Tifa has just said; then he's laughing too, the short sharp bark of amusement he saves for laughing at sarcasm directed at him. (Tseng hears it a lot.) "Well. Yes. And particularly around Hojo. But ..." He trails off, makes a gesture of inarticulate frustration at his inability to properly convey just *how fucking disturbing* Hojo truly is. "I've known there's something off about him for years, but having him tapped to 'command' the reconstruction team? That just *didn't fit*."

"So we watched him," Tseng continues. "In shifts, as subtly as we could. Reno took most of it, actually." Tifa raises an eyebrow at that; Tseng flashes her a quick grin. He knows what she's thinking. "You've only seen him off duty. On duty, he's ... rather a lot like he is off duty, actually, only backed by competence. It puts people off guard. When I need someone under surveillance without them realizing they're *under surveillance* instead of just having company, I use Reno."

Tifa's eyes narrow. "Reno spends a lot of time down in the Seventh Heaven when you aren't there," she points out.

"He does," Tseng agrees, his voice the picture of innocence, and when her eyes narrow further, gives up all thoughts of teasing her more. "And no, I didn't tell him to. He says you're the only bartender in all of Midgar who's willing to give him credit and doesn't mind the broken furniture bill."

Rufus sits forward a little at that. "You give *credit*? To *Reno*?" Tseng can't quite decide if his tone is frankly admiring or implies she's daft.

The faintest of blushes creeps across Tifa's cheeks; Tseng watches it in fascination. "He always pays up eventually. With interest. And he's always very apologetic about the property damage once he sobers up, and he pays for *that* too, and we are getting completely off topic here and I'd like to sleep sometime this century."

Rufus clears his throat, but he's still smiling. "Right. Anyway. We'll put 'toss the mansion from top to bottom' on the do-list, see if we can figure out what Seph was doing there, in the hopes there'll be something still there. So. Four days?"

"Four days," Tifa agrees. Then -- all humor gone -- she hugs

herself again, a little more tightly this time, and sighs deeply. "And here's where it starts to get into the part that I really, really don't want to talk about, and the part I warned you about, because I'm pretty sure about some of the rest of this but not *all* of it, and I can't pinpoint the moment it starts to go fuzzy."

Wordlessly, Tseng holds out a hand, his eyebrows quirked, offering without obligation. Tifa stares at his hand for a second as though she can't quite figure out what he means by it, before shaking herself and looking up at him. He's just ready to drop it, thinking she won't accept his offer, when she crosses the room on quiet feet, putting her hand into his. He intended only to give her the momentary comfort of touch; he is surprised when she uses his hand as support to climb onto his lap, the way he can sometimes tempt her to do when she is taking ten minutes to sit at his table in the middle of a shift.

Then, she always perches on his knees and wraps an arm around his neck for balance. Now, she tucks herself sideways into his embrace, shifting and settling until her back is against the arm of the couch and her feet are shoved into the crack between the two couch cushions, and Tseng is always surprised, every time he remembers how *tiny* she really is, but realizing she can curl herself up so her head fits under his chin while she's sitting on his lap is somehow even more shocking. He wraps his arm more firmly around her, curling it around her side and letting his hand spread wide over her chest, right over the point where her scar begins, telling her without words that he has her, he will hold her as long as she wishes to be held, and he wills strength into her with every inch of his touch.

"It was Sunday," she says, and Tseng looks down to see that her eyes are closed. Her breathing is even, her heart rate -- he can feel it under his hand -- only slightly elevated, but the fingers of her hand, which she has placed over his on her chest, are clenching and releasing, over and over, with just the hint of her fingernails digging in each time. The thought of watching her face through what he knows she is about to narrate feels incredibly invasive; he looks up instead, turning his head so that his cheek rests against the crown of her head. In that position, he can see Rufus watching him; he isn't sure what to expect (isn't sure how Rufus will react, seeing Tifa turn to him for comfort, seeing Tifa showing what Rufus might possibly interpret as a sign of weakness), but he certainly isn't expecting Rufus to be slumped even further in his chair, watching Tifa as well, with every line of his body and face radiating a fierce and ferocious protectiveness, as though all he wants to do is leap out of the chair and stand in between Tifa and the dragons of memory.

Tseng's face must give something away -- although he knows his body language doesn't change, or at least not enough for Tifa to tense up and reflect that change back at him -- because Rufus's eyes flick up to him. Rufus winces slightly -- an apology, in the shared shorthand they've developed over the years, and that makes Tseng even more resolved to question Rufus later, because the only reason for Rufus to react so strongly to the sight of Tifa's distress is that Rufus has placed her on the (very) short list of people for whom he *would* leap in front of dragons.

But now isn't the time. Tseng matches his breathing with Tifa's,

then slows his a little further, hoping Tifa's body will follow his lead even if Tifa isn't consciously aware of it; she does, and he assigns one small part of his mind to holding that breath pattern as long as she is nestled against him.

"It was Sunday," Tifa repeats, and even her voice sounds younger, like the child she no-doubt was two years ago, before her baptism by fire, no matter that her calendar age at the time would have had her just out of her teens. "I woke up when I always do -- too damn early -- and went over to the inn. Skipped my run that morning. I still felt bruised and battered from that fall on Tuesday, and I'd made the mistake of doing my usual ten K the day before, instead of easing back into it, so when I woke up that morning and could barely move, all I felt like doing was saying 'fuck it' and going back to bed for the whole damn day."

She laughs a little, hollow and echoing. It's bitter, but at least it isn't desperate. "I've spent the last few years wondering how things would have been different if I had." Neither Tseng nor Rufus says anything, but silently, Tseng is glad she's capable of making jokes, as bleak as they might be. Another minute, while Tifa breathes. Tseng wonders what she is remembering, what she is seeing, and how much she is deciding to leave out.

Finally, she sighs again. "It was a quiet day. That was the worst, really. It was like every other day in the world. My father and I spent the afternoon airing out one of the suites we didn't usually put guests in -- the one he and my mother had lived in, before they moved into the house when I was born -- because the hunting party was going to be arriving Monday afternoon, and we were full up otherwise. It was hard work. Backbreaking work, really; nobody had stayed there in years, and we had to haul the mattress out into the backyard and beat the dust out of it. I hurt everywhere, and everything I did made it worse, and I remember being *miserable*, all day, and wishing Shinra and Sephiroth would just give up and *go the fuck home*."

Then she turns her head so her cheek presses against Tseng's chest, and her voice goes utterly, completely flat. "It was just past dinnertime when the first bells went up. We have -- had -- a volunteer fire brigade. Mostly the men -- I'd tried, a few times, to join them, but they never really wanted to believe I could do the work as well as they did. My father was part of it, though, even though he was getting older and really should have stopped. He got up to answer the bells, the same way he always did, and I got up to go with him, because usually they would at least let me haul some water from the well if it got bad enough. But he opened the front door, and it was like ..."

She trails off again. Breathes, deeply, slowly, and Tseng thinks she may be drawing upon the discipline of the Wutaian adept to keep her in a very light trance state. Certainly she sounds far too tranquil when she speaks again. "Nothing could have started the fire that fast except materia," she says. "The whole north side of the main square was ablaze already. And Sephiroth was standing in the center of the square, and he held out his hand, and another whole block went up. I could hear the people inside the houses --" She cuts herself off before she can finish the sentence.

Tseng knows damn well what she was going to say, though -- *I*



*could hear the people inside the houses, screaming as they burned alive* -- and he bends every inch of his will on the task of not tensing up, not letting his breathing change. Across the room, Rufus has closed his eyes; Tseng can see the muscle in his jaw, standing out in sharp relief, as Rufus clenches it.

"Here's where I start to get confused," Tifa says, so very very quietly. "Because -- from that point on, everything felt like it was happening to somebody else. The minute I saw Sephiroth standing there, with his sword on his back and his hands outstretched to call the fire and his eyes -- *glowing*, I swear they were glowing, I *swear to you* it wasn't just reflected fire -- The minute I saw him there, I remember thinking, incredibly clearly, I am going to die. We are all going to die. And then it was like -- like someone else took over for me, and everything past that thought was *her* doing it, not me."

The weight of her body is cutting off circulation to Tseng's legs. He would rather *lose those legs* than shift right now. His fingers itch to write down the details -- glowing eyes mean SOLDIER, but even SOLDIERs' eyes don't glow strongly enough for a terrified girl to notice from halfway across a town square, and he can feel the itch in the back of his head telling him this is another clue. But he can't reach for his notepad without disturbing Tifa, and besides, he's certain he'll remember every word of her story for a long damn time.

"My father turned to me," Tifa continues, and Tseng has *no earthly idea* how she can manage to sound so calm; it isn't even the kind of calm presaging hysteria or the flat, affectless tone of the survivor. "The look on his face was -- He was scared, he was *terrified*, and that was the worst part, really, that my father, who could handle anything in the world, was terrified. He told me -- ordered me -- to grab the emergency hiking rescue gear and get out of town. Get up to higher ground. I must have hesitated, even though it only felt like half a second, because he slapped me. Hard. Straight across the face, and I just *stared* at him, and he told me, go. Before it's too late. Don't stop to save anyone, don't stop to rescue anyone, don't stop to help -- just go. And whoever was driving my body for me turned around without saying another word, without even telling him that I loved him, and she grabbed the emergency backpack and shoved it on her shoulders -- my shoulders -- and went out the back door without even stopping to think."

Another pause. "The house went up less than a minute later," she adds, her voice detached, almost clinical. "I couldn't help it; I stopped to listen. But I didn't hear my father screaming, and at that point, I still hoped that he might live through -- through whatever was going on."

Across the room, Rufus shifts, just enough to plunge both his hands into his hair and *pull*. Tifa doesn't notice, though. Tseng watches Rufus, because he can't bring himself to watch Tifa, and Rufus is in *agony*, listening to this story. Rufus has been wishing for someone to tell him the truth of Nibelheim for nearly three years now, and if there's one lesson Tseng has been trying to drum into him since the moment he assumed responsibility for Rufus's education, it is this: *be careful what you wish for*.

"I went," Tifa says. "I -- I won't say this is the worst part, they're

all worst parts, but to this day I can't quite make myself believe that I really *did* go running straight out of town, without stopping to try to help anyone, but --" She laughs again, thin and hollow. "What could I have done? The people who weren't on fire were overcome by smoke inhalation. The people who weren't overcome by smoke inhalation were -- He drew his sword. A few people tried to rush him, to make him *stop*, in the hopes that enough of us could overcome even the Great General Sephiroth, but -- They didn't have a chance, really. We didn't have a chance. And the next thing I knew, the next time the whoever-it-was possessing me eased up and let me have a moment to think again, I was up in the mountains, on one of the cliffs that overlooked the town, and the town ..."

She trails off again. Shifts her weight a little, and it takes a minute for Tseng to realize what she's doing; he moves too late to be in perfect sync with her, half a heartbeat too slow. It's as though his awkward echo reminds her she's in his lap, that he isn't some form of particularly mobile couch cushions; she opens her eyes and draws back her head to look up at him, puzzled. He can practically *hear* her thoughts: *what am I doing sitting in your lap?*

Rufus, sensing the moment of her self-hypnosis has broken -- a little, at least -- leans forward, slowly enough that it shouldn't be enough to trip her subconscious sentries. "Is it all right if I come sit on the couch, too?" he asks, and his voice is as gentle as his rage, a moment ago, was not. "Or would space be better?"

The request makes Tseng blink -- he would not have expected it of Rufus, who learned how to keep himself aloof from the world at an age so early he'd already thoroughly internalized the lessons long before Tseng had met him -- but, studying Rufus, he thinks he knows what caused him to ask. Hearing Tifa's story has unsettled him nearly as much as the process of telling it has unsettled her, and although Rufus is capable of weathering any storm the universe (and his father) might throw at him, with aplomb and grace, when Rufus is among those few he trusts (Tseng, Reno, Rude -- Reeve, to an extent -- Sephiroth, before he'd died, before he'd gone off the deep end, and watching Rufus baffle Sephiroth had always been an endless source of amusement) and Rufus is upset by something, Rufus tends to *cling*. If they were listening to Tifa's story on a recording, just the two of them, Rufus would have been plastered against Tseng's side ten minutes ago.

Tifa draws her head back even further, looking at Rufus with wide eyes that are more than a little wild. Tseng is expecting her to protest, expecting the very request to snap her further out of whatever calm she's managed to find and incite another post-traumatic reaction, but she startles him (amazes him, astounds him); she meets Rufus's eyes for a long minute, then nods, once, more of a jerking of her head than anything else.

Rufus breathes out, short and sharp relief, and when he moves, it is as slowly and carefully as Tseng knows Rufus can manage. He is careful, so careful, to settle himself on the far end of the couch, far enough that he isn't touching Tifa at all. Tseng stretches his other hand along the back of the couch to rest it on Rufus's shoulder, knowing what Rufus is looking for -- what Rufus craves -- is a point of contact with him. Underneath the t-shirt he's wearing, Rufus's muscles

are trembling, barely perceptible. They still at Tseng's touch, and Tseng knows this is what Rufus needed, and he would not have asked if that need were not urgent.

Then Tifa moves again, and what she does makes Tseng want to stop breathing. She lifts her feet from underneath the couch cushion where she'd tucked them, the couch cushion Rufus is now sitting on, and -- slowly, deliberately, moving as though she might change her mind at any moment -- she walks her toes across the tops of the cushions until she can tuck those toes beneath Rufus's thighs.

Rufus looks at her like he can't believe the evidence of his own body. Moving just as slowly, his eyes on hers the whole way and watching for some sign his touch would be unwelcome, he lifts one hand and -- as gently as though touching a masterwork of art -- curls it around Tifa's ankle. Completing the circuit. Tseng tries to remember if it's the first time he's seen Tifa touch Rufus, or Rufus touch Tifa, in any context other than their sparring contest this morning. He gives up when he can't remember, because there are other (more important) things to think about.

Tifa doesn't close her eyes again. She keeps her eyes locked on Rufus's, and when she speaks, her voice is so soft Tseng knows it would not carry past the couch. "It wasn't you," she says. Rufus's whole body tenses at her words. "It was him. Not you. It might be your responsibility, but it wasn't your fault."

That Tifa can think to offer comfort, even now -- to the man whom Tseng heard her vow not twenty-four hours gone never to trust, with anything -- makes Tseng's throat close over. "You don't know that," Rufus says. He sounds just as quiet, and just as controlled, and just as miserable. "Not for sure. I was the one who asked him to look into things when he got there. Whatever he found in that mansion --"

"Whatever he found in that mansion," Tifa says, "I think I've conclusively demonstrated that he was already ... not the man you knew ... by the time he got there. Whatever happened to him, it started before he arrived in Nibelheim." Her eyes are locked on Rufus's face, and Tseng knows -- *knows* -- he is missing so much, in being unable to read the volumes he can see passing between them. (He can read Tifa. He can read Rufus. Rufus and Tifa reading each other, a strange and unexpected informational channel he'd never expected to see made manifest, could be in ancient Illyrican for all he can understand.)

"It's still on me," Rufus says. From any other man, it might be an attempt to claim unearned drama, to wallow in self-pity and beat his breast in elaborate theatrics. From Rufus, it is simply a statement of fact.

Tifa nods, once, slowly. "Yes," she says, and Tseng can feel, underneath his hand on Rufus's shoulder, Rufus's flinch at her words. Then she takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly, and the hairs on the back of Tseng's neck stand up, the way they always do when he is present at a moment that is being witnessed by the gods. "Yes. It is. And -- I forgive you for it. Be free of it. Let it go."

In her voice, Tseng can hear blanket absolution, can hear that Tifa

holds the full and knowing measure of every drop of the blood of her people on Rufus's hands, can hear that Tifa understands -- comprehends -- accepts everything Rufus has done and has not done, and has weighed and measured it in her heart with care and judiciousness. Tifa would not say those words lightly. Rufus knows that much.

Or, if he doesn't by now, after a day to learn Tifa's depths and breadths, he simply has not been paying attention. And Rufus always pays attention.

Rufus is staring at her. His face is blank, but it isn't the blankness of Rufus trying to control his reaction lest it be used against him; it's the blankness of Rufus not having *any idea* what comes next. Tseng's seen it a few times, over the years; somewhere along the way, Rufus trained himself into freezing when he's confronted with something he simply cannot integrate into his worldview, working to keep himself from giving too much away, and by now it's simply second nature. Watching him, Tseng thinks Rufus's mind, right now, is like a computer that has been fed too many contradictory inputs and is simply refusing to process any of them.

Tseng can relate. He sits there, his arm wrapped around Tifa, and watches her words begin to work their way through Rufus, from ears to mind to ... something. He can feel, underneath the hand still on Rufus's shoulder, the trembling start up again in Rufus's muscles, so tiny and minute he can't see it, can only feel. Tifa must feel it too: she reaches forward (straining from where she is sitting on Tseng's lap, and if she were any less in shape, her abs would be screaming at her from holding her up), bridging the distance between them, and -- telegraphing the movement, moving so slowly that Tseng knows she is giving Rufus every opportunity to protest -- rests her fingertips against his cheek, as light as a feather.

It's Tifa's gesture of comfort, of reassurance, and Rufus blinks -- once, twice -- and then brings his hand up as well, resting his against the back of hers, his eyes wide. "I --" he starts.

"I *said*," Tifa says, sounding sharper this time, "I forgive you. Don't throw that away."

Tseng feels like he can't even breathe. Rufus blinks again. He's lost the control over his face; as Tseng watches, his defenses crumble into nothingness, and behind them lies agony and relief in equal parts. A heartbeat, another, and then Rufus is burying his face in his hands (knocking Tifa's hand out of the way), breathing deeply and slowly, and by then the tremors have turned visible. The motion is enough to snap Tseng out of his reverie; he unwraps the arm he's been holding around Tifa and slides it down her back, stopping just above where her shirt (his shirt) is tied up, holding it there to help hold her up so she need no longer rely on her core strength alone to keep her in place. With the other hand, he squeezes Rufus's shoulder, digging his fingertips into Rufus's trapezius muscles, right where he knows they always ache.

"Right," Rufus says, muffled through his palms. Nonsense words, meant to delay the moment where he'll need to say something of substance. "I -- yeah." He rubs his hands sharply up his face, ending

with them in his hair, pulling sharply. "Right. I --"

It's the most inarticulate Tseng has seen Rufus in years, but then again, this is perhaps the biggest surprise Rufus has gotten in years. He's just about to suggest a break, for them to pause and give everyone involved a moment to regain their composure (give *Rufus* a chance to regain his composure; Rufus hates letting anyone see him this unsettled) when Tifa beats him to it. He can't see her face, not with her leaning so far forward, but he can hear the rueful warmth in her voice. "We can tactfully pretend the last five minutes didn't happen, if it would help."

It makes Rufus laugh, which makes Tseng glad to see. "No, I'm -- I just -- I have no earthly idea what to possibly say to that. Except -- thank you." Another pause, and just when Tseng thinks Rufus has finished speaking, he adds, "I will do everything I possibly can to be worthy of it."

Tifa tilts her head to one side, and Tseng can imagine the expression on her face, that thoughtful consideration she so excels at. "If I didn't believe that," she says, "I wouldn't have said it in the first place."

Then the moment is passing; Tifa slides her feet out from under Rufus's thighs and eases herself off Tseng's lap, so smoothly it takes Tseng a second to realize what she's doing. He fumbles, just an instant too late, to help her up, but of course she doesn't need the assistance. Once standing, she picks up the whiskey Rufus had poured her to replace the one she'd dropped, takes a healthy gulp, and follows it by drinking half her bottle of water, all at once. She has her back to them while she does, which Tseng thinks might be a tactful offering to Rufus of a few moments to compose himself.

Rufus, when Tseng looks over at him, is still looking shell-shocked. He looks at Tseng, and Tseng has no trouble reading the expression on his face: part of Rufus can't believe Tifa means what she just said, part of Rufus knows (already) Tifa doesn't say things she doesn't mean, and the part of Rufus that will always and eternally be eleven years old and looking for validation (vindication, affection, *attention*) is still in shock at hearing the words. (It will take a long time, and possibly several repetitions of the same core theme, before that part of Rufus begins to believe.)

Tseng squeezes his shoulder again -- *it's all right; she means it; let it go* -- and clears his throat. "Maybe a break for dinner?" he offers, as gently as he can. "If you wouldn't rather get the last of this over with."

"No," Tifa says, her back still to them, playing with the label on the water bottle. "No, I think -- A break might be a good idea. The rest of it is ... difficult."

Tseng isn't sure if she truly means she'd like a break, but he knows "difficult" is an understatement, and he isn't sure which of them she's trying to protect. (Both, probably. If she'd only meant it would be difficult on her, she would have said 'difficult to say', or something much like; if she'd meant otherwise, she would have said 'difficult to hear'. The tactful elision speaks volumes.) "All right," he

says. "Do you have any preferences? For dinner, I mean."

Tifa does turn at that, looking more than a little startled. "I -- I guess I'd assumed --" She waves a hand towards the rest of the apartment, vaguely. "I mean, I could cook. I'm used to it."

"You could cook if there were any food in this place *to* cook," Rufus says, dryly, and Tseng feels a surge of relief that Rufus has recovered his composure enough to joke. (That it's true doesn't make it any less of a joke.) "He has every place that delivers to this address on speed-dial."

"Not true," Tseng protests, mildly enough that Rufus will hear it as the relief it truly is. "Only the ones that don't suck." He pushes himself up to standing, after giving Rufus's shoulder one last squeeze. "I'll get the menus. Tifa, you're welcome to choose."

Tifa's brows draw together, and the look on her face says Tseng has stumbled over an unmarked landmine. "I --" She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. "Just pick something. I don't care what it is."

He looks at Rufus; Rufus looks at him. Rufus's face is a question; Tseng shrugs his answer. He doesn't have a clue what Tifa could possibly be thinking, or what might be bothering her. (That something is bothering her is clear.) Rufus moves into the silence, though, with the ease he always displays in defusing awkward situations. "What's the name of that Wutaian place you keep ordering from?" Rufus asks. "Why don't you call them up and tell them to send whatever, for four. If they know it's for you, they'll pull out all the stops."

It's a good enough suggestion; Saotome-san is one of the very few of Tseng's fellow countrymen living in Midgar who don't consider Tseng a traitor to all they hold dear, and every time Tseng is feeling homesick for familiar cuisine, he heads over there, or calls them up, and tells Saotome-san to use his discretion. (The food he gets is always utterly unlike what passes for "Wutaian" food here in Midgar, and utterly unlike what Saotome-san serves to his other customers.) Tseng glances at Tifa for approval of the plan; she shrugs, one shoulder rising and falling, and Tseng takes that as answer enough. He unpins his hair and goes to make the call.

When he comes back -- after a stop in the hallway to order Reno down to the lobby to wait for the delivery -- neither Rufus nor Tifa is in the sitting room. Tseng beats down the instinctive surge of worry -- he *knows* the building is as secure as any in Midgar, but not finding Rufus where he left him always unfurls a tiny thread of panic, and probably will for the rest of his natural life. But a second later, he hears the voices drifting in from the balcony outside, sees the slight gap in the *shōji* screen where it was imperfectly closed. A wisp of smoke drifts in, as confirmation.

He's debating with himself whether he should join them (he could use a cigarette himself) or leave them be when he hears the raised-spike irritation of Tifa's voice, and that seals it. He isn't above a little eavesdropping (all right, a lot of eavesdropping) when the opportunity presents. He moves a little closer, careful not to get in between the light and the screens to cast shadows, just in time to catch the tail end of what she's saying: "-- work with you. That doesn't mean you

get rights to everything I'm thinking."

Tseng would be more worried, if he didn't know the tones of her voice well enough to say this isn't her true anger; that's much colder. This is Tifa peeved, Tifa annoyed, but not the sort of anger to require him to intervene before someone gets pitched off the edge of the balcony. Rufus's voice, answering, confirms his suspicions; he knows Rufus's cadences far better than he knows Tifa's, and Rufus is just as irked but not angry at all, not beyond the sort of anger Rufus always covers with when he is truly disconcerted. "If it's something that will affect our working relationship, then yes, I do have the right to know. Especially if you're serious about wanting to accompany us to Nibelheim."

Tifa's frown is audible. "You know I am. Or rather, I thought you knew --"

"Yeah," Rufus agrees. "I know. And I know why. But in order to make that happen, I'm going to have to pull more than a few strings and arrange a few things in ways that you probably won't want to know about, and you're going to have to play along and pretend, and if whatever was bothering you so much in there is going to cause problems with that, I need to know. Now. Before I get too far along in planning." Pause, and then Rufus's voice softens, smooths out from his commander-of-everything tone to the more intimate voice he uses among his true friends. "You don't have to tell me everything --"

"It's nothing," Tifa says, and her voice is calming, too; Rufus must have bent his body language to the problem of easing out her snappishness. "It's stupid. It's just --"

She trails off, going silent, and Tseng is just about to go join them after all, thinking his presence might make her more willing to talk, when Rufus says, more gently than Tseng would have given him credit for being able to manage, "It's the contrast between Below and Above, getting to you, isn't it."

Of course. Of *course*; Tseng should have been able to intuit that answer himself (and he's a little surprised Rufus could, but then again, Rufus and Tifa have demonstrated a rather startling ability to read each other so far). Tifa's voice, when she speaks, sounds rueful. "That obvious, is it?"

Rufus chuckles, softly. "Tseng missed it, if that's any consolation. But I saw your face this morning, when you came back from the market, and when you were explaining your problems with getting supplies, and it was enough like your face just now that I guessed. Look, I told you this morning, and I meant it: I'm going to fix that."

"You're going to try," Tifa corrects, as swiftly as though she'd been waiting for Rufus to say that very thing. "And you've told me, both in words and in what you aren't saying, that you don't have the ability to fix everything, and you don't even see everything that needs to be fixed --"

"So help me," Rufus says, and his voice is like the snap of a serpent striking. "You're right; I *don't* have any idea what life in the slums is like. So tell me. Show me what needs to change, and I will change it."

There's an intensity in Rufus's voice that worries Tseng. Rufus, when roused to knowledge of a problem, will move heaven and earth to fix it, and Tseng has seen him, in the past day, becoming slowly aware of just *how much* life in the slums is a problem. And Rufus is good, and Rufus is used to maneuvering under the radar, and Rufus has been playing corporate games of precedence and negotiation for at least as long as Tseng has known him, and the last thing Rufus needs right now, while they're in the middle of trying to figure out the answers of Nibelheim, is to become embroiled in an extended battle against his father over the economic policies of Midgar. It's a one-way ticket back to Junon. Or worse. Overturning these rocks may be danger enough; Rufus does not need more.

When Tifa sighs this time, it's loudly enough for Tseng to hear it, drifting in on the wind along with Rufus's cigarette smoke. "I believe you will try," she says, her voice having the sound of someone picking carefully through a field of unexploded bombs. "And I believe you'll probably succeed, at least to some extent. Eventually. But ..." She trails off again, and Tseng wonders what volumes are passing between them, in looks and in body language, that he cannot see from his vantage point inside. "I've spent at least two years of my life despising Shinra with everything I have in me," she says, finally. "And -- I said last night that I would never trust you, *could* never trust you, but you -- we --"

Another pause. Tseng thinks, from the way the shadows move against the backdrop of Midgar by night, that she's pacing. "I think I may have been wrong about that," she says, abruptly, and Tseng stops breathing. "I think you're doing the best you can, and playing out the hand you were dealt, which is a way shittier hand than I ever would have thought, but that doesn't mean I have to *like* the fact my entire world has been picked up and shaken around in the last day. And I don't. Like it, I mean. If we -- if you really can change things the way you say you want to, it will be worth it. Even if you can't change everything. But if you're going to expect me to be all smiles, if you're going to expect me to never have a moment when I want to wring your neck, you're going to damn well be disappointed. If I can't snarl inside my head at one of you expecting to be able to pick up the phone and have a banquet for four brought to your doorstep like it's your fucking *right* or something, when there are children starving right underneath your feet, this alliance is doomed before it even gets off the ground."

There's silence for another minute or two. Tseng can hear the *click* of Rufus's lighter, opening and closing, a sign Rufus is thinking; Rufus only chain-smokes when he is either at his desk or working through a problem in his head. "Fair enough," Rufus finally says. The lighter clicks, clicks, clicks, and Tseng can imagine Rufus leaning over, elbows on the railing, cigarette in one hand and lighter in the other, fiddling. "I told you this morning you'd probably want to strangle me more than once. But for Ramuh's sake, don't take it out on Tseng. He's doing the best he can."

Eavesdroppers rarely hear anything about themselves they like, and Tseng knows he should make himself back away, go back to sitting on the couch (or go prepare the dining room table for when their dinner gets here) before Tifa can answer. He doesn't. Mostly because Tifa starts speaking, hard on Rufus's heels, before he can do



anything. "Don't you bring him into this," she says, heavy and vicious. "He has nothing to do with this. At all."

The lighter clicks. "Ah," Rufus says. Tseng knows that sound. It's what Rufus sounds like when he's had a cherished theory confirmed. "So. You *do* love him, then. I'd wondered."

Tseng can hear Tifa growling, softly enough to be more a barely leashed hum than anything Tseng can truly hear. Or maybe that's just due to the rushing of his blood singing in his ears. Whatever Tifa might say, whatever Rufus might answer, is lost in the sound of heavy banging: Reno, kicking at the door, his hands too full of the delivery bags to reach the keycard Tseng left him. Tseng swears (silently, internally) and beats it to open the door before Rufus or Tifa can come looking for the source of the noise and spot him eavesdropping. (Oh, *Leviathan*, he wishes Reno had showed up two minutes earlier or two minutes later.)

"Pizza delivery," Reno sings out when Tseng opens the door. He's laden with packages, plastic containers stored in paper bags wrapped around with plastic bags for the handles, and Tseng sees the tableau with eyes sensitized by Tifa's complaint and realizes for the first time in a long time how *conspicuous* Midgar's conspicuous consumption truly is. (Once upon a time, he would've noticed without needing to be prompted. When he was fresh-come to Midgar, he'd spent days with eyes wide, when no one could see him, at every last bit of Midgar's excess. He's not sure when it became simply second nature to him.)

But Reno is staring at him, good humor slowly leeching away, to be replaced with Reno's version of concern, and Tseng realizes he's missed his cue. "If it's pizza delivery, you've got the wrong apartment," he says, thirty seconds too late.

It's enough for Reno to crane his neck to look around, looking for evidence of what's going on. "You okay, boss?" he asks, voice low. (Dammit. Reno has always seen far too much, and while it's useful when applied to an object of surveillance, it is simply *infuriating* when applied to him.)

"Everything's fine," Tseng says, in the short, clipped tone that will tell Reno without having to be so crass as to deliver actual *orders* that Tseng doesn't want to talk about it. "Give me those. Rufus and Tifa are out on the balcony --"

"Rufus and Tifa are right behind you," Rufus says, from over his shoulder, and Tseng most carefully *does not jump*.

It's been a day.

"Dining room," Tseng says. "All of you. Before I start shooting."

It probably gives away too much -- he's pretty sure Rufus, at least, will be able to intuit Tseng was listening to them, but then again, Rufus likely would have believed from the very beginning. (It's always been safer for them both to assume the other, if even slightly within earshot, will be listening.) He can hear Rufus's chuckle, behind him, receding slightly; at least Rufus has decided to obey with grace. Or as close to it as Rufus gets.

Reno, still lingering in the doorway, casts a look over his shoulder; Tseng can see him chewing on his lip, likely evaluating the way Rufus and Tifa are within each other's orbits without *bloodshed*. Or possibly looking for evidence of prior bloodshed. "So I'm eating in the hallway, yeah?" he says. Unspoken, his willingness to do so, should Tseng but say the word.

Tseng closes his eyes and counts to ten. In Wutaian. "Come on," he says. "Just keep your mouth shut."

Reno looks wounded. "Aw, c'mon, boss, I'm housebroken."

"Get your ass in here, Reno," Rufus calls, from the direction of the dining room and kitchen. Tseng can hear plates clacking as Rufus takes them down from the cabinets; apparently they're going to be formal tonight. (More formal than they usually are when eating takeout, at least.) He wonders, suddenly, if Tifa can use chopsticks. (Tseng taught Rufus, years before. Reno eats sushi, both *nigiri* and *maki*, with his fingers; Tseng has long since despaired of ever teaching him manners.)

Reno raises an eyebrow to hear Rufus's order, looks to Tseng before moving. It's always interesting to see, how Reno confirms orders -- even Rufus's -- with Tseng first. But Tseng nods, and Reno shuts the door behind him, and together they head into the dining room.

Tifa's already sitting at the table. Like everything else in this apartment, Tseng's dining table is Wutaian-style (his Shinra employee apartment is done in soulless Midgar fashion, and is where he brings anyone who isn't among his circle of trusted intimates, with the exception of those whose noses he wishes to rub in his heritage). Tifa doesn't seem to be at all disconcerted by the unfamiliar furniture, though; she's kneeling on the cushion, almost in proper pose, rather than sitting cross-legged the way a westerner would. Her face doesn't show anything of the conversation Tseng overheard. Rufus is just coming out of the kitchen, hands piled high with plates and bowls; Tseng notes he has opted to bring four pairs of chopsticks, even though he knows Reno won't be using them, and thinks (not for the first time) that Rufus's sense of manners is impeccable. (He has no doubt Rufus will wait to see if Tifa reaches for chopsticks or not, and if she doesn't, he will eat with his hands as well.)

"Heya, Tif'," Reno says, dropping down to sit cross-legged on the cushions across the table from her. The genial greeting doesn't hide Reno giving her his closest inspection, although Tseng thinks he might be the only one who can see it. "Chief, you wanna grab me a bottle of beer, while you're up, yeah?"

"What, did someone shoot you in the knee in between the door and here?" Rufus asks, even as he's putting the dishes down on the table and turning around to fetch the drinks. (Tseng knows precisely what Reno's doing, and he's pretty sure Rufus does, too, or will if he thinks about it a little: Reno wants a minute to get a look at Tifa without the distortion of her reactions to Rufus being next to her, and possibly wants to show Tifa that Rufus is not as distant and unapproachable as most people think he is, in case Tifa hasn't realized yet. It's almost sweet, in a very Reno way.)

"Yeah, yeah," Reno calls after Rufus. "My legs are still asleep from sitting on my ass in the hallway. I was injured in your service, so you can damn well fetch me a damn beer."

"Your wish, my etcetera," Rufus calls back, dry like deserts. "Anybody else?"

"Water for me," Tseng says -- the last thing he needs at this very moment is to be drinking -- and kneels on the cushion in between Tifa and Reno, taking the spot with his back to the door. (It's his own home; his shoulderblades won't itch *too* badly, and he knows Rufus will grumble at him if he puts Rufus in that spot.) He begins opening the bags and taking out the platters of food. As expected, Saotome-san has outdone himself.

"I'm fine with water, too," Tifa says. She sounds perfectly normal. Tseng doesn't quite let himself look too closely at her, to see what her face might say.

As it turns out, Tifa can use chopsticks, although she fumbles once or twice at first, and Tseng thinks it might be the first time, or the first time in a while, that she's used them, when he catches her watching the way he holds his out of the corner of her eyes. (If it is, she's a fast learner.) Conversation for the first half of the meal is light, mostly due to Reno seizing the topic of discussion and holding onto it with both hands. He manages to keep going with tales of some of his and Rude's funniest disasters all the way through the soup and *tsukemono* and halfway through the sushi, and both Tifa and Rufus laugh in all the right places.

Still, Tseng is waiting for the other shoe to drop, and sure enough it does; Rufus interrupts as Reno finishes one story and is about to launch into the next. "Reno," is all he says.

Reno stops, knowing as well as Tseng does what that tone in Rufus's voice means. He dips his head and stares at his sushi. "Yeah, chief?"

"We're going to need a chopper and a pilot," Rufus says. "Tomorrow. First thing -- say, nine AM. Extra fuel, for the long haul."

Reno flicks his eyes over to Tseng; he knows damn well, or can intuit, that 'the long haul' refers to Nibelheim. "Yeah?" he says, finally. "How many people am I calculating weight ratios for?"

"Four, including you." Rufus manages to make it sound like an order, and to include the "and don't give me any backtalk" as part of it, hidden between his words. "I don't know how long we'll be gone. I'll arrange things with Heidegger. I think we'll be going to Cosmo Canyon to check something; it's far enough the fuel usage won't be suspect if anyone bothers looking, and we can jettison the difference on our way back."

Tseng can only see Reno's tiny wince because he's looking for it. "Yeah, okay," he says, sneaking another glance at Tseng to make sure Tseng won't object. "Ah, am I picking you up here, or ..."

There's no helipad on the roof of this building; Tseng chose quite deliberately, and partly for that reason. If they're bringing Tifa with

them, Reno will have to either land on the street -- and Heidegger *will* hear about that -- or they're going to have to bring Tifa up to one of the Shinra buildings. Neither is a very good option.

Rufus's lips twist. He glances at Tifa; Tifa looks back at him, and Tseng knows she can tell there's something wrong. "It's up to you," he says, quietly. "This building doesn't have a helipad. We *can* arrange for pickup outside, but it'll involve shutting down the street for at least twenty minutes or so, and that'll be conspicuous. We can go for the park down the street, which means witnesses. Or, we pick up the chopper on the roof of the building I live in, which means you and Tseng meeting me at the Shinra residential tower."

Tifa chews on her lower lip; Tseng can see her thinking. "If it were just the two of you, you'd get picked up there, wouldn't you," she says. It's not a question.

Rufus inclines his head. "Yes. But we can work with either of the other options; I did agree to the conditions you set."

Tifa purses her lips. The expression is not a happy one. "That's what you meant when you said I was going to have to play along, isn't it," she says. That, too, isn't a question. "Assuming I say yes, which I am not yet: what's my story?"

"Either my new personal assistant, or Tseng's new recruit for the Turks," Rufus says, so quickly Tseng knows he's been thinking up a cover for Tifa since the moment she first said she wanted to join them on their trip to Nibelheim. "Either one works. I've been auditioning PAs for the past four months after my last one quit; I can't find one who'll stick for more than two weeks." (Which is true; Rufus is an incredibly demanding boss. Tseng sees Tifa's lips quirk, ever-so-slightly, and remembers the troubles *she's* been having with finding and keeping help, too.) "And the Turks are understaffed, and have been for a while, because Tseng's picky about hiring, so they're always on the lookout for new recruits. The PA cover is more solid; the new-recruit cover would give you more respect among the rest of the company. Again, your choice."

The table falls quiet for a few moments; Tseng can see Reno very deliberately not asking, although he's fidgeting as though he wants to say something. (Tseng would kick him if they were sitting at a Midgar-style table, but he's kneeling right now; it would be too conspicuous.) Tifa is thinking it over, carefully picking through her options. "When you say 'more solid', you mean --"

"He means Heidegger would expect to've at least met you already, if you were gonna be one of us," Reno says, quietly, as serious as Reno ever gets. Tifa turns her look on him; he looks back at her, and Tifa blinks a few times, seeing Reno's professional face again. "The boss gets to do his own hiring, and we'd backdate the paper trail, make it so that the forms were buried on Heidegger's desk somewhere he'd believe he'd just lost 'em in the pile, but you'd have to deal with him at least once when you got back, probably, depends on how long you were gonna need the cover. We'd say you couldn't hack it when you were ready to go back."

Tifa winces, ever so slightly. "And the other?"

Rufus shrugs. "Nobody would look twice. My last PA walked out on me on Wednesday; it usually takes me two days or so to comb through the files and get another candidate from HR. I haven't, yet; somehow I got a little distracted." That wrings a tiny smile out of Tifa. "Using that cover would give you an excuse for being wherever I am, for as long as we needed. When we wind up back in Midgar, and if we think you might still need access to the Shinra building, which we probably will, you'll have to spend at least a day or two in the office with me. I'll do my best to keep from being too much of an overbearing asshole, but I'm not easy on my PAs and I couldn't be too easy on you without it being suspicious." He anticipates Tifa's next question, or reads it from her face: "Filing, paperwork, running errands, calling people and arranging appointments, keeping my calendar. It's not difficult work, it's just tedious. I have a secretary -- administrative assistant -- to handle a lot of it, but despite being able to do the work of three people, she can't do everything, and she keeps threatening to quit if I go through another PA and the work winds up back on her desk."

*Something* makes Tifa wince again. "If it involves computer work, that's probably out," she says. "I've never used one before."

"I'd teach you," Tseng says, quietly. (Of the two potential covers, it's the better option, by a long shot. He does not want to think about what Heidegger would do or say to her, especially if Heidegger thought Tseng had done an end-run around him to hire a new Turk; it's been years since they've had a woman on the team, and Heidegger is most of the reason why. He could make the story work - - Rufus is right, they *are* understaffed and have been for a long damn time, but it takes *time* to find people with the right attitudes -- but the deception would be difficult, and probably quite hard on her.) "You're fast enough; you could learn enough to fake it in a day or so."

Rufus nods. "I usually hire for PAs out of the secretarial pool, but not always. It wouldn't be too out of character to have a new PA who didn't know everything right up front; the system we use is different enough from the system at the university that people are usually lost at first anyway."

Tifa stares at them both for a long moment. Then she sets her chopsticks down (sticking them into the rice bowl, Tseng notices, and winces; he hopes it isn't an omen) and gets up from the table without saying another word, striding out of the room. A minute later, Tseng hears the screen door to the balcony closing behind her.

"Well, that went well," Rufus mutters.

Reno leans over. "Give her a second, yeah, chief?" he says, and Tseng can hear Reno's own edged brand of compassion in it. "You can't expect her to be jumping for joy over this immediately."

"Let me go talk to her," Tseng says, quietly. Rufus casts him an annoyed glance; Tseng tries to look calm. He pushes himself up from the table. "Don't eat all the *inari* before I get back."

When he slides open the door to the balcony, knocking softly on its edge to herald his arrival, Tifa has both of her hands clenched around the balcony railing and is resting her forehead between them.

She straightens up when he comes to stand beside her and looks out over Midgar by night, but he doesn't think she's truly seeing the view. He doesn't say anything, just rests his hand at the small of her back; she holds herself stiff for a long, worrisome minute before relaxing into the touch.

"I hate this," she says, finally. "I hate this so much."

"I know you do," Tseng says, trying as hard as he can to keep any sort of sympathy out of his voice; he knows that anything that could be mistaken as being in even the same neighborhood as pity will go over right now like a lead balloon. "Too many choices, and none of them good ones."

That makes Tifa laugh, hollow and aching. "No, if none of them were good ones, that would be easier," she says, and her voice is wild. "The problem is, there is a good choice. It's just the one I least want to do."

Tseng winces. Too much to hope she wouldn't see that, yes. "He wasn't lying," he says. "We truly could make any of the options work." (If they try hard enough. If they get lucky.)

"Don't lie to me, Tseng," Tifa says, sharply. "You know as well as I do there's a best option out of all of the ones on the table. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: don't assume I'm stupid."

Her anger stings, even though he knows the reason for it: she is angry about so many things right now, and he's a safe target to displace her anger upon. "I have never assumed you are stupid," he says, keeping his voice as calm as possible. "And I have never lied to you. You know that as well as I do. I will refuse to answer, I will refuse to volunteer information, I will flat out tell you I can't tell you, but I have never lied to you directly."

She deflates a little at his words, her shoulders slumping over. "I know," she whispers. "I know. I'm sorry." She breathes in, long and slow. "You know what I have to say, don't you."

"I do," he says. He rubs one thumb along the line of her waist, where her shirt is riding up. Her skin is warm, even in the cool air of night, despite the sweet breeze that's one of his favorite things about this location. "And I meant it. I will help you as much as I can. And so will he."

"Yeah." She leans over again, rests her forehead back on the railing. "Okay. Okay. This had better be worth it, dammit."

"I hope it will be," Tseng says, quietly, as Tifa straightens up and marches back into the apartment.

Rufus and Reno break off their conversation as Tifa strides in. She doesn't give either of them a chance to react, just points straight at Rufus. "Do whatever you need to do to make the personal assistant thing happen," she says. Orders. "And if you piss me off too much, I will *kill you at your desk*."

Rufus spins his chopsticks in his hand, sets them down on the

table next to his plate. He inclines his head, once, gracious as ever in victory. "Thank you," he says, softly.

Tifa rubs a hand over her face. Tseng thinks he's never seen her looking quite so defeated. "Don't make me regret it," she says.

Reno pushes himself up to standing, shaking out his legs as he goes (he always bitches they fall asleep whenever he's stuck sitting at Tseng's table). "C'mere, Tif'," he says, and when Tifa turns a startled look at him, he smiles. (Reno is so very good with skittish things when he wants to be.) "You're gonna need to dress the part. I'll run out and take care of it; I just need to know your sizes."

The corner of Tifa's mouth twitches up a bit. Tseng can't decide if it's irritation or amusement. "If this is just a cheap excuse to cop a feel --"

Reno puts his hand over his heart and affects an innocent look. "Would I do that? Don't answer that. Seriously, I'm good at sizing, I got three sisters, I just need to get a good look at you in good light, get some approximate measurements. Without the shirt and skirt on, you're willing, but you're not, I can deal, yeah?"

Tifa closes her eyes and takes a deep breath; Tseng sees her lips moving, can't quite tell what she's saying to herself. "Yeah," she agrees. "Don't make me have to break a kneecap."

"Expense everything," Tseng tells Reno. "And be sure to get things she can move in." Things she can fight in, if she has to, he means, and he knows Reno will know what he isn't saying.

"Yeah, I ain't stupid," Reno says, easily. He gestures Tifa into the living room with a sweeping bow, even though Tseng thinks Tifa would be perfectly willing to strip down right here. Reno is fiercely protective of others' privacy, though; Tseng thinks it's because he didn't get a lot of his own, before Tseng hired him.

Left alone with Rufus again, Tseng drops back down onto the cushion like a puppet with its strings cut, reaching for Reno's beer. (It's empty, dammit.) "This has not been the best day in the history of the world," he says, weary beyond all measure.

"Cheer up," Rufus says. "It'll get even worse after dinner when she finishes her story."

"I'm going to drop you off the balcony," Tseng says. "After I finish eating."

"I cannot measure the depths of the joy I am filled with that I now apparently have two people in my life willing to rise to the task of threatening my life in every conversation," Rufus says, and picks his chopsticks back up.

Tifa comes back five minutes later, looking less mutinous than Tseng would've guessed; she's dressed (again?) but has left her shirt (Tseng's shirt) back in the living room, and Tseng tries not to look disappointed. (He hadn't expected to find the sight of her in his clothes so ... comforting, really.) "Four hours!" Reno hollers, a second before the door slams behind him. (Reno has never met a door he

was willing to close gently.)

"Should I fear what he's going to bring back for me?" Tifa asks, hovering awkwardly in the doorway. Her eyes sweep over the table; Rufus and Tseng have carefully left one of each of the pieces of sushi assortment for her, but she doesn't seem interested in sitting back down again. "And was he lying about having sisters?"

"No, he really does have three," Tseng says. "He generally won't admit it to anybody but another one of us, since Turks' families are a typical target when someone wants to try to make us ... cooperate, but he does have sisters. Their mother died when Reno was in his early teens; he mostly raised them." He doesn't elaborate on what Reno's life was like, back then. It's Reno's business if he wants to tell Tifa or not. (He hopes Reno will; his story might help reassure Tifa, or provide her with an ally. Make her believe she has an ally, he should say; Tifa has already won alliance from every person in this room.)

"Huh," Tifa says. Her eyes are a little distant; Tseng thinks she might be trying to assimilate that knowledge into her picture of Reno.

"There's still some sushi," Rufus says, careful to make it an invitation to sit back down and not an attempt to obligate her to. "Would you like to sit down and finish eating, or are you done?"

"Hm?" Tifa looks at Rufus, still a bit unfocused, then shakes herself slightly and focuses in sharply on him. "Oh. No. No, that's okay. I'm not as hungry as I thought I was." Tseng wonders if Reno said something to her while they were in the other room. (No, he knows Reno would've said *something* to her. He wonders *what* Reno said, to make her so distracted.) "Reno said he'd leave the packages in the hallway when he got back and text you to say they were there," she says, to Tseng. "So he didn't interrupt."

Tseng only nods; that's standard procedure. "And no, you don't need to worry about what he's going to find you," he says. "He only dresses like that himself because he likes it when people underestimate him. He's fairly good at figuring out what'll look good on someone, and he knows where is open at this time of night." Too late, he realizes this is probably another example of the conspicuous consumption Tifa was protesting earlier, but she doesn't seem to object. (He really *must* ask Reno what he said to her.)

"I'll put the rest of the sushi in the fridge," Rufus says, unobtrusively stacking plates (he has the server's skill of balancing plates and containers halfway up his arms; Tseng notices Tifa noticing, but she doesn't say anything) and withdrawing into the kitchen.

Left alone, Tseng rises from the table and goes back to Tifa's side. "Are you all right?" he asks, quietly enough that Rufus won't hear. "Did Reno say something?"

She focuses in on him again. "Hm? Oh. No, nothing, really. Or, I mean, nothing more than asking me questions about what colors I like and what kind of reach I need in the pants. I'm sorry. I just -- It's been a long day, and I'm very tired, and we still have a lot of things to go over. And Reno was staring at -- at the scarring, and he didn't say anything, but I could feel him wanting to, and ..." She makes a



little hand gesture. "You know. It got me thinking. About what I still haven't told you."

Tseng winces lightly. "Ah. Yes." He strokes a hand lightly down her arm, and when he gets to her wrist, she turns her hand and takes his. The simple, unthinking touch goes a long way towards easing his fears. "Can I get you anything?" he offers. He knows she probably won't say yes, but he has to make the offer anyway.

But Tifa surprises him. "Actually, you can give me five minutes. If you don't mind. I'd like to ..." She trails off, sighs again. "I'd like to get out of these clothes and into something more comfortable. I have a feeling that once I'm done, I'm going to want to go straight to bed, and I'm not going to want to change."

Unspoken, the knowledge hanging between them, the thought that she likely isn't going to be good for much once she finishes telling them the truth of what happened to her. "Of course," Tseng says softly, squeezing her hand. "Let me get your bag. You can have your choice of the spare bedroom or my bedroom."

"Your bedroom," she says, before he can barely finish speaking, and he's grateful once again that her response to adversity is not to push him away, but to cling to him. "If -- If you don't mind, I mean."

"I never mind," he says, softly, and lifts his other hand to brush his fingertips against her lips, using her own gesture in the hopes it will show her how much he really means it. "Down that hall, on your left. I'll be in in a minute with your bag."

When she comes out a few minutes later to rejoin them in the sitting room, she's changed into the pair of navy sweatpants hacked off at the knee he's seen her wearing to sleep in on particularly chilly winter nights (usually she wears nothing to bed unless there's someone else in the building, secure in her status as child of a mountainous village that has much harsher winters than Midgar ever sees, but there were a few days last winter where even she loosened up enough to turn up the heat and wear clothes to sleep in, under extra blankets piled high) and a dove-grey tank top that clings to her curves in all the right places. Tseng can't help but look at Rufus, who has returned to sitting in the same freestanding chair he'd chosen earlier, before he'd moved to the couch; Rufus never *leers* at women (never has, and Tseng has never had to teach him not to) but he's never failed to at least *appreciate* them, especially ones that look like Tifa. Rufus doesn't let that appreciation show anywhere Tseng can see it this time, though.

Moving like a sleepwalker, Tifa comes to a stop next to where Tseng has settled on the couch, where he'd been sitting before dinner, and looks at Rufus. "You're probably going to want to be over here for this," she informs him. Her tone is plain, blank, matter-of-fact; it takes Rufus a long few seconds to realize what she's said.

"That good, huh," Rufus says, in an undertone, but he's getting up anyway, sitting down on the other end of the couch. Tseng stretches out one hand to pull him a little bit closer, resting his palm on the nape of Rufus's neck the way he does when he's trying to offer the most comfort, like he's trying to reach in through Rufus's spine and

silence the thoughts buzzing in Rufus's head. Rufus closes his eyes and leans back into the touch, eyes slitting shut.

Tifa watches the whole interchange without saying a word; Tseng can't read her face. He holds his other hand out to her, expecting her to take up her position on his lap again. She surprises him; she comes over on silent feet, then settles down on the floor in between him and Rufus and pulls his hand down until it rests on her shoulder. There's a knot beneath his thumb (there always is; Tifa's shoulders are *rock*, and not only due to how muscular they are; it's where she holds most of her tension) and he digs his thumb into it automatically. She leans her head back and rests it on his thigh, and the sound she makes is halfway on the way to being a moan.

"Okay," Tifa says, drawing her knees up to her chest, splaying her feet so one of them rests against Tseng's and one rests against Rufus's for balance. "I think ... We're really, really close to the end of the useful information I can give you. I know I said that before, but ... here's where it gets really bad."

Rufus looks over at Tseng, his face saying, plain as day, *it wasn't bad before?* But it's a different kind of bad, and Rufus well knows it. "Understood," Rufus says, quietly. His hand twitches, where it's resting on his thigh, and Tseng thinks he's fighting back the impulse to rest it on Tifa's other shoulder.

"Yeah," Tifa says, nonsense syllables to ease her back into the habit of talking. She closes her eyes -- Tseng can just see her face, from where she is sitting against him, and he thinks she doesn't realize that he can, or she would move -- and she looks like she's focusing on controlling her breathing again. Tseng makes himself match her breaths, in and out, in the hopes the sound of his breathing will help to give her body a focus. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Rufus doing the same; he was the one to teach Rufus all those subtle small tricks to control an interaction or to set another person at ease, but sometimes he thinks Rufus was only humoring him by pretending he didn't already know.

There's silence for a long minute, Tifa's chest rising and falling underneath the clinging grey fabric, as they all breathe together. From here, Tseng can see a few inches of the scar along her chest. He wonders if she chose that tank top, rather than the more high-necked ones he knows she owns, to make a point, or to underscore her story.

"I was -- it was sort of like being in a daze," she finally says. "I came out of it -- I don't know how much longer. I was standing on the overlook over the town, and if S-Sephiroth had looked up, at any point, he would have seen me. He didn't look up. He was concentrating on setting the whole town on fire, block by block, house by house, and he didn't stop until everything was burning. Everything except the mansion on the outskirts of town. He'd have to stop every few minutes, to kill another person who was trying to rush him with whatever weapon they could find. And once it all was on fire, he looked at it all, and even from up there I could see that his face was just ... blank. Like there was nothing there. It ... I want to say that it didn't look human, except I don't know if I was projecting that onto him, because I didn't want to believe that any human being could do that."

"Did he say anything?" Rufus asks, quietly.

Tifa shivers, once, one small tremor Tseng can feel against his leg. "When it was all done, he -- He cried out for his mother. It was loud enough for me to hear from up there. He sounded... I can't even think of a word for how he sounded."

Rufus hisses, one indrawn breath. Tseng looks over at him; Rufus shakes his head, quickly. *Not now*, he's saying, clear as day.

Tifa's voice is calm, almost meditative. Tseng thinks the long pause before she began speaking again was for her to find that place of silence and calm inside of her, something to cling to through the rest of what she has to say; Tseng has no idea what that something might be, but whatever it is, clearly it's necessary, because her face is telling him the next pieces are even worse than the parts that have already come. "He turned around, then. Finished looking around him, like he was evaluating a scene to see how well he'd done, and when he was satisfied -- he stopped to throw another fire spell at a block that wasn't burning fast enough to suit him -- he walked straight through the flames and out of the gates. I thought --"

She breaks her even breathing, takes a deep shuddering breath. "I thought he was coming for me. I really did. But he just kept going, into the mountains, and it was the same sort of *being drawn* that he'd had the other day. He went straight for the reactor. And I --" Another of those heaving breaths, and another, and Tseng rubs reassuring circles against her shoulder. "That's when I started running, too," she finally says, and the eerie calmness her voice is overlaid with starts to crack. "Because there was someone running after him, and it was my father."

Tseng bites his lip. He doesn't want to interrupt, but he wants to do *something*, something to let her know she isn't alone, that she doesn't have to push herself this hard. (But she does. She has information they need, and she knows it, and she has vowed to give it to them, and it doesn't matter how hard it is on her to tell the story; she has given her word, and Tseng knows how much that means to her.) Rufus must see it; his hand twitches again, and then he reaches up to where Tseng's other hand is resting on the nape of his neck, picking it up and moving it to two inches over Tifa's shoulder.

The instruction is as clear as though Rufus shouted it; Tseng lets his hand fall, switching to kneading her shoulders with both hands, and Tifa makes another of those bitten-back half-moans; this one sounds more pained than pleasurable, but when he stops, fearing he's hurting her, she knocks her shoulder back against him in clear instruction, so he goes back to working at the knots there.

"Where I was," she finally says, "it took me fifteen minutes -- even at a full run -- to get to a point where I could get on the path up to the reactor. And then -- and fuck, I'm *still* fucking kicking myself for this, even today --" It must be bad; Tseng can count the number of times he's heard Tifa use language like that on one hand. "Do you believe, I forgot that the bridge was out? I'd *been* on the fucking thing when it went, and I still forgot." She's laughing, then, dark and bitter. "So that lost me another ten minutes. I -- I think I made up for it in speed, a little. I don't know how fast I was running, and it was mostly

dark out -- only a quarter moon -- I'm still surprised I didn't go down and snap an ankle or a leg bone. I guess I really did know the mountains as well as I thought."

Or the reflected light from the town on fire helped, Tseng thinks, but doesn't say.

"The door to the reactor was open when I got there," Tifa says, and Tseng isn't imagining it; her breathing *is* speeding up. He squeezes her shoulders, sweeps his hands over the lines of her muscles, works at them with as much tenderness as he can. "And my father was lying on the floor, just inside, in some kind of -- entryway, or vestibule, or something, and he was lying in a pool of his own blood, and he was dead. His body was still warm, and the blood had started clotting, but it hadn't started separating yet. Five minutes. I missed by five minutes, tops." (Tseng wonders how she knows what blood does, once it is no longer inside the body.) "There was -- there was a sword lying next to him. Sephiroth's sword. Like he'd -- killed -- killed my father and then just f-forgot to p-pick it back up again --"

Oh, *Leviathan*, his heart is breaking for her. Next to him, Rufus is looking like he wants to stop her, like he wants to tell her it's all right, stop there, you don't have to --

But she does, and all three of them know it.

Tifa stops before her voice cracks entirely. She breathes. Tseng breathes with her. (Right now, he'd breathe *for* her if he could.) Her hands twine together, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees; he thinks it's to keep her from clutching at her scar.

When she speaks again, she's found her self-control, and her voice is all but *dead*. Tseng wonders what this is costing her. Whatever it is, it's a debt he can never repay. "So I picked up the sword," she says, and both Tseng and Rufus twitch to hear her say it, because they both know full well Sephiroth was the only person in the world who had the strength to wield Masamune, and for Tifa to be able to have so much as picked it up speaks volumes about how much adrenaline she must have been riding at that point. "I couldn't -- I couldn't hold it very well, especially since it was about a foot and a half taller than I am, but at that point, I would've used anything. And that's -- Here's where I lose it. Here's where I really lose it. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry --"

"It's all right," Rufus says, so softly it takes a moment for Tseng to realize he's spoken. "You can stop there --"

Tifa shakes her head, roughly, sharply, and Tseng can see a few tears tracking their way down her face; he doesn't know if she knows they're there. "No. No, I can't. Because -- I don't know if this is real, but if it is real, you need to know it. I thought I was hallucinating it. I thought -- But with what you told me before dinner, it has to be real, doesn't it?" She breathes, deep and aching, and Tseng watches as she lets her hands untwine for just long enough to dash away the tears. (The motion is brisk, impatient. She is, he thinks, the only person in this room judging her for shedding them.) "Because I ran into the reactor, after Sephiroth, and there were -- I didn't see much. But there were some sort of -- pods, or cocoons, or *coffins* or something,

arranged in tiers, and at the top of the steps leading up in the center of the tiers, there was a big thick door, and Sephiroth was standing in front of the door with his hands splayed out on it and his forehead leaning on it like he was trying to fucking *commune* with it, and there was something written over the door, and it was the word 'Jenova'."

Tseng stops breathing. He remembers Tifa's reaction, last night (was it really only last night?) when Rufus had been giving his version of this speech: *all Hojo would tell him was that his mother's name was Jenova, and she died giving birth to him*, and Tifa had been terrified and refused to say why, and if this is the reason, is it any wonder?

But Tifa is still talking, and she's lost the calm entirely; she's getting louder and louder, her voice speeding up, and all Tseng can do is hold on to her shoulders and try to tell her with every line of his body that he will find what is at the root of all of this and *end it* for her. "I shouted at him -- I don't even remember what it was -- and I -- I picked up the sword and I -- I ran at him, all the way up the stairs, and -- I'd forgotten everything I'd ever known about proper form, or how to fight, and I just -- I wanted him dead, I wanted him dead like my father was dead, like my town was dead, like everyone I'd ever known was dead, and I just charged straight at him, and he -- he took the sword away from me, like you take something sharp away from a *baby*, and he --"

She makes a gesture, one that's unmistakeable, even one-handed, as Sephiroth's favored overhand strike. Even now, she can't say the words. Her shoulders are quivering, hunched in upon themselves, her body trying to draw itself into as small a target as possible. Tseng watches as she gives in to the impulse, letting her knees fall into a cross-legged pose and wrapping her arms around her stomach, leaning over until she's curled into a miserable little ball, her forehead resting against her feet and against the floor.

So. Now he knows the details of where her scars came from.

Next to him, Rufus is quivering, as though it's all he can do to keep himself from launching off the couch and going to hurt something. He looks at Tseng; the anguish is plainly written across his face. Tseng shakes his head, not knowing any more than Rufus knows what either of them can do to help. (There isn't anything. There can't be. Not for this.)

A long minute passes, and Tseng is just about to reach for her, to slide off the couch and position himself next to her to take her into his arms, when Tifa sits up, gasping wetly for air, and pulls the hem of her tank top up to scrub over her face. "It was stupid," she says, picking straight up where she left off, her voice full of viciousness directed inward. "It's the stupidest thing I've ever done. I knew it wasn't going to do any good. I knew even while I was doing it. But I -- There wasn't anything else I could do. I had to. I had to try."

She's right; it was stupid. It's also the bravest, most gallant thing Tseng has ever heard. Oh so very carefully, Tseng puts his hands back on her shoulders. She falls back against his thigh as though his touch was the thing to remind her she'd been holding herself up, and having been reminded, she found she couldn't do it anymore. He

slides one hand up her neck, around her jawline, and cups her cheek. Her skin is wet, and a second later, another tear hits Tseng's knuckles.

Quietly, moving as soundlessly as Tseng has ever seen him, Rufus slides off the couch and disappears through the door into the rest of the apartment. He comes back no more than a minute later, the box of tissues from the bathroom in his hands, and he is so very careful to keep his eyes fixed on the *tatami* mats and not on her as he places them in front of Tifa's feet before sitting back down on the couch.

Tifa takes a deep breath and a handful of tissues, then lets out the one and applies the other to her face, scrubbing so hard Tseng winces in sympathy as he moves his hand out of the way to give her access. She blows her nose, twice, then drops the sodden mass next to her. "Shiva damn it," she says, more under her breath than out loud. "I swore I wasn't going to do this in front of you again --"

"If anyone in the world questions your right to weep," Rufus says -- and oh, his voice is steel and death -- "I will break their neck with my own hands."

Tifa takes another breath at that, and when she lets it out, she's actually laughing. Not much, and not out of anything more than what Tseng thinks is a fairly understandable case of hysteria, all things told, but it's laughter, damp and wheezing. "That doesn't mean I have to like it," she says.

"No," Rufus agrees. "No, you find it humiliating. That much I know." His hand twitches again, and this time, he gives in to the impulse: he stretches that hand out and rests its fingertips against her bicep, a touch so light Tseng knows he's simply waiting for her to pull away. She doesn't; she doesn't quite lean into it, either, but Tseng thinks it's only because she's saving her strength for what few scraps of self-control she's managed to pull back together. "You're afraid we'll judge you for it, and for what you did, and I can tell you this: I do. I judge you very highly for it."

Tifa hiccups. It is, perhaps, the most pathetic sound Tseng has ever heard her make, and that includes the time he helped nurse her through last season's flu strain. "Just let me finish telling it," she says, instead of responding to Rufus's words. She sounds exhausted, worn through, having nearly burned through the last of her prodigious strength and only clinging to the final bits of it with bloodied fingernails. "I -- It didn't hurt at first. That was the strangest part. The sword -- stuck -- in my -- The doctor said, later, it went straight through my breastbone, one lung, five ribs, and the edge of my liver and stomach. He -- It's how I knew he had gone insane. Later. When I could think about it again. Anyone who's had the training that Se -- that *he* had knows not to hit that hard. You pull your strike, or your sword gets stuck in bone, and *he had to have known*. And he just didn't care. Because his sword did get stuck, and he yanked it out, and he *pushed*, and I went flying back down the stairs and I hit my head against the concrete and I knew I was dying and I --"

She gulps for air again, and Tseng imagines what it must have felt like, lying there on the floor of the reactor, one lung slowly filling with blood, dying and knowing she wouldn't die quickly enough for it to be

a mercy. Rufus's hand shifts on her arm; Tseng can see the skin whitening, the sign Rufus is gripping hard enough she may very well have bruises in the morning, and it isn't until he looks down at his own hands that he realizes he's gripping her shoulders just as hard. He concentrates on his fingers, forces them to relax. Tifa isn't feeling it right now, he knows, but she may complain of the marks, later.

"It hurt, then," she says, and her voice is the sound of the child she must have been, once upon a time, stating that simple fact as though asking someone, anyone, to kiss it better. "It wasn't until after I landed that it started to hurt. I thought, oh, and I thought, he just killed me, and then -- it was like I was on fire, everywhere, and I couldn't breathe and when I did it sounded *wrong* and --"

She stops, and she must have realized her breathing has gotten high and tight and dangerous, because Tseng can feel her shuddering under his hands as she bends her force of will onto making her body realize it is here and not bleeding out on the floor of that reactor halfway across the world: her shoulders go *down* and her chest stills, forcing her breath back down into her belly where it belongs. "That's when I definitely started hallucinating," she says, after a long, long moment. "Because I was lying there, and I thought I heard the door open, and I thought I heard footsteps -- two sets of footsteps -- and a few minutes later, that boy I was telling you about -- Cloud -- he was kneeling over me, and I thought, oh. You came. I needed you, and you came. And he went away again, and there were more noises, like someone was fighting, and then --"

She shakes her head. "I don't know," she says. "I don't *know*. I keep trying to see it, I keep *dreaming* it, and it's different every time. Sometimes it's him. Sometimes it's the SOLDIER who was there on the mission. Sometimes it's someone I didn't meet until I was brought here. Sometimes it's the man who taught me the fighting arts. Sometimes it's my mother, even. All I know is *someone* had a mastered Restore, and *someone* carried me out of the reactor, and *someone* got me to Midgar -- somehow -- I don't know how, I don't remember any of it, I don't even know why Midgar --"

Tifa's voice is rising again, and Tseng reaches his hand up to cradle her cheek again, stroking his thumb over her jaw as gently as he can. "It's all right," he says, softly, putting as much reassurance as he can into his words. "Nobody expects you to be able to remember." (It would be helpful if she did. It would answer at least a few of the questions about what happened in that reactor, and possibly why Hojo wouldn't let any of the reconstruction team get anywhere near it. But he will be *fucked* if he gives her one hint, in word or in deed, that he blames her for the actions her mind took to protect itself when she thought she was dying.)

Tifa takes another deep breath, her chest heaving, her body shuddering. "You're hurting me," she says, to Rufus, in an undertone.

Rufus releases her like her skin is a stove that has just burned him. "Ramuh," he says. "I am so sorry --"

She shakes her head, slowly. "It's all right. I understand why." She takes another handful of tissues, scrubbing her face with them again, and drops them to join the first bunch. "The next thing I know,

I was waking up, and it was a month later, and I was in Midgar, and all the doctor would tell me was that someone had brought me in to him -- he wouldn't tell me who, no matter how much I asked -- he said the person who brought me in broke a hell of a lot of Shinra's regulations to do it --"

"Unconditional pardon," Rufus says. He looks over at Tseng. "Find out who it was so I can issue it."

Tifa laughs at that, silently, or at least Tseng thinks that's what the ripple running through her shoulders is. "Yeah. Good luck in getting him to talk. I couldn't, not in the entire time I was there, and I somehow don't think he'll be any more eager to tell *you*. Anyway. I was recovering for about three months, total. It would've been slower if I hadn't been treated with materia first -- hell, I'd be *dead* if I hadn't been treated with materia first -- but because I was, it will never heal completely. I'm -- the doctor said I'm lucky to have gotten back all the function that I have. He didn't think I would. And when I was ready to get up and get moving again, he was the one who found Kyle for me, and got me the job there, and that's when I met you --" She twists in place to look up at Tseng; Tseng is glad to see her face looks calmer, at least -- her eyes are still red, but the tears have stopped coming. "And six months after that, Kyle was transferring title to the bar into my name and retiring for real this time, and you know the rest of the story."

Tseng knows he doesn't know *all* the rest of the story, but he knows enough, at least, and the parts she's glossing over aren't the parts that have any bearing on what happened in Nibelheim. He puts his hands back on her shoulders, working his thumbs as gently as he can into the knots there, mindful of the places where he can see the reddened skin of incipient bruising from where he was holding on. "Thank you," he says, because all the other things he wants to tell her are in Wutaian, in the highest mode possible, and he doesn't think she's up to the task of translating in her head right now.

She just looks at him, worn out and weary. "Tell me it was worth it," she says, and she isn't referring to what happened; she's referring to having told the story, having dragged that horrible night out of memory and spread it out for them so vividly. "Tell me it will help."

"It will help," Rufus says, slow and contemplative. "Jenova. You said -- The name over the door Sephiroth was trying to get into was Jenova. You're sure of it."

It isn't a question. Tifa turns to look at him. Whatever passes between them is more of that silent communication Tseng has been marveling at all night. "I thought I might have dreamed it," she says. "Until last night, you said the name. And I knew I hadn't."

"No," Rufus agrees. He looks at Tseng. "Nibelheim first. And then, depending on what we find there? We're going to go have a little *talk* with Hojo."

Tseng looks back. He flicks his eyes down to the back of Tifa's head, back up to Rufus. The corners of Rufus's eyes twitch, just a little, enough to let Tseng know his message has been received, and Rufus agrees: if Hojo is the one behind all of this, and it is becoming



increasingly likely he is, they have both just agreed Tifa will be given the right of first refusal to be the one to kill him. (Tseng isn't sure if she'll take it or not; that is something he can't predict. Perhaps one of the only pieces of her behavior he can't. He could make a case for either option.)

But Tifa is sagging back against Tseng's knees, now, and he can feel the tremors running through her, minute and endless, like she's finally used the last scrap of her strength and Rufus's reassurance that her courage has helped was the sign she could stand down. "Good," she says, and oh, she sounds *drunk*. "I think -- I think I need to go collapse now --"

"Yes," Tseng agrees. He slides out from behind her, reaches both hands down to her; she looks up at them for a long minute, then seems to realize what they're for and puts her hands in his. "Come on. I'll bring you to bed." He flicks his eyes over to Rufus again, and Rufus nods, knowing Tseng is saying without words he'll come back once Tifa is asleep, for them to go over everything Tifa has said. Tifa misses it; she's too busy hauling herself to her feet, and once she's standing, it takes her a long minute of swaying in place before she's steady enough to let go of his hands.

He gets her into the bedroom with one arm around her waist, supporting her the whole way. It's awkward -- the height difference makes it hard for him to pace her steps -- but he's hauled Reno home drunk enough times that he has plenty of experience at manhandling semi-conscious bodies, at least. He sits her down on the side of the bed, remembering to unpin and unbraid her hair and comb it out with his fingers, and she's shaking the whole way. That, more than anything, is what decides him. "Will you let me give you some painkillers, and something to help you sleep?" he asks. The last thing he wants is for her to wake in the middle of the night.

She opens her eyes and looks up at him, and her eyes are two blank, endless pools. "When I dream, I want to be able to wake up from the nightmares," she says.

Oh, *Leviathan*, sometimes he thinks he would wreck *worlds* for this woman. "The stuff I have in mind shuts off dreaming for a night," he says. "It's dangerous to use for too long, because the brain needs to dream to stay sane, but -- Sometimes there are nights when dreaming would be worse than not dreaming. I think this is one of them."

He *knows* this is one of them, for her at least -- knows it well enough to be willing to give her one of Shinra's experimental drugs, although this one has been in use for nearly thirty years with no reported side effects except the ones that happen when people decide to abuse it, and he's been taking it, on and off, for at least a decade. (Of course, his sanity is debatable, but still; he's willing to give it to her for one night.) She considers, watching him, and he's just about ready to mention that he takes it himself -- she's slow enough, and dazed enough, that he thinks she might not pick up the implicit statement he'd just made -- when she nods. "All right," she says. "But -- only tonight. No matter what happens tomorrow."

Tseng combs his fingers through her hair one last time and nods.

"All right," he agrees, and goes to fetch the drugs and a glass of water from his bathroom.

She's still sitting up when he returns, but the glassy look in her eyes, matched with the way she's swaying slightly, tells him if he'd taken so much as thirty seconds longer, she wouldn't have been. He stops in front of her. She squints at him for a minute, then seems to remember what he'd gone for and holds out a hand. He puts the two pills into it. "Potion, in gelcap form," he says. "Two of them is one dose." She nods, slowly -- her every motion coming like it's underwater -- and puts them in her mouth. He holds out the glass of water, but she's already swallowed them; she takes the glass and drinks anyway.

Once she's finished, he takes the cap off the tiny vial of purple-tinged syrup and hands it to her, carefully, making sure she has a tight enough grip on it before he lets go. "Drink it quickly," he warns, "and have the water ready. It's foul." She nods again, then knocks it back like she's drinking whiskey neat; she barely even shudders, but she's quick with the water anyway.

Thus finished, she hands the glass of water back to him -- he puts it on the bedside table -- and slides back until she can start to wrestle her way under the covers. She pauses halfway through, though, and he thinks she might be about to ask him for something, until he catches the way she's biting her lip, indecision written in her every line. He's about to ask when she moves and answers his question for him; she pulls off the tank top, wriggles out of her cut-off shorts, and Tseng can't decide if that means she knows Rufus isn't staying the night, if it's because she doesn't care and is willing to be naked even if Rufus stays the night, or because she hates sleeping in clothes, only does it when she feels she absolutely has to, and just can't face the feel of fabric choking her in her sleep tonight of all nights.

She holds out the clothes to him, like a little girl might. He takes both pieces, folds each neatly, and places them on the bedside table on the side she always sleeps on, knowing it will be the first place she looks in the morning, out of habit. She's so wiped she probably wouldn't remember it if he put them elsewhere and told her where to look, and Tseng knows the don't-dream hits hard and fast. When he turns back, she's already spread out under the covers, curled up on her side, and he'd be worried that the position was near-fetal if he hadn't seen her sleeping alone in a bed before and knows this is how she sleeps when she's not draped over him. It tells him, without her actually telling him, that she knows he's not coming to bed himself right now, but he sits down on the edge of the bed anyway, stroking her hair the way he might pet a cat to offer her as much comfort as possible.

"Sleep," he says, softly. "I'll be here in the morning. It will all look different in the morning." (He doesn't promise better; nothing will have changed by then, tomorrow will not be appreciably better than today, and it may very well be worse. But it will be different.)

After a few minutes, her breathing evens out into sleep. Tseng counts three hundred seconds off in his head, making absolutely sure she's under, before he gets up and heads back into the sitting room.

Rufus isn't there, but Tseng wasn't really expecting him to be; after hearing Tifa's story, and knowing the reasons *why* her lungs will be sensitive for the rest of her life, Tseng thinks -- knows -- neither of them will ever again smoke inside a place where she is staying, even if she isn't in the room. Sure enough, the sliding screen to the balcony is partway open, Rufus's usual cue for where he is; the glass of whiskey Rufus poured and Tifa barely touched is missing, and Tseng knows it has joined Rufus outside.

Tseng picks up the glass he'd been drinking from, refills it -- he could *really* use a drink right now, now the worst is mostly over -- and then, reconsidering, just brings the bottle with him. "Give me one of those," he says, finding Rufus precisely where he knew he would, cigarette in one hand and nearly-empty glass in the other, staring out blankly over the city.

When Rufus doesn't move, Tseng sighs and takes Rufus's cigarette from him, taking a deep drag off it and feeling the smoke warm his lungs. That, as he suspected, is enough to shake Rufus from his reverie; usually stealing Rufus's cigarette gets him punched, or at least scowled at, but this time all Rufus does is pull the slightly battered pack from his back pocket and light another one for himself.

"Ramuh and Ifrit," Rufus says, finally, after a good five minutes of smoking and drinking and silence. "Holy Alexander and his sacred band of knights. I -- I just --" He looks down at the drink in his hand and brings it to his lips, realizing too late it's empty; Tseng picks up the bottle from where he set it at his feet and wordlessly pours a refill, with a generous hand. Rufus stares at it for another minute or two before drinking.

"I am going to find out who is behind all of this, and I am going to *erase them*," Rufus finally says. It is an oath more solemn than any Tseng has ever heard him make on his honor or his name.

"I rather think you'll have to fight her for the privilege," Tseng says. He burns his lips on the last drag of the cigarette, down to filter, and flicks it over the side of the balcony. Rufus holds out the pack for him to take another; when he does, Rufus flicks open the lighter, holding it out for Tseng the way he always does, and Tseng gathers his hair back out of the way and leans in.

The familiar routine complete, Rufus goes back to staring out over the city. (His city. It always has been.) There's something going on, in the depths of that prodigious mind, but Tseng doesn't probe for it. Rufus will tell him when Rufus is done thinking and not a moment before, and if Tseng pushes too soon, all it will get him will be a snarl and a harsh word.

"The question isn't whether or not Hojo's behind all this," Rufus says, finally. And: yes. There's no doubt. Hearing Tifa's description of what was in that reactor, Tseng is certain, beyond any reasonable standard of doubt, Hojo's fingerprints are all over those pods in there, whether literal or metaphorical. "The question is, who else is in on it."

"The question is, how much does your father know," Tseng says, softly enough to be nothing more than a breath.

Rufus brings his cigarette to his lips and leaves it there, freeing

up one hand to drag it through his hair. "Yeah," he finally says, taking the cigarette back and staring at it like he can't quite figure out how it got there. "Or -- no. Because we both know that my father wouldn't let something like this happen without knowing enough about it to be satisfied. The question is, what does he *think* Hojo is doing." He stares off at nothing (at his city) again, and it's only the experience of long practice that lets Tseng know he's not finished. "And the answer to that question," he finally says, "is going to determine whether or not I have to kill him."

The sentence lingers between them as though the wind is holding it there. It isn't the first time Rufus has threatened his father's life in Tseng's hearing, but it is the first time the threat has been anything approaching realistic, rather than the blowing off of steam.

Tseng transfers his cigarette into the hand holding his whiskey glass, then reaches out and takes Rufus's chin in his hand, turning Rufus's head gently until Rufus meets his eyes. "Whatever you decide," he says, putting all his sincerity into both his tone and his eyes; "wherever your honor leads you, whatever you find it necessary to do, I will be at your side. In this, and in all things."

"I know," Rufus says. His defenses all lie in waste and wreckage, written across his face; Tseng can see, in that look, that Rufus has always relied on that one simple fact, Tseng's loyalty (always, eternally) part of the framework Rufus has built his entire adult life upon. "And I will do whatever I need to, to be worthy of it." (The same words he'd used to Tifa, earlier this night. They fit.)

The moment lingers between them, raw and aching, the first time they have ever (ever had to) put it into words. (The first time they've ever dared to.)

Then Rufus closes his eyes, and a second later, Rufus is laughing. When he opens his eyes again, they're very nearly merry. "So," he says. He finishes his cigarette and tosses it over the balcony's edge, and this time he doesn't light another. "I guess we've got a company to overthrow, don't we."

And Tseng laughs too, startled into it by how *normal* Rufus sounds, the way he'd make any statement of purpose from *I guess we've got a bar to visit* to *I guess we've got a world to save*. "I guess we do," he says, and clinks his glass against Rufus's. "You get the napalm. I'll get the C4."

And once they're done laughing, they go inside, and they start to plan.

## **ii. just gonna get my feet wet (until i drown)**

### **( 6. )**

Tifa rises to wakefulness slowly, gradually, like swimming up from the bottom of a very deep lake. She realizes, after a long minute of hazy half-pleasure, that the mattress beneath her hip is firm and cradling at the same time, that the pillow she is lying on is

warm and soft and rises and falls in such a way as to tell her that it isn't a pillow at all, and the hazy pleasure comes from the way an all-too-familiar hand is stroking up and down her spine, soft and slow, over and over again, tracing patterns she thinks might be hiding some deeper meaning.

It's the first time she can ever remember Tseng being awake before she was, and the first time she can ever remember sleeping entirely through the night when he was sharing her bed, and the thought of Tseng and wakefulness makes her realize that they *aren't* sharing her bed, and after a minute (in which Tseng's touch shifts from her back to her hair, combing gently through it) she remembers last night, and a vial of purple liquid that tasted worse than anything she'd ever drunk before, and she thinks, head still muzzy, *oh. So, he was right about the not dreaming.*

"Shhh," Tseng says, his voice still deep and lazy with sleep. "I can feel you starting to tense up. It's okay. We're the only ones in here, and we have at least half an hour before we have to be awake."

"Didn't dream," she says. Or tries, to, at least; her mouth tastes like something died in it, and it's dry enough that her tongue feels like twice its normal size.

"I asked you to let me give you something to make sure you wouldn't," he says. There's nothing in his voice that even hints at irritation at having to remind her. "You agreed. It's why your mouth feels like a desert right now; the stuff does that enough on its own, but when it's combined with a potion, it's even worse. If you don't mind me moving, there's a glass of water for the dryness and a peppermint candy for the taste, just out of my reach, waiting for you."

"Mmm," Tifa says. Part of her still feels like it's teetering on the boundary between sleep and consciousness; she summons all her energy and manages to roll away from Tseng, onto her side. It feels like the same amount of effort she'd use to run around the edge of all of Midgar. Dimly, she thinks that she should probably be worried about that, but she can't quite muster up the energy.

Next to her, the bed shifts, dips, and a minute later, Tseng's hand returns to her back. "Can you sit up?" he asks, carefully. "Or do you need a hand?"

Concentrating on his voice brings her slightly more into focus; she lifts one arm, letting it flop against the bed in a position to brace herself against the mattress (dear *Shiva* this mattress is nicer than anything she's ever slept on). Once she's got her elbow up, her palm flat against the mattress, she concentrates really hard on opening her eyes. The world is still there when she does, at least. (The bedroom is prettier than it was last night; the morning sunlight catches the grain of the wood, the flecks in the paper of the screens that line it.) "Gimme 'minute," she says. It comes out a little more clearly, at least.

Tseng laughs, softly. "Take your time. The hangover from that shit is pretty intense, but it'll clear in about twenty minutes. Faster if you have something to eat."

"Mmm," Tifa says again. Dimly, she is aware that the back of her

head feels empty, unsettled, in a way she's never felt before. Usually, she wakes fairly quickly, and forgets what she dreamed, although not *that* she dreamed, as soon as she opens her eyes; today, it feels as though the part of her head that holds those dreams is still asleep, yearning for release somehow. It's a very disconcerting feeling. She's glad for the night without dreaming, especially after the ones she'd woken from the night before (and that had been before she'd ripped off the bandage she'd applied over those memories), but it isn't something she'd like to do often. Or ever again, really.

Tseng sits at her back, one hand (it must be the hand that isn't holding the glass of water) stroking her hair again. She concentrates on the feel of it, on the way her bladder is uncomfortably full, on the way her breath feels as it rises and falls in her chest, willing herself into presence in her body. (It's not always a comfortable body. But it's hers.)

Eventually, in what could be two minutes or two hours later, she feels like she's *there* enough to attempt to sit up. Her arm buckles the first time she tries to put her weight on it, tries to push herself up to sitting, but the second time succeeds, and she gets one knee underneath her, and Tseng slides his hand underneath the side that was on the bed to give her a boost just when she thinks she might fall over again.

"I feel like I got hit by a *truck*," she says, once she's more-or-less upright.

Tseng winces, just a little. "Ah. Yes. Well, I may have forgotten to mention how you'd feel the morning after. If it makes you feel any better, though, I've been using that stuff on and off for about fourteen years now, and I've come to the conclusion that the hangover is a good idea. It keeps you from relying on it too often." He hands her the glass of water, making sure to keep his hand on it until she has both of her hands around it, and even then he keeps his hovering as she drinks.

The water tastes good. She holds the first mouthful in her mouth, swishing it around for a long minute, and she can practically *feel* it seeping back into her tissues as she swallows. "It's okay," she finally says, after she's finished half the glass. "You were probably right about me needing it." Now that she's upright, the fog is starting to clear, a little bit at least, and she's conscious of having gotten eight full hours of sleep for the first time in ... a really long time.

"Here," Tseng says. He turns back to the nightstand. The morning sunlight catches his hair, diffuse through the paper screens -- there aren't any windows, but the sunlight is strong even through the filter - - and makes dappled patterns in its depth. She catches herself watching the highlights and shadows like she used to watch clouds in the spring sky when she was younger. He presses a small something into her hand; the peppermint candy he'd mentioned, she realizes. She brings it to her mouth. The clear sharp taste of it dispels some more of the funk.

"Bathroom," she says, after another minute or hour or lifetime, once she thinks she has a chance of making her way there without falling over.

Tseng carefully hides a smile. (The fact that he is smiling at her, that he is amused by her rather than worried, goes a long way to easing the fears of a body that won't quite do what she wants for it to do; he would not be so amused if her reaction were anything out of the ordinary.) "Over there," he says, pointing with his chin to where a sliding screen stands mostly open. "Your bag is sitting just inside it. I didn't want to go looking to see if you'd remembered your toiletries, so there's an extra toothbrush next to the sink. If you'd like to take a shower now, feel free; holler if you can't figure out the controls. We don't have time for a run --"

She thinks, looking at the way his eyes flick away from hers quickly and then back again, that it's true they don't have time for a run, but even if they had, he wouldn't have let her do it. Well, that's fair enough, up here at least. "--But if you'd like to wait until after your *kata* for the shower, I do have the third bedroom in here set up as a *dojo*. The mere thought of *kata* right now is probably making your head spin, but really, you've got about another five minutes before the worst of it wears off, and once you can stand up without wanting to fall down, you'll be much better off if you get moving as much as you possibly can, to metabolize the last of it."

Tifa is beginning to see the point where she'll be able to believe him, on the horizon at least; the last of the fog is starting to burn off the surface of her mind, and her muscles no longer feel like they're quite as full of syrup. And anyway, she's done her *kata* every morning, without fail, through far worse than this, from the moment she got back up out of her deathbed, even when Dr. Ellis was hovering at her side and *hollering* at her. "Yeah," she agrees, finishing the last of the water, sticking the peppermint candy under her tongue so she doesn't have to talk around it. "Partner me? Unless you have a dummy."

"I do," Tseng says. "But I would be pleased to serve as your partner anyway."

That makes her smile, and then he is helping her out of the bed and falling courteously back to let her make the trek under her own power, and she's three-quarters of the way to the bathroom before she realizes she's naked. She wonders if he undressed her last night, or if she did it at some point. She wouldn't have thought she'd have been willing to sleep naked, not with other people in the apartment at the time she'd fallen asleep, but maybe a part of her had realized that Rufus wasn't 'other people'. Or maybe she'd just not wanted to sleep in clothes. Not after all that remembering.

Her backpack is right where he said it would be; she fishes her toiletries bag out of it, finds her toothbrush, realizes she forgot to pack her toothpaste. Well, Tseng's is right there. She brushes her teeth, drinks another two glasses of water, uses the toilet, washes her face, and the chill of the water against her skin is enough to shake the rest of the haze. She's feeling almost human again when she comes back out of the bathroom, still naked, and looks around for the clothes she'd been wearing last night; they'll do for a workout. She finds them on the nightstand next to her bed, right where she would've looked for them first thing if she'd been the one to wake before Tseng. She's pulling them on when he pads softly back out of what must be a walk-in closet on the other side of the room, wearing workout clothes of his

own -- *hakama* pants and nothing else -- and in the process of pulling his hair back and securing it with a length of leather lace.

"You look as though you've nearly summited the evolutionary ladder again," he says, smiling at her, but his smile papers over a slight bit of worry that hadn't been there before. Worry that she might remember last night, she thinks, and blame him for his part in it. Worry that she might see something she doesn't want to see, today, and blame him for his part in bringing it about.

So she crosses the room and nestles herself up against him, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek against his naked chest, and he holds himself startled and aloof for a few terrifying seconds before his arms close around her and he rests his chin on the top of her head. He breathes out, short and sharp.

"It's okay," Tifa says. She isn't speaking about the drug hangover. He'll know she isn't. "I -- Whatever's over there waiting for me to stumble into? It's okay. It isn't *my* Nibelheim. I know that. I'm ready for it. I won't *like* it, but I'm ready for it. I'm not going to blame you for it."

Tseng breathes out again, and his arms tighten around her. (It isn't comfortable, not exactly -- her shoulders are bruised, and there's a ring of corresponding bruises around her left bicep, from where he and Rufus were holding on to her last night, that even the Potion she'd taken last night couldn't erase entirely -- but she doesn't let her discomfort show, because achy or not, it feels good at the same time.) He doesn't say anything else. She doesn't either.

It's a long, long minute before he finally pulls back. "Okay," he says, then picks a hair elastic up from the bedside table and hands it to her for her to braid her hair with. "Come on. It's seven-fifteen, and we have to be dressed and out the door in no more than an hour and a half."

Tseng's *dojo* is, like the rest of his apartment, walled in paper screens and floored with *tatami* mats, with extra padding for the floor, rolled up and stowed, for times when a bout might need some extra protection. One wall is lined with mirrors; it makes sense. (Zangan had always told her it was easier to practice in front of a mirror, to watch your form, to watch the way your body moves and correct any flaws before they become deep-set into practice and muscle memory. She's never been able to bring herself to do it, even if she'd been able to find mirrors in the size necessary.) She turns her back on them as soon as she realizes what she's seeing. Tseng raises an eyebrow at her, but he's never asked why she doesn't like looking at herself in mirrors, and she thinks he never will. (It's nothing too private, nothing too personal. She just never looks quite like the way she thinks she should look, inside her head.)

"Five minute warmup?" is all he asks, instead, and she nods and begins stretching even as he does too.

She concentrates on her shoulders, on shaking out the knots and the tension, on loosening up the spots that still ache from his hands, and she knows he sees her doing it; his eyes track her motion, and there's an obscure bit of guilt lurking there. Still, once she's done



limbering up, she feels almost completely human again, the part of her brain that was still trying to dream even once she had awakened slipping quietly into sync with the rest of her mind. She finishes her stretches by tucking the hem of her tank top into her sweatpants in the front, tucking the end of her braid into her sweatpants in the back, and Tseng watches her with interest from where he's sitting on the floor, back to the wall, with his knees butterflied out to the side and his chest curled over his feet.

He's never seen her do this before, but there's something about this morning that makes her want to show off. Carefully, she picks up each of her feet in turn, rotating the ankles, then bounces in place to test the spring and give of the floor. It's not bad; it feels as though it was specially installed, as though there's more underneath than just the *tatami*. It's much better than the grass behind her bar, actually, and she does this there often enough. She comes over to stand in front of him, close enough that he has to tilt his head back to look up at her but not so close as to risk kicking him in the head, and when he looks up at her with a question in his face, she grins at him (he's startled into returning it) and *moves*.

Tifa taught herself tumbling as a lark, as a child, even before Zangan had seen her potential and first started teaching her. (It's part of why he did, she thinks; he was passing through, and he'd seen her working through the physics behind what she would later learn to call a back handspring, all by herself, and he'd gone straight to her parents and asked -- begged -- to be allowed to stay for a year and teach her everything he could.) She's horribly out of practice -- she only lets herself play when she feels she's done enough work to warrant it. Still, the room isn't long enough for anything *truly* impressive. She'd run out of room before she worked up anywhere near enough momentum.

So instead she just crouches, bending at the knees and through the hips and waist, and throws herself backwards: back handspring, back handspring, check the position of the wall as she flips, and she has *just* enough room, and just enough momentum, for a tucked back flip without risking putting a foot through the screen. She lands -- not as gracefully as she'd like, but her ankles don't wobble, at least -- and rolls forward into a front tuck one-and-a-half flip, straight into a somersault landing, to shed some of the kinetic energy she'd gathered, lest she roll *backward* and fall on her ass.

She's glad she took the extra time to stretch her shoulders, she thinks, as she finishes the roll and winds up sitting, legs splayed out in a vee in front of her, about four or five feet away from Tseng's astonished look. Otherwise, that probably would have hurt.

The look on Tseng's face is gratifyingly impressed. "If that's what a full night's sleep will allow you to do," he finally says, "remind me to drug you more often." The look turns thoughtful, after another second. "How much of that could you teach me?"

It isn't the question Tifa's expecting, but it should have been. Of course Tseng would see the potential in the skill she'd just demonstrated; half the times she can best him, when they are sparring, are because she's thrown the classic forms out the window and relied on kinetic memory and instinct to match his moves, and for

all that she hasn't thought of herself as a tumbler for years, it was the skill she'd graved into her muscles before she'd learned the Wutaian forms. No doubt she's beaten him once or twice with a throw or a kick that has its origins in a handspring or a front flip.

She narrows her eyes, studying his body as he rises from the last of his stretches, evaluating the way she knows he can move. "It depends," she finally says, and the look on Tseng's face tells her it's the answer he was expecting, though not hoping for. "Teach you, most of it. Teach you in such a way that you'd be able to integrate it into your fighting?" She shrugs. "It all comes down to how much you can make yourself break form in the midst of a match. I'm guessing that you *could*; I don't think there's much you couldn't do if you put your mind to it. Whether or not you could without breaking everything for six months while you readjusted? That's what I don't know."

"Ah," Tseng says, after doing her the courtesy of thinking about her answer for a minute. "Best not for now, then. There's a saying about old dogs and new tricks that likely applies."

He's barely ten years older than she is, Tifa knows, but he started learning far earlier than she did, and trained in a school far harsher than Zangan's gentle corrections. So -- "Later," she agrees, tacit promise that there *will be* a later, and holds up her hands for him to help her to her feet. She doesn't need the boost, but she thinks he probably wants to give it.

Once they are both standing, Tseng lets go of her wrists and bows to her; she catches the gesture half a heartbeat too late, and her returning bow is just slightly out of sync. "Two-person *kata*, this morning, I think," he says, once he's straightened up. "As much as I enjoy getting a chance to spar with you..."

He trails off, leaving the ending -- *we can't exactly afford the possibility of further injury, today of all days* -- unspoken. Tifa nods, trying hard not to think about what, precisely, the next few hours will bring once they leave this sanctuary. She knows what he means; Zangan taught her the forms both single and double, and Tseng has reminded her, with nothing but the motion of his body, during the mornings they've done this before. "You lead," she says. She isn't secure enough in her memory to be the one who takes the more active role.

The two-person *kata* they both know are a series of moves that would not be out of place in an actual sparring match, simply choreographed and telegraphed in advance, more ritual than anything else. They dance through the steps, one after another, and Tifa watches the way Tseng's muscles bend and flex, and she thinks again, even as he whirls in place and throws up one arm to block a punch he knew was coming only because it was next in sequence, of how beautiful he is when he's in motion.

The last time they did this, he broke off halfway through the third *kata* and slapped her across the shoulders to correct her form; today she concentrates on keeping her spine straight, her hips balanced, and either he doesn't find any fault in her corrected positioning or he doesn't want to take the time necessary to offer the instruction. (She'd snapped back a protest, last time, that her form was *perfectly*

*fine*, thank you, and it was hard to keep her spine balanced the way classical form said she should when she was trying to cope with her *Shiva-damned tits* getting in the way, and he'd lost five minutes to laughing so hard he'd caught a case of the hiccups before walking her through the moves at half speed to see what compromises she could make.) They make it through the first six before she bobbles a move, not because she can't do it but because she can't remember *what comes next*, and he drops out of form as soon as she does and bows to her again. (This time she catches it more quickly.)

"Feel better?" Tseng asks, once he straightens up. He looks her over with a weather eye, and she thinks he's looking to see how ready she is to face the day to come.

She's as ready as she's ever going to be. "Much," she says. "Come on. It's probably easiest if you just show me how the shower works."

How the shower is intended to work, apparently, is as a prelude to a long, hot soak in the chest-high wooden bathtub that's next to it; one is meant to sit down on the teak-wood stool and soap and rinse oneself clean, holding the shower nozzle that detaches from the wall, then transfer into the tub and linger there. They only have time for the shower. Tseng catches her giving the tub a wistful look as she's holding the spray upside-down to blast the underside of her hair with it. (The water pressure is heavenly, and the pipes don't bang at all.) "When we come back," he says, "you can have as long a soak as you want."

"I'll hold you to that," she says, and hands him the showerhead.

Once clean and dry, Tseng blow-dries his hair (and, after a raised-eyebrow request for permission, hers as well); his gets brushed out until it's shining, and once he's done, he brushes out hers as well, then pulls it up into a bun so tight it makes her scalp tingle. Tifa doesn't question his choice of hairstyle for her, just moves automatically to her backpack to pick out clothes, then stops at Tseng's raised hand. "Reno delivered your wardrobe," he says, moving over to open his closet door again and reveal a pile of bags heaped against the wall. "You get to keep your underwear."

Tifa stares at the pile in dismay. It's more clothing than she'd be able to wear in a *month*, even if she changed three times a day. "Sweet Shiva suffering," she says. "Did he buy out the *store*?"

Tseng laughs at that. "He bought everything in three different sizes, just in case, since there won't be enough time to have them tailored and he couldn't be *positive* he got your size right." And Tifa knows that he lives in a different world than she does, she's had her nose rubbed in it a dozen times *at least* in the last day, but somehow that hits her in a part she hasn't braced herself against yet: the idea that Reno could produce her an entire wardrobe in what would be the middle of the night in the slums, the idea that they have money enough to burn to buy three of everything in the hopes that one would fit, the idea that of course if they had more time they would have fitted the clothes directly to her. He's got his back to her, at least; she struggles for control over her face and must have achieved it by the time he turns back, because he doesn't look at her like there's something wrong. "He says this is most likely to fit; here."

The fabric he hands her is like a sin. It rubs against the calluses on her hands, until she's almost afraid she's going to snag it just by touching. He shakes out the pieces, one by one: first, a high-necked and sleeveless top, white and silken, that is only a fraction of an inch too large across her breasts but fits against her skin everywhere else. Pants next, in a soft charcoal grey and made out of the finest, lightest wool she's ever touched. They fit her like a glove, cupping her thighs and her hips, hitting her waist precisely, ending just beneath the ankle, but despite how they cling, when she turns away from Tseng and snaps a head-height roundhouse kick at the air, they move with her, without constricting her motion in the least.

Over it all goes a suit jacket, tailored to be slightly loose through the bust and then pull in at the waist before flaring out again and ending just below her hips, in the same charcoal grey as the pants. Looking at it as Tseng holds it up for her, Tifa thinks there's no way it's going to fit, but she slides her arms into the sleeves and Tseng tugs and adjusts until suddenly, it does. She's always hated the way jackets pull across her shoulders -- she is incredibly broad-shouldered for a woman, and her winter coats have always had to come from the men's section of the thrift shop -- but this one moves with her too, cradling her shoulders instead of binding them, and she knows she could probably have worn this ensemble in the *dojo* and fought in it for half an hour without once finding it too constrictive.

The only way it could all fit her better would be if it *had* been tailored straight to her body, and Tifa closes her eyes and breathes, deeply, lest she say something unconscionable. (Reno was only trying his best, helping her the best way he knows how. It shouldn't make her want to hunt him down and *punch him*.)

When she turns around for Tseng's inspection, though, he's looking at her thoughtfully, and she thinks she might not have managed to conceal her thoughts well enough. All he does is meet her eyes and smile a bit ruefully, though. "It's the same clothing line we get our suits from," he says. "Even the women's jackets are cut to conceal whatever you're carrying. You'll find a few extra pockets on the inside to stash whatever you'd like in."

Tifa makes herself nod. "Thank Reno for me," she says. Even her voice doesn't sound like her own anymore.

"Thank him yourself," Tseng says. "He's piloting the chopper for us." He studies her for another moment, and she thinks she can see approval lurking there, mingled with a curious regret. Then he's turning away and heading back into the closet. She can hear rustling, and jangling, and no more than two minutes later he's coming back, wearing suit pants and dress shirt, with a holster slung over it all, buttoning up his cuffs. (There's a pistol in the holster, and she's pretty sure there's another at the small of his back and one at his ankle.) "Forgot to ask," he says. "Heels or flats?"

Of *course* Reno's personal shopping service includes shoes. She doesn't doubt they'll fit just as well.

"Heels, if they're more than an inch wide," she says, because she can't scream. "Flats, otherwise."

Tseng nods. "Boots okay? Leather uppers, three-inch heels -- Reno said he thought you'd probably feel better if you were closer to eye level --" And she will, and she knows it, and she can't decide whether to love Reno or hate him for thinking of it, for knowing her (knowing a woman's mind) so well. "--But they're platform heels, two inches or so wide, and he said he specifically tried them on -- in his size, not yours, obviously -- to make sure the balance was good enough."

"Yeah," Tifa says. Breathes. "That's fine."

Tseng looks like he's about to say something else, but whatever it is, he doesn't. He just turns around and heads back into the closet, and when he comes back out a few minutes later, he's perfectly buttoned up in the navy suit that's the uniform of his profession, and he's holding a shoebox in one hand and a pair of thin dress socks in the other.

The boots fit perfectly. By that point she isn't even surprised. She slips them back off again once she's tried them on, before she stands back up, holding them in her hands so she doesn't mar the *tatami* mats with her soles.

From there, it's only a few minutes for Tseng to haul out two brand-new-looking tiny suitcases, fill one with what are apparently now her clothes and one with his, adding their toiletries to the top and zippering them up, his motions brisk and familiar. "We'll grab breakfast on the way," he says. "Coffee shop in the lobby of Rufus's building. Do you get airsick at all?"

Tifa closes her eyes. "I don't know," she says. "I've never flown before." (She'd known this was going to be difficult. Dammit, she'd *known*. But they haven't even *left* yet.)

She catches, just as she opens her eyes again, the very tail end of a wince. "Right. Sorry." Tseng crosses the room, his body language changing, the efficient motions of a man preparing for a mission sliding away until at last it is her lover standing in front of her again, no matter what clothes they each might be wearing. He reaches out and cups her cheek in his hand. "I'm trying to remember," he says, softly. "Kick me if I forget. When I forget."

Tifa tries, and fails, to keep from turning her head into his touch and breathing in the scent of his aftershave that still lingers on his palms. "I'm trying not to freak out," she says.

"And you're doing an admirable job of it," Tseng says. (She'd think he was tactfully exaggerating, were he not so careful never to lie to her.) "If it's any consolation, it fits the part you're playing. Rufus's PAs tend towards shell-shock for at least the first few days."

Tifa doesn't particularly want to think about that. "Let's just -- get this over with," she says, turning away. "Or at least get started. Before I lose my nerve."

Tseng doesn't say anything to that, just picks up a suitcase in each hand and leads her out of the apartment and down the elevator. She's expecting to return to the lobby level entrance they came in the night before, but instead he punches the button for one of the sub-

basements; the elevator doors open to a garage. The car he leads her to is dark and nondescript, but she thinks it's probably hiding as many secrets as he is. He opens the passenger door for her before she can reach for the handle, and she flushes and concentrates on seating herself without *falling over* in the boots she's wearing. (Unfair. The boots fit even better than the shoes she wears for a night's service; she stopped noticing the heels thirty seconds after she put them on.)

The ride over to Rufus's building is short and silent, and before Tifa can even think to ask why they're driving instead of walking or taking the train, Tseng is flashing his ID and scanning his keycard at a security gate and pulling into another garage.

The coffee shop in the lobby, once they get up there, has a line that stretches at least twenty people deep, even this early on a Sunday morning. She's prepared to wait, no matter how much the push and crush of people distresses her, but Tseng drops the suitcases, and her, next to a pillar that affords a perfect sightline of everything and everyone. "Hang on," he says, and disappears into the crowd before she can say anything. She bites back the protest, sets her shoulders against the pillar's curve, and watches him make his way through the crowd and up to the counter without waiting in line at all.

The crowd of people parts for him, she notices. So swiftly and smoothly it's like no individual member of the crowd has actively decided to move. Tseng walks up to the counter, catches the eye of one of the teenagers manning it, and exchanges a few brief words. Then he turns and comes back.

"Come on," he says, picking their suitcases back up. She grits her teeth against the question; she *will not* allow herself to trail behind him asking *why* every thirty seconds like a fucking *two-year-old*. Something must show in her face, though, or in the lines of her shoulders -- she's going to have to hope that Tseng is the only one up here who can read her that well -- because he adds, sounding completely casual, "One of the runners will deliver breakfast and coffee up to Rufus's suite in five minutes or so, as soon as our order is ready."

Tifa bites back the comment; she's already realizing that if she balks at every single display of thoughtless, unconscious privilege, she will be protesting every thirty seconds. At least. Seeing Tseng in his native environment is more than a little disconcerting; she'd noted, from the very beginning, how he (and Reno, and Rude) interacted with the world, with the other patrons of the bar, as though they owned everything around them, but down in Lower Seven, she'd taken it for the arrogance of the plate-dweller. Here, though, that arrogance is just as prevalent, even among the people of the plate. (Among the most elite of the people of the plate; she has no doubt that this building is where those who are among Shinra's most powerful live.)

"Lead the way," she says, instead.

Tseng nods and picks up both the suitcases again. (She thinks that perhaps she should offer to be the one carrying them, if she is to be the personal assistant, but she knows him well enough to know that

he wouldn't surrender them up to her.) "This way," he says, and leads her over to a bank of elevators.

The small knot of people waiting step away from them both as Tseng checks the button to make sure it's pushed; it's the same instinctive, unconscious crowd-motion she'd seen from the line at the coffee counter, and Tifa fights the urge to follow. Then, second-guessing herself, she does take a step away from Tseng, watching him cautiously, trying to figure out if the role she's playing would be clinging to him as a guide or as wary of him as the others apparently are. She hasn't made up her mind by the time the elevator comes and Tseng bows her into it, but she tries to (at the very least) school her face into looking like she's done this a hundred times before.

Nobody else follows them into the car; no one says anything, but there's a distinct, if wordless, impression of *yeah, I'll just take the next one* coming from everyone who's waiting. Tseng hits the door-close button, swipes his keycard, and hits the button for the sixty-fourth (top) floor as soon as they're in; he doesn't seem to expect any other passengers either. The elevator slides into motion, swift and smooth; he leans against the side wall. Casually, neither face nor tone changing, he says, in Wutaian: "*The eye in the sky is watching; have care from now onward.*" His eyes flick up over her head, into the corner, so quickly she wouldn't have noticed unless she'd been watching.

Tifa hadn't thought about cameras, but it makes sense. She leans against the back wall of the elevator as casually as he's leaning against the side; from there she can see where his eyes had directed her to look, out of the corner of her eye. It takes her a good twenty seconds to realize what she's looking for; only the lens of the camera is visible, and it blends into the trim against the ceiling so flawlessly she isn't even quite sure she's identified the actual camera, and not the elaborate and decorative facets. She isn't sure if he chose Wutaian because the cameras have audio pickup as well as visual, and her *persona* would have no reason to know Wutaian, so she can't answer; she just looks back at him and nods, fractionally enough that she hopes any observers will miss it.

The little smile he gives her says she picked the right choice. "Please do tell me if there's anything else I can do to help you adapt to your new role and position, Ms. Walker," he says, which is as good as confirming that yes, they *are* being listened to, or possibly listened to, as well as being watched. It takes her a minute to remember who 'Ms. Walker' is supposed to be, until she remembers the name on the ID card they'd had made for her (the card itself is in one of the inside pockets of her jacket; Tseng made sure she'd remembered it before they left the apartment). She'll have to spend a few hours reminding herself that -- for the next week or so, at least -- she'll need to answer to 'Miki' as though it were her own name.

It's hard to figure out precisely what she should be saying, should be doing -- she hasn't had a whole lot of time to figure out what others would expect to see, and she's never been very good at acting -- so she decides the best way to play it is as herself, only a touch meeker, a touch more demure. "Thank you," she says, and -- remembering the looks the people in the lobby had given him, remembering the way everyone seems to view him with such mingled

awe and fear -- she adds, "Sir."

(It's almost worth it for the look on his face, quickly beaten down: part hysterical amusement, part abject horror.)

The elevator doors open before Tseng can say anything further; he gestures her to precede him again, which she does, but he takes the lead as soon as they exit, since she has no idea where they're going. There aren't a whole lot of choices, though: the hallway they exit onto is short, maybe five feet on either side, with a pair of doors at the end of each side and nothing more. There's one additional door next to the elevator bank -- stairwell, probably -- and one heavier door at the far end of the hallway, and that's it. The carpet is rich and plush, a thick burgundy; the walls are a neutral cream. None of the doors have numbers on them.

Tseng leads her to the hallway on the left and the door on the right before she can look much more closely. There's a keycard reader in the place of a conventional lock -- come to think of it, she hasn't once seen a key-controlled lock yet, Above -- but Tseng ignores it; he turns the door handle and it opens without hesitation, which makes him sigh and roll his eyes. "Knock, knock," he calls, as he pushes the door open with one hand and steps aside, still holding it, gesturing for Tifa to enter first. She does, swallowing back her protest at his holding the door for her, which he never does Below; she can't decide if the change is due to the roles they're both playing, or the manners he usually adopts (with women or with everyone) Above and holds back Below because they would stand out.

The room the door opens upon is ... stunning, really. There isn't another possible word for it.

It's large -- larger than the entirety of the Seventh Heaven, and then some -- and for a minute she thinks it's a single-room apartment, before she realizes that despite the furniture being arranged to divide the room into separate functional areas, there's no bed or sleeping area. Which means this is only part of the space that Rufus lives in. The floors are hardwood, an incredible golden blonde that she's never seen before; the walls are the same cream as the outside hallway. The ceiling is fifteen, twenty feet above her. The furnishings, what she can see, are all stainless steel and polished glass. There aren't any windows; she adds up sightlines and angles and realizes that the apartment is likely an L shape, curled around the edges and the corner of the building, which tells her that the outside walls must belong to other rooms.

There's a spotless galley-style kitchen and island counter directly in front of her, just past a couch and two chairs arranged to face each other; to her left, bookcases packed full of more books than she's ever seen in her life stretch all the way to the ceiling, a ladder (the same steel and chrome as everything else) fitted up against the shelves on wheels and a track left negligently in front of the third section over, and there's a haphazard stack of books piled every-which-way next to it on the floor, with several volumes on the ladder itself. In the L formed by the bookcases is a desk, easily the size of two doors laid side-to-side, that holds three computer monitors (the center one on a small stand to lift it; the other two to either side) and a laptop plugged into them. That half-circle of technology is the only



space on the desk not occupied by utter chaos: papers, books, coffee mugs, an ashtray placed where someone sitting in the chair in front of the laptop could reach it without thinking twice. The chair has a perfect view of the door.

The desk, and its contents, are the only sign that anyone lives here, that this room isn't a showplace model. Everything else is spotless, impersonal; even the artwork on the walls, the occasional piece of sculpture on a table or counter, have the feel of things that are only there because they are expected. The desk is where someone *lives*.

Rufus is sitting in the desk chair, caught halfway through the motion of stabbing his cigarette out in the ashtray. (His other hand isn't visible; she is certain it had reached for some weapon or another when the door opened, until he could identify who was entering.) He looks nothing like the man she met two days ago. He's wearing well-pressed white linen, and his hair is slicked back, not a strand out of place. The severity of the hairstyle should make him look younger, his cheekbones standing out in sharp relief, his eyes the focus of his entire face. It doesn't: it makes him look older, slick and polished and just as impersonal as the chrome and steel around him. He looks like a weapon; the play of the light across his face is like the play of the light across a blade's edge.

Then he smiles. It transforms his face, and for an instant she can see the same humanity she'd seen in him last night, the humanity that had made her accept how wrong she'd been in her evaluation of him. (Which is the lie, the posture, the pretense? This, or then? She's desperately afraid that neither of them is. Or both.)

"Good morning," he says. He pushes himself up from the chair -- it goes skidding backwards, heedless of possible damage to that gorgeous floor -- and comes over to stand in front of her, maybe two arms-lengths' distant. The look he gives her is dispassionate, assessing; it sweeps from her face down her body, lingers on her shoes, and then rises back up again. She'd expect to feel objectified, depersonalized, the way she always does when a man is scrutinizing her body that closely, but somehow, from him, the perusal lacks any hint of the sexual. He's evaluating her like he would a work of art, studying the false face she's presenting.

Finally he nods. "Good," he says. Tifa suppresses a wash of relief, of pleasure, at passing his wordless test, and then snarls at herself for feeling it. (She can't *not*. She already knows that Rufus's standards are incredibly high, and that very few people meet them; to be one of them is to be a part of a rare minority, and she can't help how it makes her feel.)

Behind her, Tseng has shut the door, sometime during the extended inspection; now, he moves over to the (closest) nook of chairs and couches and throws himself down onto the couch like he belongs here. (Of course he does; he's probably here five times a week.) "Morning, kiddo," Tseng says. "Coffee delivery's on the way. I told them to bring up a pastry tray, too."

Rufus nods, absently; he's still studying Tifa. "I ate already, but coffee is always good," he says, his tone distracted. Then, inspection

apparently complete, he turns back to his desk and gathers up several ... somethings off of it. (They're technology. That's about all Tifa can tell.)

When he turns back again, he's lost a bit of the severity, the piercing assessment, and she can see hints of the man who slouched in Tseng's chair, in jeans and a t-shirt, with one leg hooked up and over the chair's arm. (Only hints, though. He wears his suit like it's a second skin, like it's a part of him, and she thinks he might be more used to suit and tie than he is to jeans and t-shirt. If this is the clothing he usually wears, it's no wonder Tseng hadn't worried more about him being identified in the slums; there's only the faintest resemblance.)

"Here," Rufus says, handing the first of the items to Tifa. She takes it and looks: now that she has it in her hand, she can tell it's a cell phone like the one she left behind underneath the bar in the Heaven, only far slimmer and more compact. She slips it into her jacket pocket without opening it; she'll figure out how to work it later. The next thing Rufus hands her is a tiny bit of plastic and rubber, shaped like a C or a distorted comma, with what looks like a microphone on one end and a speaker of some sort on the other. She looks up at him, and the question must be written on her face, because he gives her a quick and almost boyish grin. "Wireless earpiece. So you don't have to fuss around with trying to find the damn phone to answer it. Here, let me."

He holds out his hand for her to hand it back to him, which she does; he steps close, telegraphing every move as carefully as he has all along, and fits it (gently) against the shell of her ear, settling the bud so that it almost, but not quite, fits into the entrance of her ear canal. His touch is impersonal, clinical. This close, she can smell his soap or aftershave, something spicy and rich without being cloying. He adjusts the clip against the cartilage of her ear, and it pinches for half a second, feeling utterly alien, before he takes his hand away and the pinch turns to nothing more than a slight pressure. Within thirty seconds, she's forgotten she's wearing it.

(He's wearing one too, she realizes. It's very nearly the color of his skin; it blends so well she hadn't noticed.)

Apparently satisfied, he steps back and hands her the last thing he'd picked up. Tifa can't make hide nor hair of what it might be: it's a device that's maybe four inches wide by two and a half inches tall, perhaps half an inch deep, and it nestles comfortably into the palm of her hand. Most of the front is taken up by what looks like a screen, and there's a button at the bottom of it, presumably to turn it on. That's about all the guesses she can make about its function.

"That's your tablet," Rufus says. "It's the one thing no self-respecting PA would ever be seen without. I'll show you the basics of how to use it on the chopper ride over, or Tseng will, but for now, just know that you're never seen without it, that you start to get twitchy if it's out of your reach for more than five minutes, and you spend a lot of time poking at the screen and frowning."

That's useful information -- perhaps the first bit of useful information she's received on how to play this -- and for Rufus to be

so forthcoming with instruction means that they probably aren't being observed here. (Or if they are, Rufus doesn't know about it. But she has the feeling Rufus always knows when they're on stage.) It gives her enough boldness to say, "What else should I know? To make this work best."

She's careful to phrase her question so that if she's wrong and they *are* still being watched or recorded, she won't give too much away. Rufus only laughs, though. "Play it like -- you're a little nervous, you want to do a good job, but you aren't quite sure yet what doing a good job entails. You're used to not being noticed -- a good PA is unobtrusive, no, invisible, until his or her charge needs her, at which point she steps in with the information he or she needs before he knows he needs it. I'm thinking, you're fresh out of university, you applied to the secretarial pool a month or so ago, so you're not really used to Shinra corporate culture yet, and I plucked you out of the general pool because you tested out at the tops of the aptitude scales but hadn't learned any bad habits yet for me to train out of you. That'll give me an excuse to keep telling you what I expect from you - - which will let me tell you what to do next without it looking too suspicious. We shouldn't need to do that too much today, anyone we deal with won't know anything about what's normal, but still, never too soon to start."

Tifa nods. The details are soaking in, helping her build the picture of what she needs to show to the world around her, and she's *shit* at acting but she thinks she can do this. "So -- basically, I'm the person who tells you where to be and when, tells you what you're doing when you get there, reminds you when it's time to leave, keeps track of the things you're going to forget, and reminds you to do the little things like eat and sleep."

That makes Tseng laugh. "That last is an impossible task, but other than that, yes," he says. "If you chase two steps behind him at every opportunity and wave the tablet around like you're trying to prove to him that yes, his schedule *does* say he's supposed to be meeting with Palmer and Heidegger right about now no matter *if* he's nose-deep in coding something, you'll have ninety percent of it down."

Rufus snorts. "Shut up, you. But, yes. The best PAs are invisible when they're not needed, and utterly and terrifyingly competent when they *are* needed. I've never met a long-term PA who didn't think that her charge wasn't incapable of tying his shoes without her giving explicit instructions. It would take you a few weeks to really hit your stride and get to that point, but that's where you're headed."

Tifa nods, slowly. "I can do that," she agrees. She starts to slide the tablet into the same jacket pocket she put the cell phone in, then reconsiders; she thinks about Rufus's words, considers where in this outfit she'd stow something she felt naked without, and slides it into her right pants pocket. Her hand naturally comes to rest over it when she's standing at ease with her hands at her sides, and it feels right. She can see, when she looks up, the edges of Rufus's lips tipped up, the smile something very like approval.

Whatever he might say is interrupted by a knock on the door. Both Tseng and Rufus tense automatically at it, then relax; it must be the coffee delivery. Tseng starts to get up to go answer the door, but

impulse and the character Tifa's already starting to build in her mind has her waving him back to seated. "I think the PA answers the door," she says, in an undertone just loud enough to carry to their ears and not loud enough to carry beyond. It makes Tseng laugh, and Rufus look thoughtful.

She wipes her palms on her pants (as unobtrusively as she can) and goes to answer the door, telling herself as she does that she is Miki Walker, recent university graduate, who has just started a job as the personal assistant to the second most powerful man in the world, and she is utterly and completely determined to *not fuck it up*. (It's not too far a stretch. She's got the same determination, even if it's for completely different reasons. She is deep in the heart of enemy territory, and she knows bone-deep that she can place her faith in Tseng as a guide -- and is starting to become cautiously confident of Rufus -- and she is painfully, wholly sure that if she makes a mistake, the consequences could range from disaster to death. For her, or for all of them.)

The door, when she opens it, reveals a young man in his late teens, early twenties, who is pushing a small wheeled cart upon which is a tray of pastry, an oversized carafe (presumably of coffee) with empty mugs next to it, and three disposable paper cups with fancy plastic lids. Each of the lids has cryptic glyphs, that might be letters if she squints, written on it in grease pen. The kid looks confused when he sees her. "Ah, delivery for Vice-President Shinra?" he says, his tone making it a question.

*Invisible when she's not needed; utterly and terrifyingly competent when she is.* "Yes," Tifa says, her voice controlled but with a faint touch of warmth to it. "I'm Miki Walker, his new PA. You can --" "Oh, Shiva, what would they do, does she take the cart from him or does she let him in to make the delivery? She makes a split-second decision, continues without (she hopes) an appreciable pause. "-- Come in and set up."

She holds the door open for him, and it must be the right thing, because he wheels the cart in and straight over to the coffee table in the nook Tseng is sitting at like he's done it a thousand times before. In only a few seconds, he's transferred the pastry tray, the carafe, and the mugs to the table; he hands one of the paper cups to Tseng, and one to Rufus. (He doesn't meet either of their eyes, she notices.) The third cup stays on the cart; when the kid wheels it back, he stops at her. "This must be yours," he says, and hands her the cup. His fingers meet hers when she takes it, and she's startled to find them lingering there for a minute, pressing against hers -- encouragement? The way he looks at her, with both Tseng and Rufus at his back, makes her think that yes, it is; he gives her a large smile and a tiny wink, saying (she thinks) *it's gonna be okay; good luck; welcome*.

"Thank you," Tifa says -- startled, by the moment of kindness, into putting a little more emotion in it than she probably should, but it only makes the kid's grin widen. (She wonders what's motivating him: is it that he sees a pretty woman and wants to flirt, or is it some mysterious unstated camaraderie among Shinra service staff?)

"No problem, Ms Walker," the kid says, cheerfully. "If you want a pickup of the leftovers, just call down, someone will come up for

them."

"We'll be leaving in fifteen minutes or so," Tseng says, from where he's leaning forward and already picking through the pastry tray, napkin in hand. "Leave the cart; we'll put it in the hallway when we go. Send someone up for it in an hour or so."

The smile falls off the kid's face, but he nods, turning back to Tseng. "All right, sir," he says. "Have a good day."

Tifa remembers herself just in time to walk him over to the door, open it for him, shut it behind him. (She's cautiously pleased at her first appearance in front of someone who doesn't know the game; then again, she's had lots of practice interacting with people, and can usually manage to make them see whatever they're expecting to see from her, as long as she's not trying to play a specific role.) The coffee cup in her hand is warm, but not unpleasantly so; she sniffs at it as she walks back over to where Tseng and Rufus are sitting. It smells like coffee, with something else added. She takes a cautious sip, and nearly moans. It's the best coffee she's ever tasted, by *miles*, and there's some sweet syrup added in addition to what must be steamed milk.

"I got you my favorite," Tseng says, seeing her face. "Caramel and white chocolate macchiato."

"Minus the four additional packets of sugar," Rufus adds. He's picked out a cinnamon-and-sugar-dusted pastry, despite his claims to have already eaten, and is demolishing it neatly over a napkin. He eats with the brief, economical motions of someone who habitually wears white.

The drink *is* sweeter than she usually likes, especially this early in the morning -- she can't imagine what it tastes like with four extra sugars, but then again, she's been aware of Tseng's sweet tooth for a while -- but it's good nonetheless. She settles herself down -- briefly debating where to sit, but Tseng takes the question out of her hands by snagging her around the waist with one arm, the way he usually does, and nudging her down to sit at her side -- and debates breakfast for a few minutes, before choosing a corn muffin as the least likely to cause problems if she *does* turn out to suffer from airsickness after all.

"What's the news?" Tseng asks, while she's concentrating on not getting crumbs everywhere. "I didn't get a chance to check my email this morning."

Whatever Rufus is thinking of, it makes him snort. "Heidegger's bleating about UrbDev's budget again, and trying to push through that Department of Engineering he and Palmer have been trying to do for the past decade. With Palmer in charge, of course. Blah blah, Reeve's department is clearly overworked, blah blah, spin off some of the more taxing responsibilities --"

"To Palmer?" Tseng snorts as well. "Because he handled the *last* set of responsibilities so well. Did Reeve reply, or is he doing the dignified-silence thing again?"

They keep going, bantering names and positions and departments

back and forth. Tifa listens as carefully as she can, in between bites of muffin and sips of coffee, trying to get things (people) straight. They seem to have forgotten she's here, or at least decided that they can speak freely in front of her. It's interesting, actually, how freely they seem to speak in front of her. Even when Rufus was giving her Shinra's secrets on Friday night, last night, it wasn't this detailed; she has the sense that if she only understood what they were saying, she would be receiving enough information to destroy something.

(But they're committed to destroying and re-forging it anyway, aren't they? It's odd, so odd, to think that she has finally found the anti-Shinra rebellion she has been looking for, the one controlled by logic and practicality in the way no slum group truly is, in the hands of the man who will one day be that company's face. In a way, though, she supposes it makes sense. Rufus *is* Shinra, in a way she knows she will never understand even if she observes him for months, *years*, and she knows without having to be told that his father's excesses and abuses strike deeply at the heart of what Rufus considers *his*.)

So, for all that she barely understands what's going on -- they aren't stopping to gloss things for her, and she doesn't dare interrupt to ask for them to -- Tifa assigns a corner of her mind to taking notes, memorizing names and facts and bits of strategy. She doesn't doubt she will, at one point, have the background necessary to draw conclusions about what she is hearing. They appear to have decided she is to be trusted with the keys to the kingdom (perhaps literally, if her keycard can be used to open doors in the Shinra building itself); she will not betray that trust without specifically revoking her implicit parole, but there is nothing preventing her from listening.

The discussion takes her through the entire muffin and coffee; despite his protests of having already eaten, Rufus finishes the cinnamon bun and a blueberry muffin, along with his coffee, before pouring himself a refill from the carafe, taking Tifa and Tseng's empty cups and refilling them as well, all without pausing. They've moved on to discussing a proposal from Scarlet (from context it must be the woman in charge of weapons development, the only woman on the Shinra executive board, about whom Tifa knows next to nothing; Tseng is optimistic about whatever latest thing she has proposed while Rufus is more skeptical) when Tifa catches, just at the edge of her hearing, a soft buzz. Tseng slips a hand into his inner jacket pocket and pulls out his cell phone, flipping it open and squinting at it. (She has long since suspected he needs reading glasses.)

"Reno just got clearance," Tseng says, flipping the phone closed again and returning it to his jacket. "Saddle up."

Tifa stands up and starts tidying the remains of their breakfast onto the single tray. (She can't help it; she is a waitress at heart and is fundamentally incapable of leaving dishes strewn without attempting to bus them.) Rufus rescues the carafe of coffee before she can whisk it away and tops off all three cups. It's only the work of a minute to transfer all the detritus onto the cart and push it out into the hallway when they leave. Tifa tries to leave things neatly stacked, so whomever is sent to fetch it won't have trouble.

The helipad is, apparently, on the roof immediately above them;

the elevators don't go that far, so they have to take the stairs. Tseng lets her carry her own suitcase this time, although she's not sure if it's due to the role she's playing or simply because his other hand is taken up with his coffee. She wonders for a minute if she's supposed to carry Rufus's as well as her own, in which case she'll have to leave her own coffee behind -- which would be a sin, even though she doesn't actually need coffee this morning to wake up; even the plain coffee is better than anything she's ever had before -- but Rufus hefts the suitcase up from where it had been sitting next to the couch with no sign that carrying it himself is anything out of the ordinary. He unplugs his laptop from its dock before they go, coiling the power cord up and shoving it in his pocket (where it utterly ruins the line of his suit, but she doesn't think he cares) and tucking the laptop itself under his arm. It slides precariously until he bends his elbow in more tightly, and she bites back a protest at how cavalierly he's treating it. (The cost of that machine would buy produce for the Heaven for six months at least, even at slum prices.)

The conversation between Rufus and Tseng continues, desultorily, as they make their way up the stairs, but Tifa observes (with the part of her brain that is listening for cues) that the tone of it has changed. In Rufus's apartment, they spoke like generals planning a campaign. Here, without much change in the nature of the conversation itself, it manages to sound like idle gossip, used to pass the time.

When they step out onto the roof, the wind would be whipping Tifa's hair if Tseng hadn't fastened it back into a bun that morning, and the noise is fearsome. The noise comes from the blades of the helicopter waiting for them, Reno waving from the cockpit and looking the same as he always does; the wind comes from the fact they are higher up than Tifa has ever been in her entire *life*. It's too loud for conversation. She watches as Rufus and Tseng switch to some deeply-coded language of gestures and facial expressions, performed around the coffee cups they're both still waving, and follows along at the three-step-remove from Rufus she's already beginning to resent having to adopt.

Tseng is the first into the helicopter's passenger compartment; he stows his suitcase behind the front-facing rear seat, then reaches down for Rufus's first, Tifa's second. That done, he climbs over the bulkhead between the two bucket seats of the rear-facing front seat and settles down into the copilot's chair. Rufus leaps up into the passenger compartment as well, throwing his laptop negligently on the seat that faces him, then reaches a hand down to offer Tifa a boost. She admits she could use it -- the step is a fierce one, and she is not as tall as she would like -- but still, the casual grace with which he grasps not her hand but her elbow and lifts her in what just misses being a dead-lift just plain *rankles*.

Dear Shiva, this damn thing really is loud. She's beginning to think she'll have a headache as fierce as any she's ever had after a long and driving weekend of service by the time they arrive, full night's sleep or no.

But as soon as she's seated (and harnesses herself in, following Rufus's lead, after Rufus leans over her and pulls the sliding door shut) Rufus gestures to behind her, where a set of -- headphones? -- are hanging on a hook over her shoulder. She picks them up and puts

them on, mirroring his move, and the minute they settle over her ears, about sixty percent of the noise cuts out. (They don't even press too uncomfortably against the cell phone headset she's still wearing.) "Better, hm?" Rufus says. His voice comes through the headphones, and she realizes they're radio receivers as well as ear protection. To enable conversation on the flight, she supposes.

"Much," Tifa agrees, after following Rufus's cue and fumbling with the headset to pull down the microphone attached to one side.

From where she's sitting, she can't quite see Tseng or Reno in anything other than one-quarter profile, but Tseng's voice sounds amused as he joins the conversation. "The radio channel's encrypted; we can speak safely. Reno, are we clear?"

"Gimme -- aw *come on* you zolom-blowing son of a syphilitic chocobo -- I did *too* file that flight plan --" Reno flips a few more switches, then bangs on something that looks like it might be a radio, pushing buttons with a quick snap of the wrist. "Five, four, three -- okay, there we go. Mornin', Tif', you look killer, clothes fit okay?"

Tifa bites her lip. "Yes, thank you," she says. (She *will not* let Reno suspect how much it bothered her this morning. Bothers her still.)

"Mmm," Reno says. He turns his head, *looks* at her, and she has to blink, because she thinks he might be able to see how much it bothered her anyway. He looks serious, and a little sad, and far too knowing, and she doesn't have any idea what it all might mean. Then he grins, and it passes and he's just Reno again, sloppy and genial. "Everybody's harnessed in, yeah?" he asks, instead.

"We're clear back here," Rufus says. (Thankfully, he seems to have missed the whole exchange.) "Ready when you are."

"A'ight," Reno says. "Hang on to your hats, ladies and gentlemen and Turks," and with that, he flips one more switch and pulls back on the stick he's gripping and they're in the air.

Flying, Tifa discovers, approximately two minutes later, is the *best thing ever*.

It takes two minutes to discover this, because the first two minutes are utter misery; the helicopter lifts, then *plunges* off the side of the building, before rising again and swooping dizzily through the buildings that surround them. Tifa catches herself clinging to the edges of the seat and watching the coffee cup she'd placed in the holder next to her to make sure it doesn't spill all over everything. (She's not sure what she'll do if it starts to, but it's better to worry about the coffee than worry about where the fuck she left her *stomach*.)

Next to her, Rufus reaches out a hand to steady both cups of coffee. "Reno!" he yells, loudly enough that she can hear it both in her headset and through it. "If I've told you once --" (The effect is ruined by the fact that he's clearly trying not to laugh. That makes Tifa relax a little; if Rufus is laughing, they're not *about to crash*.)

"Yeah, yeah," Reno calls back, unrepentant. "The thermals are



shit this time of day! I gotta roll with 'em if you don't want to burn all our fuel fighting 'em!" But a few seconds later, the pitch and yaw of the helicopter evens out. They rise again, smoothly and swiftly, and Tifa finds herself with her face pressed up against the glass, just *staring*.

There's a whole *world* down there.

From this far up, the people below are nothing more than blobs, and the cars look like tiny toys. She can see the entirety of Midgar spread out underneath her, like an architect's model, like a child's toyset. From this far up, she can't see any of the misery of the slums, any of the overbearing excess of the plate; all she can see is Midgar, dressed in her finest, early-morning sunlight glinting off the struts and edges of the plate and reflecting upwards to the heavens like a prayer.

Tifa doesn't know how long she stays there, staring, before she remembers that she's not alone; Midgar has long since disappeared in the distance, though, and she is watching the green of the grass beneath (so much more vivid, so much more bright than she'd remembered) and the peaks of the mountains they're approaching. Dimly, she realizes there's been a conversation going on in her ears while she watched, Tseng briefing Reno about something or other, but she hasn't heard a word of it.

Feeling obscurely guilty -- she didn't come along to gape out the window like a child while the adults plotted and planned around her -- she makes herself sit back in her seat, folding her hands in her lap as demurely as she can and making herself turn her head away from the window. (It doesn't quite help; turning her head simply brings the front window -- windshield? -- into view, and she catches herself being captivated by the sight of the clouds swirling and parting in front of and around them. But it helps.)

Too much to hope her abstraction hasn't been noticed; Rufus is watching her. When he sees her attention has returned from its flight of fancy, he gives her a smile. It's utterly unlike any smile she's seen from him yet -- the man has a vocabulary of expressions so wide she already knows it would take her months or years to learn them all -- but it's just as beautiful as the others: she thinks, looking at him, that this smile is delight in her delight, a touch of pride, a thread of quiet joy that he is here to see her fascination, that he could offer her that moment of beauty.

As she looks at him, feeling helpless in the face of that delight and joy, he reaches up a hand to cover the microphone attached to the headset, leaning in and pitching his voice so that she can hear him and neither of the other two can. "There are moments that make it all worth it," he says. "Flying brings a good quarter of them. If you ask, later, Reno can take you up solo and teach you how to drive her."

He's trying to give her a gift, she thinks, in the best way he knows how. It isn't his fault that his words bring yet another stab of realization: when this is over, she will either be dead (or wish she were) or she will return to the life she's built for herself down in the slums, away from all this power and the rarefied heights of Upper Central. For the first time, she truly realizes something she hadn't

quite let herself believe yet: this experience will change (is changing) her, hopefully not beyond all recognition.

Hard upon the heels of that realization comes another: when this is over, depending on how it ends, one of the most powerful men in the world will owe her a favor. The thought of what that might mean for her, for her *life*, makes her dizzy and light-headed in a way that being thousands of feet in the air doesn't.

Rufus must see whatever her face is showing, because the smile slowly fades from his face, to be replaced by a rueful look she's already starting to become familiar with. (Tifa makes herself smile back at him, before his smile fades entirely. She doesn't want him to look too closely at her, and besides, his smile is too beautiful for her to want it to disappear completely.) "We're carrying our fuel for the whole trip," he says, briskly, letting his hand fall and going back to speaking on the shared channel, "but we'll have to stop at Costa del Sol to refill the tanks. The way Reno flies, that's about five hours from here. Why don't I get you up to speed on the tech skills you'd be expected to have?"

Tifa nods, even as Reno's saying, "Hey, chief, on the way back, we're gonna stop at Costa del Sol for a day or two so's I can shack out on the beach and let pretty girls bring me frozen drinks with umbrellas in 'em, yeah?"

"You've used all your vacation days for the year already," Tseng says, dryly, while Rufus stretches one arm to reach behind the seat where their gear is stowed and fish around until he surfaces with a tablet of his own, identical to the one he handed Tifa half an hour ago. "And next year. And possibly some of Rude's vacation days for this year."

"You never let me have any fun," Reno gripes. "Tif', you're on my side, right? When was the last time *you* got a vacation? We could share an umbrella. I won't even grope you too much when I put the sunscreen on ya."

Tifa holds up her hands, even though neither Reno nor Tseng can see her. "Leave me out of this," she says. "I just got here. I don't know enough to know whose side I should be taking yet."

(That gets her three simultaneous answers: "Mine, yo." "Tseng's." "Not Reno's." She can't help but laugh. She wonders if that was Reno's goal in the first place.)

Reno and Tseng go back to talking -- Tifa keeps one ear open for the first five minutes, realizes they're discussing some arcane quirk of Shinra budgetary regulation (and how to best work around it), and lets herself block it out -- while Rufus gestures for her to take out her own tablet (or rather, the one that she's been given to carry; she holds no illusions that she will be allowed to keep it once this is all over) and demonstrates how to turn it on. "It's a touch screen, with an on-screen keyboard," Rufus starts, "although you can plug in an external keyboard if you have to do too much data entry on it. If your fingers are too callused and it doesn't consistently recognize when you touch it, we can dig up a stylus for you to use -- I have to do that half the time if I've been on the shooting range too much lately. Okay. See

this icon? That's the scheduling program. Yours is already calibrated to sync to two calendars, yours and mine --"

Learning how to use the tablet takes the first hour and a half of the flight, although she has the basics down within five minutes (it's a remarkably intuitive device to use). Rufus spends the longest amount of time on the email program and its various quirks and foibles; apparently she is to have access to his email inbox and is authorized to delete, forward, and reply to mail with impunity if it's something he doesn't actually need to handle personally. ("Half the company has started to realize that if they want to get anything done, or get anyone to actually *make a decision*, carbon-copying me is the fastest way to get whoever's dragging their heels to shit or get off the pot. So, the email hits my inbox, half an hour passes, there's a flurry of more email, and the next thing you know, whatever problem they had has been solved and they don't need me anymore, except the email is still there taking up space. I'll give you the list of things that I absolutely have to see and the things I don't give a fuck about; you triage.")

Once again, she's surprised -- stunned -- at how she is being given access to more information than anyone *sane* would give someone who has flat-out said she would like to work to overthrow the very institution she's pretending to be employed by. She wonders if this is an expression of trust or a complicated and multi-layered test. (Or maybe Rufus is just that hard up for competent help, the way he says he is, and even two days of her half-trained pretense at assistantship will be better than whatever he's dealing with.)

After she's gotten the crash course in operating the tablet -- she realizes, based on the way Rufus has slipped into talking about things, that he's expecting (subconsciously or otherwise) that she will have his email and calendar open constantly, scanning through all new messages and meeting invitations as they come in and alerting him of the critical ones immediately, and she wonders if he even *remembers* that she's mostly playing the role as a cover story and not actually as a job she intends to keep -- Rufus clicks his tablet off and slides it into a pocket inside his suit jacket. (She catches the tiniest glimpse of a leather shoulder holster, underneath the vest he's wearing under the jacket, and wonders how much of his elaborately layered costume is due to needing a place to conceal enough weaponry to feel secure.) "Now," he says. "Step two: the laptop."

With the example of how to work the tablet fresh in her mind, figuring out the laptop isn't as challenging as Tifa expected it to be. Rufus shows her how to work the desktop version of the email client - it has more features, most of which he is scornful about ("It's utter shit, I just ssh straight to the mail server and access my inbox through the command line, but for you it'll be easier if you pop the spool straight down to the client", and she nods to disguise the fact that she understood maybe one word in ten of that sentence), but thankfully most of them can be ignored. That done, he shows her how to work the WorldNet browser, in order to look up information when she needs it. (The helicopter apparently has WorldNet access. She's not sure how, but she's only heard of the WorldNet from overhearing things in the Heaven, and it's always seemed like magic to her in the first place, so she doesn't wonder.) The final step, after that, is learning how to search Shinra's internal network, which apparently

replicates most of the information available on the WorldNet and extends it even further.

"Here, you try," Rufus finally says, tipping the laptop from the center console (where he's been typing and mousing, and she's been watching) into her lap. She clutches at it frantically when it threatens to keep sliding over the too-slick pants she's wearing. He doesn't say anything at her sudden panic (*oh Shiva what if I drop it what if I break it what if I make it stop working*), but the corners of his lips tip up slightly anyway.

The metal of the laptop chassis is warm against her thighs. Tifa looks down at it and takes a deep breath. *The person you're pretending to be graduated from the University*, she tells herself, firmly. *She would have been using computers for years already.*

The browser window, open to the Shinra internal search engine Rufus had been demonstrating, waits patiently for her to ask it something. Hesitantly, Tifa touches her index finger to the 't' key, and keeps herself from flinching when the 't' appears on the screen. Clumsily, using two fingers, she types her name and presses the button to begin the search. *No results found*, it tells her.

Rufus doesn't seem surprised at her search. "I had your records wiped when I had your ID made," he says. "Try your alias."

Feeling awkward -- and wondering what records Shinra had on her, for them to have needed to be wiped -- Tifa clicks back to the search window again and types in 'Miki Walker'. The browser thinks for a minute, then spits out a veritable cornucopia of results, mostly pages from Midgar University's student newspaper. She discovers, reading the excerpt from each that the search engine displays, that Miki Walker majored in marketing, that she ran on the women's track team and solidly finished second and third in most of her races, and that she once wrote an editorial in her sophomore year decrying Midgar's post-War economic sanctions against Wutai.

"That last seems a bit out of character," she says, helplessly. "If I'm working for Shinra now, I mean." She has no idea how they possibly could have constructed this much history for her in less than a day. Or how they could have made it appear as though it's always been there. Or what will happen if she runs into someone who should have known 'Miki', if Miki had ever existed, and yet has never seen her before.

"Hm? Oh, the editorial. Tseng wrote that one." (In the cockpit, Tseng -- hearing his name -- turns his head, then looks back when he realizes Rufus wasn't calling for him. The simple, thoughtless motion, the way Tseng automatically looks to make sure Rufus isn't looking to get his attention, makes Tifa want to scream, and she's not sure why.) Rufus grins at the expression on her face. "It's okay. Most of the students at the U spend half their time protesting Shinra policies and then turn around and hire on as soon as they graduate. It's practically expected; you'd look odd if you *hadn't* had some sort of history. I told you, the alias is solid."

Tifa bites back her response. She's served drinks to dozens, if not hundreds, of Midgar University students. They've always seemed

implausibly young to her, kept artificially in the twilight of their childhood and struggling to find some form of self-definition. She's always felt sorry for them, in a way. More than one of them has wound up pouring their hearts out to her, drunkenly, long after the bar itself has closed; whether it's about their fears of disappointing their parents or their hunger to make something better of themselves, to get out of the slums and into the echelons of Shinra that Rufus has never not known, she has heard it all, and felt sorry for them, and offered what small pieces of counsel she could. To Rufus, it's a joke.

She doesn't say any of it. She just clicks the back arrow until the browser displays the plain, unaugmented search window again, then slides her hands under the laptop and moves to set it back on the console between them, for Rufus to go back to his lessons.

He shakes his head, though. "We've got about an hour and a half left until we'll be taking a break. Best thing for you to do is to use the time to get more familiar with typing. Here, I specifically installed a tutorial program -- at best it'll teach you how to touch type, at worst it'll at least help you remember where the keys are for hunt-and-peck." He leans over, brings the program up with a practiced slide of fingers across the touchpad, one that tells her he's been using computers like this one for as long as they've existed. "Let me know if you get stuck."

By the time they land in Costa del Sol, the program has taught Tifa how she is supposed to hold her hands over the keys, and has drilled her in reaching for the most common letters over and over again until she thinks she will see them, glowing as though they're on the screen, behind her eyes when she closes them tonight to sleep. She's managed to engross herself in the task, at least; it takes Reno shutting off the chopper's engine for her to realize they've landed, and she kicks herself for missing the view. (She's never been to Costa del Sol before. Or rather, she's never been to Costa del Sol while she was *conscious*; she still doesn't know what route her mysterious benefactor may have taken her to Midgar via.)

They've landed on a ground-level, concrete helipad behind an ornate building. "Pit stop," Tseng says -- the first thing he's said in at least an hour, or rather, the first thing Tifa remembers him saying -- unbuckling his seat belt and sliding open the cockpit door. "Reno, you refuel us, then it's your turn. Tifa, you can stretch your legs, or if you have to use the facilities, I can show you --"

"I'm fine," Tifa says. She did have more coffee to drink this morning than she usually does, but it hasn't worked her way through her system yet. "I'll just ..." She trails off, makes a vague hand gesture that indicates getting out and stretching. Tseng nods, unconcerned, and leaves the helicopter, following Rufus into the building they've landed next to; Reno jumps out of the other side of the cockpit and disappears around the side of the helicopter to do mysterious mechanical things to it.

Tifa is left alone inside the helicopter, completely unsupervised. She could steal it and fly away, if she knew how to fly it, if there were enough fuel. She could sneak out the door and blend into the vacationers who are no doubt thronging the streets a few blocks away, melting into the crowds and disappearing to take her chances

here; Costa del Sol is a resort town, and resort towns always need qualified help.

She doesn't do either. What she does is shake her legs out -- she isn't used to sitting for this long at once -- and, carefully placing the laptop on the seat across from her and shrugging out of her jacket to lay over it, slide open the door and jump down to the ground.

The heat hits her in the face as she does; it's about twenty degrees warmer than Midgar was, heavy and humid, but there's a brisk breeze and she can smell salt and water and something else, something she's never smelled before, on the air. It must be the smell of ocean. She has to squint against the sun, which is strong and harsh in her eyes, enough to make everything around her look washed out. Sweat begins to prickle in the small of her back, and she's glad that she took off her jacket, even if she'd only intended to conceal the laptop so it would be less of a temptation to any thief walking by. Reno is standing towards the backside of the helicopter, maybe five or six feet away, tipping up a large canister so that it pours into an opening in the helicopter's side. The canister is bright green, a neon-acid color that makes her eyes hurt nearly as much as the sun does, and she doesn't recognize the symbol painted on the side of it.

Reno glances over at her. "Hey, Tif'," he greets her, as genial as he ever is. He's taken off his jacket, too; the tails of his shirt are untucked as always, and the top two buttons of his shirt are open. The goggles he always wears pushed up on his head are actually over his eyes instead of holding up his hair; she's never seen him actually wear them until this moment, but seeing them slowly darken when he turns his head back to his task and his face turns back into the direct sunlight, she realizes that they must at least partially be treated with something that helps to block the sun.

"You lean back into the chopper, there's two drawers under the seat you were in," Reno adds, before she can say anything in response. "Bottom one of the two, closer to the door, there's a couple pair of sunglasses. We'll be here at least twenty while the boss and the chief piss and smoke, an' trust me, you're planning to stay out here while they do, you're gonna want the shades, yeah?"

Tifa turns back, wordlessly, and follows his directions. The sunglasses are precisely where he said they'd be, shoved in the side of a drawer full of what looks like all kinds of different clothing (including, she notices, a few sets of various uniforms, from plain engineer's coveralls, both with the Shinra logo and without, to Army fatigues, with others she doesn't recognize as well). She picks the first pair of glasses that come to hand -- they all look identical anyway -- and puts them on even before shutting the drawer. They oblige her by darkening just like Reno's when she turns back into the sun, and she realizes after a minute that she's stopped squinting and her incipient headache is whispering quietly away. (She wonders if that's why Rude wears his all the time; she'd thought it an attempt to intimidate, to look more frightening to people who couldn't see his eyes, but maybe he's just sensitive to levels of light that normal people wouldn't call bright at all.)

Reno, when she walks back around the helicopter to find him again, is replacing the empty canister in the cargo hatch (at the end

of a row of about fifteen or sixteen others) and pulling out the next. He nods when he sees her wearing the glasses. "Good," he says. "You probably got a headache like nobody's business *anyway*, just dealing with all our shit, last thing you need is sunglare on top of it."

His tone is sympathetic, without holding a hint of pity or coddling, and she hears, in those brisk words, a level of understanding that has been patently absent from both Tseng and Rufus, no matter that they've both been more-or-less trying to remember this is all new and strange to her. That understated empathy fills something inside her Tifa hadn't been aware was empty, and a few things click together all at once. She catches herself blurting out, before she can stop herself, "Which Sector did you come from?"

She bites her tongue the minute the words leave her lips, hoping she hasn't offended him, but all Reno does is grin at her. "Lower Four, you couldn't tell by the accent," he says, and yeah, okay, she's thought more than a few times that she can hear the cadences of Below in his voice, but she'd thought it was an affectation so he could blend a little more easily in the Heaven, make people more likely to forget that he was Reno of the Turks. (It never worked.) "Ma died when I was twelve, m'sisters and I never knew who our fathers were. I was turning tricks and selling smack to support us all when Tseng found me and signed me up, five years later, and it was six, seven months until I stopped thinking it'd all go away the minute I woke up. So, y'know, I got your back with all this."

"Oh," Tifa says, feeling stupid for not having realized, feeling (irrationally, completely) *better* for knowing.

Reno finishes emptying the second canister into the helicopter's belly and stows it back again. This time, he takes two canisters. "Here, hold this a minute," he says, holding out one of them. "Careful, it's sealed, but you don't want to let it drip on ya, it'll eat through your clothes and at least three layers of skin if it does. And those pants make your ass look fuckin' fabulous, you don't want to lose 'em." He manages, the way he somehow always manages when he compliments her, to make it sound like honest appreciation without a hint of pressure or sleaze. It's one of the things she's always liked best about Reno.

Tifa adjusts her grip on the canister carefully. "Thank you for taking care of the shopping for me," she says. With the new information she's just been handed, she can say it without feeling the same sort of frustration and rage she was feeling this morning; knowing Reno was in the same position she's in now, or close enough, turns his efforts on her behalf from him throwing excessive amounts of money into the task of forcing her to conform to what Shinra would expect her to look like, into him trying to help her feel a little less out of place (in what she's wearing, at least) out of affection, or at the very least, understanding. (The excessive amounts of money are the same, and she's still not comfortable with that, but viewed through this new lens, she can almost see that as a sign of caring as well.)

"Hey, yeah, no prob, you're welcome," Reno says. She can't see his eyes, behind the sun-darkened goggles, but she has the sudden sense he's scrutinizing her. "You're thinking of beating yourself up over the fact that you resented the fuck out of it for at least ten

minutes this morning, don't. The boss took me for my first few shopping trips, and I wanted to punch the sanctimonious fuck in the nose at least a dozen times every fitting."

Tifa can feel her lips quirking at the image that produces in her imagination. "I was only pissy at you for about two minutes," she admits. "Mostly, yeah, it was him, *them*, just..."

She trails off, would wave her hands in midair (were it not for the can she's still holding) to try to convey the sheer *disconnect* between her and Tseng this morning over the topic of clothing, between her and Rufus and Tseng last night over the topic of food cooked to order and delivered to one's door, between her and Tseng this morning over the thought that of course he wouldn't expect to wait in line and of *course* their breakfast would be delivered. Reno's nodding, though, and she gets the impression he understands perfectly.

"Oh, yeah," Reno says. "The chief, well, everybody expects him to be used to getting waited on hand and foot, and the fact he'll do things for himself half the time, he gets the chance, yeah, that's enough to shock half the old guard into near heart attacks every time they see him doing it. The boss? Hey, he can tell himself he's an outsider up there just as much as we are --" The casual 'we' makes Tifa simultaneously bristle and warm straight through; she makes a face at herself, inside her head where Reno can't see it, lest he misinterpret. "But yeah, *really* not as much as he thinks he is. Dunno if you know it, and I'm not supposed to know it either so don't go mentioning to nobody, but back in Wutai? He was a prince, an' I'm not talking metaphorical. He was to Wutai what the chief is to Midgar, is the impression I've got from what little he's said, and he might've walked away from all the shit that comes along with that to come here, but a whole fucking lot of it followed along with him. He's used to breathing that air. Slum rats like you'n'me, we gotta work for it, and it ain't never gonna be natural, right?"

The accent and rhythm of the slums is getting stronger the more Reno talks. He's grinning at her still, inviting her to share the joke (even though it isn't funny, and he *knows* it isn't funny, but Reno makes everything a joke). Tifa nods, once, slowly. She hadn't known that about Tseng, not *consciously*, but her complete lack of surprise tells her that her subconscious mind had pieced together the clues a hell of a long time ago: his familiarity with the fighting arts, the upper-caste inflections to his Wutaian speech, his manner of command, his philosophy, his honor, his tendency to divide the people he encounters into obstacles to be removed or allies to be won or fragile things to be protected.

"So," Reno adds, "you keep stubbing your toe on the giant piles of bullshit they haul around like a ten-ton weight and don't even realize they're carrying, you come find me, yeah? I'll remind you it ain't you that's got the problem, it's them."

Tifa catches herself laughing, helplessly. She can't *not*. "Deal," she says, and Reno puts down the empty canister he's finished with and sticks out his hand to her to seal it. She puts the full canister she's holding down on the ground too, shakes on it, and feels much better.



"Now," Reno says -- and just like that, the topic is over and done with and he's back to looking like he doesn't have a care in the world -- "gimme that canister, an' I'll get it into the beast, an' then, 'scuse me for being pushy about it, you *really* want to go into the villa and piss before we take off again. Usually we'd stop here long enough for lunch, but the boss didn't mention it, an' I'm gonna guess that means he's in there arranging a picnic basket an' we'll be eating on the go. It's at least four hours to N -- to where we're going, probably more if the mountains got weather today, so you should really stop." He cocks his head. "You want, I'll take you in an' show you, you just wait until the boss an' the chief get back."

Reno's offer makes Tifa identify the subconscious pressures keeping her from not wanting to go inside with Tseng (and Rufus); from the outside at least, the building looks like a mansion, like a luxury resort, and she realizes her desire to stay outside was in no small part a desire to avoid having her nose rubbed in the sort of casual luxury she's been having to confront since she left the Heaven yesterday. Having Reno at her side, though, makes the thought a little bit easier to contemplate. "Yeah," she says. "Yeah, okay. Thanks." Reno nods again, like her responses make perfect sense to him. For all she knows, they might; she wonders how much he sees, remembers again Tseng's comment from last night that when he needs someone placed under surveillance when they don't know they're under surveillance, he uses Reno. "Don't tell him," she adds, abruptly. She knows better than to think Reno will outright lie for her, but she thinks he might be willing to avoid volunteering information. "Them. If you -- I mean, if you aren't directly asked, could you ..."

Reno turns back to face her, his eyebrows going up, so startled that his hand nearly slips where it's holding the canister feeding the belly of the helicopter; he swears and catches it just in time, but even so, three drops fall from the spot where they meet. (Fascinated, and a little bit sickened, Tifa watches the concrete smoke and pit, and suddenly the other pockmarks around them start to make sense.) "Tifa, honey," he says once he's got things back under control, speaking slowly. Tifa can't decide which is more surprising: that he calls her full name, without the slurred elision he usually employs, or that he adds the call-name, which he never has before, and which he manages to make sound affectionate without a hint of sleaze. (It sounds *brotherly*, she realizes, and -- knowing now what she does about his family -- she wonders if she might be the same age as one of his sisters; she guesses he's a few years older than she is.) "I ain't gonna say a fucking word to anybody. This ain't business, and it ain't something could be dangerous if nobody knew. This is *personal*, and it's nobody's fucking business but yours, yeah?"

Tifa takes a deep breath, feeling the humidity clogging her lungs, feeling the air thick and heavy against her tongue. Her throat feels tight. "I -- thank you," she says.

Reno nods, once. "Look," he says, abruptly, as the silence stretches out between them again. "It really ain't my place to say, but --"

He pauses, and it takes her a second to realize he's waiting for permission. "Go ahead," she says. (She'd say he would anyway, except she thinks, looking at him, that if she said no, he'd shut up and

never speak of it again.)

"The boss hasn't told me anything past the absolute basics," Reno says, slowly, and she gets the impression he's feeling out what he'll say, calculating how he can best say it, not for maximum results but rather, for minimum harm to her. "But, I mean, you'd gotta be stupid not to put two and two together and realize we're headed out to Nibelheim because *somebody* thinks you might be able to put your finger on something that'd make all this finally start to make sense. I just wanted to say -- I've been there, yeah? Nibelheim, I mean. I was there when they remade it, and it wasn't fucking pretty, an' it's gonna be pretty damn rough on you, and I wanted to let you know that ..." He trails off. "I dunno what I want you to know, really. That I'm really fucking sorry about being part of the team that put it together again. That I'm really fucking sorry it happened in the first place. That I'm really fucking glad you're helping us out despite all of that, 'cause it's been fucking weighing on me for *years* and I really wanna know what the fuck went down for real and how we can fix things so it can't happen again. That even though I'm glad you're helping, I'm really sorry you gotta go through the process of stirring up all this shit again. You know. Shit like that."

He looks down, realizes that the canister is empty, takes it away and (carefully) snaps the cover back onto it. He picks up the other canister from where he'd left it at his feet and takes them both around the side of the helicopter, stowing them back into the cargo hatch before she can think of anything to say. It's good he does; it gives her a few minutes to gather her composure, to figure out how she's going to react.

Tifa has found more sympathy for her life story in the past two days than she had in the past two years, and it's *creeping her out*. Johnny had been the first person she'd told what had happened, and Johnny had been devastated for five minutes and then started plotting a way to *use* it, to turn their tragedy into propaganda and use it to rally people against Shinra's regime. She'd stopped telling people shortly after that, because Johnny wasn't the only one who'd reacted that way. She'd come to expect that sort of tunnel vision from people who heard, the human mind incapable of grasping tragedy without trying to find some meaning from the depths of the tragedy, grasping for something that might redeem it, even a little, even *ex post facto*.

In the past two days, she has now found three people whose first impulse has been to think of her first. Tseng's helpless wish to stand between her and her memories, Rufus's fierce anger over what has been done to her, and now Reno's quiet apology: all of them are more than she's ever gotten before, and even though she knows all three of them want something from her as well, it somehow doesn't feel like as much pressure as she's gotten in the past from others. She can't figure out what the difference is, not without a hell of a lot more time to sit and think it over; all she knows is that the difference exists.

It doesn't make up for how uncomfortable she's feeling, but still. Reno is trying, they're all trying, and it's more than she's gotten from others. Tifa's ready for him when he comes back around the helicopter, bottle of water in one hand, pouring it over each of his hands in turn and then holding the neck of the bottle in his teeth while he rubs his hands together briskly and then dries them on his pants.

"Thank you," she says. It isn't much, but it needs to be said. "I -- Yeah. This whole thing isn't going to be fun, and it isn't going to be easy. But -- For the first time in years, I'm actually starting to believe that there's a chance I might get some justice."

Hearing herself say it, Tifa is startled to realize it's the truth. She wouldn't have thought to put 'justice' and 'Shinra' in the same sentence. She knows Tseng has a sense of honor and a love of justice running through him a mile wide, but Tseng's form of justice is the justice of the sword, of the avenging angel, and she's known for a long time -- perhaps as long as she's known him -- that Tseng's hands are bound by the men who give him his orders. It's Rufus, though, who's come to make her believe that justice might actually be done.

Rufus's justice is colder, she thinks -- colder and harsher and even more edged -- but she thinks she might be all right with that. Tifa doesn't approve of violence, in a way that only someone trained to commit violence can disapprove, but she thinks that if she had the true author of Nibelheim's destruction before her, it wouldn't take much for her to want to tear out his or her throat with her bare hands.

But for now, Reno is smiling at her, mad and merry. "Justice we're good at, us and the chief, yeah?" he says. "Even if you wouldn't think so. Stick with us. We'll get to the bottom of this. An' I'll get in my claim right now, I wanna hold your coat while you kick whoever's behind all this in the nuts."

It makes her laugh. *Reno* makes her laugh, and she's starting to see the complexities behind his simple facade, and she thinks -- hopes -- that whatever happens, she won't lose the sight of this, the insight into the real men behind the Shinra boogeyman the slums have spent years fearing.

"It's a deal," she says, and in the distance she can spot Tseng and Rufus coming out of the building across from them (both of them in mid-conversation, gesturing sharply, and neither of them talking to each other; she wonders who's on the other end of the phones). "Now come on. You were going to show me the inside of that monstrosity over there. And then we should probably get back on the road."

## ( 7. )

The sun would just be beginning to set in Midgar by the time Reno flashes Tseng the discreet twenty-minute warning; here, halfway across the world and across half a dozen timezones, it's just turning afternoon. Tseng slides his tablet (where he had been working on an email about the plans for Corel, trying to manage Scarlet without her realizing she was being managed, which is always a task that drives him up the fucking wall) back into his pocket and glances in the well-hidden mirror that reflects the passenger area of the chopper. Rufus has kicked off his shoes and is sitting in half-lotus in his seat, engrossed in his tablet; he's pulled out the roll-up keyboard and plugged it in, and Tseng can tell from the way his fingers tap against the rubber keys that he's irritated beyond all measure and trying to

figure out how the fuck to phrase whatever email he's working on for maximum venom. Tseng would have expected him to have the laptop proper -- he's said multiple times how much he hates using the tablet for any real work -- but the laptop is in Tifa's lap instead, and she's frowning down at it just as sharply as Rufus is frowning at his tablet.

The slow and rhythmic click of her fingers against the keys tells him that she's working through the typing tutor; the occasional bitten-off swear tells him that she's not doing as well as she'd like. (He will be sure to pull her aside at some point and tell her that it takes months, if not years, for touch typing to become possible, much less second nature. He can type nearly a hundred words a minute now, but it had taken him a long time to stop having to look at the keys and type with three fingers.) The expression of concentration on her face is enough to tell him that she's absorbed in her task. He wouldn't have expected otherwise -- Tifa throws herself into just about any task with a ferocity that never fails to impress -- but he wars with himself briefly. He can't decide whether it's more merciful to let her know how close they are, to allow her to watch the approach (and steel herself against what she will find there) or let her continue on, distracted and preoccupied, until they land.

Reno must be able to see his dilemma, though, because he takes the decision out of Tseng's hands after another few minutes of Tseng studying Tifa in the mirror. "This is your fifteen-minute warning, yeah?" Reno says, clicking his headset back to the common channel from the auxiliary channel he and Tseng had been using for most of the second leg of the trip to discuss strategy without bothering Rufus and Tifa from their tasks. "We'll be landing in a few, so you might wanna pack up, get ready, do whatever you gotta do to brace yourselves."

He's talking to them both, but he means Tifa, and Tseng wonders what passed between them while he and Rufus had been inside the Shinra compound in Costa del Sol; he and Rufus had come back to find Tifa wearing a pair of the sunglasses from the random-disguises bin and staring at Reno like he'd just said something either profoundly unsettling or profoundly relieving. Tseng hadn't been able to tell which, and they hadn't said anything, just gone inside to use the bathroom. By the time they'd both come out, walking closer together than Tseng's ever seen Tifa walking with anyone who wasn't one of her chosen people, the catering staff inside had produced their lunch, and it was time to go. Once they'd gotten back into the chopper, the moment for asking had passed.

Now, Tifa looks up from her task, distracted for half a second before her face sharpens. "Yeah," she says, quietly enough that the microphone almost doesn't pick it up. "Um, what do I need to do to shut this down?"

"Just close it," Reno says, before anyone else can answer. "It'll go to sleep when you do, an' when you open it up again, it'll be right where you left off."

His tone is easy and casual, but there's some note in it Tseng has never heard before -- something caring, something protective -- and Tseng remembers a scared, skinny seventeen-year-old kid staring at a computer like it would blow up if he so much as touched it. That

mysterious closeness suddenly makes perfect sense: he realizes that Reno has adopted Tifa just like Rufus has. Rufus's adoption might be that of the liege lord, but Reno's is that of the big brother; Tseng has never met Reno's sisters (they all keep their personal lives personal, as much as they can when they're living in each other's pockets), but he's overheard Reno on the phone with them, and Reno always sounds like this.

There's something about Tifa that inspires that kind of loyalty in people. People want to either protect her, or climb underneath the umbrella of her protection. Tseng noticed it a long time ago. He doesn't think he's any less susceptible to it than others are, even for being aware of the effect. It's like how half the time he walks into Rufus's office intending to chew him out for some crazy stunt and winds up leaving utterly convinced Rufus had been right all along. He supposes it's his lot in life to fall in with charismatic bastards all around.

In the backseat, Tifa bites her lip and gently eases the lid of the laptop down, slowly enough that Tseng can tell she's waiting for it to crack beneath her palm. When it's closed, Rufus unfolds himself and leans over to gently unplug the power cord from the jack in between the consoles -- the laptop's battery charge ran out long ago -- and coil it back up. "Here," he says. "I'll throw it into my suitcase."

Tifa bites her lip and passes the laptop over. Without it to concentrate on, she looks out the window, down upon the mountains beneath. She's facing away from Rufus, and Tseng thinks she might think she's being unobserved; her face *changes*, gets tight and taut and miserable with an overlay of fierce longing. She loves these mountains, Tseng realizes. Loved. It's another thing that was taken away from her.

Next to her, Rufus lifts his face, looking (unerringly) to the mirror no matter how well-concealed it is, meeting Tseng's eyes in reflection. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. The look he's giving Tseng is enough to speak volumes.

"What's the plan?" Tifa asks, abruptly. Tseng thinks she might be looking for something to concentrate on other than the way Reno's guiding the helicopter smooth and easy over the last of the mountain peaks before circling around for the Nibelheim approach, but she doesn't tear her eyes away from the window, her gaze sweeping over the scene below. Tseng thinks she might be searching out landmarks, trying to figure out how close they are and when she will be able to spot the village-that-was. (He signals Reno, as unobtrusively as possible, to take the approach that will mean the town will be visible on the right-hand side of the chopper, the one Tifa is sitting on; Reno flaps a hand back at him, the *no shit, teach your granma to suck eggs* written in every line.)

In the process of twisting around to stow the laptop and power cord in his luggage, Rufus shrugs. "We land at the mansion -- there's a helipad behind it -- and check it out to see whether we can stay there, or whether it's in too much disrepair, in which case --" He winces a little, realizing what he's about to say, but bulls onward. "-- We'll get rooms in the inn. I don't want to head up to the reactor until the morning; we'll all be tired from the time change and I want us to

be well-rested."

Tifa nods, absently. "Makes sense," she says, her voice distracted. She lifts a hand to the window, leans forward just a bit; Tseng, looking just as hard as she's looking, notices the smudgy lines beneath them turning slowly into the outlines of roofs and streets. Tifa inhales, sharply.

Rufus hesitates, turning back around and preparing to fasten his seat belt again, and leans over for a better vantage point. When he realizes what she's looking at, he winces ever-so-slightly, then leans back immediately, giving her more room. Gently, cautiously, he reaches out and touches two fingers to the back of the hand that Tifa has resting against her thigh, where her fingers are digging into her skin. Tseng can just see Tifa's startled twitch, the way her fingers immediately relax.

"Whatever it is, we'll get to the bottom of it," Reno promises, and Tseng looks over to him to see his eyes are fixed on the mirrors, too. (And not the windshield to see where he's going. Tseng would be more concerned, did he not know Reno's skill as a pilot surpasses any other Tseng has ever seen; Tseng swears he flies by intuition and feel more than anything he can see.)

Reno intends for his words to be comfort, Tseng knows, and Tifa's face does smooth out a little; she turns her face away from the window and smiles, her eyes lifting, and Tseng realizes, suddenly, that she knows precisely where the mirrors are, and that they are watching her. "I know," she says. "I --"

Then she stops. Her eyes widen, and she leans forward; whatever small bit of relaxation Rufus's touch, Reno's words, bought her has gone away, and her fingers are once more digging into her thighs, both hands this time. "Wait a minute," she says. Her voice is urgent, intent. "Wait a minute. Oh, *fuck*."

The expletive rings in the tiny cockpit, managing to echo even past the whirr of the rotors. Rufus's head comes up like a predator listening for the sounds of prey. "What?"

Tifa turns to face him, still leaning forward, every line in her body radiating urgency. "I think we have a problem," she says, and Tseng can tell it's only through great self-control that Rufus doesn't grab her shoulders, shake her, and demand she *spit it out already*. "You said -- You said your father was the one who ordered Nibelheim be rebuilt, right? You said --" Her eyes unfocus for a second, the expression Tseng already knows means that she's accessing a memory. "We can't let anyone know we can't control our people', right?"

"Yes," Rufus says, frowning, impatient.

Tifa shakes her head, short and swift, not negation of Rufus's words but not wanting to believe the truth. Tseng frowns; he can't figure out what she's driving at. "So," Tifa says, "*where did he get the people?* And how much do you want to bet that at least one of them has orders to report back if someone -- anyone, but *especially* his son -- starts poking around and asking questions?"

There's a minute of utter silence except for the rotors. It's broken,

finally, by Rufus starting to swear, viciously, scatologically, and full of blasphemy. The litany goes on for a full minute; all the while, he's pulling the laptop back out. "In thirty seconds you have just justified the considerable amount of time and energy that it took to get you here," he says to Tifa when he finally breaks it off. "*Fuck*. Reno --"

"Holding pattern until you say the word, far enough that it's not in visual range," Reno says, immediately, and Tseng can tell he's just as shell-shocked as Tseng himself is. Leviathan curse it, he should have realized. He should have *thought*. But he's far too used to knowing he is Tseng of the Turks and there is no door that will not open to him, and Rufus is far worse, and he hadn't put two and two together, and he *should have*. It's his job to keep Rufus from getting killed. And if it hadn't been for Tifa --

Thank Leviathan for Tifa, is all he can think. Because without her, they would've walked straight into Nibelheim without a single thought to subterfuge, and it likely would've fucked everything beyond all belief.

"Give me options, people," Rufus says, his attention focused on the laptop screen, his fingers flying over the keyboard. Tseng knows he's looking to see what he can find in the internal files, whether or not he can find a project or a budget item for whether Nibelheim's 'citizenry' are on the payroll, whether he can confirm any Shinra operatives stationed there, black-budget or not. (Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and if Rufus does not find anything, it will not mean there is nothing to be found; Rufus's skill at negotiating the information ecology of Shinra's complex network of databases and data warehouses is unparalleled, but not everything can be found through those means, and even less can be found at a distance. But if Rufus finds something, at least they will know for sure.)

Tseng's brain feels like he's trying to swim through mud. "Touch down at the reactor, Tifa guides us in to town, we pose as a hunting or climbing party or a group on a tour of the continent," he offers. "Tifa, you said that was common --"

But she's shaking her head. "That wouldn't get us into the mansion," she says. "It's far enough away from the town that it didn't burn when Sephiroth attacked --" She can say his name without hesitating, this time, Tseng notices, with the corner of his brain that isn't running through damage-control mode. "But it's close enough that you can't get there without *someone* noticing, and the windows are visible from town, and if there were lights in there someone *would* come looking. If whoever's living there now is anything like we were, I mean." She frowns again. "How does --"

"*Fuck!*" Rufus interrupts her, bangs a fist down on the console between them; Tifa flinches at the sound, the motion, but Rufus doesn't seem to notice. He looks up, and his eyes are *furios*. "I wouldn't have found it if I been deliberately looking for it, because it's hidden too fucking well. *Fuck*." He slams the lid of the laptop down. "Anybody want to guess what department code the twenty people on payroll down there are being charged to?"

"If I say the science department, do I get that stop at Costa del Sol on the way back?" Reno asks. The words are a joke, but the tone

isn't.

"Right in one," Rufus snarls. "Hojo. We're right back to Hojo. And if we can't figure out a way to get answers from down there, I am one step away from flying back to Midgar and *beating them out of him*." In his voice, Tseng hears the long smoulder of Rufus's ferocious temper, half an inch from ignition. He searches for some way (any way) to defuse it, because the last thing they can afford right now is for Rufus to explode.

Tifa closes her eyes for a long few seconds, and one of her legs starts to jiggle, as though she's wishing she could be up and pacing. Then she freezes and opens her eyes again. "You said -- The mansion was built for Shinra engineering and maintenance crews. What if we're one of them? There for, I don't know, spring reactor cleaning or something." Then she stops herself, shaking her head. "No, that probably wouldn't work, I'd bet you anything there's a special team that only does this reactor, people who know what's really going on, you said you weren't allowed into it when you were here with the reconstruction team --"

It's true, and part of the oddness they'd never been able to clear up, and it's one of the major reasons a visit to Nibelheim has been on the list since Rufus got back from Junon -- Tseng hadn't let him even contemplate the trip from Junon, not without backup, not when half the staff in Rufus's Junon office had been spies for his father. But the thought sparks something anyway. "If we're in the mansion, could you get us up to the reactor with nobody noticing?" he asks.

Tifa bites her lip. "Maybe. Probably. Yeah. Depending on how much gear we find in the mansion, or if I can buy from the general store and make it look like I'm buying for the mansion. I'm not taking you up into the mountains without both hiking and climbing gear, but if the mansion really is used as a base of operations for reactor maintenance crew, I'm pretty sure there'd be *some* gear stowed. You'd have to be suicidal not to have it. And even if there isn't, I could *probably* put together something I'd be satisfied with from general supplies we'd be buying if we'd be moving into the mansion for a while anyway."

It all falls into place. "That's it, then," Tseng says. "We're a team of low-level engineering grunts sent out by Heidegger and Palmer to do a survey of the structural soundness and logistical benefit of all Shinra-owned property, in preparation for identifying things that will need to be fixed or rebuilt once the Department of Engineering has ownership of all that."

Rufus blinks. Twice. "There's no way in hell the Department of Engineering will ever happen," he says, slowly.

Tseng laughs, feeling the giddiness of a plan coming together. "That's what makes it perfect. There *is* no Department of Engineering, not yet, but Hojo won't know if it's going to happen or not unless he talks to Heidegger and Palmer. And he won't do that, because if he does, it shows that he's too interested in Nibelheim. Palmer and Heidegger know there's no way in hell the Department of Engineering will happen, but they're not going to *admit* that, so if Hojo *does* break character and say something, they'll play along, and unless Hojo



corners them *both*, they'll each think the other ordered it. And if all else fails and Hojo decides to pursue it, and all hell breaks loose?" He shrugs. "I'm not going to lose sleep over either Palmer *or* Heidegger getting onto Hojo's shit list. Anybody disagree?"

Another few minutes of silence. "It could work," Rufus finally says, slowly, turning things over in his head. "It could really work." He frowns. "We'd have to look the part --"

"Disguise drawer," Reno says, promptly. "Tif', it's right under your feet, the one you got the sunglasses outta. This is a Turks chopper; we come prepared. I know there's stuff in there in my size and the boss's. Boss, you're too fucking recognizable, but if we shove a baseball cap on your head and you hang back, you should be okay, yeah? Chief, you could probably fit Rude's, you don't mind swimming a little --"

"I'm the new recruit," Rufus says, immediately. "Just graduated. My first field assignment. Nobody's sure if I can hack it yet, so nobody bothered finding me coveralls that fit."

"That leaves Tif'," Reno says. "Who, I mean, don't get me wrong, Tif', you're gorgeous, but you are *precisely* the wrong size to fit into any of our clothes, you'd look like you were playing dress-up --"

"So, she's not an engineer at all," Tseng says. "What she's in now would work for a middle manager well enough. She's the bureaucrat who was sent along with us to make sure we don't go over budget and we don't skip any parts of the checklist." He frowns. "We give her a clipboard, shove a pencil through the bun -- I think there's a spare pair of plain-glass wireframe glasses in the props drawer to disguise her even more --"

"Yeah," Rufus says, slowly. "Yeah, okay. This could work." He takes in a deep breath, lets it out, slowly. "Odin's balls and Bahamut's wings, that was close. Too close." He turns to pin Tifa with his gaze; the storm on his face calming down a little now that the crisis has been dealt with, or at least a plan formulated, but from the way Tifa's shoulders go back at the look, Tseng thinks Rufus might still be working on banking the last of the fury. "And I am in your debt twice over. You are apparently better at spotting mistakes about to be made than we are." (Tseng winces, just a bit, to hear that proclamation; he knows he'll be hearing about his failure to realize just *how much shit* they could have landed in when they have a spare minute for Rufus to tear a strip out of his hide.) "From here on out, it is your duty to speak up, should you see those mistakes about to be made."

Tifa's voice is dry. "I would have anyway."

Rufus passes a hand over his face. Then frowns and digs both hands into his hair, starting to break up the strands slicked back by product, working at each of them with impatient fingernails. "Grab the coveralls," he says. "We'll be on stage the minute we land; we need to dress the part now."

It takes some wriggling to get changed while the chopper's still in the air, and Tseng winds up having to take the stick for five minutes while Reno contorts in his seat to undress and re-dress, swearing all the way, but by the time they land, they look the part. And it's a good

thing, too, because there's a crowd of three "villagers" standing next to the mansion's helipad when they land and open the doors, and Tseng's blood runs cold at *just how narrowly* they dodged that bullet. (If Rufus's father knew that Rufus were digging into the truth of Nibelheim, so soon after having returned from being banished to Junon for fighting the 'reconstruction' plan so fiercely...)

They'd agreed, in the last minutes before they landed, that none of the three of them (Reno, Rufus, and Tseng himself) were suited to the role of the leader of their little team. Each of them is far too recognizable, each in his own way, even if the attention given to the Turks is usually to the suit and not the man inside it. The disguise drawer has coverup makeup in Reno's skin tone to hide the facial tattoos -- they're Reno's trademark, and like the suits, people remember the ink far more than they remember the man who's wearing it -- but makeup isn't perfect; Tifa told them they're still in the window for the spring rains that rise out of nowhere and turn into a deluge before you can so much as blink, and the coverup isn't water-soluble but getting caught in a downpour will at least make it plain that there's makeup there, since wet makeup doesn't behave the way wet skin does. Tseng is Wutaiian, which in itself isn't a problem -- after the first war, thirty years ago, many of his countrymen came to Midgar to escape the sanctions Shinra levied on the defeated nation and stayed to educate themselves in the technology Shinra had used to crush Wutai's spirit so thoroughly -- but the scar of his death-sentence marked between his eyes is just as distinctive; again, makeup can conceal it, but not perfectly.

And Rufus is Rufus. To place Rufus, undercover, in any position that would require him to play slightly at command, but not entirely, risks setting a plan up for failure. Rufus is an excellent actor -- Tseng remembers telling Tifa the story of Rufus's senior year, remembers the story they'd fed his father, and thinks that the lessons were indeed applicable in the business world, just not in the ways Rufus had claimed at the time -- but he works best when he can inhabit a character wholly unlike himself. Any crack for Rufus Shinra to move into the role he is playing is begging for disaster when Rufus's character slips; even the most excellent actor can't hope to remain on stage 24/7.

So it's Tifa who leaps from the helicopter first, her boot-heels clicking across the concrete of the helipad, her clipboard poised as though she's about to grade their welcoming committee on style and substance both. She looks cool and terrifying, competent beyond all measure, and Tseng thinks he might be the only one who saw her pause near-imperceptibly before opening the door, squaring her shoulders and steeling herself for what was to come. Tseng follows her, trying to look bland and mousy, trying to blend into the background; he slinks in her shadow, watching her eat up the ground with her confident, long-legged strides. (He blesses Reno once more for the high heels on the boots; the extra three inches they afford her have magnified her natural tendency to project into all available space and then some. She looks like a goddess.)

The information Rufus was able to find about Nibelheim on the Shinra intranet includes the mayor's -- sham mayor's -- name; they couldn't tell whether or not he was on the black-ops payroll, in on the deception or not, since all of the payroll files Rufus was able to

unearth were blind items, each resource identified by number and nothing more. (Which tells them that there's a file somewhere -- even if it's just in someone's head -- where number and name correspond, and that tells Tseng there's more digging to be done, and he knows Rufus's fingers are already itching to start in on the work.) Tseng has to admire the way Tifa brandishes the clipboard as she nears the delegation, alternating between looking up at them and flipping through papers (hastily assembled from every scrap of paper with the Shinra logo they could turn up in the chopper, accompanied by handwritten notes; Tseng wishes like burning they had a printer, so they could print up some official-looking forms overnight, but their little entourage had been planning to travel light, dammit, and Rufus doesn't pack along a printer unless he knows he's going to be doing business from the road).

"I'm assuming one of you is Mayor Calotta," Tifa says, and even her voice is different: she sounds like every terrifying middle manager Tseng has ever tried to talk his way past, like she is itching to discover all the ways in which the world around her does not conform to specifications so she can have the pleasure of whipping it into line.

The three men share a helpless gaze; one of them finally steps forward. "I'm Mayor Calotta," he says, looking like he's trying to decide whether or not to add the "ma'am" on the end.

Tifa lifts her chin and looks down her nose at him. (It, too, is easier with the heels; they are nearly of a height, and Tifa may have half an inch on him in the boots.) "I am Tara Miller," she says -- they'd decided that using her already-established alias would be too risky, in case anyone remembered it and reported it back; 'Miki Walker' is one of the Turks' standard burner aliases, able to be activated and transferred at a moment's notice when they find someone who needs it, and although the Turks and Rufus are the only ones who'd recognize the name on sight, Tifa may need to be Miki for a while longer. "Shinra Department of Engineering and Support, provisional. My men and I have been ordered to complete a full survey of all Shinra property worldwide to determine which properties to keep, which to repair, and which to dispose of. The property we are standing upon *does* belong to Shinra, yes?"

Unspoken, under her words, the implication: *if this property is Shinra's, what are you doing on it?*

One of the two unnamed men (and Tseng, looking for reactions, has already pegged him as the likely snake in the grass; his eyes had widened, just a bit, at Tifa's words) steps forward as well and clears his throat. "Of course, ma'am. We just didn't hear anything from Shinra telling us to expect anybody --"

Tifa fixes him with a cold glare. "I was not aware that Shinra needed to inform anyone of our plans," she says, neat and precise, and Tseng is torn between marveling at her ability to carry this off and wondering what it might be costing her. "The Department of Engineering and Support is *provisional*, gentlemen, and I will not be the one who fails to secure our permanent funding by failing to complete my mission. Now, it is of course company policy to integrate fully with local governmental bodies whenever possible, but I assure

you, you'll barely know we're here. Our schedule on this inspection tour is quite tight, and barring any discovery of particular interest, we'll likely be out of your hair by Wednesday. Thursday at the latest. If there have been any updates to local building code since the property's last inspection, please have someone deliver a summary by tomorrow morning -- I likely won't have time to send any of my men down to check with your inspectors for changes; we'll barely have time to send someone down for supplies. Barring that, we'd rather like to get to work. We appreciate the welcome."

Tseng thinks he might be the only person to notice the way her wrists are shaking as she turns away from the group of men and starts her long stride back to the chopper. Rufus had been the one to coach her through that speech, twice, while stripping out of his suit and making his transformation into an anonymous engineering worker. ("Be firm, be arrogant, and above all else, *don't let them get a word in edgewise* before you turn your back on them and walk away.") Tseng plays *hesitation* for a second, gives the three men an embarrassed, apologetic smile (*sorry, guys, but she's the boss, even if she is an arrogant bitch, and she signs the paychecks so I'm going with her*), and then jogs the few steps needed to catch up with her, keeping his shoulders slumped over and his chin tucked down so his cap shades his eyes. "Nice," he says, in Wutaian, in an undertone he know will not carry. (Since there's no chance of disguising his Wutaian heritage, he's pondering -- mostly for his own amusement, he'll admit -- pretending he doesn't understand or speak anything but.)

Next to him, Tifa breathes out, sharp and rough. (Is it just the stress making her inhaled and exhaled sound like that, or *was* that really a slight wheeze he just heard? He resolves to listen closely when they are inside and away from the noises of nature.) "*Not done yet*," she says, her lips barely moving, and pauses about twenty feet from the chopper. The pantomime she goes through is clearly a set of orders to Rufus and Reno, still in the chopper, no doubt watching the whole thing with bated breath from behind the tinted windows: *get the gear and get your asses moving*.

(The spectre of Tifa giving orders to Rufus, even if only by gesture, is alone worth the price of admission.)

The "welcoming committee" is slow to depart, watching to see what they're going to do, and Tseng thinks (now that he *is* thinking) that there's something else wrong here, something more than just a set of Hojo's spies being uneasy at visitors coming out of nowhere. It makes him hold out a hand, touch Tifa's elbow quickly just as she's reaching for the front door. The delegation is far enough away that he doesn't have to watch his language too carefully, but he keeps his voice down anyway. "Hold on," he says. Then, knowing he has to make it look good -- his shoulderblades are prickling, and he knows without having to look that the departing trio have slowed down on the path away from the mansion, are turning back to look at what they're doing -- he pantomimes pointing at an "item" on the clipboard, taking Tifa's shoulder and drawing her back down the walkway, pointing up at the eaves of the mansion as though he's showing her something she'll need to mark down on her checklist.

Tifa's fast enough to catch on -- he hadn't expected otherwise -- and she looks up to follow his indication, frowning and pulling the

pencil out of her bun to gesture up with it even as her words have nothing to do with the physical presentation they're fronting. "You caught it too, didn't you?" she says. Her face is a pleasant, thoughtful frown, like they're doing nothing more strenuous than arguing over whether the rafters are up to code. (Tseng can tell, without even looking too closely, that they aren't; the place looks like it's about to collapse.) "The one on the left, the one with the black hair and the creepy eyes, who said they hadn't expected us."

The motions of his cover are automatic: bend his head down over the clipboard, point out another thing to consider, hold his hands up about a foot apart and use them to frame a section of the roof. Tifa waves the pencil in midair, sketching out something in the section he would be indicating, were any of this real. (It's lovely to work with someone who follows his cues so flawlessly.) "Him," Tseng agrees. "Which tells me they *do* get regular visitors here, which tells me this mansion isn't as abandoned as people might think, which means there's no way in hell I'm letting you be first in. You and Rufus will wait out here while Reno and I clear the place."

Tifa inhales, sharply. (He isn't imagining it; her breath really *is* growing more labored, and it isn't from panic; he knows the signs of her panic by now. Dammit.) "I --" She bites back whatever she was about to say, transmutes it into, "I understand why you'd think you have to do it that way, but if there's any way you can be comfortable with letting me at least as far as the entryway, *please*." Her poise and composure cracks, just a little, and for half a second Tseng can see the stark naked agony in her face. It's only a flash before she gets control of herself again, but the fact she cracked at all is horribly telling when Tseng knows full well she knows how much is riding on her performance. "This is hard enough on me without having to stand out here on stage pretending I've never seen the place before. I can do it if I need to, but I'd really rather not."

Rufus and Reno come up behind them, each with a suitcase in each hand. "By a bear?" Rufus says, in an undertone. (One of their old codes: "exeunt, pursued by a bear", a line from one of the classic plays Rufus had always been reading, and they've always used it to mean that they are under observation by someone who hasn't really left after all.)

Tseng nods, gestures at the clipboard, points up to the rafters again. (Rufus, too, catches on immediately; he shuffles his weight from one foot to the other, scratches his head as a cover for pulling the brim of his hat down further -- although that might be natural; disturbing all that product probably means his scalp is itching -- and then gestures widely, like he's arguing for his own interpretation of what they're seeing. Reno just pulls out a cigarette, then looks at Tifa, closely, and pops it into his mouth without lighting it.) "Our friends are down by the bushes just past that bend -- *don't* look -- and one of them said something that makes us both think there are frequent enough visitors that I can't be sure the mansion really *is* deserted. I want you two to --" He thinks, fast; it's the small tensing of Tifa's shoulders, preparing herself to hear bad news, that decides him. "-- Stay just in front of the door when we go in, and *don't move* until Reno and I clear the place."

"Thank you," Tifa murmurs. (Rufus looks at him, clearly

wondering what she's thanking him for; Tseng makes the 'later' face.) "Are they still watching us?"

Reno fishes out his lighter, gestures wildly with it while pointing up to the rafter with his other hand. The lighter goes flying, precisely where Reno intended for it to go; Reno throws up his hands (clearly telegraphing *I give up on this fucking day*) and stoops to retrieve it. It's very smoothly done; Reno does faux-clumsy beautifully. "Yup," he says, when he comes back up. "Only spotted two of 'em; the third might've left, might just be behind something. Tif', time to throw a temper fit. Grab the cigarette, toss it in the bushes, yell a bunch about how we're all a bunch of slackers an' need to get inside and get to work, something. Me an' the boss first."

Tseng's expecting her to protest, expecting her to take a second to steel herself for the pretense; she doesn't. She grabs the cigarette out from between Reno's lips, her voice spiking in her clear, carrying last-call cadence. It isn't precisely *yelling* -- her voice never rises above slightly louder than conversational -- but there's no doubt their observers will be able to hear her.

"We do not have time for you to stand around and smoke while we are burning daylight, *gentlemen*," she snaps. (For a second, Tseng sees merriment flash through Rufus's eyes, there and then gone, and he thinks Rufus might be forcing back laughter, lest he ruin their cover.) She brandishes the cigarette in Reno's face. "*This* does not sign your paychecks. I do." Snap, *throw*, and little flakes of tobacco arc through the air as Tifa pitches it. "You and you," she adds, somehow managing to contrive it so that Tseng and Reno are the ones she's pointing at, "get our things inside and start on form 2B-slash-9. *You* --" The pointing finger transfers to Rufus. "--Are coming with me, and I will demonstrate to you the *proper* way to begin an evaluation, unlike what *some people* think is appropriate."

Tseng bows his head (it neatly conceals his own desire to burst out laughing; she sounds like a slightly sweeter, far-more-articulate version of Heidegger on one of his rampages) and grabs the two nearest suitcases, then scurries into the mansion. Reno does the same. The minute they've both cleared the door, they drop the gear in unison and fan out -- the sightlines mean their uninvited guests won't be able to see inside. Behind them, Tifa stalks in, her head held high; Rufus scurries along behind her and shuts the door. The minute he does, Tifa leans back against the wall; her shoulders sag sharply.

Rufus, however, doesn't do anything to let his cover drop, or even falter slightly. He whistles softly for attention, then flashes Tseng and Reno another of their private signals. This one says, *I'm not sure if we're on camera or not*.

Tseng kicks himself; he should have thought of that too. "*He says, there may be an eye in the sky, watching*," he says quietly, knowing Tifa won't be able to interpret Rufus's signs. (Wutaian has no word for 'camera'; they have borrowed the word from Midgar's common tongue, and any listener would be able to know what is being discussed, did they hear it.)

Tifa looks stricken for half a second, then straightens up and pastes her *persona* back on. "*Ears?*" she asks.

Tseng signs it back at Rufus, who shrugs. He's angled himself in such a way that his back is to the most logical place to put a camera; he signs a quick *five*, tugs his cap (*minutes*), and says, out loud, "Want me to go check the circuit breakers, ma'am?"

Tseng isn't sure if Tifa even knows what a circuit breaker *is*, but she nods. (No, that's unfair; she owns property and buys electricity from Shinra just like everyone else does; her unfamiliarity with computing technology does not extend to an unfamiliarity with every form of technology.) "Yes, please," she says, her tone brisk. She hesitates so briefly that Tseng wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been looking for it. "Gentlemen, I have had a very trying day, and I would like to get settled as quickly as possible. You two, start the preliminary walkthrough. I will begin constructing the final checklist."

Smart of her -- very smart, and Tseng thinks, not for the first time, that it's a pity he can't just *hire* her. She's just given him and Reno an excuse to clear the mansion and herself a reason to stay in the entranceway, the way Tseng had requested her to. (Can't help the fact Rufus won't be doing the same; Rude is the Turks' counter-surveillance and electronics expert, and although both Tseng and Reno can recognize and defeat the basics, Rufus -- whose hobby has been electronics and technology for as long as Tseng has known him -- is far more equipped to identify and handle a camera feed, if one exists.) Still, he can mitigate the risk: "I come with you, show you the breakers," he says to Rufus, playing up the thickest Wutaian accent he thinks he can still summon. (Rufus makes a face, but doesn't protest.)

The circuit breaker is in the same place it usually is in construction of this style and age: in the coldroom off the kitchen. Rufus opens it up, removes the front panel (Tseng bites back a protest; he's pretty sure you're supposed to turn the master feed off before you do that) and runs his fingertips over the wires, muttering softly to himself. Eventually, he puts one finger on breaker number 11, and one finger on breaker number 13. "Hang on," he says, and flips 11. The lights in the kitchen go out. He flicks it back on, then flips 13.

"Will you *please* provide warning before cutting the power to the room I'm working in?" Tifa hollers.

"We're clear, then," Rufus yells back, turning 13 back on. "Those are the only two breakers a surveillance system could've been," he adds, to Tseng. "If there's anything in here, it's stand-alone and battery-powered, and there's no model in production that's both battery-powered and continuous-transmit. If there are eyes and ears, they're capture-and-squirt, once a day when the comm satellite is overhead, and I checked the orbits; we have at least another five hours if that's the case. I'll toss the place before then and make sure."

"Then it's back to the vestibule with you," Tseng says. When Rufus *glares* at him, he shrugs. "I could make you feel better about it by saying I'd like to have someone keep Tifa company to make sure she's handling this all right. Which is true, even. But I'm not letting you anywhere else in this place before we sweep it."

It makes Rufus mutter with ill grace, but he heads back into the foyer, and Tseng draws his weapon and begins clearing rooms, one

after another.

After having failed in sufficient paranoia *twice* in a span of half an hour or so, Tseng is on high alert as he goes, eyes open for the smallest of details. He's certain they're alone within two rooms, but he proceeds methodically anyway, mapping the space in his mind as he goes. The mansion is replete with an old and stately grandeur that has long since started to decay, and Tseng is surprised it isn't in worse shape than it is, but the layers of dust -- whole strata -- are not as undisturbed as they should be, if this place truly had been completely unused in the nearly-three years since Nibelheim's death and re-creation. Someone has been here since the reconstruction team left.

He only wishes he'd been more insistent, at the time, that he and the Turks should be allowed into the mansion, to stay there rather than camping out with the rest of the reconstruction workers in the hastily-erected emergency services pavillion tent they'd pitched in the backyard. Somehow, every time they'd tried, Hojo had been there to distract them. This is the first time he's been inside. It would have been nice to have the previous experience to contrast his evaluation with, but he realizes as he goes that he has found no reason *why* Hojo should have been so secretive. There's nothing out of the ordinary in here. Just the few books Tifa had mentioned when she'd discussed sneaking into the mansion as children, here and there, and the slowly crumbling furnishings and decor of a manor house that had once been grand.

"You find anything?" he asks as he passes Reno coming back down the stairs when he finishes his sweep of the ground floor and returns to the lobby.

Reno looks unhappy. "Yeah. Two things: jack and shit. And I'm not sure about the jack."

Tifa is sitting on the second-to-last step of the great staircase, having dusted herself a place to sit without dirtying her pants, her knees drawn up to her chest but still being careful not to lean back against the stair tread behind her and risk her white silk blouse. Rufus's confirmation that they are not on stage -- or at least, not on stage in real time -- seems to have robbed her of the last of the strength and self-control she had been projecting when they were still being observed; she looks small and tired and lost. There's another dust-free space next to her, where Rufus was clearly sitting, but it's empty now. She's looking across the room, at a sofa that *had* been sitting undisturbed in the parlor area and is now in the corner of the foyer. It's standing up on edge, and Rufus is perched, barefoot, precariously, atop it, reaching high above his head and feeling along the decorative frills.

Tseng closes his eyes and prays for patience. (Rufus has the balance of a cat, and knows damn well how to fall. The worst he could suffer would be some scrapes if the sofa decided it would no longer bear his weight and collapsed, and Tseng knows that's why Rufus has shed his shoes and socks: so that he can grip with his toes, feel the tiny vibrations of the wood and fabric beneath him, and know enough to throw himself free if the furniture is as decrepit as the rest of the building. It doesn't help.) "Dare I ask?" he says, as dryly as possible,



sitting down next to Tifa. He doesn't like the way she looks, or the way she *sounds*, and he's hoping that if he settles in next to her, he'll be able to evaluate her and decide what kind of treatment is appropriate.

"He said if there were cameras, that's where they'd most likely be," she says. She sounds pale and colorless, as washed out as she looks.

Tseng is just about ready to say to hell with the subterfuge necessary to keep Tifa's fierce pride from flaring up when Reno crouches down in front of her. "Tif', I really don't like the way you're breathing, yeah?" he says. "You wanna take a deep breath for me?"

It's not the way Tseng would've approached it, and he expects Tifa to snap at him, to insist that she's all right, that she can handle things. But she only makes a face and sits up straighter, dropping her knees and resting her hands on her thighs, straightening out her spine, to obey.

Reno leans in, closer than Tseng would have thought Tifa would let him, until he's got his ear pressed against her upper chest. He stops breathing himself, concentrating fiercely, and when he pulls back, his face is unhappy. "You know what I'm gonna say, don't you," he says, sitting back on his heels.

"I was *born here*," Tifa wails.

Reno nods, his expression sober. "Which is why you know fucking well you're starting in on a case of rapid-onset environmental pneumonia. You want it to turn into pulmonary edema, or you gonna let me treat it for you?"

The Turks all carry Restore materia, as a matter of course, even if they don't usually keep it equipped. Rude's the one who usually handles their healing if all of them are in the field, though, and most people who know them think it's because Reno is one of the people with poor affinity with the restorative materia. They all know the truth, though. Reno's one of the best, most natural healers Tseng's ever found; when Reno cures something, it *stays* cured. It just leaves Reno sick and dizzy for hours afterwards, sometimes even to the point of manifesting the symptoms of whatever it was he was curing.

The last thing they can afford right now is for *both* Tifa and Reno to be out of commission. If Tifa's illness truly is altitude-related, stemming from the rapid change from cruising altitude back down to Costa del Sol back up to cruising altitude and then to here in such quick succession, a shot of second-level Cure followed by night of sleep at a stable altitude will work wonders; back when Tseng had first joined the Turks, both Kailas and Blaze had reacted badly to extended helicopter travel, and that plus drugs had always been the answer. If, as he fears, Tifa's illness is due to a genuine weakness of the lungs, an incapacity to handle altitudes this high and air this thin, there's even odds that she *won't* recover.

His heart breaks for her all over again: to be exiled from home twice over, once by the actions of another, again by the betrayal of her own body ...

Still. He can't risk having both of them on the disabled list. "Reno," he says, softly, regretfully: *you know why that isn't a good idea.*

Usually that tone is enough to make Reno back down. This time, though, Reno looks up at him, eyes blazing. "Shot of levofloxacin, shot of dexamethasone, wait ten minutes, add a hyper-focused second level Cure, and you *know* as fucking well as I do that your Cure's for shit and the chief doesn't do materia unless someone's bleeding to death. I'm not letting her suffer one minute longer than I gotta, I don't *care* what Cure does to me to cast. You need her on this mission a fuck of a lot more than you need me."

Tseng knows it for the sound of Reno putting his foot down, and when Reno puts his foot down, *mountains* will move sooner than Reno will change his mind. Tifa holds up a hand, though, and she looks utterly weary and utterly disgusted with herself. "It's all academic," she says -- and the worst part is how the wheezing, crackling sound of her breath doesn't even seem to bother her. She smiles, thin and tight. "When my doctor discharged me, he told me the scarring in my lungs is bad enough that using healing spells anywhere near my chest should be reserved for cases where it's Cure or death. You know how Cure eats your body's reserves to speed up the natural healing process? Yeah, my lungs don't *have* those reserves anymore. And if the scar tissue gets dislodged, there's a good chance it will permanently block off the lung."

She sounds utterly matter-of-fact about it. Tseng doesn't know how she can. Last night she'd told them a story that had ended with her breathing her own blood, and he's been called a cold bastard time and time again and even *he* doesn't think he could handle feeling his lungs pulling this shit on him if he'd gone through what she had. It must show on his face, at least a little, because her lips twist. "I'm almost positive it was the air in Costa del Sol," she says. "Between the humidity there and the altitude here, and then all this dust... I didn't think of it. I probably should have. I'll be fine as soon as we get back down under the danger line. If it gets bad enough, one of you can medevac me to Corel or Cosmo Canyon; Cosmo's where we always used to send cases of altitude sickness, since we had to go overland, but either of them should be low enough that I can recover a bit."

In her voice, Tseng can hear her knowledge that once she leaves, she won't ever be able to return. He stands, abruptly. "We'll try the drug therapy first," he says, and turns on his heel to go back out to the helicopter and collect the first aid kit. (The Turks' first aid kits are more in the way of battlefield hospital than anything else.)

When he comes back in, Rufus -- who has dragged the sofa over to the other side of the foyer for a second check -- is just leaping down from his perch atop it, graceful and light on his feet, his hands and face smudged with dust from where he had been feeling along the decorative edging of the ceiling. He comes over to Tseng's side. "Clear, in here at least," he reports. He glances at the first aid kit Tseng is carrying. "What's wrong?"

When Rufus is working -- especially when Rufus is working on technical matters -- his concentration is unassailable, but he registers

enough about what's going on around him that he's able to think back over the conversations he's missed once he comes out of his trance of work. Still, it's easier if Tseng just briefs him. "Altitude pneumonia," Tseng says, shortly. "Small dispute about the best course of action."

Rufus looks over at Tifa, who has progressed to looking as though she is staving off a coughing fit with nothing more than pure force of will, and winces. "Who won?"

"Right now, me." Tseng carries the first-aid kit over to the steps, clicks it open and begins to root through its neatly labeled vials. They carry their drugs in both liquid and pill form, but with how grey Tifa is starting to look around her lips, an injection is the only way to go.

Reno holds out a hand as soon as he digs out the vial of dexamethasone. "Give," he says; it's the moving-mountains tone again. Tseng sighs and surrenders it. Reno's got a softer touch with a needle, anyway.

Once the syringe is loaded, Reno reaches for one of Tifa's arms; she shakes her head and holds out the other one instead. "Better use this one," she says. "The other one had two veins collapse halfway through treatment last time." (Both Reno and Tseng wince in unison.) She turns her head decisively away from the sight of Reno checking for a good vein.

Tseng takes a step forward to help distract her, but Rufus is there first; he sits down at her other side, one step above her so she'll have to crane her neck away from where Reno's working, and gives her a reassuring smile. He's clearly replayed his memory of the conversation he missed: "You said Cosmo Canyon's where you used to send cases of altitude sickness?" he asks. (Tseng would bet that he doesn't give a rat's ass about Cosmo Canyon or altitude sickness; he's just seized on that as a logical conversation flow from her last statements that doesn't involve her own medical history.) "Have you ever been there? I've heard it's supposed to be beautiful. And it happens to be where I've told everyone I am, so anything you can share about it will help."

Tifa shakes her head. "I only guided for parties trying Mt. Nibel one or two times a year," she says, "and after the first time I summited, I'd always stay at the last base camp; I wasn't crazy enough to go with them again. I got good at spotting altitude problems, though. Most of the climbers refused to admit they were having problems until it was too late, and it takes long enough to evac someone down to Cosmo Canyon from here that you have to start down off the mountain pretty much as soon as the problem goes from being a mild case of adjustment sickness to being something more serious." She breathes in sharply when Reno slides the needle under her skin; Tseng can hear the crackling getting worse. "I never followed along with the evac party, though. I was usually too busy trying to keep the rest of the team alive. Climbers are *crazy*."

"How far up in the mountains is the reactor?" Tseng asks, quietly. What he's really asking is *how much more altitude are we going to gain*; he's not a specialist in altitude sickness, but he knows enough to know that once you start displaying symptoms, the only thing to do is to either stay at the altitude you're at, or descend.

Tifa's lips twist; he knows she can hear what he isn't asking. "Still in the foothills; seven hundred vertical feet over about four miles. And before you ask, no, that's not enough to be dangerous, not if we return back down here to sleep. Look, I know how bad this sounds, but believe me, it's nowhere near as bad as you think it is. We're at seven thousand feet right now, give or take, and the real risk of HAPE only starts in around nine thousand feet or so. The sound is just the damaged pathways in my lung collapsing and then popping back open. I *know* how bad it sounds, but it's happened before, and it always stops sooner or later."

Reno flushes the needle with saline and reloads it with the next dose of the drugs he's giving her. "It always stops sooner or later *at sea level*," he says, pointedly.

Tifa sighs. "Look, I promise you, I am *not* just trying to tough this through, all right? I know how bad it sounds, I know you've all apparently decided that I'm the fair maiden to be protected at all costs, but I'm the one who's been living with this for nearly three years now, and I've seen enough cases of acute altitude problems and how miserable they are that I am not particularly eager to become one of them. If I'm getting worse, I will *tell you*, so you can all just stop hovering."

She flinches at the second needle stick; Reno flushes the needle again and goes back to the first-aid case for a third ampoule. "Hand to Alexander and Titan crush you?" Reno demands. (Tseng blinks; he hasn't heard Reno haul out slum expressions like that in years.)

Tifa lifts her free hand and makes an X over her chest. "Odin's lance strike me and drown in Hades' cauldron," she promises, providing the antiphon in a singsong. "I'll be miserable, and my head hurts, but I'm *fine*. And if I really need it, there's --" She breaks off, bites her lip. "I was going to say, there's a doctor in town who specializes in altitude-related problems, since climbing tourism's so big here. I don't know if there still is."

"I could check," Rufus offers. "Junior member of the team's the one who'd get sent to run all the errands."

Tseng shakes his head. "None of us are going down into town until at least after we get up to the reactor," he says. "I was hoping to go tonight --"

Tifa shakes her head before he even finishes speaking. "That was never going to happen. It's at least a three-hour hike, and we've only got another two, three hours before the light starts fading. I'm not taking a bunch of mountain virgins up when it's not full day."

Tseng does not allow himself to become angry; she is the one who knows this terrain, better than any of the rest of them, and he won't argue with experience. "All right, then," he says, instead. "I'll check the kitchen; I saw some nonperishables in there and a part of the pantry's under Stop. I'll see if the supplies are still good enough to let us avoid making a supply run down to town."

"There," Reno says, drawing the needle out of Tifa's skin and breaking off the tip so it can't be re-used by accident, then applying a bit of gauze to Tifa's inner arm and directing her to bend her arm

against it. He drops the needle and the tip into the kit's used-sharps canister, looking up at Tseng and Rufus. "I found some acetazolamide in the kit, too -- it was a year or so past expiration date, since we don't have anybody who gets problems from flying anymore, but it's better than nothing. Tif', I gave you a shot of it, but boss, chief, if either of you starts getting a headache, you're taking it too."

Tseng just nods; he's never had altitude problems, but he knows better than to argue with Reno when Reno's in emergency-field-medic mode. "Plenty of water, too," Tifa says. "Three, four times what you think you need to drink. In fact, if you could go get me some..."

Tseng's pretty sure she's just trying to *stop him from hovering*, but he nods anyway. "Be right back," he says.

The taps in the kitchen are still operative; the water flows red with rust for the first minute, but clears while Tseng is opening cabinets and looking to see if there are any drinking vessels or if he'll have to go out to the chopper and retrieve their water bottles. There's a full set of dishes and glassware in there, though -- for eight -- and he takes down one of the glasses, inspecting it against the light, finding it perfectly clean without a hint of dust. Another sign that someone's been here more recently than logic would state. He cups his hand under the water flowing from the tap, sniffs at it, sticks his tongue into the pool (it tastes like his skin and like calcium, and he bets that when this mansion was regularly tenanted, they had a water softener installed; he'll go looking for it later to see if it just needs to be turned on), and finally decides it's safe enough to drink.

He's just turning to head back to the foyer when the back of his brain quietly informs him of the thing he's been subconsciously noticing since he first walked in. "Reno," he hollers.

A minute later, Reno sticks his head in. "Yeah, boss?"

"C'mere," Tseg says. He points at the far corner of the kitchen, the one against the outer wall -- the one that *should* be the corner of the mansion. "Stand right here, wait two minutes, and then bang on the wall."

Reno quirks an eyebrow, but does as he's told. (That's a miracle.) Tseng opens the back door and walks outside, following the line of the building, pacing off steps as carefully and evenly as he can. It's twenty-two steps from the door to the corner. He rounds the corner, puts his ear against the wall, and waits.

He waits a good five minutes, and he can't hear anything. He bangs on the wall himself. The sound echoes, hollow and hard.

Back into the kitchen, and Reno's got his hand on the wall, trying to feel for Tseng's answering signal. "Nothing," Tseng says.

Reno nods, somehow unsurprised. "Couldn't feel you, either," he says, knowing Tseng would have tried the same signal in reverse. Pacing out the length from the door to the far wall, and discovering it's only fifteen steps, is sort of an anticlimax at that point.

Tifa has gotten up from where she was sitting when he returns to the foyer with the glass of water in his hand, and she's helping Rufus

haul the sofa back into the parlor where he got it from. Tseng waits until they're done before handing her the glass of water. (She's breathing a little easier, he notices; her lungs are still crackling a little on the inhale, but she doesn't look as grey and faded as she did before Reno started ministering to her.) He gives Rufus a look that's clearly *you couldn't keep her from helping?* (Rufus looks back, *I'd like to see you try* written as clearly as though he said it out loud.)

Reno bounces on his toes. "We found the secret room," he announces, gleefully.

"Correction," Tseng says. "We found the *location* of the secret room. We haven't found the *entrance* to the secret room yet."

"Details, details," Reno says. "Who wants upstairs, and who wants downstairs?"

Somehow -- Tseng isn't precisely sure how -- it winds up with him and Tifa upstairs, Reno and Rufus downstairs. (He'd rather Tifa stay downstairs, where the dust isn't as thick, but he apparently doesn't get a vote; at least Rufus pulled out the handkerchief he always carries and handed it over for Tifa to wear as a makeshift dust mask.) Tifa insists on changing out of her new clothes before starting -- "I'll change back if I have to go outside, I promise, but for all that I can move in them just fine, I can't get over being paranoid I'm going to wreck them, and it's filthy enough in here that I almost already have," and nothing Tseng says to her can convince her that the Turks' regular dry cleaner can get out any stain she might incur. (They're particularly good with blood, of course, but Tseng's never had to write off a suit completely unless it's been shredded entirely, no matter how obscure the stain.) He doesn't protest too much, though; he gets the feeling, looking at how much *better* she seems to feel when she's back in the tank top and skirt he'd packed for her to wear as workout clothes, that she'd simply been looking for an excuse.

(He does insist she keep the boots, though. Leviathan alone knows what they might find; he doesn't want to constantly be worrying about what she might step on.)

They start in the rear bedroom, the one overlooking the back lawn; Tifa watches him for a few minutes to see what he does before joining in next to him. Together, they inspect the edges of where the walls join the floor, run hands over the walls to find any hidden seams. Tseng knocks along the edge of the wall to see if anything sounds different, but nothing does. He finishes by inspecting the chimney that's lurking in the corner of the room that's shared with the other bedroom, thinking it the best bet, but nothing.

"If it's in here, it's going to take X-rays to find it," he finally says, breaking the silence they've been working in (punctuated only by Tifa's breathing, but thankfully, that's been getting better; now he can only hear the crackling wheeze when she breathes in too sharply, and he's hoping it isn't just that the handkerchief is muffling the sound). "Let's try the other room."

Tifa seems easier up here than she was downstairs -- Tseng remembers her saying that she and her friends never made it much past the foyer when they were young -- but she doesn't seem inclined

to conversation. She just nods and follows him out of the room, into the other bedroom, and goes back to working at the walls. She starts on the side by the front, leaving Tseng to begin at the chimney.

It's only a few minutes later that he strikes pay dirt (literally; the mortar in between the bricks is of the chimney is crumbling, and half of it flakes away when he touches). The seams of the hidden door are nearly invisible, but his fingers catch on them and he knows immediately what he's touching. "Got something," he says, and starts exploring the edges of what must be the entrance with his fingertips, looking for the catch that will open it.

"So do I," Tifa says. Her voice sounds utterly flat, calm and controlled. When he turns to see what she means, she's holding out a book, thick and heavy and covered in aging leather. There's no title stamped on its spine or front, but she flips open the front cover and holds it out to him. He looks down to see the name neatly written on the flyleaf: *Simon Hojo*.

"It was under the bed," Tifa says. "Like someone kicked it there by accident and forgot it when they were packing."

Tseng's eyes narrow. "Now isn't that fascinating," he says. "What's in the book?"

It's hard to read Tifa's face with half of it covered, but Tseng thinks she's giving him the unhappy look. She flips another two pages and holds it out again. The title page, written in large authoritative letters opposite a frontispiece illustrating the female reproductive system, proclaims it to be *Dewhurst's Textbook of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, third edition, published forty years ago. "There's a bookmark," Tifa says. "Page 374. In the section on gestational/maternal immune intolerance."

Tseng's eyes narrow. "Stick it on the bed," he says. "And go get Rufus and Reno."

He's hoping to have the door open by the time she gets back -- and to have already checked out whatever's behind it to evaluate its safety -- but no such luck; he's still sweeping the chimney for the catch when the other three come back in. Reno heads straight for the bed where Tifa left the book, picking it up and flipping through it. Rufus steps up to Tseng's side, holding out a hand to check the brick himself; he finds the seams of the hidden door about thirty seconds faster than Tseng had, but of course Tifa would have told him it was there.

"No luck finding the catch?" Rufus says.

"Not yet," Tseng says. "I thought that --" He breaks off when he hears a *click* and then a *scrape*; the chimney shudders a little, tiny vibrations setting more of the mortar to flaking, and the crack of the hidden door gets wider and wider, until it's visible to the naked eye.

He turns around to see Tifa standing in front of the bookcase on the other side of the room, stretched up on her tiptoes, her hand on top of the highest shelf. She gives him what he thinks is a tiny, embarrassed smile and shrugs a little. "In the awful Gothic novels, the switch is always in the bookcase," she says.

Reno puts down the book and comes over to inspect the door, drawing his weapon as he does. (Tseng follows suit.) "Both of you, stay right here until we call for you," Reno says.

"I should probably protest that you don't have the authority to give me orders," Rufus says. "But, you know, I think I'm totally okay with not being the first one to investigate the creepy secret room in the creepy deserted mansion."

Tseng snorts. "Stay put. Both of you." He pushes on the bricks that have moved out of place; the door groans again, but grinds back further. He sticks his head through it to see what the door might reveal. It's a staircase, heading down (and down, and *down*); the treads are wood, and look uneven and unsteady, as far down as the reflected light from the bedroom illuminates them. He sticks his hand in and feels the wall; there's a light switch right where he'd expect there to be. When he turns it on, he calculates, based on the depth of the stairs, that whatever's on the other side of the stairs is at *least* in the basement.

He's expecting Reno to make some sort of wisecrack (playing *jan-ken-po* for who has to be the first in would be Tseng's guess), but -- thank Leviathan -- Reno seems to have flipped over into utterly professional mode. He slides past Tseng, weapon held at loose ready, and starts making his way down the stairs. Tseng follows.

The air is stuffy, and at least five degrees hotter than the rest of the mansion -- probably from the sun shining on the outside wall; the stairwell is wide enough to account for all the missing space in the building, which would make the far wall the outside wall -- but it starts to cool off and get less stuffy the further down they go, and by the time they're down the stairs entirely, it's taken on a hint of dampness. "We're underground," Reno says, stamping one foot on the concrete floor to test it. "If the step count's accurate, probably by about ten feet."

"Let's hope whoever built the secret underground bunker was a better engineer than whoever built the mansion proper," Tseng says, "or we might just open this door to find it's all caved in."

It isn't, thankfully. The door opens onto a long hallway, lit by wall-mounted sconce lights every few feet. Three-quarters of them are burned out, leaving the space dimly-lit and eerie. There are doors stretching out on either side of the hallway, all of them closed. Tseng gestures to Reno to start clearing the rooms on the far side of the hallway, while he begins on the side closest to the stairs.

The first room looks like a stockroom, piled high with wooden crates, each of which has some long and incomprehensible chemical name stenciled on the side. The second is more of the same. Tseng's just reaching for the door of the third when Reno comes bolting out of one of the rooms he'd been assigned, and his face is deathly pale. "Boss," he says, urgent *come and take a look at this* unspoken.

Reno's holstered his weapon, which is the only reason why Tseng doesn't start running as he follows.

The room Reno was in is dark and gloomy; there are bookshelves everywhere, and for a minute Tseng's mind wants to call it a library.



It isn't, though. There are lab tables set up in the center, with complex glass workings over old-style Bunsen burners and flasks and jars of chemicals everywhere. It looks like every single mad-scientist lab in every single bad horror movie Tseng has ever seen.

That isn't what made Reno come running for him, though. What made Reno come running is the two tubes, each about seven feet high and four or five feet in diameter, hooked to a ridiculous number of wires and plastic tubing, each filled nearly to the top with a liquid that is glowing softly blue. Lights flash on the panels in front, and the electrical wires lead to what is no doubt a uninterruptable power supply hooked into a generator in case of power failure.

There's something floating in each of the tubes. Something -- someone -- human.

Tseng only barely stops himself from signing the prayer against evil in midair. "Gods of my fathers," he whispers. Both men are naked, floating in a near-fetal position in the tubes, but whatever the liquid is, it hasn't made their skin shrivel. One has black hair; one has blond hair. Both of them look young, but Tseng can't tell if it's because they are young or because the buoyancy of the liquid is keeping gravity from taking its toll on their facial muscles. Both of them seem well-built, the brunette more than the blond; they don't look like they've suffered any muscle atrophy from being kept (in *fucking jars*) for however long they've been here. Each of them bristles with what must be hundreds of tiny needles inserted into each of their major muscle groups, and they're festooned with wires and IV lines.

Reno makes for the files and books on the lab table nearest the tanks. "There's a log book," he says. His voice is clipped, neat; Tseng recognizes it as Reno's version of *utter fury*. "First entry's almost three years ago. Want to guess *when* almost three years ago?"

Tseng doesn't need to guess. "Leviathan damn him to the seventeenth watery hell," he says. "We must have been *right outside* when he was doing this."

"Yeah," Reno says. Then: "-- I really, really don't want to say this, but --"

Tseng closes his eyes. "Yeah," he says. He knows exactly what Reno's going to say. "Go get her. *Warn her first.*" Because there's one person who possibly could confirm the sick suspicion that's beginning to sleep in the pit of his stomach, and she's upstairs.

"I don't think there's any way you can warn something about this," Reno says, but he goes.

Left alone in the lab, Tseng knows he should start going through the paperwork, looking for some way to identify what's been done to these poor bastards, some way to *undo it*. He can't make himself move. He just stands there, staring at the evidence that Hojo is even more *rabid* than they'd dared to think. The skin at the back of his neck is *crawling* at the way the room feels, heavy and oppressive and fetid with a stink that isn't physical at all. The earth-sense, spirit-sense, that he's spent much of the past twenty years trying to rid himself of is *screaming* at him. Whatever Hojo is doing here, it is an abomination unto the laws of nature and the gods.

He can hear Reno's voice, low and urgent patter, along with three sets of footsteps (too much to hope that Rufus wouldn't come as well), long before they enter the room. Reno is the first one in. Tifa is right behind him, and when she sees the scene, she freezes in place (Rufus barely avoids running into her) and brings her hand up to her chest. "Holy gods," she breathes. She crosses the room, quickly, and stops right in front of the first of the two tanks, bringing her other hand up to press against its glass, right at chest-height on the blond floating inside. Tseng starts forward, intending to tell her not to touch, but one look at her face stops him: her eyes are shining with tears, and she looks like she's been punched in the stomach. "*Cloud*," she says.

"You know him?" Reno comes up on her other side, studying her, not the tanks.

Tifa nods, lifts a hand to dash the tears from her eyes, nods again. "He's --" She looks at Tseng. "Remember, I told you -- the boy I grew up with? The one I thought didn't -- wasn't -- I don't --"

There's a crash from behind them; Tseng whirls, drawing his weapon as he does, but it's only Rufus, and as Tseng moves, he picks up another of the empty Erlenmeyer flasks from one of the other lab benches and throws it as well. Tseng knows that look; it's the hot, vicious spike of Rufus's temper, having slipped its reins at last. Normally, he'd let it go -- when Rufus's control slips enough that the only possible outlet is breaking things, the smartest thing to do is to be in *another building* -- but *now is not the time*. "Rufus," he says, sharply.

"Don't give me that shit," Rufus snarls. He picks up a third flask and throws it too, hard enough that tiny flecks of glass splatter back from against the wall. "Who the *fuck* does he think --"

"Stop it!" It takes Tseng a second to realize it's Tifa who spoke; her voice is half-hysterical. Amazingly, Rufus listens; he lowers his hand just as he's ready to throw the fourth flask, but doesn't put it back down yet. Tifa's shaking, tiny tremors running throughout her whole body, but her chin comes up and she stares Rufus down across the room. "Just -- stop it. We have to figure out -- we have to --"

Rufus stares at her, one long minute, and then his shoulders heave; he puts the flask down and closes his eyes, and as Tseng watches, he shudders once, from his face all the way down to his knees. When he opens his eyes again, the fury is still there, but at least it's more banked. "Right," he says. "Sorry."

(From behind Tifa, Reno looks at Tseng, eyes wide. Tseng knows why: if either of *them* had tried that, they'd be trying to reattach their *heads* right about now.)

Tifa takes another deep breath. Tseng can see all the signs of nascent panic, can watch her trying to fight it back with nothing more than strength of will. "Okay," she says. Closes her eyes. Shivers again. "Okay. Okay." When she opens her eyes again, they skitter over the tanks like she doesn't want to make herself look, but knows she has to. "That's Cloud. The boy I grew up with. The one I thought I saw when I was dying. The other one -- He's the SOLDIER. The one who was on the mission with S -- Se --"

She can't make herself choke out the name. Reno puts a hand on her elbow; she turns, blindly, and buries herself up against his chest, and Reno's arms come up around her automatically, one hand stroking up and down her back. "I don't remember his name," Tifa says, muffled against Reno. "I thought -- I thought I saw him die, but I couldn't -- I couldn't remember, and I didn't want to --"

"Take her upstairs," Tseng says to Reno, softly. She doesn't need to see the rest of this.

Tifa pulls back from where she's clinging to Reno and whirls on him. "*Fuck no, you won't,*" she says. "I have a right to be here. I have a right to know."

Tseng opens his mouth, prepared to argue, but stops at Rufus's choked "Bahamut's *balls*." When he looks to see what caused it, he almost echoes it.

The SOLDIER's eyes are open, and he's staring at them.

"Get him out of there," Rufus orders. "I don't care what you have to do to get him out of there, just *do it*."

Tseng winces. "We have no idea how to do it safely --"

"I don't *care*," Rufus repeats, and for a second Tseng thinks he might just shove past them and topple the tank himself. "That man is alive in there, and I want him *out*."

Reno slides past Tifa to step in between Tseng and Rufus. "Gimme ten minutes to read the shit they left," he says. "I ain't gonna even *try* to touch that stuff until I know what it is and what it's doing, and I ain't gonna let any of the *rest* of you do it, either."

"I'll help," Tifa says. She moves over to the table and picks up a stack of papers, starts flipping through them. "We'll all help. Come on. If we can find something that says how to work those things --"

It takes them twenty minutes, not ten, but Tseng eventually finds a schematic for the tanks, with parts labeled. The liquid the two men are bathing in is primarily Mako, with additional additives to make it oxygen-rich enough to sustain liquid breathing; there are feeding tubes to carry a steady stream of nutrients, catheters for waste, IV lines for administering additional drugs, sensors hooked to computers to record data. He realizes, partway through, that *someone* has to be coming up here at least once a week to change the nutrient mix; he keeps that to himself for now, but he's pretty sure that's why they'd had a greeting party. (There's pretty much no way whomever Hojo has stationed here to keep an eye on things won't be in the mansion five minutes after they've left, and since there's also no doubt they'll be taking these two men with them when they go, they're going to have to figure out what they'll do when they leave. But that can wait.)

Once they have the schematics, it's only a few minutes to flip the right switches to drain the tank and crack it open to catch the man as he falls; Tseng makes sure he's the one to do it, plucking out enough of the tiny steel needles from his muscles that it's possible to ease him down to the floor without driving them in further. The man goes into a coughing fit the minute he's free, both spitting up and vomiting

blue-tinged fluid. Tifa kneels at his side, pulling Rufus's handkerchief off her face and using it to wipe his face, her touch as gentle as it can be. As soon as the man can open his eyes, he's staring at her. He looks familiar, in a way Tseng can't place; the Turks and SOLDIER never interact often, but he's pretty sure he's met the man before.

"D--" The effort of speaking sends him into another coughing fit. "Dead," he wheezes, once he's recovered.

"You're not dead," Tseng says, softly. "Reno, get over here and unhook him."

But the man is shaking his head, still staring at Tifa. "Not -- me. You."

"No," Tifa says. "I didn't -- I wasn't dead. He didn't kill me. He just thought he did."

"S--sorry," the man says. He's shivering now, great heaving tremors; Tseng looks at Rufus, gestures with his chin for Rufus to look around for something, anything, they can use as a blanket. "Tried. Thought you -- thought he --"

"It's all right," Tifa says. "I don't blame you." But the man's eyes have drifted shut, and he doesn't respond.

It takes Reno five minutes to unhook all the wires and tubes and remove the rest of the needles; by the time he has, Rufus has run the stairs and returned with two blankets from the bedroom upstairs (dust hastily beaten out of them), the first aid kit, and two pairs of coveralls from the helicopter. (Tseng bites back a reprimand for having gone outside without telling Tseng where he was going, and only hopes Rufus was bright enough to check their unwanted observers have departed or to make it look like he was fetching something else.) It takes both Tseng and Reno to wrestle the unconscious man into a pair of the coveralls; he's heavier than he looks.

"Getting him up the stairs is gonna be fun, he doesn't wake up again anytime soon," Reno mutters, as they haul him up onto the cot in the corner of the room. There for whomever supervises this little house of horrors to sleep on overnight if the lab needs more close observation, Tseng presumes. "What was that about the dead thing?"

"Tell you later," Tseng says. He hasn't told Reno anything Tifa told him and Rufus, not yet; he'll probably have to, but he doesn't want to do it in front of Tifa.

Tifa must have heard, though. She's standing back up in front of the other tube, staring at the body inside it. (Willing him to open his eyes, too?) "He came running after Sephiroth, into the reactor," she says, quietly. She doesn't have trouble with the name this time; Tseng thinks she's gotten over her initial shock, shoved down her panic into somewhere it can't touch her. For now, at least. "After Sephiroth attacked me. I -- One of them must have been the one who hit me with the first Cure spell." She looks back and forth between the SOLDIER and the other man -- Cloud -- still in the tube. "They were both there," she says, slowly. "I *wasn't* hallucinating it."

"He was the guard," Rufus says. "I'll bet you anything. He was the guard."

Tifa brings her hand to her mouth, presses her knuckles against her lips. "Oh, *Shiva*," she says, and she sounds little and lost. She sits down, suddenly, right where she is; Tseng gets the impression it was sit down or *fall* down. She looks like someone who has had a very old question answered with decisive finality, as though a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. As he watches, she draws her knees to her chest and slumps her forehead down on them.

"Do you want us to wait a few minutes before we crack the other tank?" Tseng asks. (Wait a few minutes for her to compose herself, he means.)

"No," Tifa says, muffled against her knees. "Just --" She breathes in, breathes out. Then she squares her shoulders and picks her head back up. "I'm okay. Come on. I'll help."

The process is faster a second time, but the man -- Cloud -- isn't conscious for it; Reno needs to haul him into recovery position, although thankfully the cough to expel the oxygenated Mako from his lungs seems to be instinctive. Tifa kneels at his side, hovering as Reno strips tubes and removes the central IV line and the smaller needles; she pounces as soon as everything's clear, wiping off Cloud's face, more tenderly than she did the other man's. "Cloud," she says, softly, pushing strands of wet hair out of his eyes. "Cloud, wake up. It's all right now. Everything's going to be okay. You're safe now. Wake up."

It takes a long minute for Cloud to open his eyes, and when he does, Tifa makes a little dismayed noise. Tseng leans over to see what caused it, and has to blink. The man's eyes are glowing, SOLDIER blue.

"Ti -- T -- Ti --" he stutters. His voice sounds like a skipping record.

Tifa nods, her eyes brimming over with tears again. "It's me, Cloud. It's Tifa. Everything's going to be okay. We're going to take care of you. I promise, all right? I'm sorry it took me so long, but I'm here now, and everything's going to be all right."

Tseng waits for some kind of reaction, but all Cloud does is close his eyes again, and he doesn't reopen them.

"We have a hell of a problem here," Rufus says in Tseng's ear, while Tifa and Reno are working to get Cloud's unconscious body into a jumpsuit.

"Just one? I count about thirty," Tseng says. When Rufus gives him *the look*, he sighs. "I know, I know, I'm not funny. I'm assuming you mean the problem of getting them out of here without alerting whomever's been coming in and keeping an eye on things, and what we do *after* we get them out of here, since it's likely that their watchdog will cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war about three minutes after we take off."

Rufus nods. "And where we bring them, and how the *fuck* we find

someone to take care of them, and what we do when Hojo realizes his lab rats have gone missing." Rufus's eyes are sick as he looks over to the empty-standing tanks. "Not to mention, how do we wreck this shit so thoroughly that it can't be used again."

"I got a mastered Fire I could equip," Reno says, viciously, from the floor at Cloud's side. Then his eyes get wide. "Shit, Tif', I'm sorry, I didn't think --"

"It's all right," Tifa says. She pushes herself to her feet; she's drenched in Mako fluid, but she doesn't seem to care. "Right about now, I'm ready to set this place on fire *myself*." She walks over to the tank, studies it for a second. Then, before anyone can say anything to stop her, she whirls and drives her heel straight into the panel of buttons and switches in a perfect roundhouse kick. It crackles and sparks, caving in.

She's breathing hard when she turns around, but at least her lungs are sounding nearly clear now.

"Pack everything you can get your hands on," Tseng says, making a decision. "There are crates in the other room; we can empty those and use them. I want all the books and papers first; if there's anything mechanical, haul it into here and leave it in a heap, and we'll decide if any of it is critical later. Leave any chemicals and any lab equipment. I want everything that could possibly explain what Hojo thought he was doing here packed up before those of us who are going leave for the reactor, because we aren't leaving this place alone until we're ready to go completely, and we aren't leaving it standing when we do."

Reno shakes his head. "We don't got enough fuel with us to take on much more than what we've already got. It'll be pushing it just to bring the two of them; we'll have to stop at del Sol and refuel as is. And I don't wanna *think* about the cargo space --"

Tseng closes his eyes; the day did lack only that, but of course Reno's right. "Fine," he says, shortly. "Pack everything anyway, as tightly as you can. How much additional weight can we take on and still make it to Costa del Sol?"

Reno's eyes go distant for a minute; Tseng watches his lips move. (Reno's the best chopper pilot Tseng's ever flown with, and he knows the fuel consumption equations like he knows the back of his hand, but he never can do them well enough in his head; he always has to visualize them.) "Guessing at how much they both weigh," he says, finally, "and bear in mind this is really rough and I wanna doublecheck it twice, I wouldn't want to take on more than another three, four hundred pounds."

There's probably about three times that much weight in books alone, scattered around. "All right, then," Tseng says. "Triage as you pack. Anything that's a standard print of a standard textbook, leave on the shelves, unless there are notes in it, and note down the title. Anything with notes in it, or anything that's a journal or logbook or printout, put in one pile and we'll prioritize further when we're getting ready to pack up. Try to keep things in roughly the same order you find them."

"I'll go empty the crates," Tifa says, softly. Tseng gets the impression she needs to be *out of this room*. (He doesn't blame her. Now they've drained the Mako fluid from the tank, his skin isn't crawling *as much*, but he'd still rather go get some fresh air himself, and it's a chore to force himself to contemplate the work that needs to be done.)

Reno looks down at Cloud, looks over at the unnamed SOLDIER. "I really don't think I should leave them alone, boss," he says, once Tifa's out of earshot. "The other guy seems mostly okay, little bit out of it but yeah, who wouldn't be, but him?" He jerks a thumb at Cloud. "I really don't like the way he's breathing, his heart rate is *way too slow*, and aside from that one minute of consciousness, he hasn't responded to any of the usual stimuli. I got the feeling, we leave him alone too long, we might come back to find he's slipped away entirely." He bites his lip, flicks his eyes to the door as though making sure Tifa really is gone. "Which, depending on what Hojo's been doing to them, might be the most merciful option, you know?"

Tseng winces. "Let's hold off on that for now," he says. (Tifa had reacted to Cloud's presence like a woman finding a long-lost lover -- something he's trying not to think about too closely -- and he doesn't want to see what it would do to her to find out they'd been too late, particularly considering her apology; for all there is no way she could have, Tseng knows Tifa would blame herself for not pushing to return earlier.) "Stay put, keep an eye on him, do what you can. I don't think we should give him any medication or use any materia until --"

He's interrupted by the sound of Tifa, screaming. All three of them are out the door with weapons drawn before the sound even fades.

They find Tifa standing in the center of one of the storage rooms, her hand pressed up against her chest, breathing hard. She holds up her other hand as soon as they burst through. "It's okay," she says, quickly, "I was just startled, it's okay --"

She doesn't turn around to face them, though, and Tseng realizes she doesn't want to take her eyes off what she's found: a shipping crate that's three times the length of a standard one, with the lid off of it. Inside is another man, lying on his back with his arms folded across his chest. He's asleep -- no, unconscious, the IV needle in the back of his hand attached to a plastic bag hanging on the inside of the crate.

"Reno," Tseng orders, feeling incredibly weary, and Reno holsters his weapon and comes around to check the man's pulse with two quick fingers.

"Alive," Reno says. He squints at the IV bag. "Phenobarbital and nutrients. Whoever put him under didn't really care much if he woke back up again, not if he's on his back like that and isn't intubated."

"Can you bring him out of it?" Rufus demands.

"Yeah, sure, gimme -- oh holy *fucking shit*." Reno blinks. "Um. Somebody wanna c'mere and tell me I'm not imagining the fact he's got a giant fucking *claw* for a right hand?"

Tseng comes over and looks. "You're not imagining it," he says,

lifting his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, right between his eyes where the headache is starting. "Okay. Bring him out of it. Slowly. Tifa, step *back*, and get behind me. Rufus, over there, out of sight, and cover me. Reno, get ready to move." He trains his weapon on the crate, waiting, as Reno reaches over and closes the IV drip.

"Should take about twenty, thirty minutes before he --" Reno leaps back, startled, as the man sits straight up; Tseng thumbs off his safety, just in case. (Something's bugging him about this, though, and it *isn't* -- isn't just -- how quickly the man shook off the anaesthesia. He, too, looks almost familiar. Tseng is bludgeoning his memory for where he could have possibly seen the man before, and coming up with nothing.)

The man's eyes sweep the room as he turns his head quickly from side to side, stopping when he sees Tseng holding a gun on him. "I am not a threat to you," he says. His voice is low, deep, calmer and more clear than Tseng would have expected it to be. (For someone who just woke up unnaturally quickly from a *medically induced coma*, at least.) His eyes, Tseng realizes, are a deep red -- Tseng suppresses the shiver at the sight of them -- but at least they aren't glowing. It says a lot about their day that this can be a relief.

"You'll have to forgive me if I don't leap to believe you," Tseng says, but he thumbs the safety back on anyway, even if he doesn't lower his weapon. The man's wearing nothing more than rags, with a labcoat over it all; they look like the remnants of suit pants and a dress shirt, Tseng realizes. "Who are you?"

The man closes his eyes. "My name is Vincent," he says. "What year is it?"

The name sparks some memory. "Vincent?" he says. His memory *finally* coughs up what he's been trying to remember for the past two minutes: the names and files of former Turks he'd gone through when he'd accepted the position as the department's director. What *had* the last name been ... "Vincent Valentine? Listed as missing, presumed dead, from the Turks?"

"It's May of 991," Tifa adds, from behind Tseng's shoulder.

The man -- Valentine -- slumps his shoulders. "I was once a Turk, yes," he says.

"Listed as missing, presumed dead, from the Turks *thirty years ago*?" Tseng presses.

"If it is 991, twenty-eight years ago," Valentine says. "I have been sleeping a very long time."

"Yeah, no *shit*," Reno says. "Bahamut's *balls*, man, who did this to you?"

"It was Hojo, wasn't it." It isn't a question; Rufus holsters his weapon and comes out from the crates he'd used as cover. Valentine's head whips around at the sound; Tseng can see the fingers of the man's claw/hand twitch, and thinks he might be stopping himself from reacting further. (It's the same twitch that they all get when they're surprised; exaggerated startle response is an occupational hazard.)



Rufus comes to a stop right next to the crate Valentine is sitting up in; Tseng resists the urge to *grab him by the collar* and haul him backwards. (It's not like he gives orders *for his health*.)

Valentine frowns up at Rufus. "You know Hojo?" The frown deepens as he studies Rufus. "And -- You are Shinra. Not Jonathan --"

"I'm his son," Rufus says, quietly, the same mixture of pride and shame he always has when he has to claim that identity. "Rufus. This is Tseng, the current director of the Department of Administrative Research, and Reno, his second-in-command. The lady is Tifa; she's a ... consultant."

Tseng closes his eyes for a second and sighs. That's blown it; giving their true names means that if this man, whoever he is, is on Hojo's side, they're going to have to kill him before they leave. But Rufus is still talking: "We came here to investigate something that happened about three years ago, when a man named Sephiroth destroyed the town, and when we got here we found --"

Valentine interrupts. "Sephiroth?" He leans forward, urgently; Tseng thumbs off the safety again and shifts his aim from a chest shot to a head shot. (A bullet to the chest doesn't slow someone down fast enough to prevent injury to whomever they're attacking, at such close distances; a head shot will kill much faster.) "You know Sephiroth?"

"You're going to want to back up, Valentine," Tseng says, softly.

Valentine turns to look at Tseng, notices Tseng's aim, leans back. "I am unarmed," he says, holding his hands up -- slowly -- in the universal sign of weaponlessness. "I will not hurt your charge."

"I'm pretty sure that thing counts as a weapon," Tseng says. (Now that he can get a better look, he can see the 'fingers' of the claw are definitely sharpened blades.) "If you really were a Turk, you know damn well how twitchy we get. Rufus, *back up*. Now."

But Rufus only turns his head to look at Tseng. "He's not going to hurt me," he says, with utter conviction, and Tseng wants to *throw something*, or possibly pistol-whip Rufus into compliance. Rufus picks the *worst fucking times* to assert his independence, and even though Rufus is right ninety-nine percent of the time when he exerts his skill at reading people, there's still the one percent to contend with. "Reno, c'mere and get the IV line out of his hand so we can get him out of there."

"There is no need," Valentine says. "My sleep is the penance for my failure, and I pay it gladly. Farewell."

"Failure?" Tifa asks, urgently, as Valentine's good hand starts to reach for the IV line as though he's going to re-start the drip. "What failure? Did it have anything to do with Sephiroth?"

Valentine stops moving again. "Sephiroth," he says, his eyes slitting shut, pain written deeply in his voice. "Yes. You could say that. I tried to save Lucrecia from Hojo's madness, and I failed. I tried to save Sephiroth, both before he was born and after, and I failed. I cannot bear the weight of a third failure."

Rufus turns his head again and looks a question at Tseng; Tseng shakes his head. He's never heard the name 'Lucrecia' before.

"We're trying to figure out what happened here, three years ago," Tifa says. "I grew up here. I was the only one who lived through what Sephiroth did to this town, and I nearly died too. I --" She bites her lip, and Tseng stifles a curse as she comes out from behind him, moving around to stand at the foot of Valentine's makeshift coffin. (At least *she* has the good sense to stand out of Valentine's immediate reach.) "Sephiroth killed my father, and everyone I grew up with, and everything I ever knew," she says. "And the more we look into it --" Tseng is glad, at least, for the unthinking 'we'. "--the more we realize Hojo was behind nearly everything. Enough to know that we *have* to stop him, before he does anything worse. There are -- there are two men in the other room, and Hojo had them in some sort of -- tank thing --"

"My father has given him free rein," Rufus says. The shame is clearer in his voice, now. "I had no idea of his atrocities. I know now. And I'm going to stop him if it's the last fucking thing I do. Help me. Help me, and I'll do anything I can to get you justice."

Valentine closes his eyes and turns his face away. "It is not justice I seek, but atonement," he says.

Rufus reaches out and grabs Valentine by the chin, dragging his face to meet Rufus's eyes. (Tseng swears again when Valentine's body tenses and his hand comes up to encircle Rufus's wrist, but at least he reached for Rufus's wrist with his left hand, his actual hand, not with the monstrosity someone -- Hojo -- made of his right.) "That's fine," Rufus says, and there's heat in his voice this time. "You want atonement? That's *fine*. Help me, and earn it. And once we're done, if you still want to go back to sleeping your life away in a coma, in a coffin, in the basement of a place time forgot, I will *put you back here myself*. But help me first."

They stay like that for a long minute -- Rufus's eyes locked on Valentine's, Rufus's fingers on Valentine's chin, Valentine's hand wrapped around Rufus's wrist -- and Tseng's eyes begin to water from the effort of not blinking them. (Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Reno, weapon trained on Valentine as well, backing up slowly and stealthily until he's got a clear shot that won't hit Tifa if he has to take it. Tifa notices too, though, and Tseng wants to swear again as she lifts her chin and moves so she stays in between Reno and Valentine, fouling any shot Reno could take.)

Then Valentine laughs. It's low and bitter, rolling across the room like a spill of thick black coffee. "You are Shinra indeed," he says, and lets Rufus's wrist go. (Tseng finally lets himself blink. Twice.) Then Valentine is pulling away, and he moves so inhumanly quickly that Tseng can barely *see him* leap out of the coffin -- on the other side from Rufus, or else Tseng's instincts would fire before Tseng even knew he were doing it, which he's pretty sure Valentine knew *damn fucking well*. When Valentine finishes moving, he's standing away from Rufus, with the crate between them, and he reaches up and pulls out his IV line himself, tossing it aside as though it's nothing. (Tseng's not sure, the light down here is *shit*, but he thinks the blood welling up from where the needle had been is too fucking dark to be normal.)

"I will help you," Valentine says. "Somewhat. For now. If you are enemies of my enemy, we can be allies, for a time." In this light, his eyes are the color of blood. He keeps those eyes trained on Rufus, and Tseng wonders what Valentine thinks he sees there. "I will not tell you my story yet," he adds. "Too much of it are things no man should know, and I do not know what Shinra has become, and I have little cause to bear Shinra goodwill."

Rufus bares his teeth. It's not -- quite -- a smile. "That's fine," he says. "Neither do I."

Then he steps back, *finally* out of range -- Tseng feels his shoulders unknotting, before he realizes Valentine had moved quickly enough that he's probably able to cover the space between him and Rufus faster than Tseng could move between them as a shield, and has just confessed to holding a grudge. (Well. As for that, Tseng can't quite blame him.)

"Come on," Rufus says, making it an order to all of them, not caring how at least half the room bristles to hear the command in his voice. "If Valentine won't tell us the specifics of what's been going on down here, we can at least see if we can figure it out ourselves."

## ( 8. )

Tifa wakes up with dust and Tseng's hair in her nose and a weight on her chest that feels like a Valron is sitting on top of her. The dust is from the fact that no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't get all the dust out of the sheets and blankets, and the mattresses are a lost cause. The Valron on her chest is because even though she was drinking water until she thought she'd nearly float away, all night long while they worked and listened to Vincent dance around all the things he wasn't yet going to tell them, and even though Reno was pressing more pills on her every three hours like clockwork, she *knows* she's not going to be able to breathe clearly again until she gets back down to sea level. (Dammit.) Tseng's hair is because despite having gone to sleep alone -- the first out of everyone to sleep after a night of trying to figure out what the *hell* had gone on down there, and though she'd thought she'd toss and turn all night, seeing the horror-show images of what was lurking in the basement beneath them playing out before her eyes like a slide show of death and destruction, she'd dropped off immediately -- and though she'd thought she would perhaps be the only one sleeping that night, at some point Tseng had climbed into bed with her.

Usually, when they sleep together (more often this week than in the past six months before, and at least the human connection is a small comfort in the middle of this madness), she wakes to find herself draped over his chest. This morning, she's on her side and he's spooned up behind her, one arm draped over her side and one hand splayed across her chest, his nose buried in the nape of her neck and his hair half-tangled with hers and lying everywhere. Their relative positions tell her she was unconscious enough when he came to bed that she didn't wake at all when he did. That's unusual. She suspects the last set of pills Reno pressed upon her might have included a

sedative or a tranquilizer of some sort, although she doesn't feel anywhere near as groggy as she felt yesterday morning. Which is good; she *never* wants to feel that groggy again in her *life*.

She rolls over, slowly enough that hopefully she won't wake him as she wiggles her way out from under his arm, and apparently he's tired enough for it to work; he doesn't stir. Once she's sitting up, she takes an experimental deep breath (get it over with quickly, learn the bad news). She has to close her eyes against the way her inhale catches on *something* at the halfway point, hitches and skips and slices its way through her chest. She lets the breath out, tries again and gets three-quarters of the way through before it happens again, and *does not* let herself react. (This wasn't home anymore anyway. Home is a surprisingly large apartment over a surprisingly-hers bar in a city she loves surprisingly more than she should, with people who look to her for life and livelihood and respite and retreat. It doesn't matter that she can't breathe comfortably here anymore. This is the last time she'll ever be here.)

She's wearing the same clothes she went to sleep in, her tank top and skirt. The hair elastic and pins that had held her hair in its bun yesterday are piled on the nightstand. She leaves the pins, but takes the elastic and uses it to pull her hair back. It's tangled enough from sleep that she can't braid it; she isn't sure where their suitcases were left, though. She'll dig out her hairbrush later and try to conquer it. Or let Tseng do it.

As she eases out of the bed, her feet as silent as she can make them on the floorboards, there's a movement from the far side of the bed. What she took for a pile of discarded blankets shifts; she barely keeps herself from squeaking as Rufus sits up, blinking owlishly. When he sees it's her, he lowers the pistol he'd pulled from underneath his makeshift pillow and runs a hand through his hair. She lifts a finger to her lips, gesturing for silence, before he can say anything, indicating Tseng still sleeping soundly. Rufus nods, yawns once, and climbs out of the nest of blankets. He's wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants, and part of her can't help but notice the firm, solid musculature of his chest. His suits hide it, rather well. She thinks that's probably deliberate.

Tifa gestures to the hallway -- *I'm awake; I'm going downstairs* -- and Rufus nods again. She isn't surprised when he follows her, but he doesn't say a word, even when they're far enough from the door to the bedroom they slept in (*not*, thankfully, the one with the door to the secret basement lab) for his voice not to carry. He peels off when they get to the top of the steps downstairs; he heads down, while she heads for the bathroom.

Her toiletries case is on the back of the toilet tank -- Tseng's work, no doubt; he's got an attention to detail that she'd *kill* to find in any one of her employees -- and she makes quick work of her morning routine, brushing her teeth and detangling and braiding back her hair before making her way downstairs. She can hear water running in the kitchen, and finds Rufus muttering imprecations at the coffee maker. (The pantry, they'd discovered last night, is well-stocked enough that they can probably *just* get by without having to visit the town for supplies, even though all of it is canned or freeze-dried or under a Stop spell to be nonperishable and doesn't look like it

was all that great quality to begin with. Rufus had said uncomplimentary things about the quality of the coffee, although Tifa hadn't noticed anything wrong with it.)

"Reno's downstairs, on guard," Rufus says, before she can figure out what kind of greeting she's supposed to give him. He sounds bleary and exhausted, but awake enough. "Tseng and Valentine spent the rest the night after you fell asleep going through the rest of the papers and books down there, working on figuring out what we should take and what we can destroy. Valentine still hasn't told us much past the absolute basics; he's still trying to figure out whether or not he can trust us, although I think he's starting to come around. The SOLDIER -- his name's Zack Fair, I looked up his jacket from the ID on his tags -- woke up again for about fifteen minutes. He wasn't very coherent, but he could at least confirm it was Hojo who put him there, and Hojo has been back at least a few times to ... inspect his work. The other man -- Cloud --" She can't see his face -- he's still fussing with the coffee maker, trying to get it to turn on, but from the sound of the pause she thinks he might be biting his lip, trying to figure out how to say it. "He hasn't woken up again. Reno isn't ... sanguine about his potential for a full recovery. I'm sorry."

In the cold light of morning, the realities of what she'd seen last night -- of *Cloud*, whole and *real* and not the hallucination she'd feared he had been, for so damn fucking long -- it's easier to be optimistic. Still not easy, but easier. "Thank you," she says, softly. "I ... Cloud's always been more stubborn than any of us ever gave him credit for. I'm not going to give up on him yet. No matter what's been done to them." She crosses the kitchen on light feet, reaches for the machine. "Here. Let me; it looks like the one I used to have in the bar before I replaced it."

Rufus cedes his position to her. She can feel the weight of his regard as he watches her out of the corner of his eye. Trying to decide how sincere she's being, she thinks, or possibly trying to figure out how much blame she places on his shoulders for this entire clusterfuck. (Less than he might think, she thinks. Not nothing, because he does bear some culpability -- all of Shinra does, and he more than most, since he should have known what was going on inside the company that will be his someday -- but she won't judge him by his father's failures. She'll judge him by what he makes of the knowledge, now he has it.)

"We need more people to take care of this before we leave," Rufus continues. "There's no way we'll be able to relieve the basement of enough of its files without help, and a truck, and I'm *not* leaving anything behind us when we go. I called in this morning before Tseng and I crashed, while I was handling all the shit I left back in Midgar. Rude and Reeve are flying in to Rocket Town, then coming in overland. They should be here anywhere in the next few hours, depending on how bad the mountain passroads are. Rude said to tell you Elena's been, quote, 'kicking ass and everything's running just fine', unquote. I really wouldn't have pulled them, except we don't know what's going to be useful and Valentine's got his lips sewn --" He stops; she looks over to see his eyes reflecting the sudden horror of a man realizing a metaphor might be more literal than not. "-- Valentine's being cagey. Tseng told them to stash the car somewhere in the mountains and make their way down on foot, and to be careful

when they do, and we think they can *probably* get in without tipping anyone off."

Tifa pushes the last two buttons in sequence, and the coffee maker gurgles and starts to drip. "If you can get a message to them before they get here, I can tell them the best places to hide the car, and the trails that have the best chance of making it down here undetected," she says. "Or I can go pick them up and guide them in." She's not sure how well her lungs will handle the exertion, but it would be easier than trying to provide directions; she's not entirely sure how the paths have changed.

The weight of Rufus's gaze grows sharper, until she imagines she can feel it, sweeping along her jawline, pressing against her cheek. "I thought you'd need more convincing about the merits of the plan," he says.

Tifa shrugs and reaches up to the cabinets, standing on tiptoe (she *misses her bar*, dammit, where everything is hung at heights she can reach without having to stretch) to rummage through for two coffee mugs. "You mean, you thought I'd flip out because two of the three people you arranged to cover for me while I was gone are no longer on the schedule," she corrects. When she turns to the sink to fill a glass of water -- her head *hurts*, goddamn it, worse than her chest even does, and while she knows it's probably not going to stop hurting as long as she's here, staying hydrated can at least prevent it from getting *worse* -- Rufus is staring at her, confusion and chagrin written clearly across his face. He shakes himself, just a little, when he sees her looking at him, and the familiar blankness settles over his features again. (She thinks she only got to see it in the first place because he's too exhausted to cover, and because he's had a shit week and he hasn't had his coffee yet.)

She takes pity on him. "It's all right, you know," she says. "I didn't think it was going to last. They're too valuable to your organization to tie up in a bar in the slums for long. If I'm right, you can count the number of people you trust enough -- or can fake trusting well enough -- to call on for something like this on one hand. You can't afford to have half of them out of commission for something so relatively minor."

She *has* surprised him. He stares at her, that uncanny lack of emotion splayed across his face. By now, with enough time together to have begun to learn how to read him, that flat affect is enough to be a cue on its own; it means he's thinking something he doesn't want anyone to guess at. "I keep underestimating you," he eventually says. "I'm not sure why. You've certainly demonstrated enough times that I shouldn't."

That makes her laugh, which sets off a fit of coughing. He takes a step towards her, concerned, and she waves him off. The unthinking expression of concern makes her decide to take a chance at saying what she's really thinking; he's proven enough times that he's willing, or at least able, to hear it. (All right, and because she wants to prove to him that her insight isn't a fluke.) "Because you've spent your whole life building an identity based on being the smartest person in the room," she says, leaning one hip back against the counter and watching him closely. "Because subconsciously you still think 'slum'

means 'stupid', even if you'd never let yourself think it consciously. Because you don't have many -- any? -- examples of intelligent women in your life, and most likely have to cope with a lot of women throwing themselves at you in the hopes of snaring the Shinra fortune, and it's built up a great deal of negative association. Because you've had a series of very bad shocks in the last seventy-two hours or so, and most people, when they're trying to deal with something this stressful, retreat back to first principles, whether consciously or not."

Something flashes deep in Rufus's eyes, even though he manages to hold on to the control he's keeping on the rest of his expression. Tifa expects an immediate denial, expects spluttering and shock and possibly for him to turn her words back on her, since she's pretty sure he believes that the best defense is a good offense. But he surprises her: all he does is tilt his head to one side, his brows drawing together thoughtfully, and he's quiet for a good long moment as he studies her. Looking for hints, she thinks, on how she means her statements and which aspects he should address first.

"Add another example to the list," Rufus finally says. "You know, most people wouldn't dare to say anything like that to me."

Those words could be a threat, Tifa knows -- would be a threat, if they were delivered in a different manner, or by a different man -- but she knows Rufus doesn't intend them to be. They're an observation, a statement of absolute fact, delivered in a meditative and dispassionate tone: most people in the world *wouldn't* dare to confront Rufus Shinra with the evidence of his own privilege, of his own preconceptions, and Tifa is pretty certain the list of people who would is a near-exact overlap with the list of people whom Rufus would trust enough to call in for something like this. (Which makes it ... four people. Tseng, Reno, Rude, and Reeve. Shiva's garters, she hasn't quite realized up until this very moment just how *isolated* Rufus really is, or how miserable his life must be in some ways.)

"I'm not scared of you," Tifa says. It's not exactly the truth. She is frightened: of what he could do to her if he decided it was necessary, of what a wreck he could make of her life if it would advance his cause in any meaningful way. Or just by accident, through not realizing what effect his actions might have on someone who lives in a world so drastically different than the world he knows. That's almost worse: that he could destroy her and not even realize he was doing so. But she may have only known him for three days, but she's already confident enough in her assessment of him -- in her assessment of Tseng's loyalty, and the quality of Tseng's ability to judge character -- to say with certainty that he would not do it covertly.

If she gets in his way, he will have no compunctions at eliminating the problem she poses. But he will look her in the eye while he does so, and that's more than nearly everyone in the world gets.

She realizes, suddenly and swiftly, that -- for the time being, at least -- she has been included on the list of people Rufus Shinra will deal openly and honestly with. She doesn't doubt it's temporary, and she doesn't doubt she belongs on that list solely because of her connection with Tseng -- and she wonders how much of that Tseng

intended, when Tseng first decided to seduce her and found her all too willing, and how much of all this Tseng has been planning from the start -- but it doesn't change the fact that she's there now. She can't quite place her finger on what she feels about her inclusion in what is perhaps the most exclusive company of people in the world.

She should be planning ways to exploit it, she knows. She should be thinking of what she can get out of this, and how she can use the situation to her advantage and to the advantage of all the people in the slums, and how she can ingratiate herself further into Rufus's good graces and influence him in the future. Or, at the very least, she should still be gathering information, plotting and planning and storing away scraps and fragments of intelligence that might be useful later.

She's not sure when she stopped doing that. All she knows is the thought of exploiting the situation she's found herself in -- exploiting *Rufus* -- makes her feel vaguely queasy. She'd sworn, going into this whole insane adventure, that she wouldn't let it change her mind about Shinra. She should have realized it was a fool's vow even as she was making it. She hasn't changed her mind about the Shinra Electric Power Company, but this particular Shinra is another story altogether.

Rufus can't quite meet her eyes; it's the only thing, she knows, preventing them from falling into that strange unspoken communication she still doesn't understand. (She has no idea how it is she can read him so well, how she's found this much commonality with a man with whom she has nothing in common.) "Yes," he murmurs, as though to himself. Then he shakes himself again and reaches for one of the two mugs she'd brought down. He swaps the carafe of coffee for the mug so deftly that only a drop or two of the dripping stream of coffee falls to the burner; it hisses and dances, boiled away, as he watches the mug fill. It's a server's gesture, another of those quick, instinctive actions that feel casual and offhanded like he's done them a thousand times before, and it's just another one of those weird character notes she can't quite manage to explain away.

He switches out the full mug for the other, empty one after a minute, and then surprises her by handing her the full mug and waiting for the second one to fill for his own. "What're yours?" he asks, watching the coffee drip.

Tifa shakes her head. She's found him easy enough to follow so far, but this time he's lost her. "My what?"

In profile, she can see his lips quirk upward, a self-deprecating smile delivered quickly and then let to fade. "Sorry. Usually I'm better at showing my work, but I haven't had my coffee yet. You said most people retreat to first principles when they're dealing with something this stressful. What're yours?"

The question has the air of something deadly serious despite the light, almost teasing tone he adopted to ask it. Normally, she would give a question like that a flippant reply, something to deflect her interlocutor away from taking a good hard look at her, something to keep from giving too much away. She's already stripped herself bare for this man, though -- figuratively, literally -- and at least since



Saturday night she's been dancing around admitting to herself that she's agreed to be Rufus's ally. For a while, at least. He's entitled to ask the question; he's entitled to know as much as he can about her strengths and weaknesses, in order to be able to make intelligent decisions. For the good of the mission they've teamed up for, even if it means giving him enough that he'll be able to predict her later once the mission is over. (But Tseng already knows that much of her, and when they find themselves on opposite sides, she's sure Tseng will be one of the ones sent to deal with her. She's not thinking about that, either.)

So Tifa starts opening cabinet doors, looking for the sugar -- there's no milk, not even those awful fake-milk plastic pods she sometimes has to resort to in the Heaven when her suppliers can't find her milk that hasn't soured, but she's pretty sure she saw some powdered non-dairy creamer, too; she just can't remember where it all was -- and does him the courtesy of thinking about his question. He doesn't interrupt while she does. Eventually, though, she has to give up. "It's going to sound like I'm ducking the question -- which I'm not trying to -- but I don't actually know. Not the extent of them. Three years ago I would've had an answer for you. I've changed in the past few years. A lot."

Rufus opens the drawer at his right hand, unerringly, and pulls out a spoon to hand to her for the sugar. She takes it; he swaps his mug for the carafe again (managing to avoid spilling anything this time) and reaches past her for the one cabinet she hadn't gotten to in her search yet. Of course it's the one that has the sugar and the powdered creamer. "So give me both answers," he says. "Then and now."

Tifa gives him a good hard look. He looks back, meeting her eyes fearlessly -- of course he would, even though most people have trouble holding her gaze when she puts that much *push* behind it. But Rufus can do that push too -- she's seen him do it, to Tseng, to her -- which is probably why he seems immune to hers.

His eyes really are impossibly blue.

Tifa isn't sure what the answer to his question is. Not consciously. So she does what she usually does when she knows she knows an answer somewhere deep inside her head, but can't put her finger on it: she starts pacing and she starts talking, trusting that sooner or later, she'll find the words she's looking for. She isn't sure why she wants to answer his question, except the possible hope that if she explains her belief system to him well enough, he'll begin to see all the ways in which Shinra is failing her. Failing everyone who isn't part of their elite. He's already shown signs of seeing far, far more than she would have expected him to see, but she's not sure what his underlying principles are, past the commitments of honor and responsibility he's already claimed in her hearing, and there are a thousand different ways to interpret honor. Maybe if she tells him what hers are, he'll help her understand a little more of his own.

"My -- My father raised me to have a few basic principles," she starts, slowly. "To treat people equally, and equally well, no matter who they were or how much power or money they had -- or didn't. To work hard at whatever I did, no matter what it was. To always do my best, no matter how exhausted or upset or angry or just plain not into

it I was, no matter whether I was enjoying what I was doing or not. To always be prepared, and always plan ahead, and always think before I acted or before I said anything, because not being prepared can kill you in the mountains and if you stop to think before you do anything you're less likely to make mistakes because you're panicking, but at the same time, to trust my instincts and not stop to over-think things in the middle of a crisis." Hearing her father's lessons laid out like that, even in summary, her throat itches with the desire to weep for him again, but she's done her share, and more than her share, of grieving. "I guess that hasn't changed much," she adds. She hadn't thought about it in so many words in a long time, but she's been living by her father's credo for as long as she can remember.

When she turns on her heel to pace back the way she came, she sees that Rufus, ignoring the table and chairs at the other side of the room, has vaulted up onto the counter. He's sitting cross-legged, his back ramrod-straight, drinking his mug of coffee and watching her over its rim. He doesn't pretend he isn't inspecting her closely when she meets his eyes, just salutes her offhandedly with the mug and takes another sip. He looks interested. No, strike that; he looks *fascinated*. At the thought of her having a good enough relationship with her father for her to have learned standards of ethical behavior from him? From what Tseng has told her, from what Rufus has insinuated, that must be as alien to him as his upbringing was to her.

Tifa makes her way back over to the counter and picks up her own mug of coffee; she has to blow across the surface to cool it off enough to drink, since the non-dairy creamer does nothing to assuage the heat, and she wonders whether Rufus has heat-resistant skin lining his mouth and lips, to be nearly halfway through his already. He still doesn't say anything, just continues to watch her, and the expectant weight of his silence tells her that he doesn't think she's done talking yet. (She isn't, she supposes. But it's irritating for him to assume.)

"I started studying the Wutaian arts when I was six," she says. The corner of Rufus's right eye twitches at that revelation. She wonders why. "So -- sixteen years, give or take. My teacher taught me a lot of things beyond just the fighting moves. I've learned enough from Tseng to know that what he taught me wasn't exactly what a Wutaian child learns, but Tseng says it's close enough. He -- my teacher -- he was half-Wutaian, came to Wutai as a teenager and lived there for twenty years. I'm still not sure how he persuaded them to teach him -- they're not fond of anyone whose heritage isn't pure -- and he won't say anything one way or the other, but from him, I learned a lot of the same lessons. Work hard. Train every day. There's always room for improvement. The thing he taught me that my father didn't, though, was that -- When you're stronger than someone else, when you're faster or better or more dangerous than someone else, it's your responsibility to protect them. To take care of them. And you have to watch yourself, every day, every *minute*, because the more you learn the fighting arts, the more dangerous you *are*. You're making yourself a weapon, and nobody's going to tell you what's right and what's wrong. You have to figure that out for yourself. And I learned that the hard way."

Bitter shame floods back into her throat at the memory. She'd

forgotten about it until that very minute. She's forgotten so much, washed away by the flame and the agony and the fear, that sometimes she feels like her whole life before she came to Midgar is nothing but a half-remembered dream. This, though, is something she'd tried so hard to make herself forget, long before that horrible day, even as the lessons she'd learned from it had written themselves deep.

Sensing that she isn't going to say anything further without being prompted, Rufus says, "I won't push, but if it's something I should know --"

Tifa shakes herself out of her reverie. "No, it's just -- I -- My mother died when I was young, and I went a little wild for a -- long time, afterwards. There were four of us who always used to run all over the town and the mountains together, me and three boys my age, and when I was sixteen, one of them --" She stops and shakes her head, slowly. "He thought I was his girlfriend. I thought we were all just friends. He used to come and throw stones at my window on the nights my father was staying over at the inn to take care of things, until I would sneak out through the side door so Mrs. Strife next door wouldn't see us and tell my father what I was up to. We'd go out exploring the foothills by moonlight together -- oh, it was so stupid of us, really, but we were teenagers and we knew the mountains like we knew our own backyards, and we were invulnerable and nobody could tell us otherwise."

She folds her hands around her coffee mug, looking off into the distance, her gaze soft and unfocused out the windows of the mansion. From here, all she can see is the yard behind the mansion -- overgrown and weedy, wildflowers peeking through the tall grass -- and the smallest sliver of the concrete helipad. The treeline of the evergreen forest that marks the edge of the Shinra land occludes any hope she might have of seeing the mountains from here. She's glad, really. Inside the mansion, far enough inside that she and Johnny and Nick and Ranulf never saw it as children, she can pretend she's anywhere but in the town she watched burn. She said to Tseng, yesterday morning, that this isn't her Nibelheim. She still believes it. The town outside these doors is a mockery, a sham constructed by the same people who destroyed it, and she's capable of drawing lines and boundaries in her mind. Has drawn them. But that doesn't make it *easy*.

"It's a squalid little story," she says, tearing her eyes away from the forest and looking back at Rufus. He's wincing, ever-so-slightly -- as though he isn't even aware he's doing it -- and she knows he's figured out where the story's going. "I thought it was just another late-night hike. He thought we were meeting up for an assignation. When I realized what he had in mind, I made it clear to him I wasn't interested in what he thought we were there for, and he made it clear to me he didn't really care if I was interested or not."

She turns away from Rufus, unable to face that edged sympathy, and paces over to open the pantry and inspect the shelves to see which of the nonperishables can be turned into something resembling breakfast so they don't have to face the MREs they'd eaten for dinner again. "I found out later I wasn't the only girl he'd pulled it on. I didn't realize at the time, or I'd probably have done even more damage. As

it was, I broke both his arms, shattered his kneecap, and broke his nose and one of his cheekbones. The doctor said later I came this close to driving bone splinters up into his brain, and he never quite walked properly again. I hadn't -- It wasn't on purpose. I didn't make the deliberate choice to hurt him that badly. I wasn't even scared enough for it to legitimately be self-defense. I was just so *angry*, and I couldn't stop hitting him --"

Behind her, there's a soft *click* as Rufus sets his coffee mug down on the counter. She braces herself for whatever he's going to say, her shoulders tensing, preparing herself to hear the same platitudes she'd heard over and over again from her father at the time or any of the judgemental things half the town had said about her from that point until the night the town burned. All he says, though -- soft and meditative, without a hint of the sympathy that would set her teeth on edge -- is, "I was fourteen."

Startled, Tifa turns around: he's still sitting on the counter, his legs folded up carelessly beneath him, his posture still perfect, watching her with careful concentration. He sees the confusion on her face and smiles, another of his fractional expressions, the barest hint of lips drawing upwards. "The first time I killed someone. Like you, I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be, and a group of people who took exception to Shinra's policies and methodology happened to notice that I'd failed to notify my guards that I was stepping out. They thought if they could kidnap me, they'd have leverage over my father, although they'd have probably settled for killing me if they couldn't manage the kidnapping. The story at the time was I was a helpless, incompetent child. I'd played the role long before Tseng took over my training -- I figured out early on that my life would be easier if everyone underestimated me while I was still that young; it gave me leeway -- but Tseng agreed it was a good idea and helped me perfect the appearance. They weren't expecting me to be armed. They certainly didn't expect I knew how to use the knives I carried. Tseng caught up with me just as I had finished slitting the second man's throat, and for a minute I was actually disappointed, because it meant that he would take over and I wouldn't be able to finish taking care of myself. But all he did was watch while I killed the third and final man, and when I asked him why, afterwards, he said that I needed to prove -- not to him, but to *myself* -- that I could do it, so I'd know for the next time."

He pauses, and the smile returns, this time more fond, even though it fades quickly. "Of course, he ruined the effect by saying that if I ever slipped my security detail again, it wouldn't matter, because he'd kill me himself. But I know what you mean. For me, it wasn't anger. I wasn't angry at all. There was just this little voice in the back of my head telling me what to do next, how to move and where to strike, precisely like just another drill. It wasn't until much later I realized I probably should have been angry. Or frightened. Or upset, or sick, or *something*, anything other than being proud of myself that I remembered my training in the heat of the moment and thinking blood was a lot messier than I thought it would be."

"So you know, too," Tifa says. "How easy it is." How seductive it is, the idea of vengeance, the idea of acting as judge and jury and executioner. She has had to enforce her will upon the streets around the Seventh Heaven by fists and feet multiple times, after giving fair

warning and full chances, and each time she does, she's always disgusted by herself afterward at how *easy* it is. Nobody should have that right. *Treat people equally, and equally well.* Dr. Ellis had told her about the oath doctors take, at the conclusion of their training. *First, do no harm.* She's been trying to live her life by that code for a long time, and over and over, she's been failing.

Rufus nods, unsmiling, his eyes calm and intense on hers. "Yes. I always have. And not just physical violence. I know you think I'm not aware of all the power I hold, but believe me, I am. And I'm not afraid to use it, because power you don't use winds up using you. But I try to use it well. As well as I can, at least."

Tifa thinks about what he's just revealed about his childhood, what kind of a life it must have been to know your whole life you were a target of people who wanted to kill you just for the name you bore, to have drilled and trained over and over again how to handle an attempt on your life enough for it to be second nature when that attempt actually happened. She can picture the child he must have been, too quiet, too sober, never knowing who he could trust. Or worse than that: knowing he couldn't trust anyone. It makes her heart hurt for that child, the child who grew into this wholly-unexpected man before her, and the strength of her reaction surprises her enough to make her cranky. (Crankier.)

"I don't understand you," she says, the words bursting from her lips. "Every time I think I have even a *tiny* grasp on -- on who you are, or what you'll do, or what you're capable of, it all just falls to hell ten minutes later when you do or say something that doesn't fit that model. It's driving me crazy."

She doesn't like not being able to understand people fully at the best of times, and that's when the most pressing decision she has to make about someone is whether or not to serve them another pint or show them the door. When she's trying to decide if she's right or wrong to work with -- to *trust* -- the man who could be the key to achieving all her plans and goals or who could crush her like an insect beneath his heel without even noticing, it's *infuriating*. "I have absolutely no frame of reference with which to calculate your trustworthiness," she says, before she can think twice and censor her words, before she can count up the cost of saying such a thing flat-out. Even though she knows damn well he already knows what she's thinking, and has known for a while. Maybe even since that first conversation in the Heaven, which feels like *years* ago by now.

She doesn't know what kind of a reaction she's expecting -- isn't that the point of what she'd just said? -- but what she gets is a crooked smile and a wistful, half-apologetic shrug. "I know. If it makes you feel any better, I confound *everyone* like that. I learned very, very early in life that people were going to try to use me, that everyone I knew was trying to manipulate me in *some* fashion, and I had to learn how to read people in self-defense. To figure out what they were trying to manipulate me *for*, and whether or not I was going to allow them to think they'd accomplished it in exchange for what I wanted out of them. It's second nature by now. I do it as easily as breathing, and most of the time, with about as much thought."

He finishes the last of his coffee, sets the mug aside on the

counter with a soft *click*, but doesn't move further, only stays sitting on the counter and studies her with thoughtful eyes. "I'm doing it to you, too, of course," he says, just as calm and uninflected as the rest of the conversation so far has been. "That's what you're hesitating over, I think. You can see I'm manipulating you, and your instincts register it as dishonesty or deceit, even as your conscious mind is evaluating the balance of everything else you've seen me say and do so far and trying to tell you that yes, I am dealing with you honestly and above-board. I bet that conflict is what's driving you mad. If you think it would help, I could tell you what I'm manipulating you to do." He smiles a bit more, more ruefully this time. "The bits I've noticed, at least. I'm not always aware of it."

Tifa has to laugh. If she doesn't laugh, she'll scream, and thirty seconds after she did the kitchen would be full of well-armed men looking for the thing that *made* her scream, and she's pretty sure she only gets one free pass before they start thinking she can't handle the stress of this whole situation. (Although she will maintain until her dying day that finding a man in a coma in a shipping crate where she'd expected to find more jars and vials of chemicals and drugs is a damn good reason to scream.) "I'm not sure whether it would help or not," she says, a bit wildly. "But tell me anyway."

Rufus unfurls his legs from where they've been folded up in front of him, dangling them over the edge of the counter and leaning back to rest his palms against the surface of the countertop. "At first I was trying to get you to agree to tell us your story, of course," he says, so quickly she knows he isn't picking through his words for the best way to present them. Or if he is, it's on such an instinctive level to be nothing more than he always does, and she thinks about what he's just said about growing up knowing everyone around him was trying to manipulate him *somehow*, about learning to manipulate them in return, and she is suddenly and sharply *furious* at the world he lives in, for being somewhere a child had to grow up with that knowledge. "I honestly thought you'd need more convincing, but that was before I realized you'd been looking for someone to listen to the story, *really* listen, for a really long time. Probably since just after it happened. Which made me realize you're not a leader by temperament, for all you've got the natural gift for it. Which is a tragedy, by the way."

He offers her another one of his crooked, endearing smiles. It's a surprisingly boyish expression, and she finds herself stopping to think, to calculate what she knows of his public biography and the timeline of Shinra's history, realizing he's no more than a year or two older than she is. He seems so much older, really. (*She* feels so much older than she is, too much of the time.)

Tifa's head *still fucking hurts*, and her thoughts are swimming, and she can't seem to get her feet underneath her in this conversation. It's worse because she doesn't think he's trying to put her off-balance. If anything, he's trying to set her mind at ease. "What is?"

"That you dislike leadership so much. I mean, I have to be grateful for it on a professional level, because if you didn't my company probably wouldn't be standing by now, but on a personal level, it seems like such a waste. I could do stunning things with you, if you'd let me plant you in the middle of things and nudge you a little

to get you used to playing politics the way you'd have to. But I'm getting off track." Rufus picks up one hand from where it's leaning against the counter and uses the other as a pivot with which to leap gracefully from his perch, picking up his empty mug and heading over to take the half-full, warming pot from the burner. He refills his mug and gestures with the carafe in her direction, brows lifting in a question; she shakes her head, thoughts still whirling, not certain how the *fuck* she's supposed to react. Surely he can't be talking about *giving her a job in Shinra*. Surely.

"Or maybe not," he adds, thoughtfully, setting the pot back onto the burner and leaning one hip back against the counter as he sips from his mug. "Getting off track, I mean. Huh. Just realized that one." His eyes go distant, reviewing -- *something* -- in the depths of his mind, flicking back and forth as though he's reading lines of writing in midair that only he can see. "I'll come back to that. Anyway. I realized pretty quickly, you've been looking for someone to ally with in your quest to topple the most abusive parts of the Shinra regime -- or the Shinra regime, period, although I think you're smart enough to realize doing so would create a power vacuum nothing good could come out of, and the disruption to the world would be too sharp and too severe for whatever arose from it to be better than the things it replaced -- and that spelled out the next step, pretty much without even having to think about it: persuade you that the internal *coup d'etat* I've been planning for years is the movement you'd like to ally yourself with, and secure your help with my long-term goals. Which are, right now, in no particular order: overthrowing my father, breaking down whatever Hojo has planned, and undoing and repairing the worst of the damages the two of them have managed to inflict on my company, my city, and the world."

He ticks off each of the points on his fingers as he speaks them, then spreads his hands and shrugs. "That was easy enough, really, since by that point you'd seen enough of my style of leadership, in what I'd said and done -- to you, for you, and on your behalf -- to realize I might not represent the ideal rebellion you'd build -- if you didn't despise the idea of being the one to make moral and ethical judgements for others to follow, I mean -- but I was probably the best chance you'd get to actually accomplish your goals with a minimum of bloodshed and without having to compromise the principles you refuse to back down from -- just the ones that you could live with breaking."

Tifa's staring. She *knows* she's staring. She can't help herself; hearing him lay out the facts like this, neatly dissecting his motivations and hers, is at the same time both utterly fascinating and utterly nauseating. She can tell, by the way he's speaking -- dispassionate, detailed, with no hesitations and no gaps where he has to pause or struggle to find a word -- that this rundown is familiar to him. That is how he thinks *all the time*. That having to put things into words for her is unfamiliar, because he doesn't often *articulate* those thoughts, but isn't alien enough that he's struggling. Which tells her he lives with a constant, chattering stream of thought in the back of his mind doing these calculations, running these analyses, *every waking moment*.

She has no idea how he's managed to stay sane. (Or if he even has -- but no. Not even he, the master manipulator, could fool her *that well*.)

Whatever she's thinking must not be showing too much in her face, though. Or Rufus has already decided not to let whatever it is he can read from her interrupt him, for the duration of his little lecture. He keeps going: "It was easy enough to tell that the tactic you'd respond best to would be honesty. Unmitigated honesty, really, because you're swift enough, and empathic enough, to be able to tell when someone's lying to you. And I'm good at lying -- damn good, really -- but I'm not *that* good, I don't think. Trying to play you by telling you only what you wanted to hear *might* have worked, but it wasn't a guarantee, and the failure mode for that method would have been ... epic, really. So I decided to roll the dice and go for broke, and from that point onward, I haven't been trying to play you at all."

The boyish smile makes a reappearance, amused and self-deprecating. "Which is what you're registering as an attempt to play you. Because it is, really. This whole thing has been. I decided to take a hell of a gamble on Tseng's character assessment and his ability to evaluate who's trustworthy and who isn't, and everything I've done, said, and shown you since then has been the true, honest, and unmediated self that maybe five or six people in the history of the world have ever gotten a chance to see. I'm manipulating you with complete honesty. Which, of course, I'd say no matter what the truth *was*, but I really do think you're good enough to spot that. Which, again, I'd say no matter what, but Tseng agrees. He said Friday night that he didn't warn me what he was bringing me into your bar in order to do ahead of time because you'd be able to spot the -- oh, what did he call it? Inauthenticity of my reactions, that's it."

He shrugs, artlessly. "So I decided -- consciously, in this case, but usually the process happens on a subconscious level -- that I was going to let you use me to get what you want -- in this case, a change in Shinra's humanitarian policies and the dismantling of the worst of my father's abuses, which I happen to agree with but I would've gone along with no matter what, unless your goals and mine were violently mis-aligned, which fortunately they weren't and aren't -- in order to get what I want out of you: your information at first, and then, your active cooperation in that dismantling. Something I've wanted to do for years. And thus, since our goals happen to line up so closely, since you respond so well to honesty and to authenticity -- pretty good word for it, I suppose -- and since I happen to actually respect the hell out of you and like you on top of it, as much as it's wise for me to ever actually like anybody, you get to see Rufus Shinra in all his flawed glory, all the way on down."

Rufus salutes her with his coffee mug again and takes another sip, watching her carefully over the rim, his eyes fixed on her face. That odd communion she's almost starting to get used to snaps back into place, though, and she can see -- buried beneath the light, casual overlay he's wearing like a cloak -- a vulnerability that she's almost certain he isn't aware of, for all he's just demonstrated a level of self-knowledge (self-manipulation) that borders on the obscene.

He's watching her to see how she'll react, whether his honesty (and it was honesty; she knows, can tell, that much) will cause her to flee screaming. He's braced for her to step back from the tentative and slowly-growing connection they've been building for the last few days, for her to slam up the barriers and walls she thinks he's used to seeing as a matter of course. For her to decide that she can't abide



cooperation with a man who views the world so coldly and dispassionately, for her to reject his worldview as so alien to her own, withdraw the parole she's tacitly offered them, and refuse to cooperate further in what he'd termed the "dismantling" of Shinra's crimes against the world. (She wonders, dizzily, how much of what *she* would term criminal would also merit that label in his mind.)

Strangely, the thing that sticks out most, in all that flood of words, is Rufus's casual and unthinking aside after admitting to liking her: *as much as it's wise for me to ever actually like anybody*. He hadn't said it regretfully, or as a play for sympathy, or as a method to manipulate her emotions back in his favor after the potential loss of goodwill represented by his admission of manipulation. It hadn't been a confession, or to give her a fuller picture of his mindset, or a piece of information he thought it was important for her to know. She would have been able to sense any of those. It was simply one of his truths, the truths he's apparently decided she has a right to, and she can't tell if he even was aware he was saying it. The picture those few words paint of his life right *now*, to say nothing of his childhood, is heartbreaking.

"I think," Tifa says, slowly, meditatively -- seeing the way his eyes ice over, go more blank, as he steels himself to hear the worst, which only makes her conclusion more evident -- "that at some point in the next few days, before I hand back the all-access card you've given me --" and that's a shock, hearing herself say it, when that access could be a more valuable weapon in the struggle for freedom from Shinra's dictates than an entire warehouse of bombs and guns, but she'll deal with that bit of revealed knowledge later -- "I'd really like to use it to let myself into your father's office, at some point when he's likely to be the only one there. Because after hearing all this, I really think I'd like to go and kill him for you."

Shock blossoms in Rufus's face for half an instant before he locks it down. "What?" he asks, the artless syllable falling from his lips in the most unguarded utterance she's heard him make. "-- I mean, wanting to kill him, all right, yeah, I don't blame you at all there, but what do you mean, 'for me'?"

Dimly, Tifa is aware of the throb and burn of anger, deep in the pit of her stomach. It's the same anger she was feeling, slapping Nick's hands away from the hemline of her skirt for the second time. It's the same anger she was feeling, kneeling in the puddle of her father's blood and reaching for his pulse, knowing she wouldn't find it. This time it burns cold, not hot. She can feel her ears buzzing, feel the rush of blood through her veins, feel the way her fingers flex and relax, over and over, without her conscious instruction. "How anyone could do that -- to a *child* -- to *their* child --" Her voice sounds hollow, and not at all like her own.

Rufus's brows draw together, and he regards her with absolute, unfettered confusion. "Do what?" he asks. And three days ago, she'd have said he was acting, trying to play on her sympathy, trying to elicit this very reaction, but no one, not even him, could possibly play at that much blank incomprehension. Not well enough to fool her. She's never been shy of admitting her own talents, and Tseng's words quoted to her by Rufus himself are correct: she's almost certain she would spot any attempt at acting. No matter how good Rufus is. He

calls himself a very good liar. She believes it. But Tifa is very, *very* good at spotting when people are lying to her.

She closes her eyes and breathes deeply. There's nothing getting angry right now can possibly do, except make her short-tempered and full of rage for the rest of the day, and that's hardly a recipe for making successful choices. The few scant things Valentine had told them last night while they'd been searching the library were horrific enough for her to know that whatever they're going to find in that reactor is going to make her want to kill things -- people -- already, over and above the stress she *knows* she'll be under just from being back there again. The last thing she needs is this knot of rage and fury gnawing away at her. She knows herself. When she is this angry, when she is this close to losing control, dangerous things happen. She knows better than to let herself make decisions when her judgement is this clouded by emotion, and she's going to have to be making a lot of decisions today, and they're going to have to be the right ones.

She still wants to put her fist through Jonathan Shinra's face. And she doesn't think she'd be able to stop there.

"You don't even see it," Tifa says. Her voice is shuddering from the effort of keeping it even. "Because to you it's just the way things are. The way things always have been. You think it's normal, it's the way everyone grows up, it's the way things are for everyone. And it isn't. It really, really isn't. You have to -- You've spent your whole life just waiting for the people around you to betray you, haven't you? You said yourself, your whole life, people have been trying to use you, and you had to learn how to read them, to manipulate them, to use them *back*, and -- That's no way to raise a child. That's no life for an *adult*, either, but an adult can at least choose how to handle things. You were a *child*. How could he *do* that? Did you -- did you even have anyone?"

Rufus is staring at her as though she's speaking Wutaian, his face painted over with bewilderment. That's perhaps the worst part of this whole conversation: he can't see a reason for her anger. To him, his upbringing -- his treatment during his childhood, the emotional abuse that produced the man who is standing before her and laying out a worldview where people must be treated like chess pieces and the only thing he can count on is that he can't count on anybody -- seems *normal*.

"I had Sephiroth," he says, speaking slowly and clearly the way she somehow knows, instinct sparking to life, that he speaks when he can't figure out where a conversation is leading. "Tseng. Reno, eventually, once he joined the company, and Rude, too. My father adopted Scarlet when I was eight and she was eleven, when her parents were killed, but we were never close, so she doesn't count. A few of the middle managers or the lower-level employees of the company whose departments I would go hide in when I wanted to escape my tutors -- I was popular in the secretarial pool when I was younger; they liked spoiling me. I started working in the lower echelons when I was eight or nine, and they took care of me, too. I wasn't alone, not the way you're thinking."

All Tifa can do is stare back. If that's his definition of 'not alone' -- She remembers her mother, curling up with her in the evenings even

through her illness, watching the snow fall softly through the windows of her bedroom and reading her fairy-stories over hot cocoa. Remembers her father patiently teaching her trick after trick for keeping the inn's kitchen running and beaming at her the whole way, not because she'd gotten something right, but because he loved showing her the things he loved.

For her entire childhood, no matter what happened, she never doubted she was loved: loved for herself and not what she could do, loved because she was their daughter and their world and both of them would have done anything to make sure she was happy, healthy, and whole. (She remembers her father, his face pale and drawn, his hand cracking across her face, ordering her to safety in his last few doomed, gallant minutes: ready to give his life to safeguard hers, a parent's eternal impulse to sacrifice.)

"That isn't what I mean," she says, through lips that have gone white and numb with her fury. "You *know* that isn't what I mean."

Rufus sighs. She can see his instinct to protect himself warring with his vow to give her nothing but the truth, poised on a knife's edge so keen even she can't guess which one might triumph. "I know," he finally says, and she can tell the admission costs him, dearly. He turns away from her, fussing with the coffee maker, topping off his mug with the last of the pot and sliding the drawer out to dump the grinds. He's doing it to keep from having to look her in the face; that much she can tell. "You have to understand: I couldn't think like that. Literally *was not allowed* to think like that. My father thought attachments made me weak, and the last thing he wanted was a son and an heir plagued by weakness. After one or two times where people I showed affection for were removed from my orbit, once I realized that the minute I started to like my nannies and my tutors they'd be reassigned, I learned to stop showing it. If Tseng had defected three years earlier, he wouldn't have lasted three weeks as my teacher. I learned." He laughs, short and sharp. It isn't amusement. "I learned every last damned thing the old man had to teach me."

When he turns back to face her, his expression is back to being controlled: tight, motionless, blank. She can only tell how bothered he is because his shoulders are hunched high and tight, rounded in, the posture of someone trying to hide in plain sight and make himself less than he truly is. He follows her eyes, sees her noticing, and closes his eyes, briefly; surprised, she thinks, to discover his body is betraying him, skin and bone taking unconscious steps to brace itself against emotion his mind has learned to shrug away. She watches him inhale, slowly and deliberately, and bring his shoulders down on the exhale, shaking his wrists and arms to loosen them.

"How did you learn?" Tifa finds herself asking. Her voice is soft and uncertain in her own ears, gentle and restrained, and she can feel the beginnings of her anger draining away as she watches this living pattern of contradictions before her.

He opens his eyes again and looks at her, weary and worn. "Learn?"

"How to care about people." She's watching for his reaction when

she asks, which is the only reason she can see the fractional twitch at the corners of his eyes, the sign of an arrow hitting its mark. It's the only sign he allows himself, and she thinks it might be unconscious. If his father taught him not to care about people lest they be taken away from him, his father must have also schooled him against showing emotion at all, no matter how strongly he feels it. Or maybe he taught himself, tired of his emotions being used against him.

Rufus picks up his mug of coffee again and studies her over its rim before drinking. "Most people would say I don't care about anyone," he says. It isn't an answer; he clearly meant for it not to be. (She's pushing her luck, half-drunk and all giddy with the daring of it. But she's on his side for now, or he's on hers, and if there's one thing she's always believed, it's that you should be able to understand the people who are your allies, thoroughly enough to be able to predict their motions.)

Tifa shakes her head. "We're not talking about what everyone else thinks. Everyone else is stupid to believe what you want them to believe, anyway. You *do* care. You have to. Otherwise you'd be a monster, and while there are people who say you are one, the man I've seen over the past few days isn't a monster. Not yet. After another few years of frustration and failure, maybe you would be, maybe not, but you aren't yet." She doesn't have words for the expression that scribes across his face, seen only because she's looking with every inch of her concentration: half relief, half fear. She's spoken words he's feared himself, she realizes, pierced to the heart of one of his midnight haunts. "And you've admitted yourself that you've been showing me the truth, and not another one of your pretty lies and poses. *Someone* taught you how to win the loyalty of the people who look to you. Tseng wouldn't have given himself over to your command so thoroughly if you hadn't."

The pieces fall into place then, one stunning flash of clarity fitting together all the signs and portents she's been observing, all the things she's seen and been unnerved by coming together into the larger picture she hasn't seen yet. Hasn't been letting herself see. The final dregs of her anger dissipate, leaving her with something she can't identify sitting in the pit of her stomach, hot and heavy. "He loves you," she says, slowly. "He wouldn't be who he is to you if he didn't. And you love him, too. You might not know you do, but you do, don't you."

It isn't a question; it doesn't need to be a question. If she'd thought about it ahead of time, she would have expected the thought to pain her, evidence of Tseng's affections being given to someone who isn't her, but it doesn't. She and Tseng have never promised fidelity. She wouldn't have allowed the promise even if he'd tried to give it, which he wouldn't have; their sole promises have been to make no promises, both of them finding safety in never allowing the words to be said aloud, and she -- knowing all too well how tightly he holds his honor -- would never willingly become the means by which he would find himself forsworn. She and Tseng knew from the beginning their affair wouldn't last forever. She's grateful to know there'll be someone there to love him after their time is through.

The thought is revelatory, unlocking *something* in her chest that she knows she'll have to think over later, but she doesn't have time

for it right now: Rufus hisses at her, sharp fury spiking through the sound, and she would fear his anger more if it weren't accompanied by his chin dropping, tucking against his chest, the instinctive action of a wounded animal moving to protect his throat. "You may be my temporary ally, woman," he says, and his voice has frozen enough to cut her with its ice; his rage, like his justice, burns cold. "You are not my conscience. Stay out of matters that do not concern you."

The lump in the pit of her stomach is traveling slowly up her throat, lodging right behind her breastbone, acid and fear bound together. She's regretting the mug of coffee she'd half-finished. But he was the one to start this and she was the one who followed where he led, and if there's one thing she's certain of, it's that he will never respect someone who retreats back to safety once challenge has been declared.

Her body is moving to defend itself without her command, stepping free of the counter she's been leaning against, arranging a clear line of motion and defense if she manages to goad him past the limits of his learned control's hold on his far more primal temper. She can see him realizing, see her instinctive actions sparking instinct of his own: his mug of coffee forgotten on the counter behind him, he is tightening his form, straightening his shoulders, allowing his weight to settle properly on his hips and around his center of gravity. His motions force hers, instinct prompting instinct until she has set her feet in the most basic of triangular stances, weight balanced on both thighs, knees loose and ready.

He doesn't realize he's doing it either, Tifa thinks. They've both been too well trained. There's more than one way to defend yourself against an attack, and she's pretty sure he's learned them all, layers of defense built up over scar tissue no less real than the scar tissue clotting her lungs, for all it's invisible to the naked eye.

She could back down, could defuse this confrontation with soft words and open stance, but the little voice behind her eyes that tells her when she needs to cut someone off and when she needs to offer a shoulder and a bar-rag to cry into is whispering at her to push, push, *push*: follow the steps of the hidden pathways Rufus's eyes were whispering to her, lance the wound now, uncover the scars Rufus has unwittingly shown her the shapes of, put form and shape to the deeply-shadowed secrets he hasn't let himself see.

Return him the favor he'd done her two days gone, for all it hadn't felt like a favor at the time. She's faced down her demons and looked them in the eye, given voice to the fears she'd locked in the depths of her mind since the night she was carried from this town dying inch by inch, and whatever they find in the reactor up there, whatever further deprivations they uncover to match the evils that have been sleeping beneath this roof that they've already found, she will face it with more power for having unlocked those doors herself rather than having them forced open. She couldn't have faced what they've encountered thus far with as much equanimity as she has, without having faced down those memories first. There's something in Rufus's eyes, in the unconscious cues his body has been feeding her (*protect, deflect, get away, if you strike first and decisively they can't hurt you before you can end them*) leading her to believe he's protecting a similar weakness of his own, an ancient hurt he's taken inside his chest and

nurtured like a grain of sand building up into a pearl.

"Do you need a conscience?" Tifa throws his words back in his face, but she keeps her voice low, her tone as gentle as she can make the words, considering the circumstances. She can't remember how well sound carries through these old walls, and she'd lay any odds a bettor would accept that Tseng's ear is sensitized to the sound of either one of them in distress or argument, even on the other side of the shores of sleep. The last thing they need right now is an interruption; something, the same something that prompted her down this road, is telling her that she's only got one chance at this and she'd lose it in front of anyone Rufus commands. Even Tseng, who has no doubt heard worse from Rufus over the years. Outside their structures, she alone has the power to speak this truth, and from the way Rufus flinches, she's already starting to see the shapes of that truth he'd rather deny.

"That's it, isn't it?" she probes again, and this time it *is* a question. Despite the way he'd reacted to her naming him not-monster, she isn't completely certain she's found the full shape of the secret fears that haunt him, until she sees the way his body answers her, his perfect defensive form melting away: shoulders creeping upward again, arms folding across his belly, spine curling inward as the knuckles of his left hand stand out, white-taut, against his right biceps and his right hand splays across his chest. Right over the heart.

It's the pose of a child, unconscious self-defense, and as his head bows over until his chin is nearly resting against his breastbone, her own heart breaks again for the child he was never allowed to be. "You taught yourself -- everything," Tifa whispers, certain even as she makes the guess, and the last pieces of her own defenses are whispering away as she takes two steps back to rest her hips against the counter behind her lest she cover the ground between them and fold him into her arms. The impulse is so strong it nearly floors her. She lifts one fist to press it against her lips, realizing when she blinks and the room clears for half a second before wavering again that her eyes are filling with tears. "Conscience. Duty. Care. From scratch and from nothing, without anybody to model the right way. You -- That's why it reads so wrong to me. To most people, I'll bet. You never absorbed any of the cues from anyone as a child, because you didn't *have* anybody who was showing you those cues. Not regularly. So you had to teach yourself out of what you saw from others in scattered moments, and because you did it consciously, the body language reads wrong to the people who learned it naturally. And to this day, you're terrified that you *got it wrong*."

She's laughing at the sheer, unmitigated *audacity* of it all, of the tiny child who must have had the wisdom and maturity beyond his years to identify nobility and honor and ethics as things he could not see enough around him to find a model and yet could know enough to know he would need them in the future. How old had he been? She remembers Tseng saying he'd had the teaching of Rufus since early adolescence, and it *must* have been before then, for Tseng to have seen enough worth molding in the raw clay Rufus had been. She cuts herself off the minute she hears the laughter in her voice, because she doesn't want Rufus to think she's laughing at him. It isn't humor. It's sheer, stunned *disbelief* at the scope of the realization.

Rufus looks up at the sound, though, and there are cities burning in the depths of his eyes. Tifa drops the last fractional pieces of her at-ready pose the instant she sees that ignition, flinging her hands wide (*I am not armed; I am not a threat to you*) and letting him see the tears (and she wonders when was the last time, if ever, anyone cried for Rufus Shinra) and the admiration both. "No, no," she says, bringing one hand back to dash away the tears, because she's cried too damn much in the past few days for her own self-respect, and she just fucking *knows* that if she starts again she isn't going to be able to stop. "I just can't -- For *years* I've been hating you, for days I've been gritting my teeth against the privilege you grew up with, that you exude like breathing, and I kept seeing it as --"

She cuts herself off; that isn't the right road to go down right now, not with Rufus watching her, wariness layered over fear over fury. "I couldn't imagine, literally *could not have imagined* you could've grown up with every single one of your material wants satisfied and yet not get a single thing you truly needed. You had everything in the world as a child, and I'd bet anything you asked me to bet that if I lined up a dozen children from Sector 7, I'd still find most of them had a happier childhood than you did. I've been hating you for years for having all the things everyone else couldn't, and it was *stupid* of me, because looking at you this minute? I'd swear on the bones of anything you hold holy that you'd give up every gil to your name in a heartbeat if you could've grown up being loved."

Tifa remembers the expression on his face when she'd told him the lessons she'd learned from her father: lacking any other word for it, she can only name it *hunger*. Of course. Of *course*. "I never realized it," she breathes. "Not once. All that power, all that wealth, and you're *still*, literally, a self-made man."

She knows she's winning, knows she's won, when Rufus buries his face in his palms for just long enough to scrub them over his cheeks, grind the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, run hands through his hair and pull, hard. "Ramuh damn you, woman," he says, more to himself than to her. He looks -- gutted. Like her words have been a sword as sharp as Sephiroth's was when it cleaved through her. "You see too fucking much."

Tifa laughs again, because it's either laugh or scream. His lack of denial is a confirmation; his posture tells her he doesn't want to admit the truth of what she's said, but his honor won't let him speak the denial. And honor it is, and she can only imagine at what price to himself he purchased it throughout the years.

"No one ever has before, have they. Not even Tseng, and he sees more of you than anybody else. You've let him see more of you than anybody else. Because he was the one who helped refine the code you'd created for yourself -- I can see so many bits of him in you, you know -- Oh, *Shiva*." The thought strikes her out of nowhere. She finds herself lifting her hand to her lips again, this time to press back the laughter, because like tears, if she starts laughing in earnest now she'll never stop.

Rufus's piercing stare is the last thing she sees before she squeezes her eyes shut, tightly enough the velvet darkness turns into amber sparkles. She's been trying his patience sorely this morning,

she knows, which is why she isn't surprised to hear him grind out, after only a few seconds, "*What?*"

"I just realized," she says, the tremors still running through her, gasping from the sheer *weight* of the irony. "You -- Your father had no idea what he was doing, did he? He took Tseng and assigned him to teach you, and it was supposed to be an insult for you both, right? Him to be a servant, to be assigned to a child; you because it was supposed to be your job to 'civilize' him. And your father never realized -- You didn't civilize *him*; he did everything but make a Wutaian out of *you*. You saw that code of honor he wears like a second skin and it must have been like food for a starving boy, and you clung to it like you were drowning. And you made it yours too, until your father's heir has more of the worldview of the people he allegedly conquered than of him. And he's never noticed, has he?"

When Tifa opens her eyes again, Rufus is still looking at her, but the danger has passed. Some of the tension has eased out of his shoulders; the edges of his lips are rounded up, just a fraction, and his voice is thinly painted with amusement as he says, dry as the Corel desert, "We thought it best not to enlighten him, yes."

Tifa can barely imagine all of the ways in which he has had to hide throughout the years. She shakes her head again, in disbelief, in regret, in empathy. "I can't -- It must have been miserable. It must have been ..."

She trails off. Takes a deep breath, and it hurts the way every deep breath she's taken since she returned here has hurt, and as she exhales, she can feel the last dregs of her resentment slipping away. She'd forgiven him Nibelheim's destruction, but she hadn't yet forgiven herself for forgiving him; she'd seen he bore no true guilt for what transpired here, but somewhere in the back of her mind, somewhere even she never quite looks at in daylight, she'd still had one small piece of her insisting: *he should have known*. And now she knows: no. He couldn't have. Not given the games he's been forced to play since before he knew what games *were*.

She gives him her deepest look, the one Jessie laughingly calls her soul-reading look, and he lifts his chin to meet her eyes without flinching in the least. He's one of the only people she's ever met who can face that look with equanimity.

It's enough to give her the answers she's looking for.

Tifa crosses the space between them, trying with every movement to project *calm* and *peace* and *I am not a threat to you*. His chin comes up further, watching her warily. Out of the corner of her eye she can see his right hand twitch once, then be forced into stillness. She's let him place himself so the morning sunlight streaming through the windows is at his back, ceding the defensive advantage, and it halos over his bare shoulders and his rumpled hair. He looks unearthly.

Coming to a stop in front of him, she holds out her hand, precisely as though they have just met. It takes a long minute for him to decide to take it. Once he does, she doesn't let it go. His pulse flutters warmly against the tips of her fingers.



"When we started this, you gave me a oath," she says. "I took that oath, and I will not put it back into your hands yet, not until we're done, because I don't think you'd take it back until you redeem it fully. But I took it from you without making one of my own, and called it an even bargain, because what you were asking me to do was unthinkable. It's not unthinkable anymore. We're connected, you and me. By -- so many things, really. But right now, we're connected by a mystery, and by a matter of honor and duty and responsibility, and I know you well enough now to say, in that at least, we stand equally dedicated. So you deserve to hold an oath of my own." She takes a deep breath, and it's almost starting not to hurt. Or she's starting to be able to ignore the pain, at least.

Rufus's eyes are locked on hers, and Tifa (literally, physically) can't will herself to look away. She feels as though she's caught up in something much greater than she is, as though Something beyond her is witnessing her words and her vow. The weight of the moment, like history and the heavens are watching them, is more solid on her chest than the altitude or her scars. He knows what she's about to say, she realizes. He is Rufus Shinra, prince of the world, and she is a bartender from the slums, and yet in these few moments it has felt as though they are one person, one mind, one set of thoughts. (She'll freak out about that *later*.)

Low and lulling, soft and lyrical, he says, "Speak your oath, then and I will safeguard it with those of my own."

She looks into his eyes, and she feels *something* greater than they are is watching them both, summoned by the gravity of the moment, by the sincerity of what she's about to swear to. It makes the hair on her arms stand up, her skin pimple up with tiny pricks of meaning. *Choose your words carefully*, each shivering hair tells her, *because you'll be bound by them far longer than you think*.

"You've been spending the last however-many years of your life borrowing someone else's honor as a guide, to shield you against whatever part of yourself you fear the most," she begins, feeling out her way, and she doesn't, can't, miss the way his shoulders twitch as her words hit home. "You're worried I'll take him from you, and I won't. I'm not going to stand in the way of him doing whatever he needs to do to keep his oaths to you. You're worried whatever we find will outpace your understanding of the maps you've made of his honor, and leave you to rely on instincts of your own you can't be sure of and make dishonorable choices because of it, and I won't let it."

Some part of her, the part still curled up against her mother in the halls of memory listening to tales of the days when men walked with the gods and their children upon this earth, knows these things must come in threes, and she licks her lips before continuing, because she knows what the third must be. "You fear what will need to be done to see this through, and how long the task will take and whether you'll have the strength to see the end of the path we've started on, and --" Breathe. *Breathe*. But this is her fight too, has been since the moment she led Sephiroth of Shinra out of the town gates and into the mountains she loved so dearly, and there's no other answer but this. Not if she wants to live with herself after. "I won't let you do it alone. And --" She dredges her memory, digs up the old words, the ones of

tales and song. The ones the gods Themselves pay heed to. "By blood, bone, and breath, I will not let you become what it is you fear on this journey. Not without putting up a damn good fight."

Strangely, what she sees breaking in his eyes is relief, stark and plain, sending its trails and tendrils throughout him. His fingers contract on hers, an unconscious squeeze as he registers her vow. Blood, bone, and breath. She's already shed one, cracked the other, and forever weakened the third, all sacrificed on the altar of whatever Sephiroth of Shinra was chasing. What they, too, are chasing now. Answers. And the questions they go with, which are often harder to find, and which usually mean more in the discovering.

Rufus is reading her even as she's reading him, their eyes still locked together as he weighs the sincerity of her words. Tifa wonders how many vows, each affirmed on whatever the promiser holds most sacred, he's held shattered into pieces and slipping through his fingers before. Too many, judging by how long it takes him to look into her own soul to guess at the worth of her word's coin, at whether everything he has seen of her so far adds up to someone who will keep a promise given by the old ways. By the time she sees him deciding -- against all odds, against almost every scrap of evidence he's known throughout his uncertainly treacherous life, against hundreds who have betrayed him and the scant handful who haven't -- that yes, everything he has seen of her so far testifies to her sincerity and her commitment, her fingers are beginning to go numb with the pressure of his death-grip.

Then he bows over their joined hands, taking half a step back, just enough so he can clear the space between them. For half a second she thinks he might be preparing to kiss her knuckles. He doesn't, though; he bends at the waist, dipping his head, and she helplessly looks down at the way his golden hair curls along the nape of his neck and wonders *what the fuck*.

"Yes," he says. "I'll hold that oath." His words feel like a breath exhaled, a breeze whispering through the windows and blowing away the weight of witnessing.

Tifa exhales with it. Her fingers are cramping, but she doesn't want to let go of him. Not yet. How many people touch him and mean it? Is that why he clung to Tseng so fiercely the other night? Skin hungers for nourishment just as much as bellies do, and she realizes as she's thinking it that somehow, Rufus fucking Shinra has become one of her people, one of the people whose hungers she's taken it upon herself to feed.

From feared to family in less than five days. The Gods save her. (The Gods save them all.)

Then Rufus lets go, and if there's regret in his eyes, he hides it well. He turns away from her, his back fully to her, and for the first time since she's met him she thinks he's completely comfortable with her in the room, as though her oath to him has placed her in the same category as Tseng occupies, trusted intimates. (It likely has. Well, she's already realized she's going to have to get used to occupying rarefied heights this week.)

"There's absolutely nothing in this pantry I'd be willing to eat unless we were starving," he's saying, the change of subject telling her just as his body is telling her that the conversation is over, staring into the same open door she'd been inspecting (a lifetime ago; twenty minutes ago) and coming to the same conclusion. "If you think it wouldn't be too out of place, I can run down to the town and carry back some supplies. Tseng'll kill me, but if he's asleep he doesn't have any right to bitch. And I --"

He's interrupted by the sound of a soft mechanical buzzing. Tifa looks around to see if she can identify the source, but he doesn't look surprised; he pulls his handheld computer out of the pocket of his sweatpants (she hadn't seen him put it there, which means he'd slept with it) and flicks his thumb over the screen even as his eyes are flicking over the message it shows on its face. It makes her think of all the tasks she'd been trained in yesterday, and she wonders if he's expecting her to be handling his email even despite all the other things they've found, but she'll have to check with him later; there are other things to worry about first. "Reeve and Rude made better time from Rocket Town than they thought," he says, looking up. "Reeve says Rude thinks they're twenty minutes out, tops. They just passed the sign for the Mt. Nibel bypass road and pulled over to await instructions."

Tifa's starting to shake with the adrenaline aftermath of the bomb she just defused, the confrontation she somehow knows may be one of the most significant she's ever had. It makes her slow, sloppy. She cudgels her brain, trying to make it call up the mental map of a place she once knew the peaks and valleys of better than the whorls and dips of her own palms. The vision is sluggish to rise, until she takes another deep breath (feeling the burn, feeling the ache) and thrusts herself back into the skin of Tifa Lockheart of the Nibel mountains and foothills, the guide without whom a mountain expedition was guaranteed failure. That child's skin feels tight and cramped, and she realizes, for the first time, how far she's grown out of it since her ordeal. "From the sign -- Tell them to take the right-hand road, not the bypass. It starts off looking like a regular road, but it'll narrow to a lane-and-a-half dirt track in about three miles. Once they leave the pavement, stay to the right -- the mountain side -- until they pass a large outcropping on the right that looks a little like a frog lying on its belly with its legs stretched out. We used to paint the rock green to help people see the frog, but I don't know if they still do and I don't know how well the paint has held up if they haven't touched it up."

The memory startles her, how fond it feels to remember the days with Johnny or Ranulf or, yes, even Nick on belay, the rope more a formality than anything else, scampering up the rock face with a can of paint clipped into her harness right next to her chalk bag. She can almost feel the early-spring sunlight on her face, feel the grit of the rock beneath her fingers and the giddy glee of telling gravity where it could shove it.

For the first time, the memory doesn't hurt at all. She finds herself smiling as she recalls herself back to her task. "Even if the paint's gone, it's the first real branch-off; there's three potential paths there, although the middle one is more a footpath than anything else. Take the left-hand road, and go for about ... Six miles, if I remember right. It'll wind towards and away from the mountainside for a bit.

After about six miles, the trail widens to about three times the size of a car, and divides around a huge boulder. Tell them to park there, behind the boulder. It's hidden from the town, and nobody ever goes out that way unless they're specifically looking for a place to climb." She smiles, and -- feeling the expression on her face -- realizes it isn't a pleasant one. "I'm betting that the people who live here now don't care much about climbing."

Rufus's fingers are tapping over the on-screen keyboard, relaying her instructions no-doubt faithfully. "Got it," he says. "Right hand road, dirt track in three miles, once off the pavement stay to the right, road branches at the fork, which may or may not be green, take the left-hand path at the fork and in six miles the road widens and forks around a boulder, park behind the boulder." He looks up at her, his gaze piercing. "Are you going to give them directions to get down here from there once they park, or --"

"No," she says. "No, I'll -- I'll go meet them." The thought feels uncomfortable -- in no small part because she knows the most efficient route from here to there, the one that will give her the least chance of being seen, will require her to bypass at least three switchbacks by climbing up them, and she isn't entirely sure her lungs will hold. But her palms are yearning for the touch of Nibel rock one last time. Let this be her farewell; she didn't get a chance to make it before.

She expects Rufus to go back to his message, but his eyes linger on her face, and she gets the feeling he can see every last one of her fears. (Well, fair is fair, she supposes.) "Is the trail something Reno can follow too?" he asks. Something tells her he'd be demanding to go himself, except he wants Reno to be there with her because of Reno's skills with emergency medicine.

Tifa makes a face. "Gonna have to climb a few places, but he's skinny enough that I can probably boost him up the rock face if I have to, yeah. And don't think I don't know what you're doing."

The only answer she gets is an unrepentant grin. His thumbs sweep across the keyboard again and he gives the tiny computer one last look before swiping his palm across it, in the gesture she remembers is used to turn it off, and stowing it back in his pocket. "Right, then. I'll go get dressed and get us supplies." He opens a drawer and fishes out a pad and pencil, and -- paranoia or just plain habit -- tears off the top sheet to write on it against the countertop and not on the pad, where the impressions of his pencil could be read from the sheets underneath. The note he writes -- to Tseng, she assumes -- is quickly done, but even from here she can tell his handwriting is perfectly legible, neat block capitals designed to be read as easily as possible. "Take that pad and write down anything you think we'll need," he adds, over his shoulder, as he folds the note over, prints Tseng's name on the front, and props it up against the coffee maker (where, presumably, Tseng will know to look if he wakes before they return). "Remember, we can't let them think there's more than four of us."

She remembers, and there's been a corner of her mind occupied with logistics all morning, keeping in mind that whomever is manning the general store these days will no doubt talk and they can't admit to

mounting an expedition to the reactor. It takes her a few minutes to start writing down items and quantities, and just as she's finished and handed it to Rufus, Reno pokes his head into the kitchen.

"You texted, chief?" Reno asks, taking in the scene with one practiced sweep of his eyes. (She wonders what he sees there, what truths his trained-observer gaze can tease out of the way they're standing and the spaces between them. It isn't that she begrudges Reno knowing she's formally vowed to support them -- support Rufus -- on this quest; it's just that she's certain Reno is going to want to *talk about it* while they're up there.) He looks surprisingly less exhausted than he should, for having been up all night working in the basement, although he's covered in dust and looks like he could *really* use a drink.

"Mmm," Rufus says, reading over the list she's handed him. Reaching the end -- and apparently not finding any detail of her handwriting or her shorthand notation incomprehensible, since he tucks that into the pocket of his sweats too -- he looks up at Reno and winces. "Okay, nevermind the orders I was about to give, how many hours do you have left in you and can you handle a bit of exertion?"

"Eh, I'm fine," Reno says, leaning against the doorjamb and hooking both thumbs into the belt loops of the engineer's coveralls he's still wearing. "Took two Potions and a dose of Fury about an hour ago. I'll be good for at least another six, probably twelve. More if I take another"

Tifa winces. Fury is one of the street drugs she won't touch and won't let her employees use either, on pains of being sent home without pay for the first offense and fired completely for the second; it keeps you going all right, but it takes a strong personality to resist the berserker rage it has a tendency to cause. Reno looks none the worse for wear, though, or at least as calm as he usually does. Rufus shoots her a look -- gauging her reaction to Reno's disclosure, she thinks -- and then looks back at Reno. "Grab the medkit, pick up a pair of gloves from the useful-shit duffel -- I brought it in last night when I brought in the extra coveralls -- and follow the lady. You're going partway up the mountain to pick up Rude and Reeve."

"No gloves," Tifa says, quickly. Rufus flashes her a look. She shrugs apology for overriding him, but he should've known better. "That's for the movies. Real climbing, you don't use gloves, not the kind you're thinking anyway. Unless you've specifically got climbers' gloves in there, we'll be better off with just tape. I might be able to find a pair of gloves in the mountain gear, I haven't been through the depths of the packs yet, but don't count on it."

Rufus sketches half a bow in midair -- mocking, this time, rather than serious -- and flaps one hand. "You take care of the details. Tell Reno how much additional weight you both can carry; might as well take the first load up to the car with you. I'm going to go find something for us to eat -- assuming Valentine's good to take watch over our patients for a while?" he asks Reno, who nods.

"Yeah," Reno says, "we been having a nice little chat about what happened down there. He had some ideas about what we can do to stabilize them." His eyes look sick, and a little wild around the edges.

"But wait, you said you were --"

"This is not one of the ones you can argue, Reno," Rufus says, quietly. Tifa's expecting Reno to protest -- so far, both Reno and Tseng have been fanatical about protecting Rufus's safety -- but Reno just growls, soft and annoyed, and throws up his hands.

"Fine. When the boss fires me because you got dead on my watch, I'll kill you myself. Tif' --"

"Half what you usually carry for a long haul," she says, cutting him off before he has to ask. "Fifty pounds for me. I'll be in the hallway going through the gear closet."

The hiking and mountaineering packs she finds in the gear closet - - she'd noticed them yesterday when Tseng and Reno were exploring the mansion -- are nowhere near as full as she'd like them to be for a climb. She allows herself thirty seconds to mourn the loss of the beloved gear she'd scrimped and saved to buy in early childhood and never had the heart to replace once she started earning thousands of gil per season. Then she makes two piles and starts sorting.

She should be able to salvage some abandoned gear from the mountain -- the spot she has in mind used to be a frequent route and it's likely nobody's been scavenging lately -- and there's plenty of rope and enough 'biners that if she has to rig a makeshift harness to haul Reno up the longest climb of the three, she'll be able to. She's packing bottles of water from the kitchen pantry (they're old, and the water's fusty, and she knows she's overpacking -- she did this route once a week from the time she was eleven to the time she was nineteen -- and maybe it's from spending too much time among men who treat a trip to the train station like a military maneuver and maybe it's just an attempt to ward off the skin-crawling memory of the *last* time she was in these mountains) when Reno drops a box full of papers on the floor next to her. She jumps -- she hadn't heard him come in -- and then makes a face at herself for jumping. On edge.

It only takes a few minutes to stow the papers into the bottoms of the mountaineering packs and layer the supplies over them. They'll have to unpack at the other end to get at the papers to transfer them into the truck, but Tifa's seen too many disasters happen because that one vital bit of gear is buried. She slides a protein bar into the outside pocket of her pack; she found them in the gear closet, and she knows from experience she'll be ravenous no later than the second ascent. Reno insists on giving her a check-over before they set out, listening to her lungs and frowning before forcing another round of pills on her. She knows he can hear the soft, wet crackling when she breathes in fully just as well as she can, but neither of them are going to say anything until it becomes a problem. They have shit to do.

The sunlight, when they let themselves out the back door and onto the lawn behind the mansion, makes her stop in her tracks. It's weak and yellowed, the pale, thin rays of a Nibel early-spring morning. The sunlight here has a quality she's never seen anywhere else, especially not in the smog-choked environs of Midgar. She'd seen the daylight yesterday, but yesterday had been tense and edgy, knowing she was on stage, knowing if she slipped and let show her surroundings were familiar to her she would be fucking the plan so thoroughly someone

would probably get killed. This morning, there's nobody to watch but Reno as she huffs out her breath and watches it dissipate on the gentle breeze, as she swipes her boot across the thick native mountain grass and watches the play of the light over the morning dew clinging to the purple-tinged edges. *Home* beats in her heart, against the refrain of *farewell, farewell*.

Reno doesn't say anything. He just watches her, sticking his hands into the pockets of the parka she found for him in the hall closet, content to give her as long as she needs to take.

It's been years since she's been out here. They played in the backyard of the mansion as children, when there were no Shinra delegations staying here, but she'd set that aside as she grew into adulthood, and whoever repopulated the village that's outside the mansion's gates (and she is so carefully *not* thinking about it, not wondering, not thinking of indulging the sick fascination and the part of her that wonders how close they got it, how much of her house survived to be reconstructed, whether her mother's piano survived the flames and whether enough of the interior had been left unburned that the furnishings and decorations would be familiar) has clearly not been keeping up the maintenance back here.

The lawn is overgrown, overrun with the mountain grasses and wildflowers that have adapted to the altitude and the weather. A full quarter of the yard back by the line where lawn turns into scraggly forest has been claimed by a thicket of the everblooming Nifl rose, its hardy cane-stalks standing up to the worst a Nibel winter can throw at it until it can throw all its energy into making the tiny, dense blooms present through all but the deepest winter months. The plant had taken place of pride in nearly all the village gardens, given at least a border even in the ones used for food and not for ornamentation, with friendly competition going every year to see how many new colors each gardener could breed out of them each season --

Tifa stops, suspicion whispering into certainty as her eye sweeps over the thicket, noting each individual blaze of color, each blossom just beginning to open its petals with the morning light. Ellen Strife had called that pale blonde Cloud, and her mother said they teased her over which came first, the rose or the son. That deep purple -- Richard Svensson's pride; each year he got closer and closer to true black. Nita Westermarck's pinks, dozens of subtle variations she'd nurtured, inherited from her father and his mother before him, generation after generation. Amy and Matthew Ahlquist's tri-colored variations: pink/white/yellow, red/white/orange -- and oh, Shiva, yes, there, in the back corner, the green-tipped white, each bloom smaller than its fellows elsewhere in the thicket, and she remembers her mother, laughing, the winter sunlight glinting off her hair, patiently showing her how to graft cane onto cane, cross-pollinate the blooms, always looking to perfect the color --

"This is where they are, aren't they," she says.

"Yeah." Reno lit a cigarette while she was busy surveying the scene. He's standing downwind; she hadn't even noticed. He can't quite meet her eyes, playing with the lighter, flicking it open and shut, open and shut. "Back here was chewed up enough, from us all camping out, didn't take long to dig. We didn't know who was who, so

most of them, we couldn't match the flowers from the gardens and put them in the right place. But we tried our best, and the boss said it looked like everybody shared plants anyway, so they probably wouldn't mind." His gaze sweeps over the field of flowers, and there's satisfaction there. "Rude owes me ten gil; he said they'd never transplant well enough."

"They're tougher than you think," Tifa murmurs. He's being kind to spare her any more trauma, but she knows as well as he does the reason they couldn't match garden to body was because the bodies had likely been so badly destroyed that they would have been unidentifiable save by Shinra's most advanced technology; from watching the news she knows they can identify a body if they have -- something she doesn't quite understand -- on file, or with the presence of a parent or child to compare that something against. If Rufus had had his way, she realizes, they would've done that for the bodies they found. Compared them to anyone who came from Nibelheim to see if those who had left the village for the city had relatives whose bodies they wished to claim; compared those remaining against each other, so families could lie together. Under Rufus's father, the best that was done for them was the no-doubt-clandestine actions of the Turks, who are Rufus's hands far more than his father will ever know.

She knows which paradigm she prefers.

So she crosses the yard with her usual stride -- Reno scrambles to keep up -- and picks her way through to kneel next to the green-tipped white roses her mother had never bothered to name and Tifa and her father hadn't had the heart to, after they'd lost her. She reaches out, cupping one in her hand, stem sliding through her fingers, feeling the familiar silken petals. She walks her fingers down the stem, feeling for the bend, pinching it off with her thumbnail. The bloom falls into her hand, and she lifts it to smell -- their perfume is subtle, but oh so familiar -- before twining it through the end of her braid.

Then she stands up. Reno averts his eyes immediately -- he'd been watching her, then -- and pinches out his cigarette, field-stripping it and tucking the butt into his pocket. "Come on," she says. "Time's a-wasting, and I've got a cliff or two to show you how to climb."

## ( 9. )

Tseng wakes already reaching for his sidearm, and the typical morning status update cascades through his consciousness as he arrests the motion: slightly groggy means he was woken out of cycle despite having set his subconscious alarms to wake him after he'd finished his second full sleep cycle, while the pistol in his hand means he'd registered a threat. In an unfamiliar location -- the Shinra mansion in Nibelheim, right -- with a bundle of blankets on the floor on the other side of the bed where Rufus is/was, and the blankets are empty, which means that --



The unfamiliar sound that woke him repeats, and he registers it a minute later as Valentine's voice, slightly raised, drifting through the house. From the kitchen, Tseng assumes, sitting up fully and running a hand through his hair mid-yawn. It's followed a second later by Rufus's familiar sharp snort of laughter, though, with the higher-pitched sound of Tifa saying something over top of it, so what woke him wasn't danger. Just unfamiliarity. He wouldn't have woken for Tifa or Rufus, but Valentine's voice was apparently enough.

By the time he's taken care of his morning ablutions and belted on the *yukata* he took from his suitcase, he's identified the voices of Rude and Reeve in addition to Valentine, Rufus, and Tifa, and smelled something cooking. He arrives in the kitchen to the sounds of industry, but what he finds there is ... not precisely what he'd expect; Rufus, wearing a plain t-shirt and a pair of BDU pants, is at the stovetop holding a spatula in one hand and a frying pan in the other, in the process of dishing up a truly outrageous amount of scrambled eggs onto a platter, while Tifa, wearing her workout clothes, is standing just beside him, lightly resting the fingertips of one hand on the small of his back. (Tseng has seen that movement before, the unthinking ghost-touch warning of those who spend significant time in the kitchen indicating the presence of someone bearing something hot behind whomever is being warned.) Her other hand, clutching an oven mitt, is in the process of fishing out a tray of *something* out of the oven. She deposits the baking sheet on a waiting cooling rack on the side of the counter Rufus isn't using, which reveals it to be a tray of biscuits, and slides around Rufus before going up on tiptoe to pick up a spoon and reach for whatever is in the large stockpot on the back of the stove.

Something certainly smells wonderful, although if they went down into town for supplies and didn't remember that there are only supposed to be four people here, Tseng's going to have to kill someone.

"Why the *hell* can't the world remember that some of us aren't six feet tall," Tifa is grumbling, not quite able to reach the pot -- the stove-top is both deep and tall, and the stockpot is taller still -- and Rufus laughs. Tseng bites his lip as Rufus hip-checks her out of the way and relieves her of the spoon. They're moving differently around each other this morning, and he's dearly afraid he's missed another one of their bonding moments.

He loses the chance to wait and see what else has changed, though, when Reno looks up from where he and Valentine and Rude are sitting around the table, Reeve standing behind them and frowning at something tacked to the wall. (There's places set for all seven of them, though three spots have a shipping crate to be used as a bench instead of chairs and the table's crowded enough they'll all have to watch their elbows.) "Hey, boss," Reno says. The circles under his eyes and the sunken look to his lips and cheekbones tells Tseng he's on at least one dose of Fury, but he seems awake enough.

"Coffee's over on the other counter," Tifa sings out. Both of her hands are wrapped around Rufus's arm and trying to tug the spoon down to her height to taste from it. Rufus evades her, easily, snickering at her attempts; she lets go of him to ball up both her hands and beat her fists lightly against his shoulder, and instead of

striking back, Rufus laughs harder and ducks sideways. There's a flower tucked into her braid, Tseng realizes as she feints left, dives right, and wrestles Rufus's arm under one armpit, her back to him, her curves pressed snugly against his front. It's one of the local flowers they transplanted onto the gravesites, but Tseng can't tell if she knows what it is or not. (She almost certainly would be able to guess, but her mood is so good Tseng can't be sure.) "Cream's in the coldbox -- *Dammit*, Shinra!" She whoops as Rufus draws his (unpinned) hand up her right side, aiming straight for the ribs, where Tseng knows from long experience that Tifa is highly ticklish.

The scene dissolves into a flurry of elbows and knees. Tseng pinches the bridge of his nose, considers, very seriously, going back to bed, and steps around the two of them to make for the coffee pot. When he pours, he can tell by the smell that it's much better coffee than the utter shit that had been preserved in the pantry. "I don't suppose," he asks the kitchen at large, "that whoever picked up supplies was smart enough to remember that we're undercover here."

"I'm not an idiot!" Rufus calls, then, "Oof!" as Tifa pins him face-down on the floor. He taps the tile twice; she rolls off him, takes the spoon out of his hand where he'd miraculously kept it during their scuffle, and bounds over to kiss Tseng good morning.

"Reeve brought the coffee, because Rufus was bitching about the stuff here when he called," she informs him. "The eggs are from a Zuu nest Reno and I found on the way up to meet them; the stew's a Nifl mountain goat we took down on the way back. Relax."

Tseng closes his eyes. "Please tell me you didn't shoot it. Didn't you tell me the sound echoes?"

Tifa stands on her tiptoes and kisses him on the nose. "I said, relax." She lets him go and mimes throwing something like a pair of dice, her wrist snapping neatly. He notices that every single one of her fingernails is broken, and there are scrapes all over her hands; her fingertips look battered. "Fastest rock throw on Mt. Nibel five years running. Sit. I'll get the sugar and cream for you. The biscuits will be cool enough for breakfast in another few minutes."

Tseng goes along with her as she puts her hands on his shoulders, turns him in place, and nudges him towards the table. He takes the spot next to Reno, noticing as he gets closer that what Reeve is looking at is a set of blueprints pinned into the wall behind the table. (The top two corners are held by two of Rufus's ceramic knives. The bottom two corners are held by a pair of forks driven into the plaster of the walls.) Reeve, standing in front of the sheet and muttering, has a pencil in his left hand and is sketching a series of corrections to the reactor cross-section, occasionally swapping the pencil for the highlighter in his right hand and highlighting a spot.

"Tell me they haven't been like this all morning," Tseng mutters to Reno after Tifa sets the cream and sugar on the table and turns back to start transferring biscuits off the baking tray and onto another platter, slapping Rufus on the back of the hand as he reaches out for one.

"Tell you later," Reno mutters into his coffee. (His hands are, if

anything, even more banged up than Tifa's.) Tseng raises an eyebrow. A little louder, Reno continues, "Tif' and I went up to pick up Rude and Reeve. The path up to the parking spot circles around the mountain enough to be noticed from the town in a few places if somebody's looking, so we did some climbing up the switchback's cliff faces."

"I got to climb again," Tifa singsongs, bringing over the platter of biscuits in one hand and the scrambled eggs in the other; Rufus is right behind her with the pot of stew held in both hands, potholders wrapped around the stockpot's handles. (Rufus whistles once between his teeth, and Tifa slides deftly to the side Rufus isn't approaching on.) "And Reno didn't suck."

"Toldja," Reno says. "Climbing the plate pillars was some of the best exercise we'd get as kids." He rests his hands against the table, starting to push himself up (to go get plates and forks, probably; setting the table is usually Reno's job when they all eat together, since he certainly can't cook to save his life). Rude puts a hand on his arm and pushes him back down, going to do it himself instead.

Rufus drops a potholder on the table and rests the stockpot on top of it. (It smells fabulous. In addition to the meat, there's some of the potatoes and carrots rescued from the Stop stasis, but there's also some herbs and leaves Tseng can't identify, presumably harvested along with the eggs and meat.) "And before you yell at me," he tells Tseng, "yes, the lady and I were careful about the shopping trip. She wrote the list; I picked it up. Nobody followed me too obviously, although I did have a nice conversation about the Department of Engineering with the clerk at the general store."

"Won't pass," Reeve says, absently. "The President's still too pissy at Palmer over that fuckup with the space program." Then he seems to play back the last few minutes of conversation, and his cheeks begin to color. (Reeve's blushing is not the only reason Tseng could never make an operative out of him, but it's one of the biggest.) "Which you know. Sorry, I forgot that was the story you told."

Rufus dismisses the apology with a wave of his hand. "Any luck?" he asks instead.

Reeve caps the highlighter and tosses it on the table, then sticks the pencil behind his ear. "Not until I get up there for sure, but I *may* have an idea. Maybe." He looks over at Valentine, who's been quiet since Tseng walked into the kitchen, watching the byplay with wary interest from behind his unnaturally blood-red eyes. "You're *sure* he installed the shunt and isn't just getting someone to carry down the Mako for the tanks?"

"I am certain," Valentine says. "Whenever Hojo was ... inspecting his experiments in person, he found it amusing to wake me, administer a paralytic, and prop me in the corner to ... watch." The slight flaring of his nostrils is the only sign he hasn't turned into a statue. "As he was fond of reminding me, I was not considered worthy enough of the full treatment; I was his amusement. He liked to narrate."

An awkward silence follows Valentine's pronouncement, until Reeve shakes his head. "I can't make it work out, then. There

shouldn't be enough supply to power the shunt and still have enough pressure to drive a primary burn, even with this reactor being one of the old model that doesn't flare. Not unless he's done something up there that's even more fucked up than anybody would even credit him with. And although I think this table is collectively capable of crediting Dr. Hojo with a great deal of fucked up, he's a molecular biologist, not an engineer. *I* couldn't make this work, not without browning out half this continent, and I know the reactor system better than anyone in Midgar."

It's not a boast, Tseng knows; Reeve had all but built the second generation of reactors, the ones now powering Midgar, single-handedly. But Valentine is frowning. Or at least, giving the impression of frowning; for all that Tseng spent most of the night working side-by-side with the man to clear out the basement lab, he still can't quite get used to the strange expressionless plastic quality of his face, as though half the nerves have been cut. "He built the equipment for the Project," Valentine says. "He built the tanks our two unfortunates were housed in. Lu -- Someone once told me he had considered a career in engineering before deciding upon biology."

Reeve throws up his hands. "Then I've really got nothing. If he has even the remotest idea what he's doing, he could've done anything up there. I won't know for sure until I can get into the guts of the system."

There's a light touch between Tseng's shoulderblades. His body obeys the slight pressure automatically, leaning to one side. Tifa slips in next to him, sets a dish of what looks like fresh butter on the table next to the biscuits, and settles herself down on the shipping crate next to him. "New house rule," she says. "No creepy horror movie talk at the table." She surveys them all, her gaze skipping lightly across each face. "Someone tell me embarrassing stories about the boy prince instead."

Tseng nearly chokes on his coffee -- both to hear her refer to Rufus as the 'boy prince' and at the command and the self-assured way she delivers it. He expects Rufus to shoot her down with a chilly rejoinder, but all he does is laugh. "Budge over," Rufus orders, whacking the side of her hip with the back of his hand. "And watch the elbows, my ribs are already bitching from you wiping the floor with me twelve times before breakfast."

Tifa laughs, too, and slides across the top of the crate, winding up pressed against Tseng's side. She smells like fresh air, like dirt and rock, like something sweet he can't identify. Rufus wedges himself in on Tifa's other side. Tseng can't say what it is that makes his throat hurt at the sight, but something does.

A hand rests on his other shoulder, and when he twists to look up, Rude leans over him and refills his coffee. His lips against Tseng's ear, he mutters, just loudly enough for Tseng to hear, "They're burning off some of the worry before we get going. Don't fuck with it."

Well, Rude is their psychologist.

Reno's happy to accede to Tifa's orders -- Tseng could only wish he responded to Tseng's orders with such alacrity -- and the meal

(which is fabulous, if not anything Tseng would usually choose to eat) is finished before anyone runs out of tales; Rufus takes the mockery, all good-natured, far better than Tseng would imagine. Reno's just finishing up the last bits of the story of the first time he served as Rufus's bodyguard (with details Tseng doubts the veracity of, even though he does remember that half-starved, half-feral young Turk quite well and he has to admit the story is at least *plausible*; Rufus had been possessed of more sense than most sixteen-year-olds, but Rufus and Reno together were a deadly combination for the first few years) when Valentine, who's been as quiet as a temple guard the entire meal, clears his throat and Reno shuts up fast. Valentine's looking at Rufus, and it's the most human expression Tseng's seen on his face yet. "How old were you when your mother died?" he asks.

The question would only be a non sequitur to a non-Turk; Turks are trained to intuit detail from scraps and pieces, necessary training for a world where one must learn to see danger to one's charge in a passing gaze held an instant too long, a fractional tightening of an observer's mouth, the faintest tensing of a hand moving towards a pocket or poised to loose a blade from a spring-release sheath. The presence of absence of Rufus's mother is writ as large in every story of his childhood as the absent presence of his father. Tseng can't see Rufus's face from where he's sitting -- Tifa is in the way -- but he can feel Tifa's shoulders tense, feel the way she immediately puts her hand on Rufus's thigh. Rufus's answer is polite enough, but Tseng knows that sound in his voice from years of observation: it's the sound of Rufus exercising his self-control. "She died four days before my first birthday."

Valentine's eyes close, for a fraction of a second longer than a blink. "I thought so," he says, slowly. "Sarah Shinra would not have tolerated her son being raised thus, not unless --"

Rufus interrupts before Valentine can finish, which itself is a sign that Valentine's words have struck home; Rufus has better manners than that. He's leaning forward enough that Tseng can see his face now, and even in profile it is hunger and fury blended. "You knew my mother?"

"I was a Turk," Valentine says, simply. "Before I was assigned to this accursed project, I served protection detail, just as we all did." He tilts his head to one side, studying Rufus carefully. "You resemble your father in the physical, but I still see much of her in you. She would be proud of you, I think," he says.

There's a long minute of silence; Tseng can see Rufus close his eyes, see the way his chest rises and falls beneath the plain grey t-shirt he's wearing. "Excuse me," he says, his voice scrupulously neutral. Without waiting for a response, before anyone can say anything, Rufus has slid out from under the table and let himself out the back door of the mansion.

The sound of the door closing -- not slamming, but closing with a distinct finality -- echoes through the kitchen longer than it should. "Dammit," Tifa mutters, under her breath, next to Tseng. She puts her hands on the table, pushing herself up, clearly intending to follow; Tseng rests a hand on her arm.

He doesn't bother saying anything out loud; she won't need it, and it would give too much away to the rest of the table. (To *Valentine*, clearly as well-trained as they all have been, who seems to be terminally incapable of anything resembling tact. No, no, he won't blame the man, not after what he's gone through, but still: inconvenient timing.) Tifa looks back up at him. Whatever she sees in his face makes her worried and faintly annoyed expression fade to understanding: *right, you take care of it*, he can read in her eyes; *I'll stay in here and make sure nobody kills anybody*. (As he follows in Rufus's footsteps out the back door, he can hear Valentine's low murmur of a query, Tifa's responding ascerbic "you'd have to ask him that, but *honestly*, did you really think the man would want to hear about how he looks like his shithead father -- he so doesn't, by the way -- or stories about his dead mother in the middle of all the rest of this? I'm sure he'll want to hear what you knew about his mother. *Later.*")

Outside, Rufus is pacing back and forth on the grass, just finishing the process of lighting a cigarette, looking flustered and unhappy and tight-lipped. "Sorry," he bursts out, as Tseng comes close enough that he can speak without his voice carrying too far on the morning wind. "I didn't mean to -- I just couldn't --"

"I wasn't going to say anything," Tseng says, mildly. He holds out a hand. Rufus looks at it blankly for half a second, then catches up: he hands over the lit cigarette and fishes his pack and his lighter back out of his BDUs to light another. "Your reaction was far more understated than I would've guessed. I'm proud of you, actually. Six months ago you would've punched him."

Rufus snorts, the cloud of smoke from the freshly-lit cigarette streaming from his nostrils like a dragon's displeasure. "I was about three seconds away from punching him. Which is why I'm out here, since no matter what else happens, we still need to know what he knows and punching someone in the face is not the way to convince someone you're trustworthy. It's just been a hell of a day already, and it's only going to get worse. Coming on the tail end of how many days of nowhere near enough sleep. Plus, oh, let's not even go into the emotional wringer the lady and I went through together this morning."

Tseng's ears prick to hear that; he does his best not to show. Rufus does not respond well to anything even remotely resembling prying. There are times when Tseng can ask and times when he can't; he would stake his life this is one of the times when he can't. "The two of you seemed quite ... friendly over breakfast preparation," he says, instead; Rufus knows him too well to take it as anything other than the gentle prompting it is, but that much can't be helped. "She was hard on your heels before I intercepted her. I caught the nose end of her tearing a stripe out of Valentine's hide as I came out to meet you."

That news actually puts a smile on Rufus's face -- or as close as Rufus is going to get right now, Tseng imagines; it's the little quirk of Rufus's lips that is the only reaction he allows himself when he's controlling his reactions this tightly, but Tseng knows it for a smile anyway. "Did she now." It's practically a purr, dark and thick with satisfaction and not a hint of surprise.

Tseng can't help it: he knows his eyebrows are rising, unbidden, and he looks away under cover of taking a drag off the cigarette, trying to disguise the creeping unease he can't help but feel. Rufus's life has not been full of people rising to defend him; he has never learned how to accept championing with good grace. In the cage-fight environment Rufus grew up in, having someone come to your defense means they are trying to score points with you, or points against the person against whom the defense is needed. It took years before Rufus was willing to believe *him* when he acted in Rufus's defense to a third party, and he has had to curb the impulse to avenge countless slights upon Rufus's honor over the years when that vengeance would not be understood by one of Midgar's children. That Rufus is willing to accept Tseng's defense the scant handful of times he has is a marvel.

For Rufus to expect that defense from Tifa -- because that's what his reaction means -- in less than a week is unheard of, and Tseng can't help wondering whether Rufus is playing some sort of deeper game. Tifa trusts easily. Too easily, and for all she's as brilliant at reading the secret motivations of a man as Rufus is, and for all she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself, Tseng can't help but fear for her well-being. It isn't even that he thinks Rufus will hurt her deliberately; Tseng knows she's become real to him, and once you are real to Rufus he will treat you with as much empathy as he is capable of. Tseng can't even say why it is he's so disquieted. He just is.

Something of his thoughts must show on his face despite how hard he's trying to control his reaction, but then again, Rufus has always been capable of reading him, even when -- especially when -- he least wants to be read; the warmth of Rufus's hand settles on his shoulder (it really *is* too chilly out here for just the *yukata* he's wearing, but he hadn't wanted to leave Rufus alone for long enough to find a jacket to throw on over it) and squeezes. "Relax," Rufus says. "I can hear you worrying. Believe it or not, I'm actually not playing a game here. I like your lady. She's formidable."

'Formidable' is a good word for Tifa, yes, but Rufus is still disturbing him. This isn't the time to resolve the issue, though, or to delve too deeply into the tiny whisper of unease he can't help but feel. He knows himself. He knows Rufus. Prying will get him nowhere. He will wait, and watch, and see what else transpires, and sooner or later his mind will quietly inform him of whatever it is his subconscious has observed that's making him this uneasy. "She's not my lady," is all he says. "She belongs to none but herself."

"Mmm," Rufus says. It's the *I don't agree with you, but it's not worth arguing* tone.

Tseng risks a look back at him, and his breath suddenly catches in his throat. Rufus is squinting against the daylight, looking sober and thoughtful. The sun is haloing around his hair, his shoulders. He's wearing a plain grey t-shirt and a pair of BDUs. His hair is curling wildly at the edges, forming tiny wisps the way it always does when he hasn't bothered with product. He hasn't shaved in at least 36 hours by now, and his stubble is coming in faintly auburn along the hollows of his cheeks, the way it always does. He looks tired, and ever-so-slightly annoyed, and like he is dreading the rest of what today will bring. He's the image of a thousand conversations over a thousand mornings; Tseng could summon a picture from any of a thousand

points along his personal continuity of memory, and it would look much like this.

And yet.

Even before Tseng set his feet on the path of fate that would bring him to Rufus's side, Tseng had fought to quiet the spirit-sense the gods had seen fit to curse him with, and after years in Midgar, where he can go months without his feet touching honest earth, he's learned a thousand tricks for subduing it. The past week seems to have brought the talent back in earnest, and apparently twice as strong for having been so long denied. Right now, with no provocation Tseng can think of, Rufus is *blazing* across the sight-that-is-not-sight Tseng has tried so hard to lose. He could probably close his eyes right now and still see Rufus there, glowing golden with far more than sunlight reflected. To that sight, Rufus looks like a young god-prince, the weight of the world held in his cupped hands, his head bowed over them, his neck bared to the oaths of all those he owns and their hands slipped between his palms in fealty.

Tseng blinks, then blinks again, but the image refuses to dissipate. Rufus is larger than he should be, the shape of his skin more broad than that of the man he is alone. For the first time in years, Tseng can see the shade of Rufus's destiny wrapped around his shoulders, the shining hand of the gods marked upon his brow. Proclaiming him *ruler*, and *lord*, and *liege*.

It's glorious. It always has been. *Rufus* always has been, and Tseng has devoted nearly a decade and a half of his life to raising Rufus to fit into the full space the universe has built for him, but in all that time he's managed to forget *why*. (Managed to make himself forget. The attention of the gods is not such a comfortable thing after all.)

The backs of his knees are trembling, he realizes. Is it any wonder? The question is not why he would wish to kneel to Rufus; the question is, suddenly and without any foreshadowing, how he could *not* wish to.

Rufus is still talking, but Tseng can't hear a word over the sound of the blood rushing in his ears. Rufus has no idea, Tseng realizes: he has never been able to sense the world's other currents, never been able to feel the destiny wrapped around his shoulders, never realized Someone or Something had anointed him -- as far back as at his birth? The gods Rufus has never believed in and Tseng has tried to renounce hundreds of times have touched them both, steered Tseng to Rufus's side and shaped Rufus's life at a thousand tiny points of decision, but while Tseng has always felt each breath of the gods' will exerted upon his own and resented it, Rufus simply doesn't feel it at all. He has no idea. If he thinks he was born to rule the world -- and he does -- he thinks it only due to the family into which he was born, not the forces of destiny acting upon him.

Something must have happened this morning. Something about the task they've accepted, or the plans they've already made, or something someone said or did to him. Something to wake the destiny Rufus has always held marked in potential across his brow, has always had sleeping in the tiniest corner of his heart, because that



destiny is suddenly blazing across the heavens so loudly Tseng would not be surprised if the old masters in Leviathan's temple, back upon Wutai's shores, woke from unquiet dreams with headaches that would not respond to any treatment at all. The only reason Tseng's head isn't throbbing right now is that he's crossed the liminal borders of Rufus's shade enough times when his control has slipped (tired, drunk, spread out and getting fucked) that he already knows its feel.

"--told me that -- Tseng? Are you all right?" Rufus breaks off whatever he's saying -- whatever he's *been* saying, and Tseng desperately hopes there wasn't anything crucial in Rufus's words, because he didn't hear a single one of them -- and frowns. "You haven't heard a word I said, have you."

"Sorry," Tseng manages. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. That helps. A little. He can still see Rufus, shining across the landscape of his inner sight, a beacon against the velvet blackness of his eyelids, but shutting his eyes has at least eliminated the contrast between Rufus's outer seeming and the fierce burning brand Rufus is to his other sight.

The forgotten cigarette finally consumes itself the last bit necessary to heat the filter enough to scorch his fingertips; he swears and drops it. Rufus finally takes his hand off Tseng's shoulder. Tseng can feel him moving, and realizes he must have crouched down to stub out the butt enough that it would not ignite the grass, since they are both barefoot and neither can tread it out. With Rufus no longer touching him, the sense of him ebbs, enough for Tseng's usual methods for shutting down those senses to click into place, until Tseng feels confident enough in his control to open his eyes again. Rufus is on one knee in the grass, taking the chance for one last drag before putting out his own cigarette. He's looking up at Tseng through his lashes, watching Tseng warily for any signs of further reverie; the minute Tseng opens his eyes, Rufus averts his, looking down at the ground.

He can see the nape of Rufus's neck from here, bared by the haircut that would be obscene were he as Wutaian as Tseng is, and the part of him that will always and forever be the man his upbringing forged him into is horrified at the sight. Rufus should never kneel to him. To anyone, but particularly not to him, the man whom the gods have sent to serve him, blood, bone, and breath. "Get up," he hears himself saying, voice rough. "Leviathan's scales, get *up*."

Rufus frowns, but obeys, balancing lightly on the balls of his feet as he rises. Above them, a passing cloud sends the yard into shadow. Tseng blinks, again and again, but Rufus's skin still holds the golden glow of sunlight, leaving him looking overexposed. Tseng closes his eyes again, pinching the bridge of his nose and thinking, as hard as he can, *stop. Enough. I see it; You can stop rubbing my nose in it now. He doesn't believe in You anyway, and if I have to explain, he's going to think me mad.*

The back of his mouth tastes of salt and ocean, and he can hear the sussuration of scales against scales.

"*Tseng*." Rufus is starting to sound more irate now, and Tseng forces himself to open his eyes again, lest Rufus decide further action

is necessary. Leviathan's mercy, Rufus is back to being only Rufus, irritation layered over his concern, looking at Tseng with the impatience of a man who knows they don't have time for a breakdown. Tseng breathes, in and out, and waits to see if the sight will stutter back into being. When it doesn't after three full breaths, he's tentatively willing to call the moment over. "Seriously, are you all right? You look like you're about to pitch over any second."

How could he explain? Rufus would think him to have lost the last of his wits. In the dozen years and more he's been Rufus's tutor in all things, he's never so much as hinted at matters of the world that lies beyond the science and rationality and logic so prized by Midgar's children. Leviathan help him, he'd thought he could leave those things in Wutai, set down abandoned alongside his familial name and his imperial obligations. "I'm just a little light-headed all of a sudden," he says.

"Uh-huh." And damn it all, but *that* is the sound of Rufus knowing him for a liar. "Do you need to lie down? If whatever it is is going to interfere with the trip up to the reactor --"

"No," Tseng says. He makes himself turn away, no matter that his very soul cries out to bask in Rufus's reflected glory, no matter that every inch of his being is telling him to kneel before his lord. The motion feels precisely like passing out of the rays of the sun, and the chill that strikes him is more than physical; he chafes his hands along his arms, feeling the birdskin of a thousand tiny hairs rising along each inch of his flesh. "It's nothing. I'll tell you later." (Not if he can help it. Not until all of this is over, and with luck, not even then.)

Whatever Rufus might say in return is disrupted by the sound of the door to the mansion opening. They both turn, Tseng in relief, Rufus in irritation; it's Rude, and Tseng doesn't need to be able to see behind the sunglasses the man always wears to know he's studying them both carefully. (And, likely, drawing a dozen conclusions and more. The only thing to make Rude's insight bearable is the fact he keeps his own counsel until he thinks it absolutely necessary to speak.) "Tifa wants to get moving soon," Rude says. "Says it gets dark early enough that if we don't leave in the next twenty, we'll run out of daylight on the other end."

Next to Tseng, Rufus breathes out, sharp and annoyed. "Right," he says. "I'll be in in a second." Rude nods and shuts the door. Rufus turns back to Tseng. "I will hold you to that 'later'," he says, neat and precise, the same sort of casual order Tseng has heard him deliver more times than he could count the telling of.

This time, though, something about his tone -- something about the *push* Rufus puts behind it, and oh, Leviathan, Rufus has always been able to summon that cloak of command at will and set it aside when he no longer needs its weave, but never quite like this -- slices straight through a part of him Tseng thought long since armored away. *Yes, my liege*, leaps to his lips. He swallows the words down with great difficulty, and only nods instead.

Rufus gives him one last look, tense and unhappy -- if he were a cat, his ears would be pressed against his skull -- before turning away and striding back into the mansion. Left alone, Tseng breathes out,

breathes in, and gives serious consideration to the thought of how far he could get if he started running now. (Not far enough. He's been running from this for almost longer than he can remember.)

He has not burned an offering in longer than he cares to think about, has not poured out wine to share with the spirits, has hung neither cloth nor paper streamers from his balcony nor picked up any of the hundred tiny charms strewn around Little Wutai like fallen leaves. He has long since chosen to bury away the words of the formal prayers, the invocations drilled into him again and again until his speaking of them was note-perfect; his sword has not drawn the door between the worlds in so long he would have to cudgel his memory to produce the sigils. He left the weight of his priesthood on Wutai's shores, piled in a heap in his quarters in the Palace along with his family name and the burden of his loyalties. And yet he purifies himself after each death that can be laid at his feet, keeps his tiny shrine in his private apartment -- well-disguised, but unmistakable to those who have eyes to see -- and has kept Leviathan's Vigil without fail each year, even when it falls in the midst of a mission, no matter where he is and what he will be called to do once sun rises.

He's never been able to say *why* he keeps those particular devotional habits when so many others have been banished into the mists of his own personal history, why he has kept that tiny fraction of the complicated mass of everything he was taught and every vow he was made to swear, until this very moment: he has kept those habits so he might not forget the process of speaking for the gods' ears, and so They will be forced to hear his voice when he does.

For over half his life, he has been trying to disavow his belief in Them, cursing and spitting and raging the whole way, and the whole time he has known (in his deepest heart, where he keeps his secrets and his loves) the day was coming when he would be forced to stand again before Them and bargain for that which he holds dear.

So he grits his teeth and kneels, bows his head and sweeps his hair to the side, places his hand over his heart and his chin against his chest, and summons the last fractional remnants of the mantle of Leviathan's priesthood that was thrust upon him all unwilling by so many: his family, his masters, his people. The gods Themselves, who decreed in the days before there were recorded days that those who would rule Wutai should keep her deepest secrets, and those who would defend her should be consecrated to her rulers and protectors. Tseng has long since called that sacred bargain broken at the instant They failed to uphold Their end of the deal, but his heritage and his training gives him this right, for all he'd thought he'd never take up this mantle again. He has shattered each of the oaths he took to the gods' mysteries one by one in service to his honor, down nearly to the last, the one that has been the core of everything he is and the one he had been running towards for years before he even knew it existed. It is that oath he is seeking to uphold now. (Always.)

*"I know You are listening to me,"* he snarls, the same shocking mode and inflection that had earned him such superstitious awe among his year-mates and such aghast disbelief from the old priest-masters: imperial humility layered so thickly it sings coldness and precision and distance to any listener, mixed with pronouns and inflections resurrected from the archaic depths of linguistic history,

brutal and worshipful in equal measure. *"I know You have not ceased, not through a single one of the years You have used me. Know this, for I make this vow with all I am and all I have made myself without Your help: You may do whatever You wish with me. You have since the moment I quickened in my mother's womb. But if You wish for me to cooperate with You in the least, if You have even the faintest hope of grudging acceptance instead of outright defiance, You will stop treating him as a gamepiece. He is not Yours. He never will be. And this is not negotiable. If You wanted me at his side so much You were willing to nearly destroy me to get me here, You will by earth's blood stop manipulating him lest we both tell You to go get fucked."*

The sound in his ears is recognizable as nothing less than laughter. The salt-ocean taste in the back of his mouth grows sharper, more pronounced, and his rational mind whispers facts about the human body's salinity and the human mind's ability to perceive that which it expects. The part of him born an Imperial youngest son, raised to serve -- his family, his father, his brother, his country, the gods -- is telling him *yes, this*, this is how it ought to be. This is familiar, this is *correct*; even in the womb he was marked to become an emperor's rightmost and most loyal hand, to defend his lord against all who would threaten him even when those threats are from the very gods themselves, and the minute he'd laid eyes on Rufus Shinra he'd realized everything he'd done up until that point, every decision he'd agonized over and every oath he'd broken, had all been done in service of setting him before his true and rightful lord, the voice of the gods endlessly whispering in the back of his mind *go forth* until he thought he had gone mad with the charge --

But the noise he's heard behind him isn't a reflection of the wind against the building, or the hissing amusement of the gods he *will not* let himself start listening to again. It's the sound of a sharp inhaled breath, and he's on his feet and whirling around before he can stop himself, and of course, of *course* it's Tifa standing there, her hand pressed against her mouth, eyes wide as she stares at him.

Anger slices through him at the look she is giving him, the suddenly-wary edge she hasn't shown him with such naked honesty since the very first night they met. Tifa is fluent enough in Wutaian to have understood at least some of his words, enough to glean their meaning even if she does not, *cannot*, understand their nuance. It isn't enough, apparently, that he has managed to infuriate Rufus this morning; the gods have clearly decided he is to likewise plague his -- his whatever-it-is Tifa-is-to-him -- with fears for his sanity as well. He wonders how much she did understand. He wonders how much of the fear in her eyes is for his words, and how much is for whatever expression must be scrawled nakedly across his face.

*I have had enough of Your shit for one lifetime, much less one week*, Tseng thinks, as viciously as he can, because he knows he can't rid himself of the anger and it's better to direct it at the true cause than to continue to frighten those around him. (To frighten *Tifa*, who has always seemed to him fearless beyond the point most others would deem it madness, until suddenly she isn't fearless at all anymore.) *And I still refuse to believe in You.* (As well to disbelieve gravity. But all delusions are self-delusion at the core, and whether it's his knowledge of Leviathan's attention that is the self-delusion or the thought he could somehow decree the gods nothing more than a

monster story told to frighten children into obedience, he could not say.)

The only answer he receives is one brief surge of the sight coming over him again, Tifa flaring to life before his eyes just as boldly as Rufus had, cool moon-silver to Rufus's sunlit gold. Where the touch of the gods is marked across Rufus's brow, with Tifa it sleeps in her chest, over her heart, soft and steady: not an emperor's blaze but a warrior's armor, faint but bedrock-solid nonetheless. The sight shocks him into silence. Tseng has known for years Rufus was marked by destiny's hand long before Tseng met him, that his own life has been intertwined with Rufus's by the will of the heavens most likely since the moment of Rufus's birth, but he never expected this. Not Tifa. He wonders how many others of his regular companions are wearing signs of the gods' favor (the gods' curse) hidden beneath their exterior seemings. This is why he sometimes feels as though he would willingly reach into his mind and *cauterize* whatever pathways bear responsibility for these gifts the gods have cursed him with, the gifts he *cannot fucking shut away* completely no matter how assiduously he tries. There are things he should not be forced to know, and he has no idea why this morning, of all days, his usual iron control over this unwanted sight is failing him utterly.

But the vision fades just as quickly as it came to life, as Tifa takes a single step back. Away from whatever he must be showing, what he must be giving away. Her chin comes up, her jaw firming, and he can see the moment where she decides to take refuge in formality, in duty. "We're leaving in fifteen minutes," she says. "If you're coming with us, you need to get dressed."

That she should think to dictate to him infuriates him further, even as he knows his reaction to be unfounded: she is the native here, and after all the horror stories Tseng has heard of these mountains he would not wish to brave them without her guidance. (They lost seven of the reconstruction party to the mountain's dangers, and Tseng suddenly finds himself wondering whether their deaths had been natural or whether they had stumbled across something they shouldn't have.) He, too, reaches for formality, lest he say something unconscionable: he bows to her, reaching with the unthinking precision of long habit for the response he uses when confronted with a situation in which he does not know what to say. He only realizes after he's straightened back up that she, unlike the others of Midgar he is surrounded with, may very well be able to divine the implied insult of arrogance and disdain encoded in depth and duration.

The chill in her eyes tells him she can read it, and doesn't like it. Too late to convince her it was only an accident, that he's used his body for years to communicate the things he cannot let himself say, because he knows those around him will not be able to read those motions, until the motions have become second nature and not honest sentiment. (At least the anger has replaced the fear he could see there moments ago.) He can see her chest rise as she inhales to say something else, something sharply cutting or unbearably insightful. He can see the minute she changes her mind and turns to go back inside instead.

Then she turns back, and the motion is swift and graceful,

balanced on one heel, her body rotating compactly around her center of gravity, shoulders drawing back as though she's trying to keep herself from launching for him with fists and feet and fury. "Actually, no," she says, calm and neat and precise. He has *no idea* what she is denying. "I'm not going to let you do this. You don't *get* to do this. I don't care who you were talking to and I don't care what's been eating you all morning, but whatever it is, get the fuck over it. Or you're staying here, because I am not bringing you up that mountain with a chip on your shoulder the size of the one you're nursing. I will not be a party to you committing suicide-by-distraction and I will not let you make me any more into a supporting character in your story than you already have."

So. Sharply cutting *and* unbearably insightful. The rage Tseng keeps penned up deeply behind his hard-won cloak of control slips free for half an instant, and he can *feel* himself snarling at her. "*You will not speak to me thus, woman,*" he growls, realizing only after the fact that the words have come out in the language, the mode, of his birth. (How easily he loses so many years of Midgar's habits.) He knows it's the wrong thing to say even as he hears himself say it. He can't stop himself anyway.

Sure enough, his rage kindles a fury across her face he has only seen hints of, once or twice, lingering beneath the sweet gentility she usually wears. "*You are lucky I care for you or you would already bleed,*" she snarls right back at him, and oh. *Oh.* She *has* been listening to him. Because she has answered in the same manner in which he addressed her, and her vowels are as blurry around the edges as they always are and she swallows half the endings like she doesn't know what they truly signify, but she's answering him mode for mode and register for register, the arrogance of command in her every syllable. He's never heard her attempt any mode other than her usual, that linguistic travesty that never fails to leave him secretly amused. To hear those imperial inflections now, in these circumstances, makes a part of his chest ache and his knees itch to bend, and it makes him homesick for a place that was never home and a role that was never his to keep in the first place.

It only infuriates him further. He is not that man anymore, no matter that this morning seems to be trying to force him back into being, and he *will not* let her and Rufus with their new and terrifying alliance press-gang him back into the skin he spent so long learning to shed, whether Leviathan's priest or emperor's sword. Tifa has no claim over him, none he cannot renounce at any moment. He has been scrupulously careful not to let her have. She has no right to give him orders, even if she doesn't know that's what she's doing. And he isn't at all certain she doesn't know what she's doing.

They stare at each other, eyes locked on each others' faces, and Tseng can see her hands curling into fists at her sides. Then her anger passes, like a cloud passing over the sun, and the towering projection of *presence* she almost always wears fades away, leaving behind nothing more than a small, exhausted, unhappy woman. "I'm not doing this today," she says. "If we're going to fight, we're going to do it *after* I finish visiting the place I died in, and we're not going to do it while I'm standing over the graves of everyone I ever knew and loved. Put some fucking clothes on. Or I'm leaving you here."

This time, when she turns her back on him, she doesn't look back. The sound of the door slamming behind her is too loud, echoing across the yard.

Tseng closes his eyes and breathes, deeply. Breathes, and forces himself to gather the reins of his spirit into balance at his center, and tries to earth the dregs of his anger out through the bare soles of his feet, and when none of it works he stalks back into the mansion and ignores everyone's eyes on his shoulders as he crosses the kitchen and heads upstairs to dress.

His mood must have rubbed off on everyone else -- or maybe Tifa's did. When he comes back down (dressed in last night's coveralls; they're the only thing he has with him with sufficient pocket space to allow him to arm himself well enough to feel secure save for BDUs, and although Rufus could wear them and be thought the role he's pretending -- half of Midgar's young toughs dress in BDUs and play at SOLDIERS -- he is not Rufus, and cannot sell the same story), Reno and Rude are having a vicious argument over which one of them will be accompanying the expedition and which will be staying behind to guard the mansion, and their patients, against outside incursions. Tseng walks in just as Reeve finishes saying something well-meaning but clueless in an attempt to defuse the situation and Reno actually *growls* at him. "Shut up, all of you," Tseng snaps, before Reno can respond. Rude gives him a look that, behind the sunglasses, is no doubt too piercing. Reno and Reeve both stiffen, Reno because he always comes to heel when Tseng uses that tone on him, and Reeve out of injured pride.

Tseng's *head hurts*. Rufus is looking at him, eyes narrowed thoughtfully, looking as though he's about to say something. At the table, Valentine's trying to fade away into the shadows, but there's something in the set of his jaw practically *screaming* that he is judging them all and finding them wanting.

"Enough," Tifa says from the far side of the room, drawn and weary, before anyone else can chime in. "It's a moot point. I'm not taking all of you up there anyway, and if you try to go without me, you'll just wind up dead." She turns from the pantry, arms loaded with bottled water; her eyes sweep the room and land on Valentine. "You. You said last night and this morning that you know what really happened here. I know you haven't decided yet whether or not we can be trusted with that knowledge, and I'm sure you're watching this morning's shitshow and thinking we're all hopeless, but correct me if I'm wrong: you are able to sort through everything downstairs and say what holds necessary information and what is a distraction, yes?"

Valentine nods, slowly, his eyes steady on hers. "I am, yes."

"Good." Tifa crosses the kitchen on bare and quiet feet and sets the bottles of water down on the table. "Reno, Rude, you're with him, then. Everything you and Tseng weren't able to find last night, go find now. Reno, whatever you can do to get Cloud and Zack well enough to travel, do it. We'll probably be running on borrowed time by the time we come back. Tseng, Reeve, Rufus, you three are with me. You said last night there's Restore materia in the first-aid kit?" She doesn't wait for Reno's confirming nod. "One of you equip it. I don't care who. It's mating season for half the mountain predators and if you wind up in

the wrong place at the wrong time you can get half-dead before you even notice. I'll be in the hallway finishing the packs. I've got a bad feeling about this, and we're not leaving until I check everyone's gear one last time."

Tseng flicks a quick look at Rufus, waiting for him to countermand any of Tifa's orders, waiting for him to reassume control of the situation, but Rufus is smirking, lips half-curved, eyes far too amused. "Won't let me do it alone, hm?" Rufus says to her, and Tseng has no idea what he means, but it must, *must* be part of whatever transpired between them this morning that appears to have changed everything. "Silly me; I didn't realize that meant I was acquiring a new general for my campaigns." He sounds wry and amused, Rufus's *true* amusement, the subtle self-mockery so many people mistake for mockery of them.

Tseng *really fucking hates* not knowing what's going on, and he has no idea what he expected would happen when he put Rufus and Tifa in the same room, but it wasn't this. It should have been. It really, really should have been.

"Oh, fuck you backwards with Ifrit's flaming dick," Tifa says (Reno chokes to hear it), but the edges of her lips are finally starting to twitch with suppressed amusement instead of with suppressed rage. "Make yourself useful for once in your life and help me grab that water. And *somebody* had better have the dishes done when we get back."

With both Rufus and Tifa out of the room, the air feels cooler, or emptier, or *something*.

For lack of something better to do, Tseng finds himself gathering the plates that are still strewn across the table, stacking them neatly into piles and bringing them over to the sink. When he turns away to go back for the second round, he nearly runs into Reno. Reno's got four glasses pinned together with his fingers splayed around them, and he sidesteps Tseng neatly enough to tell Tseng the near-collision hadn't been an accident. "You okay, boss?" he asks, voice low enough for them to be the only ones who can hear.

"I am *fine*," Tseng says. He's really beginning to get tired of people asking him that.

Usually when he uses that tone of voice, Reno backs down. This time he doesn't. "I been keeping my mouth shut because I know none of you wanna hear me running it, and I have no idea what's going on here beyond the obvious, but boss, I can tell you're trying to hold the whole plate on your shoulders again. And if anybody could do it, it's probably you, but I don't think anybody *can*. Toss some of that shit at me, yeah? You gotta let me carry some of your crap, 'cause I don't wanna know what'll happen if you drop it."

Looking at Reno (at his second-in-command, at his own loyal right hand) staring at him, eyes wide and open and guileless, makes the last of his annoyance run out of him like water spilling from between cupped fingers. "Later," Tseng says, but it's less annoyed than it could be, and he knows Reno will be able to hear the difference. "We're on a time crunch."



"Yeah, okay," Reno agrees. "But I'm gonna hold you to that 'later'."

Too many people are telling him that this morning.

Whatever he could say in response is cut off by Tifa returning, Rufus trailing along behind her. They're carrying two backpacks each, one in each hand; Rufus hands one to Reeve, while Tifa comes across and hands one to Tseng. The curve of her jaw speaks to her determination to avoid any personal matters. Tseng obeys her unspoken request and simply takes the pack from her without pressing further. "Up to you if you want to grab a cold-weather parka or just get by with a sweatshirt," Tifa says. "It's colder than you'd think up there, although the sunlight and the exertion will probably keep you warm enough."

The way she's bracing herself against whatever else he might say makes guilt stab through Tseng. He has tried his best, through the years, to make certain he never has occasion to leave her feeling lesser than she truly is, and his irritation at the situation should not transfer itself at irritation at she who is not the architect of his annoyances. But now is not the time to get into any of the details -- not when they are in the midst of something much larger than they are -- and so all he does is nod. "Thank you," he says. Something sparks in her eyes, but he doesn't look too closely. He doesn't really want to know.

The sunlight is warm against Tseng's hair as they make their way out of the mansion and through the outlying paths beyond the backyard. Tifa leads them through the scraggly thicket of evergreens that form the back boundary of the mansion's yard, and Tseng can tell -- from what he knows of where the reactor lies in relation to the town; from the sense of where he is in relation to the world around him that is the only one of the spirit-gifts he's never tried to shake -- that she is leading them well out of their way. He keeps his own counsel. He will trust her knowledge; he's lost the knack of navigating in environments other than urban, and she shows no sign of hesitating.

For the first few minutes their walk is almost pleasant; they're all quiet, and Tseng can hear the song of some mountain bird in the distance. As they come out onto the edge of a narrow, dirt-packed pathway that stretches up and into the hills, though, Tifa -- in the lead, with Rufus behind her, then Reeve, Tseng holding up the rear -- stops short. She cocks her head, *listening*, and Tseng might not be able to tell what's wrong, but he can tell by the frown on her face that something is.

"What is it?" Rufus asks, coming up beside her.

Tifa shakes her head, but doesn't say anything; her brows are drawn together and she turns in a slow circle. Tseng catches himself sweeping the space around them for potential threat. It's been years since he's spent any significant amount of time outside the city, and the hills of Wutai are nothing like the fierce rock and treacherous footing of Mt. Nibel, but he does remember what mountainous terrain should look like. He can't spot anything wrong here.

"I don't know," Tifa finally says. "I can't put my finger on it. Something's --" She stops, frowns more. "I might just be imagining it."

"Assume you're not," Tseng says. "What aren't you imagining?"

Tifa bites her lip. "It *feels* wrong up here," she finally says. "And I know it sounds crazy. I -- I caught a whiff of it this morning, I think, but we were mostly on the other side of the plateau and I was trying to wrangle Reno. This --" She breaks off, her eyes roving over the rock face on the side of the narrow trail. "I can't put my finger on it," she says, again. "But it feels wrong."

Tseng is the last person on this earth to mock another's sense of the world around them. "Bad enough to justify turning around?" he asks.

Tifa appears to consider the question for a few minutes. Tseng watches as she crosses over to the rock face, reaches out a hand to touch it. Tiny pebbles crumble away at the touch. She frowns again and brushes harder, and a larger chunk comes free. She bends down and picks it up, rubbing her thumb over it, and seems to come to a decision. "I need a better look," she says. She shrugs out of her pack, sets it on the ground next to her, and unzips the front pocket, pulling out a smaller pouch and clipping it to her belt. When she straightens up to look at them all, her eyes skim over them all and come to rest on Tseng's, a fraction of a second longer than they should. "I need you all to do exactly what I tell you. I'm going to scramble up and get a view from higher ground. And usually it wouldn't be a problem at all, but --" Her gesture sweeps across the rock, clearly trying to communicate something Tseng isn't familiar enough to follow.

Rufus follows her gesture, frowning as though if he concentrates hard enough, he'll be able to see whatever mysterious signs and portents Tifa is reading. "What's the issue?"

She shakes her head. "I don't *know*. If I did, this would be a lot easier." She cranes her neck back, looking up at the rock stretching up above them. The trail circles around and around them, switchbacking up the side of the mountain. Where they're standing, the next pass of the trail is easily fifty or sixty feet above them. Tseng can't imagine she intends to climb that herself. "Not here," she says abruptly, picking her pack back up. "Up the trail about two hundred yards or so. There's a spot I used to use for beginners to bouldering. Maybe that's more stable."

"Do you want a spotter?" Reeve asks, quietly. "We do most of the outdoor reactor maintenance on rope, but I can spot without, too."

Tifa blows out a breath. "No. I'm sure you know what you're doing, but we haven't worked together yet. I'm rusty, but I'm not that rusty. Best thing you can all do for me is to stay out of my way. I don't even know why I'm so jumpy. I used to free climb things three times as high with a lot shittier handholds." She looks over her shoulder again, more jumpy than Tseng's ever seen her look, and actually *shudders*. "I don't know," she repeats. "I might just be on edge from all the weird shit we've run into already."

"I'll trust your instincts," Rufus says, grimly. "Lead the way."

Watching Tifa stand at the bottom of the rock face and dust chalk over her hands from the pouch she's clipped to her belt is, Tseng discovers, much like watching Tifa flowing through her morning *kata*: the pleasure of watching an artist at work. Her eyes rove over the rock, lips moving faintly as she makes brief, abortive hand motions. Trying to work out the sequence of moves, Tseng imagines. He can see, now that he's looking for it, the faintest dusting of old chalk in a few of the cracks.

"Stand back," Tifa says, finally, turning around and fixing Tseng and Rufus with a fierce glare. Reeve is already giving Tifa a wide berth; Tifa nods her chin at him. "At least where he's standing, preferably further. If I see *one* of you getting any closer, I'm going to kick you in the head."

Once they're arranged to her satisfaction, she rubs the tips of her thumbs over the tips of her fingers in a brief gesture that feels almost ritualized, and steps up to the base of the cliff rising upward before them. Try as he might, Tseng can't tell how she chooses *this* handhold, how she selects *that* foothold, but watching her flow up the side of the mountain is like watching her become one with the rock. He can tell, watching her move, that she's testing each hold before trusting her weight to it; pebbles skitter down the side of the cliff as she dislodges them, and only the fact Reeve is grinning, watching her, keeps Tseng from lunging forward in protest when she reaches for a hold and it breaks away beneath her hand. It doesn't seem to disturb her; her lips move in what he can tell is a curse, but she doesn't even wobble, only redirects her hand to a crack about six inches higher and tries again.

It's only the work of a few minutes before she's reached a slight ledge in the rock that was clearly her destination all along. It doesn't look wide enough to be able to sit comfortably on, but that doesn't seem to stop her; she hooks her heel up onto it from below, her leg stretching implausibly high above her waist, and even Tseng's eye can't quite follow the order in which she somehow pushes herself upwards on what looks to be thin air and flips herself around until she's spidered against the rock, facing outward. She shades her eyes against the sun as she cranes her neck and surveys the scene around them, looking for something.

Then she sighs, lets her hand drop, and -- Tseng's heart nearly stops to see it -- leaps from her perch, rolling with the landing the same way she'd roll with a throw to shed her momentum and coming up kneeling and dusty. ("And *that* would be why she told us to stand back here," Reeve says, watching her dust the chalk off her hands against her skirt.)

"Anything?" Rufus asks.

"Maybe," Tifa says, climbing back to her feet and rocking the shoulder she'd rolled over. "Maybe not. It might just be that I'm not seeing the wildlife I'd expect -- this time of year there should be at least a few Kyuvilduns, maybe a Sahagin or two, but I haven't seen anything. Could be it was a bad winter and they're still hibernating, I don't know what the weather was like this year, but ..." She shrugs, still looking tense. "It's been too long. I can't say for sure. It could even be bad memories and bad associations. If I see anything

concrete, I'll tell you immediately, but until then... stay behind me, and stay close. If you see *anything* that makes you think something might be wrong, sing out."

Tifa's uneasy feeling aside, the hike up the mountain is not unpleasant. Tseng was expecting something far more gruelling -- and from the way Tifa keeps looking over her shoulder and starting at every small noise, so was she -- but the only things that interrupt them are a few small animals (and one very startled mountain goat), and the largest danger they see is a broad-winged bird, its wingspan looking greater than Tseng's height, circling overhead once or twice. ("Zuu," Tifa says, noticing Tseng watching it. "They won't attack you unless you're out in the open, or if they spot metal on you. Try to keep out of direct sunlight when you see it, so nothing glints at it and makes it think you're a good target, but we should be okay.")

They're about an hour into their hike up the trail, having fallen into a two-by-two pattern with Rufus at Tifa's side and Tseng pacing Reeve behind them, when Rufus breaks the silence they've all fallen into. "So, I'm curious," he begins. He sounds idle, like he's just making conversation, but Tseng's ears sharpen: underneath the casual, relaxed tone Rufus has adopted, his question is a probe, a test. "Why us three?"

Tifa turns back from where she's still sweeping the terrain around them. "Why what?" she asks, frowning.

The little gesture Rufus makes encompasses everything: the trail, the mountain, the four of them. "Why'd you bring the three of us? You found out this morning Reno can climb if he has to; Rude's less exhausted than Tseng or I. And you didn't know anything about Reeve's capabilities. Why'd you bring the three of us with you?"

Next to Tseng, Reeve opens his mouth; Tseng doesn't know what he might be planning to say, but he snakes his hand out and catches Reeve's wrist, and Reeve quiets down. Tseng isn't actually certain either of them knows he and Reeve can hear them. Rufus's voice was pitched quietly, and Tseng and Reeve are a good twenty feet behind them. But Tifa was right, sound does carry, against the rock. He desperately wants to hear Tifa's answer, because he knows Rufus isn't just making conversation. Underneath the easy, idle tone, Rufus is testing Tifa, questioning her tactical decision and forcing her to justify her choices, and it's a sound Tseng knows damn well. He did it to Rufus for years.

Ahead of them, Tifa glances over her shoulder at some faint noise only she can hear, the late-morning sun glinting off her hair. Tseng can't tell from the look on her face whether she knows what Rufus is doing or not; she's worn the same faint frown since they departed. "Reeve was the one absolute in the party, actually," she says. Her voice is just as casual, but Tseng can hear the faint note of challenge in it, and he realizes she knows precisely what Rufus's motivations are. Or thinks she does, at least. "He's the one who'll be able to explain whatever it is we find up there. Reno's my second-best climber, but he's also been awake for over a day and is on at least one dose of Fury that's probably going to wear off before we get through this. He was also with us yesterday, so if anyone comes knocking, he can answer the door and it won't look suspicious. Rude, I

thought about, but he *is* less exhausted than anyone else, and if something happens back at the mansion, there'll need to be someone there in good enough shape to handle -- whatever comes up. Tseng ..." She trails off, tossing another quick look back over her shoulder. Tseng tries to look like he isn't listening; he must succeed, since she turns back again. "He's quick enough on his feet to handle anything that might attack us, he got more sleep this morning than you did, and out of everyone available he's probably most likely to be able to handle a fight without firearms. One shot would at least make the town aware that someone was up here, and it's too early in the season for anyone to be out hunting."

"Hmm." From the sound of it, Tseng can imagine Rufus's expression: eyebrows precisely raised, face neutral, no hint at what he might be thinking. "And me?"

Unexpectedly, Tifa laughs. It rings off the rock around them. "Don't honestly tell me I wouldn't have had to knock you unconscious to keep you from following. This way I get to keep an eye on you."

Rufus chuffs, soft amusement. "Okay, I'll grant you that. What's the biggest danger up here? Aside from the predators, since they seem to be mostly missing."

Tifa sighs. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing," she says, instead of answering. "You don't want the information; you're trying to figure out how my tactical brain works."

"Still a valid question," Rufus points out. And Tseng once more desperately wants to know what happened this morning before he woke up, what changed the way they were interacting so thoroughly he's scrabbling to keep up, because if asked, he would have thought it even odds Rufus would have gotten huffy at Tifa's recalcitrance to answer or Tifa would have gotten stiff-necked at the questioning, thinking Rufus to be implying she was less competent than she is. Instead, they sound like they're making conversation over afternoon tea.

"You know," Tifa says, still ignoring Rufus's question, "this morning you said you'd get back to talking about me and leadership, and you never did. I have this sneaking suspicion you're up to something."

"Would I do that?" Rufus sounds perfectly innocent. Tseng's heard that sound often enough to know it to be a perfect lie.

Tifa snorts. "Weren't you the one who spent twenty minutes this morning telling me all about different kinds of manipulation? I believe you'd do just about *anything* if it'd get you what you wanted. I'm just having trouble figuring out what it is you'd want. I'm not a --"

She stops dead just as Tseng is starting to boggle at what her words imply (what it implies that she is confident enough of their reception to risk saying them), throwing out an arm across Rufus's chest to halt his steps as well. "Stop," she says, her voice pitched louder this time, intended to carry to Reeve and Tseng as well. Tseng palms a knife as he comes up behind them, eyes flicking around to see what she noticed that made her call a halt, but he can't see anything.

"Wait here," Tifa says. "*Don't* move." She slips around the curve of rock blocking sight of the upcoming path before anyone can protest. No more than thirty seconds pass before they can hear her, swearing viciously.

"We've got a problem," she says, coming back around the curve. She looks worried and furious, in equal measure. "We're coming up on a switchback -- it's what'll get us up there --" She jerks a thumb above them, where they've been pacing a narrow track higher above them, heading upwards in the other direction, for about ten minutes. "Except there's been a rockslide. The entire side of the trail's sheared straight off; it's nothing but rubble. Twenty foot gap in the trail, easy."

Rufus blows out air in something slightly more emphatic than a sigh. "Is that what was tripping your warnings down there?"

Tifa hesitates. "I -- don't know. I don't think so. Or if it is, it's only a symptom. There's something really wrong up here, and I don't know what. That trail shouldn't have gone; I deliberately brought you guys up the most stable route." She chews on her lip, her eyes distant. "You know," she says, slowly. "Whatever it is, it might be the same thing that made the bridge collapse on us, back when -- back when. I said Saturday night, we were all waiting for it to go, but -- you know, thinking about it, it wasn't the ropes of the bridge that frayed. It was the edge of the ravine crumbling in."

"Hold that thought," Tseng says. "Practicalities first: is there any way to get past this?"

Tifa sighs. "Yeah, that's what I was just asking myself. There is, but it'd be about another two hours of detour, and that would mean a descent in the dark, and..." She shakes her head. "I don't know. I really don't. If Reeve has enough climbing experience, between the two of us, *maybe* we could talk the two of you through climbing up, if you do *everything* I tell you to do, without question and without hesitation... but that could wind up taking just as long, if not longer, depending on how bad things get. I don't like it. My gut instinct is to say we descend and try again tomorrow, leave just at dawn, but ..." She trails off again, shrugs. Transfers her gaze to Rufus. "How much longer do you think we have before somebody comes looking to see whether we've found the monster in the basement?"

"Not that long," Rufus says, grimly. "I'd be happiest if we were out of here by tonight and back in Midgar before somebody comes looking for me. Not only am I certain someone's going to come running up to the mansion as soon as we leave, I can only put off everyone for so long before somebody talks to somebody else and realizes I'm not really in Cosmo Canyon. I picked Cosmo deliberately because there aren't many people who'll talk to Shinra there, and I've been bouncing my emails through about a dozen different proxy servers so nobody can tell where they're being sent from, but there really isn't anything in Cosmo that would require me to stay three days. Four, by the time we got back, given the time difference."

Tifa closes her eyes for a few seconds longer than a blink would justify. Tseng watches as she takes a deep breath, clearly thinking hard, then squares her shoulders and opens her eyes again. "I can't make this call," she says. "We have two choices. No, three. One, I

can get you up this cliff somehow and we can pick up the trail above us, bypass the rockslide. It would be hard, but I *think* I can do it, and I've got gear; not enough gear to be really happy about it, but I've got gear. The only *real* danger is to me -- once I get up, I can top-roped you all, and the worst danger is getting banged to shit by falling rocks. It'll be a fucking pain -- I can tell just by looking that the holds here are not what I'd put a total novice on in the *least* -- but once I'm up, we can make it work. Two, we go back down the trail, take the other way up."

She breathes in, short and sharp. "I *really* didn't want to take you guys that way, because I have no idea if the bridge is still out and if it is we'll have to climb down into the ravine and trail up that way, but down is easier than up and the remnants of the bridge are possibly still there as a ladder. Downside to that, beyond the bridge, is that it would almost certainly give us a much more limited time in the actual reactor before having to head back, and we'd have to go *extremely* out of our way to get back without climbing back up the ravine -- it could easily take us until midnight to make our way back to the mansion. Hell, at this point, we may be looking at that anyway, because with this trail out, *all* the routes back are going to involve climbing somehow, and -- I really, really don't want to take mountain virgins abseiling in the dark. But that route would almost certainly take us longer to get up there, so it'd be a guarantee we'd either be camping out or braving the dark."

"That isn't the only reason you don't like that option, is it," Rufus says. It isn't a question.

"No, it isn't, which you fucking well know," Tifa snaps back at him, and Tseng realizes they're talking about the prospect of recreating her mad, desperate rush to the reactor while her home burned beneath her. Next to him, Reeve looks as though he wants to ask, but doesn't, sensing the charged nature of the moment. "Which is not to say I can't handle it, because I *can*. But if I have to, it's going to cost, and that's something you have to take into account. Because I could do it, and if I have to I *will* do it, but I can't guarantee how *well* I'll do it, and I honestly don't think we can afford to have me fighting off a panic attack every thirty seconds in the dark on uncertain ground. I could get you through it. It wouldn't be pretty."

Tseng's heart is breaking for her, but Rufus only nods. "What's the third option?" The way he sounds, Tseng knows he's already identified it, or something he thinks is a third option; he wants to know what Tifa thinks it is.

"We drop back to the mansion, pack everything up, shove everything and everybody into the helicopter, and take that up. Which blows any chance of pretending we weren't up there, because, once again, sound carries. When a helicopter lands at the reactor, everyone knows it. But we may have lost any chance of stealth *anyway* -- whoever's been left there to babysit is almost certainly going to come running the minute we leave, and they're going to find the wreck we made of that basement and report back. But there's still a chance we can leave them guessing about who we are and how much we know, if we destroy the place behind us when we leave." Tifa sighs again. "Like I said: I can't make the call."

Tseng's eyes flick to Rufus. "Fourth option," he says. He doesn't need to say more; he knows Rufus will know what he means. The fourth option, and the one Rufus almost certainly already had in mind, is for them to neutralize anyone who might be inclined to report back to whomever pulls their strings. Which, since they can't be sure who that might *be*, means leaving the town as much of a wasteland as Sephiroth left it, and almost certainly means killing hundreds of people who may or may not be complicit in what really went on here. He doesn't think Tifa needs to hear him elaborate; he is certain she would never forgive him, or them, for doing it. But it needs to be said.

But Tifa shocks him. "Yeah, I thought of that, too," she says, and her voice sounds *dead*. Soul-weary, at having had the thought, at having *considered* the thought, and the complete lack of inflection in her voice says she did more than just consider it in passing. "Except we don't know how frequently they check in, and we don't know if they've reported back already -- I would have, if someone came out of nowhere and told the story we told -- and we don't know if they may've described us, and I'm pretty sure whoever they report to would find it horribly suspicious if the entire town turned up dead after we left." (*Again*, the twist of her lips says, shouting silently to the heavens.)

The silence stretches out between them. Rufus is staring off into the near distance, eyes flicking back and forth in the uncanny fashion he tends to use when reasoning through something from start to finish. Tseng has always wondered what he's seeing, in those moments. "You said the danger's to you," he finally says. "How dangerous?"

Tifa sighs again -- this time, heavily enough that Tseng can hear the whistle of her breath in her chest. Or perhaps that's just the wind blowing by them. (*Please*, Tseng thinks, to an uncaring universe; *please, let it just be the wind*.) "Three years ago, I would have said not much danger at all, but three years ago, I was convinced I was invincible. Now? I don't know. Barring utter disaster, I can keep myself from getting killed. I can't guarantee I can avoid breaking bones. And I don't mind taking the risk, but if I'm down, you lose your guide."

Rufus dismisses that with a wave. "I have a mastered Restore, I can heal just about anything shy of death," he says. The cavalier way he says it startles Tseng. Rufus has always hated casting restorative magic, avoids doing so whenever possible. But of the four of them, there's no doubt he'd be the best choice. Tseng himself would be anyone rational's last choice of healer, while Reeve is competent enough in an emergency but lacks the magical strength to cast anything more powerful than a first-level Cure. And Tifa is an unknown quantity; she's almost certainly never equipped a materia before in her life. (When this particular mission is accomplished, Tseng should rectify that. Or have Reno rectify it; she'll likely learn better from him.) "Reeve, are you confident enough that you'd be able to do what she'd need you to do?"

Reeve has been listening to the discussion with interest, but one of the things Tseng loves about working with Reeve is that he never talks just to feel as though he's made his stamp on the conversation;



he isn't as taciturn as Rude is (some *rocks* are not as taciturn as Rude is), but until his input is needed, he generally keeps his own counsel. Since Tifa first proposed the option, Reeve's been studying the rock above them, chewing on his lip and evaluating the terrain. Instead of answering Rufus directly, he turns to Tifa: "I've never done rock climbing, as opposed to reactor climbing. I take it you'd want me to belay?"

"Yeah," Tifa says. She doesn't sound happy. "And there's a good chance you'll have to catch me -- if the rock gave out less than a hundred feet up the trail, I'm not all that confident about it *here*, either. But if you can belay me, and I can get up there and set an anchor, I can bring everyone else up from up top. As long as you pay attention and *don't panic*, I think it can work. Assuming nobody's scared of heights."

"I can do that," Reeve says; he doesn't even need to stop and think. "I've belayed a bit before. Not for something like this, but I'm familiar with the basics. And if I can avoid panicking when one of my idiot juniors hits the wrong button and leaves us two minutes to containment ignition, I can avoid panicking through this. Just tell me what to do."

"Right, then," Rufus says. "In the interests of maintaining *some* hope -- however vanishingly faint -- of getting out of here without fucking everything six ways to Sunday, let's start with that, with the one provision that if you get partway up and you think it's not going to work, you call it off." His eyes are fixed on Tifa; Tseng bites back the protest. It's not the choice he would have made -- if this were his mission, he would have chosen option four. But it isn't his mission, and he knows Rufus would not take well to having his objection vocalized, especially since he knows full well Rufus *knows* Tseng's choice would be option four. (He realizes, watching Tifa watching Rufus, that -- despite knowing Rufus could read his counsel from his face in that brief moment -- he is still disquieted by the fact he is the only one Rufus has not asked for input on the decision, that it is Tifa Rufus is looking to for answers to his questions. But now is not the time to examine that revelation in greater depth; he makes himself set it aside. He will not let his own insecurities endanger them all.)

The climbing lesson Tifa gives them is brief but intense, conducted in scraps and pieces as she confiscates each of their backpacks -- apparently she spread out the essentials among the four of them, something Tseng sees Rufus quietly approving of -- and piles heaps of unfamiliar tools on the ground, sorting through them. The basics are simple -- never move until you know where you're moving to; keep three points of contact on the rock at all times; don't put your weight on any hold before you test it. Don't worry if you fall, because the rope will catch you before you go anywhere, and all you have to do is not panic.

"And you're going to fall," she says, looking up at them as she recoils ropes, inspects gear. The spikes (pitons, she calls them) she's produced from the bottom of their packs come in seven or eight different styles; some of them have a faint sheen of rust over the loops on the ends. She must have salvaged them from somewhere; they all look used. "I haven't worked out the route yet, but I can tell just looking at it, this is *not* the kind of thing I'd start a beginner on.

At all. The only reason I'm willing to risk this is because I'll have you on top rope, Reeve has some experience, and the two of you are used to listening to where your body is in relation to the rest of the world around you. But this isn't like fighting. You saw me climbing earlier; you have to work *with* the rock, or you're going to fall. You're going to fall anyway, but if you're trying to fight the rock, you're going to do nothing *but* fall. You can't make the rock do what you want it to do. It is what it is, and you respect that or you get hurt."

She sounds calm and steady, commanding and in control, but Tseng is looking at Reeve, who has never learned to control his face. Reeve is watching the pile of gear she's assembling, watching as her hands move over each of the pitons and testing to make sure the rust is only surface discoloration, watching as she sorts them into three piles. At a guess, those piles are "use only in emergency", "tolerable but not fantastic", and "adequate"; the "adequate" pile is by far the smallest. With every piece Tifa assesses, Reeve looks at it, looks at her, looks up at the face of the rock, and the grooves in his lip where he's biting down on it get worse. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. The look on his face tells Tseng, as plainly as though Reeve were shouting it at the top of his lungs, that this is a lot more dangerous than Tifa is letting on.

"I'm going to do my best to chalk the route for you as I go," Tifa says, "but I may have to do a lot of backtracking, so you're going to have to pay careful attention to what gets me up the rock. But *don't* assume a hold that works for me will work for you." Her eyes flick over them, careful assessment; she focuses on Rufus. "You're going to have the hardest time of it," she says, reluctantly. (Reluctant because she doesn't want to place Rufus in danger, or because she thinks -- rightfully so -- that Tseng would be willing to accept danger to himself but quails at danger to Rufus?) "You're the heaviest out of all of us. I'm guessing you have sixty, seventy pounds on me. And I know it's all muscle, but --" She sighs. "That might work against you more than it works for you, because this isn't about arm strength, and if you try to treat it like you're doing pullups, you're going to be a wreck before you're even halfway up. Tseng, I want you first up after me, in case I need you to help me haul him. Then Rufus. Both of you, take as long as you need, and be *smart* about it."

Her lecture delivered -- and Tseng thinks she's probably glossing over a great deal, even though his head is spinning from trying to keep all the details straight -- she rises from her crouch and tosses a small device to Reeve, who catches it and inspects it carefully. "So, our first problem," she says. "There's one harness. I found two in the gear closet, but one of them was so worn I wouldn't trust it to hold a housecat. Are you all right with an improvised harness out of rope, or will you feel more equipped to catch me if you have the harness and I'm on the makeshift?"

Reeve blanches. "No," he says, so quickly that Tseng knows Tifa has just suggested something shocking. "I'll be fine. You take the harness. *Please* wear the harness."

Tifa snorts. "If you're sure," she says, but she doesn't argue too much, which tells Tseng she's grateful for the answer. She tosses Reeve one end of the bundle of rope. She watches him for a few seconds as he pulls a small loop of the rope through the device and

secures it with a carabiner. Whatever she sees seems to reassure her; she turns away again after a few seconds, picking up the bundle of straps and buckles that must be the harness and strapping herself in. She has to yank up her skirt to position the leg loops over her thighs, and yank it up further at the waist to prevent the waistbelt from resting against bare skin; she seems sublimely indifferent to the fact this leaves her underwear (pale pink and bleach-stained) visible to the three of them, but Reeve blushes and looks away anyway.

"Come here," she says, to Rufus and Tseng, once she's secured herself to her satisfaction and hung the gear on the harness's loops, and brings them over to the base of the cliff to demonstrate how to apply the basic principles she's taught them.

She makes them climb the first few feet over and over again, teaching them as quickly as she can how to recognize a hold, repeating her rules like a mantra: Weight on your feet. Arms straight as possible. Move from your center. Turn your hip into the wall to reach further above you. Rufus struggles more than Tseng does, and Tseng can't quite tell *why*; he's better at recognizing the right holds to reach for than Tseng is, even, but where Tifa is elegance and grace and Tseng is making what he thinks is a fairly adequate showing, Rufus looks like a gorilla trying to waltz up the rock. Tseng can see Rufus's frustration building, until Tifa throws up her hands after he misses one hold and nearly turns his ankle.

"You need to --" she starts, then stops herself, recognizing the signs of Rufus's temper starting to flare. Her eyes skim quickly over their tiny party, falling on Tseng before darting back to Rufus, and she takes him by the elbow. "Come here," she says, and gently but firmly guides him twenty feet or so away. Tseng strains his ears, but he can't hear the brief-but-intense conversation she launches into, hands moving emphatically to underscore her points. She's pitched her voice deliberately low; Rufus is leaning in to hear her.

"It's all right," Reeve says in his ear. Tseng is concentrating on trying to listen; he hadn't quite realized Reeve was so close, and he starts, then tries to cover the motion. "This is crazy, but it's not as crazy as it *could* be."

Tseng trusts Reeve's evaluation of the situation, but still, he can't help ask. "How dangerous *is* this?"

Reeve hesitates before answering, covering the hesitation by looking down at the length of rope he's knotting himself into with an elaborate series of loops around his waist and thighs, and Tseng can see the moment he decides to deflect. "For us, not very. Once she gets up there, she'll set up an anchor and toss the harness down for us to come up one at a time. She's right that top rope is a lot safer. It's tough to trust the rope will catch you, but it will. We'll all wind up bruised, especially me if I have to catch a fall, but we'll get through it."

Tseng can hear what he isn't saying. "And for her?"

Reeve's eyes skitter over the face of the rock. "More dangerous. She's not admitting it, but the gear is *shit*. I saw her picking it up on salvage when she and Reno came up to get us this morning, which is

why it looks so rusted. I think some of it had been up here for generations. She says she's out of practice, but if this is out of practice for her, she must have been amazing before, though. She's *good*. I wouldn't want to do this, but I'm pretty sure she can." He bites his lip. "Pretty sure."

It'll have to do. (If only they didn't have to maintain even the illusion of stealth -- But they do, or rather, they *should*, because even without knowing what lies on the other end of this quest Tseng already knows they've stumbled on something huge, and one thing he has learned over the years is that it's never wise to show your hand before you can begin to guess what cards your opponent is holding.)

Out of the corner of Tseng's eye, he sees Tifa makes one last emphatic gesture. Rufus nods and bends over, unlacing his shoes -- heavy work boots he'd picked up from the disguise bin, originally Rude's, and almost certainly at least half a size too large -- and pulling the laces so tightly Tseng winces to see them. Whatever lecture Tifa has delivered, whatever wisdom she's imparted to Rufus, seems to have helped; she leads him back to the space they'd used for practice and stands close to him when he tries again, and this time he is -- still not *easy* with the motions. But improving.

After she watches him struggle up the sequence one last time, she sighs and steps back from the rock, picking up the end of the rope and tying it to a carabiner with an elaborate and complicated knot before clipping the carabiner to her harness and then turning to Reeve and beginning to inspect his makeshift harness, running her hands along each length and adjusting the way it lies over his clothes. "You know you're going to bruise like fuck if you have to catch me," she warns him.

Reeve gives her a lopsided smile. "I'll be fine."

Tifa gives him a piercing look, but leaves it be, turning to Tseng and Rufus. "I need you to do one thing for me above all else," she says, serious and sober. "*Stay back*. It's not just dangerous for you; it's dangerous for me, too, because if I have to worry about whether I'll hit you when I kick some rock loose, it will distract me. And given the gear options we have, and the way I'm going to have to ascend this, if I fall on the beginning of the route, Reeve won't be able to catch me, because the rope won't be attached to anything yet. If I fall before I get some gear in, I may break something when I land, and I'll have fractions of a second to try to land right. *You can't help*. I know it will be tempting, I know you'll probably do it instinctively, but *do not* try to catch me. Understood?"

"Understood," Tseng says softly. Looking closely, he can see the faint thrumming of nerves running through her, her earlier jumpiness made manifest twice over; she's controlling it now, where she wasn't before, but it's there.

She studies him for a few more seconds, her eyes worried on his, looking suddenly small and uncertain beneath the cool control she's trying to project. Just when he's trying to think of a way to undo the damage he did earlier this morning with his careless words, a way to tell her that he has faith in her skill and admiration for her valor, she nods. "Okay, then. Let's do this thing."

Tifa stands at the foot of the cliff for fifteen minutes or so, eyes roving over the rock; they watch in silence, not willing to distract her, as her gaze moves upward, stops, backs up, sweeps sideways, moves again. Her hands flex and contract in midair, sketching out positions and holds. At one point, she stops, looks down at her feet, takes a deep breath, mutters something none of them can hear, and then paces about ten feet up the trail, repeating the inspection -- this time with more backtracking -- before shaking her head and returning to the place she'd originally chosen. "Okay," she finally says. "I see three trouble spots. Maybe four, I'll know more when I get up there. Fortunately it doesn't start to get really ugly until halfway up or so. Reeve, I'm ready when you are."

Reeve checks the rope he's puddled up next to him, his makeshift harness, one last time, even though Tseng has watched him check five times, and Tifa twice, already. "Ready," he says. It has the sound of a ritualized call and response.

Tifa looks over her shoulder at Tseng and Rufus. "Five feet further," she says -- Tseng obeys; after a minute, Rufus follows -- and takes a deep breath.

After the buildup, Tseng somehow expects her actions to be more showy than they are; the most interesting thing she does at first is tighten the laces of her shoes, then tuck the length of her braid down the back of her shirt and, reaching behind her, underneath the webbing of the harness she's wearing and into the waistband of her skirt. She flows up the first few feet, the holds she'd used for training, as though they're nothing. It isn't until her feet are reaching shoulder height that she stops, cranes her neck backwards, and studies the rock above her for several minutes before making each move. The next fifteen minutes are a constant loop of small, discrete motions: first she chooses where her hand or foot will go next, then she pulls or kicks at the rock to test it, then she eases her weight on to it as slowly as she can until she's certain it will hold. Twice, she changes her mind after starting to transfer her weight; once, she's nearly entirely finished the motion when the hold she's reaching for with her right hand pulls away beneath her.

Her feet slip out from underneath her as well; she's left with her whole weight dangling from her left arm, fingers flexing white-knuckled as she scrabbles her feet against the rock. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," she chants -- Tseng thinks she doesn't even realize she's doing it, although he can't quite tell if the quiver in her voice is fear or excitement -- once she gets back to the stable position she'd originally moved from. She switches her grip from the left hand to the right hand, taking her left hand off the rock and shaking it vigorously before chalking that hand again, then rubs the back of her wrist over her face to dash sweat from her eyes. (She leaves chalk smudges and dirt behind.)

"Shinra, you Shiva-damned motherfucker, get your fucking ass with its fucking overdeveloped sense of chivalry back another ten fucking feet before I have Tseng *shoot you*," Tifa hollers, and Tseng is startled to realize -- he hadn't noticed, too intent on Tifa's compact form working its way up the rock face -- that Rufus lunged forward the instant Tifa's hand slipped.

"Instinct!" Rufus yells back. He looks faintly embarrassed, stepping backwards; Tseng grabs him by the pants and hauls him in, curling his fingers into his waistband to hold him there.

"Well, *curb* your fucking instinct," Tifa calls. She rubs her face again, this time against the inner crook of her elbow (smudging the chalk even further) and blows out an unsteady breath.

Reeve steps in (metaphorically; he hasn't moved yet) to defuse the situation before Rufus can take offense. "I think you need to get some gear in," he calls up to her. (The undertones in his voice tell Tseng that Reeve thinks she needed to get some gear in a long damn time ago.)

"Yeah, I know," Tifa says. "It looked solid enough. I was saving the pitons for higher up. I don't fucking have enough of them." But she's studying the rock face, reaching for one of the pitons and the hammer clipped to her belt, wrapping the leather loop at the hammer's hilt around her wrist twice before unclipping it.

The next twenty minutes are incredibly tense and nerve-wracking for *Tseng*, and he isn't even the one on the rock. He can tell, watching Tifa's lips moving in silent invective, that this isn't going well for her; twice she has a piece of gear half-hammered in when the rock she's hammering it into splits beneath her, and once he can tell she has a split second to decide whether to catch the piece of gear as it falls. She doesn't, and Reeve winces as the piton comes clattering down towards them. "Damn," he mutters. "She's going to miss that when she gets further up."

"This isn't normal, is it?" Rufus asks. Above them, Tifa bangs a fist on the rock, resting her forehead against the back of her other arm for half a second; she looks as though she wants to cry. Then she takes a deep breath and uses the hammer to clear away debris before selecting another piton and trying again.

Reeve hesitates. "I don't know. I've never been here before, much less climbed here, and I don't usually do rock. But --" He breaks off, tensing slightly as one too-hard swing of the hammer nearly overbalances Tifa; Tseng watches his hands flex on the rope he's holding, unconsciously preparing to catch her. She recovers after a few seconds and finishes placing the piton, then pulls on it a few times, testing the placement, before clipping another carabiner into it and roping in. Reeve exhales sharply. "I don't know," he says, again. "But I don't think it is. She's trying really hard not to show it -- I think she doesn't want us to worry -- but I'm pretty sure this is worse than she was expecting. I'm honestly not sure how we're going to get past some of those moves. It might make more sense for us to ratchet up the rope instead of trying to use the rock."

Step by step -- in some cases, inch by inch -- they watch Tifa work upward and upward. Her arms are trembling by now, and her stops to rest are growing more and more frequent. Tseng can hear her breathing, rough and heavy and too damn fast. She's cursing constantly now, but voicelessly; she's saving her breath. Beside Tseng, Rufus's shoulders tense every time she moves.

She's close enough to the top of the cliff that they're all almost

starting to relax when it happens.

A large swath of the rock crumbles beneath Tifa's left hand, from small pebbles to head-sized rocks and worse, and time seems to stop; Tseng sees the foothold she'd had most of her weight on begin to give way. Her left hand flies frantically over the wall as her fingers scrabble for purchase, as she twists in midair and tries to kick away the pieces of rock that have become suddenly treacherous beneath her and throw her weight to a more solid hold. One oversized chunk of rock slams into her leg as it falls, leaving long gouges behind it. For a heart-stopping second, it looks as though she might be able to recover, to take her weight onto her right hand and hold, but gravity wins and she's falling, too far, too quickly --

She slams into the rock, feet and legs first, and the weight of her body hitting rings loudly over them. Reeve's feet come off the ground as her weight jerks the rope. The sound Tifa makes is half sob, half scream, as she dangles loosely in her harness, and Tseng can see blood welling up along the length of her thigh, her shin.

He opens his mouth to call to her, to see if she's all right (to see how not-all-right she is), when Reeve beats him to it: "Grab a hold! Get your weight off that gear!" Tseng isn't imagining it; he sounds frantic. He can't see whatever Reeve sees to make him worry, but he doesn't know what he's looking for. All he knows is that she's lost too fucking much of her progress.

"Which fucking one of us is on this rock?" Tifa snaps back. "I could do with a *little* less --" She gets her fingers into a crack in the rock, grunts, gets her feet beneath her. (The right leg -- the one that's bleeding -- buckles the first time she tries to put weight on it.) "--A little less fucking backseat climbing here!"

Tseng can see the blush rising on Reeve's cheeks. "Sorry," he says. "If the rock goes again --"

"I *know*," Tifa snaps. "Oh, fuck, *Shiva*, blessed Alexander, this fucking hurts, *fuck* --"

She rests her forehead against the rock, her shoulders heaving, blood dripping from her leg. Seeing it, she swears again (Tseng has heard her swear more in the last half an hour than he has in the last two and a half years) and takes that foot off the rock, holding it away from her so the blood drips freely, without wetting the rock.

"Ramuh," Rufus mutters, then raises his voice. "Get down. We'll take the chopper."

"*Fuck* no, we won't," Tifa says. "I've gotten this far. I'm not giving up *now*."

It's been years since Tseng has heard anyone dare to outright deny one of Rufus's orders that vehemently. For half a second, Rufus seems to barely understand her words. "We agreed that if conditions were worse than you thought, we'd call this off and try another way."

"*You* agreed," Tifa snarls. "And you can do whatever the fuck you want to do. *I* am going to send this son of a fucking bitch, and then I am going to bandage my fucking leg, and then I am going to break

into that fucking reactor and figure out why my fucking *mountain* is fucking *crumbling* under my fucking *hands*, because something is *really fucking wrong here*." She pulls herself up another foot, kicks at a piece of loose rock. The tip of her shoe leaves smears of blood against the rock, and she slips against it. She takes her foot back off the rock and wipes her toe against the shin of her other leg to dry some of the blood, leaving smears in bright contrast against her skin, and the sound she makes is rage as pure as Tseng has ever heard from Rufus in the depths of his worst temper. "And then we are going to fly back to Midgar, and we are going to add up the rest of what's been buried for years, and then I'm going to kill a few people who desperately need killing, starting with your father and ending with whoever thought it was a good idea to put living human beings in a test tube and cut off a man's arm and keep him asleep for thirty years, and if you say one more fucking word to me right now, you will be *first on that fucking list*."

Tseng has never seen Tifa this furious before. He has seen her upset; he has seen her angry; he has seen, once or twice, the faintest hint that her easy geniality and her dogged ability to see the best in people is, while nonetheless genuine, something she occasionally has to work for. He has never before heard her vow murder. He has never thought her capable of murder. And yet -- watching Rufus take a step backwards as though her rage might reach out from forty feet away and too fucking high above their heads to strike him, watching *Rufus* actually fucking *back down* in the face of her anger and her determination -- Tseng knows, without question: he was wrong.

She is. And that means she has been, this whole time. This creature of determination and rage has been present, underneath the sweet smiles and the listening ear and the thoughtful gestures, underneath the quiet words of encouragement she gives to anyone who demonstrates a need and underneath the perpetual outpouring of care and concern she demonstrates in a thousand tiny ways to everyone around her, day in and day out.

Tseng isn't sure what it says about him that this realization makes him desire her even more. (No, that's a comfortable lie. He knows what it means. He just isn't sure he likes the knowing.)

He can see Rufus deciding not to answer her, and after a long pause for Tifa to collect herself, she starts working her slow and painful way back up all the ground she'd lost to her fall.

They make it up the cliff. His own ascent is miserable and exhausting, full of rope burns and skin abrasions and moments where Tseng is certain gravity is holding a direct and personal grudge against him, and no matter how often he tells himself the rope will catch him when he falls, each time he does it takes him longer than he'd care to admit to stop the panic from the part of his brain that insists he's about to dash himself against the rocks beneath. By the time he drags himself over the top of the cliff, his forearms are stiff and swollen, his hands scraped raw and beginning to blister, but he forces himself to ignore it and tries to tend Tifa's wounds. She ignores him so thoroughly he begins to wonder if he's somehow mastered the secret of invisibility without noticing, unhooking him from the harness she'd thrown down for them to use once she'd finished with it and limping over -- unable to fully put weight on her injured leg -- to



throw it down again for Rufus's turn. He closes his eyes and wills himself to patience, stripping off the long-sleeved shirt he's wearing beneath his coveralls and cutting off the sleeves, then slitting each of the tubes into rectangles for a makeshift bandage, since their packs with the first-aid kits are far beneath them. She doesn't say anything when he presses them upon her, but she takes them from him and binds up her leg while Reeve is buckling Rufus in, and that's something at least.

Rufus's attempt is even worse than his. It takes longer than Tseng expected, and by the way Tifa keeps casting worried looks at the relentless progression of the sun overhead, longer than Tifa would like. The first time Rufus loses his grip and swings away from the rockface, his face plastered with startled betrayal at his body's refusal to bend the laws of the universe to his mind's will, Tseng has to stop himself from lunging for the rope to catch him. The dozenth time, it's merely an annoyance. By the twentieth, Tifa presses Tseng into service as a counterweight to allow her to *haul* Rufus up the rope. It's a process Tseng can tell Rufus finds both humiliating and infuriating, but by the time Rufus makes it up the last few feet, he's set the humiliation and the infuriation both aside. He tries to get Tifa to let him treat her injuries as well, but Tifa ignores him just as thoroughly. Instead, she leans over the edge of the cliffside and tells Reeve to gather up their abandoned backpacks and rope them all together for her to haul up. Rufus lets his hand fall from where it was hovering over his materia armband. He doesn't say anything, but the way his jaw flexes tells Tseng he's spoiling for a fight.

It isn't until after Reeve has made his own, much-less-traumatic ascent and is taking charge of rope, harness, and what climbing gear they have left that Tifa finally limps over to lean against a nearby boulder, her face ashen underneath the wind-whipped redness of her cheeks. "Somebody toss me a bottle of water," she says. "And I think the first-aid kit is in the backpack Tseng was carrying, if someone could find it for me."

"You won't need it," Rufus says, pushing himself off from where he's been leaning against the mountain on the far side of the trail. He sounds calmer than Tseng would expect him to sound. That isn't necessarily a good sign.

Tifa doesn't recognize the tone as the potential disaster it truly is, though. She glances over at Rufus, looking up from where she's unwinding the makeshift bandage of Tseng's shirt, and frowns. "I can still walk on it, but I need to bandage it better. This material's already soaked through."

"Sit," Rufus commands. His voice slices between them, rattles around the spaces they occupy, until Tseng would not be surprised to find the force of it had knocked loose half the mountain. Rufus lifts his hand to his bicep again, pressing his thumb against the Restore orb until faint green tendrils of magic begin to twine around his hand.

Tifa looks up at that, her face alarmed. "I told you yesterday, you can't cast Cure on me. Not with my lungs --"

"You said," Rufus corrects her, each word neat and precise, "that you can't have Cure cast on your lungs. I wasn't planning to go

anywhere near your lungs. If you wish to continue onward, if you wish to get those answers you oh-so-eloquently informed me you were seeking, you will *sit*. Because I can either heal you or shoot you, but I am not taking you one step further while you are injured. I will not allow you to be a liability."

Their eyes are locked on each others', firm and unyielding, and Tseng has to blink, because the halo around Rufus's shoulders isn't just the glow of the afternoon sunlight. Tifa's face has gone even paler than it was a few minutes ago. Next to Tseng, Reeve makes a soft sound of disbelief. Tseng knows it's only for the words Rufus is speaking -- he knows Reeve has none of those other gifts of perception -- but he still can't help wondering what Reeve sees.

"I can heal you, or I can shoot you," Rufus repeats, looming over Tifa and looking like the *mountain* will move before he does. (With how unstable the mountain's proven to be, it's certainly likely.) "And right about now, I'm just looking for a reason."

Tifa bares her teeth. It isn't a smile; it's the warning sign of a cornered animal, spitting defiance even as it surrenders. "Go on, then," she says. "Pick one."

The thing that sticks in Tseng's mind about the exchange is how *calm* they both sound. They could be discussing the question of what to have for dinner.

Rufus smiles at her -- his shark-tooth smile, the one he uses for victories and for warnings -- and kneels, majestic, in the dust at her feet. Tifa shifts her weight so she's sitting on the rock and not leaning against it; she lifts her foot and sets it on his thigh. His hands come up to cradle her calf, curiously gentle, and his eyes slip shut. His hands flare with the more pronounced glow of a high-level Cure spell, the faint flicker indicating Rufus is drawing out the casting. Tseng knows how hard it is to cast a master Cure that slowly, and he knows how much Rufus hates casting restorative magic in general -- he once likened the experience, to Tseng, as stripping down all the way to peeling off his skin and doing the same to the person he was healing - - but Rufus shows no sign of his discomfort. He only sweeps his hands up Tifa's leg, so fractionally Tseng can barely see them move.

Tifa squared her shoulders and set her teeth into her lower lip the minute Rufus's hands touched her, clearly bracing herself against an experience she was expecting to be painful, but just as the wave of Rufus's magic is reaching its crest, her eyes fly open to stare off into the distance at nothing. Her eyebrows lift, and her lips part in surprise. Not what she expected, then. Tseng wonders how badly the last person to heal her performed magic, for her to be expecting the process to hurt.

"There," Rufus finally says, once his hands have made their journey up Tifa's leg until his fingertips are resting beneath the hem of her skirt, soothing away the faint abrasions the harness produced as well as the more urgent injury. His tone is much more gentle, much less triumphant, than Tseng would expect. Rufus's fingertips skim almost tenderly along the inside of her thigh as he lifts them away, as though he can't quite bring himself to stop touching her yet; he runs one palm lightly along the length of the wound, brushing away the

pebbles and dirt his magic forced to the surface as he went, the bits of clotted blood and already-forming scab that no longer have an injury to cling to. When finished, he shakes those hands, sharply, as though trying to shake free droplets of water from his skin; the trceries of light and magic ripple against his skin before fading away. He glances up at her, his look assessing and his eyes narrowed, before rocking backwards onto his feet. "Next time," he adds, "don't fucking argue with me."

"Because that's really going to happen," Tifa says, but any last fraction of heat has gone from her voice, and she's sounding thoughtful now. Almost affectionate. She tests the leg, standing slowly and putting weight gingerly on it as though she's waiting for it to buckle at any moment, and when it doesn't, she casts another look at Rufus under lowered lashes.

Between the streaks of blood still painted on her skin, Tseng can see the long pink line of the injury, fading further and further to the white of a long-healed scar with every passing second. Rufus ignores her, pressing his thumb to the materia again and turning to Reeve, who's been valiantly trying not to show how badly injured he was by catching Tifa's fall. It's a lower-level Cure this time, and cast from a distance and not skin to skin, but Rufus still looks queasy afterwards, and when he turns to Tseng and reaches for the materia again, Tseng only shakes his head.

The journey to the reactor proper takes them another hour after that. From the worried glances Tifa keeps casting up at the sky, that's longer than it should take. Twice they have to pick their way over a pile of rubble from a rockslide higher up the mountain's face; once, at the entrance to a cave-mouth that clearly reaches back into a network of caverns inside the mountain, they pass by what Tifa calls a Nifl wolf, stick-thin and growling. Tifa's hand flashes out and clamps down on Tseng's wrist as he reaches for one of his throwing knives. "It's all right," she says, softly. "She's only trying to warn us off her pups. They whelp in the caverns every spring. We're fine as long as we don't go any closer."

By the time they get to the clearing in which the reactor lurks, the sun is no more than two fingers' length away from the horizon, and the temperature has dropped precipitously; even Tifa has started chafing her hands against each other when she thinks no one is watching her, bringing her hands to her mouth to blow on her fingers from time to time, and Tseng's skin has begun to prickle from the cold air against skin that is still sweat-dampened from their exertions. Or maybe it's not from the weather, he realizes, watching all three of his fellows simultaneously whip their heads around to stare off into the distance, in three different directions, as though they've heard some unhearable noise, as though the backs of their minds are telling them something dangerous is lurking just out of sight with its eyes trained upon them all. Maybe it's whatever mysterious sense first told Tifa there is something wrong up here. Right now, the irrational animal living in the back of his mind is screaming at him to get out of the open, to get to safety, to get *away*.

"If I were watching this movie, I'd be yelling at us not to go in there right about now," Reeve mutters. Then he takes a deep breath, crosses the clearing, and walks up the steps to bend over the keypad

at the door, all with the air of a man who knows he's walking to his own execution.

"Alexander keep us," Tifa says, underneath her breath.

Rufus looks over at her. "You can stay out here." His voice is unutterably gentle.

Tifa breathes in, sharply. The sound is rough and ragged, and Tseng thinks it isn't just from her lungs protesting the atmosphere and exertion; the sound is a memory. "Yeah, no," she says. "I took three years to get here. I'm not going to back down twenty feet away." The clang of her boot-heels against the metal mesh of the steps rings out loudly through the clearing as she follows behind Reeve.

Rufus watches her, his face thoughtful. Then he turns to Tseng, bowing him ahead with one sweeping, mocking flourish. "After you," he says. Tseng grits his teeth and goes.

The design of this reactor is nothing like any of the others Tseng has been in, over the years. The door, when Reeve finally manages to coax it into compliance, opens onto a tiny vestibule, with pipes stretching overhead and mesh grate beneath. Tseng stops Reeve with a hand on his shoulder before Reeve can step inside; it's his job to be the first in. He finds himself pausing at the threshold of the door, though, and he can't say why. His skin prickles, sharp and disconcerting, and he catches himself thinking -- for the first time in years -- of the moment he arrived at the *torii* of Leviathan's temple, five years old, his brother's hand on his shoulder and urging him forward, knowing everything he knew up until that point was about to change.

"What is it?" Rufus asks, at his shoulder. Right where Godo had been, once. One prince to take the place of the other, and the minute Tseng had laid eyes on those too-old eyes in that too-young face, he'd tried to make himself forget everything that had happened before. Today seems determined to stir up old memories. For more than one of them.

Tseng shakes his head (shakes away the memories, shakes away the pieces of someone else's life he'd left behind him long ago). "Nothing," he says, knowing it for a lie, knowing he couldn't name the truth even did he search for the proper words for days. He makes himself step forward.

The vestibule is colder than it by all rights should be, even taking into account the sun passing behind the gathering clouds. Tifa, Reeve, and Rufus all crowd in behind him. At first glance, the entryway is nothing more than a corridor of perhaps fifteen feet with lockers and benches to either side. The walkway narrows into steps leading down at its far end, following the tracing of the pipes; the space beyond is unlit, save for the faintest of glows from the emergency lighting, but the impression is of cavernous space. The grated floor suspends them over a fierce drop -- forty, fifty feet if it's an inch -- and far beneath their feet, a pale blue liquid surges and whispers in a rapidly-shifting river.

It isn't until Reeve makes an indescribable noise and whispers, "Phoenix wept," that Tseng realizes what his nose is trying to tell him;

the burnt-cinnamon and hot steel scent that in Midgar is nothing more than the faintest of teases is thick enough here to choke on, unbearably cloying inside the confines of these walls, so overwhelming he hadn't made the connection.

The grate they're standing on is supporting them over a river of pure Mako. Not the refined version that is Midgar's lifeblood, that flows through the arterial supply lines that stretch the length and width of the world, or at least those portions Shinra has claimed for its own; not the calcified and crystallized materia that allow them to harness and cast magic of all sorts. They are standing over a vein of Mako that would power Midgar herself for generations if refined and fed to the reactors to burn.

Tseng's head is pounding in his temples. Behind him, he hears someone fumbling; a second later, the overhead lights throw the scene into stark relief as they flicker twice and fluoresce with a series of pops and clicks, racing into life along the circuit with each light taking a fraction of a second more to follow its fellows. Thus illuminated, he can see the impression of space was warranted. The room below them is larger than the belly of any reactor he's been in before, rows of -- something his mind can't quite make sense of -- curving like an amphitheatre around a central staircase on the far wall that leads up to a door that looks far sturdier than it has any right. There's an inscription stretching over its arch.

(J-E-N-O-V-A)

"Phoenix *wept*," Reeve repeats, stronger this time, and what Tseng took for fear when first he spoke is more clear now. It isn't fear. It's anger.

Rufus can hear the difference, too. "What?"

"That's what you were sensing once we got away from the town. That's why the rock was crumbling under you." Reeve's talking to Tifa now, he must be, but Tseng's eyes are fixed on the door; he can't make himself tear them away no matter how hard he tries. Something in the back of his mind is screaming at him: threat, threat, *threat*. "He's diverted -- Kujuta's horns, he must have redirected half the *continent* to make this. You can't -- you don't -- it's --" He breaks off and takes a deep breath. Tseng has never heard him this flustered, this inarticulate. "It's raw, too. You can tell by how translucent it is. If it had been through pre-treatment, it would be thicker and brighter. This must go down to bedrock, and be tapped straight into the vein. I haven't the faintest *clue* what he thinks he's doing."

"That's *Mako* down there?" Tifa's voice trembles, oh-so-faintly, the only sign of the tremendous amount of control she must be exerting on herself at the moment; Tseng can hear it only because he knows the normal cadences of her voice. "Is that -- you said that's not how a reactor normally works?"

(The skin on the nape of Tseng's neck is prickling, as though something is watching him, as though he has become prey, and the rushing sound of his blood in his ears is echoed by the rushing sound of the Mako river beneath their feet.)

"No," Rufus says, quietly. "We tap natural veins, but we never let it flow freely like this without being treated first. It crystallizes too easily. We'd be picking bits of materia out of the grates twelve times a day." He blows out a breath, and it's the closest to flustered Tseng has heard him sound in years. "Are you *sure* it's tapped into the vein?"

"I'm not sure of anything," Reeve snaps. "And I won't be, not until I go down there and look. I just --"

"No." The decision to speak isn't a choice; the syllable falls from Tseng's lips before he could even think about it. If he turned around, he's certain all three of them would be staring at him. He doesn't turn around. He *can't*. "None of you are going down there until I figure out what's wrong in here."

Reeve laughs, high-pitched and too unnerving. "What *isn't* wrong in here?"

Rufus steps forward -- Tseng can feel him at his shoulder, one step behind, and for twelve years and more that's been his place, to face the world one step ahead of Rufus, to sweep the room and find the threats and face the dangers on Rufus's behalf, to shield Rufus with his body and his weapons and with his life if needs be, and if Rufus takes one step further into this reactor Tseng is going to *tie him to the railing outside* to keep him out of danger. "Stop," he says, the word gritted out between clenched teeth, and his head is throbbing and he *doesn't know what's wrong*.

He lifts his hand to his forehead, pinning his temples between thumb and third finger, squeezing tightly and rubbing in small circles as though external pressure could relieve the internal pressure pounding against his headbones. If Rufus asks him what's bothering him, he wouldn't be able to say. If he were held at *gunpoint* he wouldn't be able to say. All he knows is that something is deeply wrong here; the very walls around him cry out their unease, sharp and jagged, weeping lamentations into his ears. *Wrong*, they say, and *evil*, and *tainted*, and Tseng shudders, feeling the foulness crawling over his skin like a cloak of oil, besmirching everything it touches --

"That's what Sephiroth was doing," Tifa says. From the sound of her voice echoing against the walls, she's taken a step back, away from him, away from *here*. "That's exactly what Sephiroth was doing. Like his head was about to explode, and he was trying to keep it inside." She sounds one step from hysteria. He really can't blame her.

If this is what Sephiroth was feeling, for the four days between stepping into the reactor and the moment he set the town ablaze, Tseng has a certain tardy sympathy for him. The headache alone is bad enough; the feeling of sacrilege, the sense he will never be clean again, only worsens it. He forces his eyes open, looks for a source of this -- whatever it is. Nothing presents itself.

"All right," Rufus says. His voice is too loud in the space they occupy. "Tseng, come here."

It's a struggle to tear his eyes away from the belly of the reactor and look back at Rufus, standing in the center of the walkway as though nothing in the world could touch him, but the minute he lays

eyes on Rufus, he is nearly blinded again: the pure golden haze of Rufus's shade blazes so brightly he wants to squint his eyes against the power of it. That sight makes him realize the darkness gathering down the stairs, in the depth of the reactor beneath him, isn't natural at all. He's seeing not what is there, but what is visible only to those with his particular ungift of spirit-sight. Which is, perhaps, seeing what is truly there, at a level more pure than simple vision. But he's always tried so hard not to think about it too closely, lest he receive answers he doesn't particularly want.

"Come here," Rufus repeats, his hand stretched out to Tseng, his voice as firm as though he is commanding mountains.

Tseng inhales, one deep shuddering breath, and makes himself take the first step. The instant he does, it feels as though something holding power over him breaks, as though he can breathe more freely, as though the thick oppressive cloak of foulness slides off his shoulders to pool at his feet. The second step is easier. The third brings him inside the edges of Rufus's golden aura, and he gasps for breath as the warmth seeps through him and banishes the last of the crawling, fetid atmosphere poisoning his lungs.

Rufus's skin is warm against his as he places his hand into Rufus's, fighting the urge to kneel at Rufus's feet. He can't even spare the attention necessary to be mortified at how badly he's failing in his duty to be in control, to be the one to take the risks, to be the first in and the last out and the one Rufus can always stand behind and be assured of safety. He lets Rufus guide him over to one of the benches that run down the sides of the hallway, does not protest as Rufus places one hand on the nape of his neck (the core of his soul vibrating like a harp-string plucked by the hand of his master) and guides his head down between his knees.

There's some discussion going on above him, faint and distant, but all he can do is breathe in, breathe out, focusing his attention on the feeling of Rufus's hands cradling his head and the automatic way Rufus digs his fingertips into the taut muscles at the base of his skull.

Breathe in. Breathe out --

## ( 10. )

Faint rills of panic keep washing through Tifa's veins, and just as she thinks *this is it, we've seen the worst*, something happens to prove that 'worst' is an endlessly-shifting watermark. She'd thought the betrayal of her mountain crumbling under her hands would have been enough to drive her over the line, but seeing Tseng standing silhouetted against the belly of the reactor, his hand splayed across his forehead (like him, like *Sephiroth*) had been unfathomably worse.

Rufus is crouched in front of where he's pushed Tseng down to sit on the bench. His hands are spread over Tseng's head like a parody of a village priest offering benediction: thumbs pressing against Tseng's temples, palms spread over the back of Tseng's head, fingertips notched into the muscles between skull and neck, smallest fingers slid down to tuck behind Tseng's ears and into the hinge of his jaw.

Pressure against every spot that might be the headache Sephiroth had exhibited. The headache that had started here, and ended everything.

The position they're in makes Tseng's hair curtain off his face, keeping her from being able to see whether that *something* has reached him as well, but Tifa's already-abused breath still keeps getting higher and tighter in her chest if she looks at him too long. Her worst nightmare, brought to life again before her eyes: that *something*, riding Tseng's shoulders, twisting Tseng's face. Every instinct in her body is begging her to disarm him before whatever he's hearing that none of the rest of them can hear can convince him they're a threat. To take away everything he could even think to use as a weapon, before he tries to use it against them. (But this is Tseng. To take away everything he could use as a weapon is impossible. It always will be.)

Well-hidden behind his mask of control, behind the layer of command Rufus is so clearly clinging to, Rufus looks *terrified*, but he keeps it out of his voice. "Is anyone else feeling what he's feeling?"

There's something almost whispering in Tifa's ear, and she feels as though -- if she held her breath and closed her eyes and *listened*, listened more fiercely and more carefully than she's ever listened to anything in her life -- she'd be able to understand what it's saying to her. She doesn't let herself try. She's seen enough movies, read enough novels and heard enough tales, to know that inaudible whispers with no true source are things you should never seek out on your own. "It's too cold in here," she hears herself saying, and the minute she does, she realizes it's one of the other sources of wrongness she's been trying to place. "And I feel like someone's looking over my shoulder. But it could be -- you know. Being back here." The feeling of being watched intensifies; she shudders, once, before she can make herself hold still.

"I don't feel anything," Reeve says. "Except being furious at whoever thought it was a good idea to unbalance the ecosystem in this entire half of the continent."

"Okay." Rufus blows out a breath, short and sharp. The tiny shifts of expression on his face keep flickering back and forth between panic and terror, each carefully and quickly locked away. Tifa makes herself look away from his face, because if she's watching Rufus's face for hints, she *isn't watching Tseng*. "Now entertaining suggestions on what to do next."

"I'm all right," Tseng says, barely audible, from behind his hair. "I know you have no reason to believe me, but --" He lifts his head, gasping for air, shuddering faintly. "This place is wrong. Like the basement of the mansion. I just wasn't braced for it. I should have been. It feels like I've been showering in shit, except inside my head. I'm all right. Now that I've caught my breath, I can ignore it." His lips twist a little. "And stop making a fool of myself."

Tifa looks at Rufus; Rufus looks back at her. She can read his thoughts as clearly as though he were speaking them in her ear: *do we trust he's telling the truth?*

She knows he can read her response just as clearly: *I have no*



*fucking clue, but if we lose him, we're pretty much fucked.*

It's true. If Tseng decides it's time to kill them all, the two of them together *might* be able to stop him, but she wouldn't want to bet on it.

She wishes there were some other sound to listen to, something other than the soft musical chime of liquid surging beneath their feet and the harsh rasp of four people breathing more loudly than strictly necessary. Something to block out the sound of the shadows, of the silences that are not silent, of the clinging and awful sense of *wrongness* that seeps through every inch of air.

Rufus closes his eyes for a fraction of a second (exhaustion, fear) and then opens them again. "Go sit outside," he says to Tseng, the neat sharp sound of Rufus making a decision, for good or for ill. "Top of the stairs at least. I'd be happier with on the other side of the clearing."

Tseng shakes his head. "I need to clear the --"

"You need to *listen to me*," Rufus interrupts, and his voice rings through the air, like a gong being struck, like the high clear note of crystal singing. The sound cuts through the space surrounding them all. Tifa could be imagining it, the way the shadows seem to writhe and draw back from the purity of that sound, but somehow she doesn't think she is. Tseng hears it too, or feels it: he falls silent as though his body has decided it will follow Rufus's dictates even if his mind still wishes to argue, and Tifa definitely isn't imagining the way his spine grows straighter, the haunted look clearing further. It's something else to add to the list of things she's observing, how from the minute Rufus touched him Tseng started looking slightly less like he was about to *kill them all*, and she can't put it into words, but it makes her want to step closer to Rufus and see if it works on her, too. "I don't know what's in here. I don't know what you're reacting to. But you *are*, and you're clearly the most sensitive, and I *will not lose you to whatever this is*."

Tifa can hear the words Rufus isn't letting himself say. *I won't lose you too. I won't let this have you, too.* She remembers that naked emotion in his voice Friday night, the first hint she'd seen of the cauldron seething beneath his calm controlled seeming, confessing he'd been the one to ask Sephiroth to look into the mysteries of Nibelheim. She remembers the plaintive cry: *he never came back*. She knows, now, that Sephiroth had been Rufus's friend once. One of the only friends Rufus has ever had. It's hard to remember that, standing here scant feet from where her father's body had fallen, but looking at the implacable command on Rufus's face, looking at the terror he's only barely holding at bay even though he's doing his best not to show it, it's easier than she thought it might be.

Tseng can see it too. His face goes through a series of contortions, emotions more raw and naked than she's ever seen him display, before settling on self-loathing. For his weakness, Tifa thinks; that's certainly what he would see it as, and his eyes are sick and haunted. "I can handle it. I *have* to handle it. I can't leave you to face this without --"

The sound of Rufus's hand striking Tseng's cheek rings against the walls surrounding them, too loud for how light the blow truly was; Tseng's head jerks back at the impact, but more from shock, Tifa can tell, than from kinetic force. He brings his hand up to press his fingers against his cheekbone, where the skin is flushing red already. The look on his face is like worlds ending.

"I have never forced the oaths you have made me but we have never spoken," Rufus says. His voice is shaking, tiny quivers threading through it, as close to losing control as Tifa thinks anyone has ever heard him. "If you ever intend to keep them, now is the time. Get outside. *Now*. I can't --" His voice cracks, awful and rending. The only thing keeping Tifa from rushing to his side is the way she can't move, can't even *breathe*, lest her interference tip the confrontation to either side of the knife's-edge it is balancing upon. "You are the one person I couldn't lose without breaking," Rufus says, his voice a thin whisper, too quiet for how desperate it is. Too quiet for how it lays his soul bare for anyone to hear. "*Please*. Don't force me to prove it."

Tseng's eyes are too wide, two dark pools in a too-pale face, as he stares up at Rufus, unblinking. For a minute Tifa thinks he might argue again, and she tries to think what she'll do if he does -- how she will react, if confrontation flares into open conflict, and there's a part of her wondering *is this what happened before? is this what the whispers want us to do, to fight each other until there's no one left?* -- but her thoughts feel as though she's swimming in mud. She realizes her vision is hazing, going grey around the edges, and she realizes it's because she hasn't drawn a breath in far too long. Hasn't dared to. She breathes out, breathes in, and tastes the air on her tongue, cinnamon and ozone and rain on metal.

Tseng finally breathes in too, weak and gasping like a premature kitten drawing its first breath. When he stands, it's almost too slow, too halting, and his knees nearly buckle as he does. Rufus catches at his elbow before he can fall. Tseng doesn't seem to notice.

"If you feel anything --" Tseng finally says. His voice trails off before he can finish the sentence.

"Yes," Rufus says, too quickly, relief written in his every line. "If it reaches any of the rest of us like this, we will leave. I do so swear. *Get outside.*"

Tseng's face is blank as he obeys, his step uneven, his gait halting. Rufus stands in place and watches him go, eyes intent on his back as though willing him strength. Once Tseng has stumbled through the door and closed it behind him, Rufus collapses onto the bench like a puppet with its strings cut, chest heaving, and buries his face in his hands. He looks utterly wrecked. His shoulders are quivering, minute aftershocks running through him in wave after wave.

Next to Tifa, Reeve exhales like he's been punched in the stomach. "What the *fuck* just happened?" he asks, sounding utterly lost.

"It was trying to get its claws into Tseng," Rufus says, muffled against the palms of his hands. He drags them up his cheeks, presses

them into his eyes and against his supraorbital ridges, plunges his fingers into his hair and pulls. "Whatever 'it' is." He looks as though he's just run the entire rim of the plate. Remembering this morning's conclusions (was it only this morning? this week has felt like a full year already) that he's desperate for touch even if he doesn't know it, remembering how quick he was to offer her comfort two nights ago while she was weeping on Tseng's floor, Tifa steps around the side of the bench until she's at his back and rests her hands on his shoulders, digs her thumbs into the taut lines of his muscle. He lets his hands drop and slumps back against her, tilting his head back until it's resting against her breastbone, eyes closed tightly. She slouches enough that she can lean forward and rest her chin against the top of his head. His hair smells like mountain air.

Reeve's eyes flick back and forth between them, as though he can't quite believe what he's seeing. "I don't feel anything," he says, repeating his statement from earlier. Tifa thinks he might be preparing to call them all mad, say she and Rufus are imagining the crawling horror they can both still feel even though clearly not to the extent Tseng did, but his next words make her realize why he holds his place among the circle of those Rufus relies on: "So clearly, whatever it is, I'm the best one to go looking for it. Stay here. Both of you. I'll be right back."

Part of Tifa wants to follow him, to be doing something -- anything -- to take her mind off where she is and what she's doing. (To take her mind off what *Tseng* might be doing, and she realizes there's a part of her desperately trying to remember if he'd had any materia equipped, bracing herself against the thought they might open those doors once they're done and walk into a replay of the scene that still haunts her nightmares.) The rest of her is leaning into Rufus as much as he's leaning against her, knees weak with the aftermath of adrenaline and panic, and that's the part of her she thinks is winning. She should go outside and make sure Tseng is all right. But right now, she's not sure if she can handle finding out that he isn't.

She wasn't imagining it. The shadows *do* feel lighter, this close to Rufus, as though he is his own sun. She wonders what he's doing (or what he *is*) to make him feel that way, and whether or not it's costing him. (No: how much it is costing him.)

Tifa watches as Reeve opens one of the lockers lining the walls, takes out protective gear made of some faintly-shimmering white fabric: long-sleeved coveralls with elastic at hands and feet that he pulls on over his clothing and zips up, booties of the same material that he slips over his shoes and pulls the elastic at the coveralls' ankles down over, bright purple gloves of a thin flexible material that doesn't look like it should be as durable as it clearly is that he pulls over the elastic at the coveralls' wrists. He adds a face mask, hooking its elastic over his ears and pulling it up over his mouth and nose, then runs his fingers between the elastic and his face to pull out the strands of his long dark hair that got caught in it, gathering his hair into a quick twist and tucking it down the back of his shirt. His motions are quick and practiced, as though he's done this more times than he could count; he reaches for what proves to be a cross between goggles and glasses, slipping them over his face and settling them around the mask, then makes an involuntary grimace she can barely see around the mask and adjusts them further.

His last step is to reach behind him for the hood attached to the shoulders of the coveralls, pulling it up and over his head and arranging its elastic so it snugs into a ridge on the top of the goggles as though the pieces were made to fit together, then pulling up the cowl at the coveralls' neck until the elastic there covers the bottom of his goatee and overlaps the edge of the mask. The whole process takes him less than three minutes; when he's finished, the only skin left bare are two tiny triangles at the edges of his cheeks, where the mask and the hood don't quite overlap.

The setup looks like the most claustrophobic thing Tifa has ever seen. "Should we be wearing those too?" she asks, hoping beyond hope the answer is 'no'.

Reeve's voice is muffled behind the fabric of the mask as he shakes his head. The gesture looks strange from behind the protective gear. "No, you should be fine. The stuff's bioaccumulative, so anybody who's in a reactor regularly gears up every time, but it takes years for the lifetime exposure to become significant, so as long as you don't go swimming, you should be fine; we shouldn't be here long enough to cause issues." He hesitates, and Tifa wishes she could see his face; she hadn't quite realized how much she relies on subconscious cues of facial expression to tell what people are thinking, but with Reeve transformed into an inhuman-looking column of white, all she can see is the faint smudge of his eyes behind the distortion of the goggles' glass. "Though, you should probably put on breathing masks at least," he concedes. "There usually isn't *this* much raw flow, and I didn't realize until I put the mask on just how much particulate we were breathing. There's gear in the locker behind you."

Tifa pats Rufus's shoulders to indicate she's about to pull away, giving him a second to brace himself before she does, and opens the door Reeve indicated. The locker is divided into a dozen shelves, each with space for two sets of gear sitting side-by-side. Some piles have one or two pieces missing; some spaces are empty entirely. Tifa takes the masks from the two neat stacks on the bottom-most shelf and sits down next to Rufus on the bench, handing one to him before trying to figure out how to put hers on. Once she gets it over her nose and mouth -- it's not quite as claustrophobia-inducing as she'd feared, but it's not exactly comfortable, either -- she realizes what Reeve meant: the thick and heavy taste in the back of her mouth that she wasn't consciously aware of feeling eases almost immediately, although it doesn't go away entirely.

Next to her, the line of tension in Rufus's shoulders eases, so imperceptably she feels it rather than sees it (and is startled to realize that she *is* sitting pressed against him from shoulder through to knee; she hadn't done it deliberately). "Okay, that's better," he says, and she realizes that yes, the creeping sense of wrongness has faded slightly, the not-quite-whispers in her not-quite-ears easing somewhat along with syrupy coating in the back of her throat. It isn't perfect -- she still feels the hairs at the nape of her neck stirring as though *something* is watching her and waiting for an opportune moment to strike, still feels like her skin is trying to crawl off her body, but Rufus is right. It is better.

A horrible thought follows on the heels of that realization. (Horrible only in that she feels as though she should already have

thought of the question, already know the answer; if that answer is affirmative, she thinks they will all feel rather silly for a few moments, but such a mundane explanation would ease her mind much more than some of the others that have already crossed it.) "Is Mako a hallucinogen if it's inhaled?" she asks, pitching her voice so that Reeve -- making his way down the steps into the reactor's belly -- will be able to hear her, even through the mask. "Could that be why --"

Reeve turns to look up at them, twisting his entire body to do it, instead of just turning his head; she thinks he's trying to keep from disturbing the various bits of protection he's wearing. "I thought of that already," he says, sounding rueful (though muffled). "It would be a -- reassuring -- bit of explanation. But no. Nobody's ever reported it as a side effect, at least."

"That we know of," Rufus corrects.

Reeve's shoulders rise, fall. A sigh, not a shrug, Tifa thinks, watching him and trying to suppress the little voice in the back of her head telling her that her inability to see his body language, his facial expressions, means that she should be on high alert. "That we know of," he agrees. "Hojo supervises the department responsible for the research into long-term effects of Mako exposure. I've worked with most of the guys on the research team that gathers the data and does our quarterly checkups and I *think* they're solid enough that they wouldn't allow him to suppress news of anybody having a side effect the rest of UrbDev should know about, but I wouldn't swear to it."

Rufus sighs as well. "And we're back to Hojo. Again. I'm really not liking the patterns we're seeing here, even if we don't have enough information to solve the equation yet." It's not a statement that requires a response; if anything, Tifa thinks, he doesn't even realize he's talking to himself, and knowing that makes her uncomfortable (nearly everything today has made her uncomfortable), knowing how much control this man usually keeps over himself. He runs his fingers through his hair again, tendons standing out in his arms as he pulls, and slumps over so his elbows are resting on his knees. He gives every impression of having turned into a statue, but Tifa thinks she can *hear* the sound of his brain working, furiously calculating possibility after possibility.

On the steps, Reeve waits an extra heartbeat -- to see if they need more information from him, most likely -- before turning and continuing his descent. Tifa loses sight of him after another few steps, and the protective booties he's wearing over his shoes muffle his steps until she can't tell where he is or what he's doing. In the silence, Tifa's skin starts to crawl again. She strains to hear any evidence of Reeve's passage, of what he's *doing* down there (out of her sight, away from her eye, in this womb of malevolence that was the site of her own death and rebirth), and it isn't until the chiming sussuration of liquid rushing beneath them turns into sounds she realizes she's struggling to pick out that she --

*(you must know this)*

*(abomination)*

*(unclean)*

(free us)

(help)

"I'm going outside," Tifa says, before she realizes she's speaking, before she realizes she's stood up and Rufus is looking up at her, eyes wide and startled as though he'd forgotten she was there. "I want to check on Tseng. Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

Rufus's eyes crinkle at the edges, and she thinks his lips must be curving behind his mask. "He'll only yell at you for leaving me unattended in here, you know."

"I hope he does," Tifa says, sharp and grim, and the rest of that sentence lies unspoken between them: *because then at least I'll know it's still him.*

Rufus inclines his head to her, rueful agreement with both the spoken and unspoken halves of her statement. "Don't take too long," he says, and lets the other half of his own sentence go unsaid: *if I can't rely on him right now, I'm going to need to rely on you twice as much.*

She wonders if he knows that's what he means, or if he'd admit it if he did.

Tifa's head clears a little as she steps out into the weak late-afternoon sunlight. Part of her is calculating angles, times, distances, *fuck, if this takes more than an hour we are going to have to do at least part of the return in the dark, Shiva damn it.* Tseng is half-sitting, half-kneeling on the topmost step of the staircase leading up to the reactor, his legs folded over themselves in front of him, each foot resting on the opposite thigh and his knees tilted downward and taking part of his weight onto the step beneath him. His hands are splayed in front of him: the tips of his thumbs, index, and smallest fingers lightly touch, while his third and fourth fingers are folded over so the full length of their second knuckles just barely brush. His eyes are closed. His breathing is calm and even, centered in his belly, and his color looks much healthier than it did inside.

She's moving silently, the deliberate stealth she's always made it a point not to adopt around him since the first time she realized that she *could*, and she'd eased open the reactor door as quietly as she could: no need to renounce whatever advantage she could have, if whatever was riding him inside hasn't relinquished its grip yet. He doesn't show any sign of having heard her. His breathing doesn't change, his shoulders do not tense, he shows none of the hundred tiny telltales of a man preparing for attack. It doesn't reassure her as much as it should. She doesn't doubt he's capable of producing threat without warning, no matter how closely she studies him.

One step towards him, and then another, her eyes trained on his face the whole way and bracing herself for the worst, but the only movement she can see is his breathing, in and out, steady and sure. "It stopped as soon as I got out here," he says, before she has to decide whether she's going to let him know she's there or not, and she startles to realize: she didn't have to. He knew she was there the minute she stepped outside. His next words confirm that he knows it's her, too: "And you shouldn't have left him alone in there, no matter

what he told you to do."

Tifa lets herself exhale in relief -- *okay, it is you in there*, even as she makes herself consciously not dwell on the question of how he could know it was her -- and lifts a hand to remove the mask from her face, tucking it into the waistband of her skirt, at the small of her back, before coming over to sit at his side.

Tseng does open his eyes then, turning his head just enough to be able to see her out of their corners, and she stifles a shudder. He looks like he did this morning when she walked out into the backyard of the mansion to find him on his knees, speaking words she couldn't fully understand to someone who wasn't there: grim, haunted. But at least it's nothing like he looked inside. She's seen this expression on his face before, on the late nights and in the early mornings when she thinks he's wrestling with unanswerable questions, and at least this time he looks human.

So she forces a smile, and if the tightening at the corners of his eyes and the sudden tension flowing back into his shoulders tell her it's not a good one, there isn't much she can do about that. "It was my idea, actually," she says. "And he said you'd say that."

Tseng keeps his eyes on her for a few more seconds, then closes them again and turns his head back to a neutral position. He doesn't say anything, just breathes, in and out. She draws her knees up to her chest, wraps her arms around them. The tips of her fingers sting and throb, and her arms and her shoulders are burning with exertion, and she's missing half the skin on her hands from rope burn and friction, but everywhere Rufus's hands touched, glowing with green fire, feels like the way she feels after ten hours of sleep and a long slow workout: warm and limber and raring to go. (She isn't thinking about what it felt like, the long liquid slide of his skin over hers, the soft euphoric cloud whispering *it's all right, it's okay, just let go, let me, everything's going to be just fine*. Magic disturbs her. It always has.)

"You know what that is in there," she says, abruptly. She isn't sure what makes her so certain. All she knows is that he'd looked sick, and he'd looked haunted, but he hadn't looked surprised.

Next to her, Tseng exhales. More sharply than he'd intended, judging by the way his spine stiffens slightly and his next breath is careful, so careful. "No," he says. He's never lied to her and he isn't lying now, but he isn't telling her the whole truth, either, and she is suddenly *so fucking sick* of this, of being constantly on edge, of having to watch for every tiny cue, of having to step around him like the landmine everyone else has always accused him of being.

She closes her eyes and breathes, too. It doesn't fucking help.

"I can't -- Not here," Tseng says, just as she's trying to decide if she'd be better off getting up and going inside after all, if the voices whispering in her ears inside the carnival of horrors would be a better option than the silences singing so loudly outside. "I will tell you. I will explain the things that let me -- I will explain what I can. But not here, not when we do not know ... what is listening." He opens his eyes again, but this time it isn't to look at her. It's to look over his shoulder, back at the door to the reactor, the quick nervous look of

someone trying to see if the danger is still there. "I did not lie to you; I don't know for certain. But I have an idea. And -- not here."

The silence stretches out between them again. "I thought I heard something speaking to me," Tifa finally says. "Inside. That's why I came out here. I -- I didn't tell Rufus --" *didn't want to worry Rufus, didn't want to make him think that another of us was cracking* -- "I just thought, he promised. So I came outside."

Tseng looks at her. And she's so fucking sick of having to watch for every tiny cue, so tired of having to turn up her perception to maximum gain in order to avoid being left in the dust, so worn-out and weary and *exposed*, but she can't make herself stop reaching for those fractional scraps of information, and that's why she can see it in the stillness of his face: surprise, and confusion, and the faintest hint of anger and she can't tell why. "You would hold his vows for him?"

Anger washes through her, too. This is the second time today he's tried to pick a fight with her over *nothing*, and now is *even less* the time for it than this morning was. There are so many things she could say: *how much of an asshole did you expect me to be and you were the one who manipulated things so I would start to see him as a person, what did you expect would happen* and maybe, just a little, *if you didn't spend so much time loudly expecting everyone to try to betray him, maybe more of them wouldn't*. She doesn't say any of them, though, because now is not the time, and she doesn't know, exactly, what they've stumbled into but every instinct in her body is telling her that it's important. Important enough that they don't have time for this.

"I'm pretty sure," she says -- slowly, evenly -- "that the right question there would have been, what was the creepy voice that doesn't actually exist saying to me, not something about some obscure point of honor that *nobody but you actually gives a shit about* right now."

Astonishingly, Tseng *blushes*, the stain spreading over his cheeks, and one part of her is watching with morbid fascination. She hadn't thought he was capable of blushing, had thought him capable of controlling his reactions closely enough to avoid his body betraying his thoughts. She digs what's left of her fingernails into her legs, feels dust and grit and her own dried blood flaking away over a wound that didn't even have the courtesy to leave a scar, and she breathes slowly and deeply and reminds herself: *you knew. You knew exactly where his loyalties lie. None of this should be a surprise to you.*

The thought doesn't make her feel any better. Not in the least.

"I --" he starts, and then his head whips around again, eyes searching for the reactor's door. Which opens, a fraction of a second after Tifa's eyes automatically follow his (looking for the danger, looking for what made him move so quickly). She tries to tell herself he only moved once the door opened, once he conceivably could have *heard* the door opening, and she knows he didn't, and she prays, silently, more sincerely than she can remember praying in a very long time: *Blessed Lady Shiva, please let this not happen again.*

Rufus stands in the doorway, blinking against the late-afternoon



sunlight. Tifa watches his eyes sweep over Tseng's face, watches him come to the same conclusion she had without needing the confirmation of speech, intuiting the truth of Tseng's self-possession from nothing more than the fractional tells he takes in with a speed even Tifa finds uncanny. "Good," he says, abrupt and sparse, and throws something at Tseng, whose hand flashes up to catch it automatically. (A third protective mask, Tifa realizes, when Tseng blinks down at it.) "Put that on, Reeve thinks part of the problem might be breathing the raw Mako particulate in the air. And get in here, both of you. I --" He breaks off, and Tifa realizes the tight, taut lines around his eyes aren't only from having just emerged from the relative darkness of the reactor into the sunlight after all. "We looked in the pods."

It takes a second for his words to sink in, and then Tifa's on her feet, reaching for her own mask and fitting it back over her face as she moves, inside the reactor again within a dozen seconds and not stopping to wonder *what the fuck she's doing*. (She has always been the person who runs towards the danger instead of away; she's always been the person who interposes herself between the threat and the others being threatened, and if there's a particular sharp pain in her chest at doing that now, here, ten feet from where she hasn't let herself look to see if her father's blood is still staining the floor, she can blame it on her lungs. She's probably overdue for another round of the pills Reno keeps forcing on her, anyway.)

She'd only faintly registered pushing past Rufus as she went, but he's on her heels as she goes, Tseng half a step behind, and so when she pulls up sharply at the top of the stairs down into the reactor's belly, frozen at what presents itself below, Rufus steps on the back of her heel and only barely stops himself from body-slamming her down the steps. Tseng makes a noise, low and sick, and Rufus is snapping, "Dammit, I told you to *wait*," and the mass of crinkly white fabric and not-quite-rubber and not-quite-glass that is Reeve is crouching on the floor in a puddle of translucent liquid all too similar to the liquid Cloud and the SOLDIER had been suspended in and there is a *thing* on the floor next to him --

It's moving, faint twitches that look like it's trying to gather its strength. It might have even once been human.

"I *didn't* open the pod," Reeve is saying, hands fluttering frantically over the -- the *thing's* body, looking like he can't decide whether to offer it aid or push it away. "I was trying to figure out the circuitry and it opened its eyes and it saw me and pushed open the pod itself --"

Tifa takes the steps in two quick bounds, her shoes skidding in the liquid on the floor as she lands, and shoves Reeve up and out of the way before she even realizes she's moving. Reeve slips too, comes down heavy and wrong-footed, his legs flailing underneath him until he loses the struggle to remain even partially upright, He lands, heavily, on his ass. Tifa hears him go down, spares one quick look over her shoulder to make sure he isn't injured -- he doesn't seem to be, unless you count the injury to his pride -- and to fix his location in her mind so she can make sure she stays *in between* him and ... it. 'It' is probably the right word.

"Get back up those stairs before it decides to attack you," Tifa orders Reeve, and her own voice in her own ears sounds wholly strange. The thing's skin ripples, the -- spikes? crests? -- on the top of its head spreading and flaring, and she swears and settles her weight more firmly, brings her hands up, tells herself, *the floor's wet, that stuff's more slippery than water is, watch where you step --*

The sound the creature makes is the scream of a wounded animal, sharp and desperate. The cry echoes off the metal of the walkways, the ductwork, the walls. Tifa is just opening her mouth to repeat her order when she hears Tseng's voice from above her, thick and choked: "Wait."

She spares him a glance, taking her eyes off the creature long enough to see that he's descending the stairs as well, looking ghost-pale, looking like he's using every inch of his will not to vomit. "Wait," he says again, and Tifa drags in a shuddering breath, trying to decide if it's *Tseng* speaking or if it's -- whatever was speaking to her, whatever was trying to control Tseng, whatever must have, *has* to have, been controlling Sephiroth. (She believes it now, she realizes, one tiny fleck of knowledge ambushing her from the deep sea of emotions simmering just beneath conscious thought: the thing she's feared, *hated*, for so long was not Sephiroth himself but a manifestation of whatever *thing* they've all been feeling since the moment they set foot across the threshold of this promontory of hell, and she *does not have the fucking time to think about that any further*.)

She looks up to Rufus, still standing on the catwalk above, his hands curling over the railing and his knuckles standing out white, and she can read the agony and indecision on his face as though it were an open book: he doesn't know, either.

Tseng looks as though he's barely holding himself upright, as though he's half a heartbeat away from collapse, but he levers himself stiffly down to kneel at the side of the creature, his motions jerky and pained, holding none of his usual grace. He reaches out both hands without hesitation, cupping the creature's face, turning its head (gently, so gently) to meet his eyes. "Tell me," he says, and his voice is a terrible mercy.

It's not speech, not precisely -- it *can't* be, not with that many teeth in the way -- but the sounds the creature makes, wretched and terrible, resolve into words anyway: *SOLDIER. Hojo.*

And, finally: *Help.*

With those few words the world realigns itself -- not monster, but victim -- and Tifa realizes she's shaking, deep waves that start at the small of her back and spread outward. She can see their echoes in Tseng's hands. He closes his eyes for a second or two, clearly steeling himself for something, and then opens them again and looks up at Rufus. "Throw me down a bottle of water," he says, and Rufus hesitates for no more than half a heartbeat. Tifa can see the effort it causes him not to ask. He turns to where they dropped their packs when they entered the vestibule and pulls out a bottle that's three-quarters full. It catches the light oddly as it tumbles arrow-true, end-over-end, stright down into Tseng's waiting hand, and Tifa shakes

herself out of the stupor of fear and adrenaline and horror she's fallen into and makes herself go to Tseng's side.

"Tell me what to do," she says, not quite able to make herself kneel next to him (next to it) but forcing herself to look, to see what's been done. To witness. This close, she can see that the writhing she took for the creature (oh, Shiva, the *person*) trying to get up, to attack, were actually spasms of agony. Its skin looks raw, peeled or burned away. Its chest is heaving, the sound wet and labored and gasping.

Tseng shakes his head. "There's nothing we can do," he says, sounding sick. His eyes are unfocused, like he's listening to something nobody else can hear, but for the first time it doesn't make her worry at all. "He can't fully breathe air yet. He isn't -- finished. He wanted to warn us --"

"Phoenix have mercy," Reeve says from behind them. Tifa can hear him scrabbling to his feet. "Can we -- let me try to figure out how to get the pod he broke out of refilled, we can put him back in it before --"

"No," Tseng says, sharply, just as the -- man -- on the floor makes another sound, this time weak and thready. "No. It wouldn't be a mercy. Not at all."

That's what finally breaks through the last of Tifa's resistance (thinking: *is this what they were trying to turn Cloud into? is this what would have happened to him if we hadn't come for him?*) She wonders who this man was, if there's anyone who's missing him, if there's anyone out there wondering what happened to their son, their brother, their father. She kneels down at the man's other side, one hand hovering in hesitation before resting it, as gently as she can, on a part of his shoulder that looks less raw than the surrounding area. He makes another noise, pained and rough, but when she draws back her hand Tseng says, absently, "No, it's all right. It'll hurt no matter what, give the poor bastard a bit of comfort." She puts her hand back on the man's shoulder. The texture of the not-skin beneath her palm is wet and unnatural.

"Do you think restorative magic would help, or hurt?" Rufus says, softly. He's come down the stairs from the vestibule, but he hasn't come any closer than the bottom step; not because he's frightened or disgusted, Tifa thinks, but because he doesn't want to split Tseng's attention or make Tseng feel he had to protect Rufus instead of concentrating on -- whatever Tseng is doing.

Tseng does look up at the question, though, and Tifa thinks something about it has surprised him. "I don't know," he says. "It can't hurt to try, but first let me just --"

He doesn't finish the sentence, only uncaps the bottle of water he's holding and pours some into his palm. Tifa thinks he's going to offer it to the man, shifts her weight in preparation for helping to hold up his head so he can drink, but Tseng only closes his eyes and brings his palm up to his own chin, pulling down his mask and blowing so gently across the surface of the water that it barely ripples. He mutters a few words in Wutaian, and Tifa's ears sharpen: conversing

with him over the past few years she has learned, out of necessity, how to *listen* for his high-caste inflections even if she can't quite keep track of them when she herself is speaking. This isn't just a different mode, though. It's almost a different language, the vowels older and more wild, the consonants familiar but meaningless. Her ear won't follow it; the only word she can pick out is *Lord*.

Whatever Tseng's doing, the man -- poor bastard indeed -- is calming, his eyes following Tseng's gestures with what looks like hunger. Tseng closes his eyes -- trying to remember something, or trying to brace himself for something? She can't tell -- and dips the fingers of his right hand into the water in his left palm, flicking them out so droplets fall against the man's chest. He repeats the gesture another two times, then traces lines over the man's forehead before turning his left palm over and resting it there, water trickling down over his face. Tifa has to blink; she doesn't know why, but her head is swimming, almost like the way she felt when Rufus was healing her. Like there's some magic being performed here, deep and primal.

"*I am sorry*," Tseng says, still in Wutaian, but slipping back into the manner Tifa is more used to hearing from him. It's the gentle tone he uses in the middle of the night, when she wakes from a nightmare. "*It's all I can do. I left the temple half a lifetime ago.*"

The man's breaths are getting deeper and more rapid, great whooping heaves as animal instinct tries to force his lungs to suck in more of the air that isn't doing him any good at all, but he opens his eyes again and jerks his chin in what Tifa thinks is trying to be a nod. Tseng bows his head for an instant, low enough that the edges of his hair slip over his shoulder and brush against the man's chest. He holds his palm over the man's eyes and says, so very softly, "*It's all right, little brother. Let go. I will carry it from here, and I will not rest until it is made right.*"

Under Tifa's hand, the man breathes out one last time, and then is still.

There's a minute of silence, in which Tseng's lips move again but he makes no sound, and then Rufus asks, "What did you do?" His voice is calm enough, but there's a note hidden deep within it, firm and unyielding, that tells Tifa he won't be satisfied with half-answers.

Tseng finishes whatever litany he was wordlessly reciting, head bowed, before looking up again. Tifa's breath catches. He looks unearthly, the way Rufus looked in the kitchen this morning while crowned by morning sunlight, the way Rufus has been looking for the past half-hour, light to drive back the shadows. In a way she cannot name, it's the precise opposite of how Tseng looked half an hour ago when they first walked into the reactor. He looks somehow ... *more* than he ever has before. (The tiny sound Rufus makes, an inhale too sharp and an exhale too-long-delayed, tells her he can see it too. Whatever it is.)

Then she blinks and it's gone, and Tseng looks drained and weary, swaying slightly on his knees.

"He is -- was -- of Wutai," Tseng says. "I gave him the final blessings, that he would not die with the desecration of what has been

done to him weighing down his soul." Tifa inhales -- there's more to it than that, she *knows* there is, even if she can't guess what that more might be -- and Tseng's eyes flick to her, quickly, then back to Rufus. "The rest of it -- not here. There are some things that cannot be spoken where evil sleeps." He pauses. "Slept, I think," he corrects himself. "I think ... whatever did this is no longer here. But it was. For a long time."

His words hover in the silences between them, filling up the space more than they should, for half a minute. Rufus is the one to break the spell, the not-spell, the *whatever*. "All right," he says, something unidentifiable buried deep inside his tone. He turns in place, once, slowly, eyes sweeping the room for ... something. Some hint at what might be going on here. "I -- This is obviously even bigger than we thought it was. And we're going to have to..." He trails off, more uncertain than Tifa has seen him yet be. Or, no. Realizing what none of them have quite yet let themselves think. "Alexander's mercy. There are *dozens* of those things in here. And there's someone in each of them, isn't there."

Tseng's eyes look sick. "Yes," he says, and says the other half of what they all are avoiding: "And we can't help them. Not without leaving too much proof that we were in here."

Tifa sucks in a breath. He's right. She knows he's right, knows it's his responsibility to weigh those factors and make those decisions, knows precisely to the inch how much those decisions weigh on his shoulders after, but she can't help the fierceness of the hatred that tears through her for his saying it. The emotion slices through her more cleanly and keenly than Sephiroth's blade did, fifteen feet and three years from where they are all (re)discovering this chamber's horrors, and Tseng's eyes flick to her for half a second before darting away. *He sees my hatred*, she thinks, and then, more urgently, *he can sense my hatred*, and she holds her breath, on the cusp of some realization that feels far more earth-moving than it should.

It blows away, though, as soon as Rufus speaks. "I think that cat is already out of the bag," he says, tense and unhappy. "We've already fucked with enough that whoever comes after us is going to be able to tell we were up here too. And probably make a few good guesses about who we are, and what we were doing."

"Probably isn't definitely," Tseng counters. "We have a cover. It's not a good cover, but if we blow it and then walk out of here and head back to Midgar, we'll be committed; our enemies will know for certain --"

*Your father will know for certain*, he means.

"Tseng," Rufus says, war-torn and weary, shoulders bowed too far. "We've already passed that point. We declared open war the minute we walked into that mansion; we just didn't know it." His chin comes up; he's staring beyond them, at the steps leading up to the door, at all of the secrets they still haven't unearthed. "I declared war on him a decade ago and more," he adds, softly enough it could be an afterthought. "This is just the point at which I can't pretend anymore that I haven't."

The sentence hangs in the air between them, as heavy and oppressive as the rest of the atmosphere in here, and then Reeve breaks the spell by stepping forward, shoulders squared beneath his protective suit. "Mr. Vice-President," he says -- stark, formal.

Rufus's whole body jerks to hear it; he looks back at Reeve, face guarded behind his mask. "Mr. Director," he says. He's matching cadence for cadence and formality for formality, but Tifa hears the wariness buried behind that formality, hears himself bracing for whatever Reeve will say. Expecting Reeve to declare him anathema, Tifa realizes; steeling himself for Reeve's betrayal, for Reeve to discover at this late moment that he cannot countenance a direct attack. Not for the first time, she curses the mask and protective gear Reeve is wearing. If she could see him, if Rufus could see him, perhaps --

But Reeve's chin tips upward, set and determined behind the white filter pressed against his face. "Mr. Vice-President," he repeats. "As the only other representative of the Shinra executive board present -- I vote we sink the fucking bastards."

That sentence, too, hangs between them, until Rufus blows out a breath Tifa hadn't realized he'd been holding, on a sound that's more of a laugh than anything else. It breaks the tension, even though Tifa's not sure how it does. Rufus runs a hand through his hair, and when it drops again, he seems to have found some new source of strength: he seems, once again, larger than he should be, or more solid, or *something*. "Yeah," he says, and then, "yeah, okay," and laughs again, one short sharp bark. "Sometimes you pick your battles. Sometimes the battles pick you." His gaze sweeps over each of them in turn, and Tifa finds her own shoulders setting, her own chin rising, when he gets to her. "Let's get what we can from this place, and I'll figure out what our next steps are on our way back down."

It only takes a minute, and one long shared look, before the three men each turn (in near-unison) and scatter throughout the cavernous emptiness of the reactor's womb. Tifa is left standing there, next to the body of the man (not-man) who was willing to die to bring them a warning and to set them on this path, and realizes that the three of them have been marching steadily towards this moment for years. She remembers the revelations of Rufus's history this morning, remembers the careful confessions in Tseng's apartment the other evening, and thinks: Rufus had said, then, that he and Tseng have been planning their coup for years. Have been laying ground and preparing alliances, setting each tiny seed into place and nurturing it as it grows. She hadn't realized then, listening to them, that there must be others inside the company they've been courting and creating, setting into place or seducing away their loyalties, but of course Reeve must be one of them. Rufus cannot hope to overthrow his father with only the Turks at his side.

So she follows along behind Reeve as he heads unerringly for the wall of switches and dials, pipes and cutoffs, and watches as he lifts a hand and runs his finger in midair, clearly tracing the progress of one of the pipes or conduits or wiring out of the rats'-nest before him. "How can I help?" she asks.

Reeve barely spares her a glance, though his tone is kind. "Unless

you know anything about electrical engineering or Mako flow, I don't think there's a --" He breaks off, mutters something rude under his breath. "Of course he's got this box locked." He wraps his fingers around a padlock that's securing a metal box, barely visible behind bundles of wire and flexible tubing, and flips the padlock up to squint at the faint markings on the bottom of it. "...And of course it's not one my master will open. Rufus! Did you bring your picks or am I going to have to cut this?"

"Hold your chocobos," Rufus yells back -- Tifa can't tell from where; both he and Tseng disappeared while she was watching Reeve watching the panels. "I've got them with me, just lemme --" He breaks off, with a yelp; there's a sound of something buzzing, and the sharp cinnamon-and-steel scent around them takes on an overtone like metal and lightning. "Son of a bitch," Rufus swears, but it sounds more rote than urgent. "Tseng, get over here for a second, I need another pair of hands --"

Tifa takes a few steps back. All three of them clearly know what they're doing, or at least far more than she does; she won't interrupt, since they're on a deadline and telling her what she could do would clearly take more time than if they just did it themselves. It makes her feel superfluous, unnecessary -- slum girl good only for getting them where they need to be, not good enough to do anything once they get there -- but she stops the thought as soon as she realizes it's forming: this part isn't hers to help with. It doesn't need to be.

That she wishes it could be -- that being left alone in this reactor with nothing to distract her from the memories and the overwhelming, oppressive *wrongness* is enough to make her skin crawl -- is not their problem; they have other things to do.

The chill of the air is getting worse, and she chafes her hands along her upper arms to warm them. Her fingertips catch on a series of tiny bumps that weren't there earlier; she frowns and looks more closely, moving closer to the nearest pool of light from above and running the side of her thumbnail along her skin. The roughness lifts as she scrapes her nail along, and she lifts her hand up to squint at her nail, moving it back and forth so the light catches it. Tiny droplets wink back at her, sharp crystal structure glistening as brightly as diamonds or starlight, and when she looks down at her skin again she can see the pattern of spray, each individual fragmentary chip seeming to glow with a light that is not entirely reflected.

She shivers. Mako becomes materia. Sephiroth told her that, years ago, on this very mountain, and she'd filed the information away as something that would likely never be useful for her to know but would remember anyway in case she proved to need it. She wonders what magic is forming on her skin, and the thought is so unsettling that she scrubs her hands against her arms harder and harder until the droplets begin to slough off.

It's too cold in here.

If she is to be the only one who is not working on whatever mechanical wonders the other three have committed themselves to, it falls to her to set the watch, to guard against dangers from without and within. The cold is setting into her muscles, already worn and

weary from their day so far, save for the spots where Rufus had healed her, and so she makes herself start moving again. Ten steps in one direction, ten steps in the other, back and forth, until she switches to pacing a box instead of a line. Her boots echoed against the grate, upstairs, but down here the flooring is concrete, thick and stone-like, and it absorbs the sound.

She detours around the puddle of liquid that spilled from the pod when the man-creature hurled himself out of it; one part of her notices that it hasn't begun to crystallize yet. It must not be pure Mako, then. Her eyes follow the splash, tracking it along the floor, back up to the cracked pod, to the door that fell (was broken) off its hinges and was cast away to land against another pod in that row. Something other than the Mako-liquid must have spilled or leaked at some point as well, since that pod and the one next to it both have a spray of dark rust along their bottom edges, flaking up from the floor --

It hits her, then, like a fist to the stomach, like a fall from a great height. It's not rust.

It's blood.

*Her* blood, sprayed and splattered across the margins of the pods, stained where it pooled along the concrete of the floor. She'd left part of herself here, and through apathy or distraction, whoever architected this warehouse of suffering never bothered with more than a cursory cleanup. The discoloration of the concrete stares up at her, a grisly memento that has seeped into the stone to become part of the permanent mute testimony of this place. Of the horrors that happened here, then and now.

*Blessed Lady Shiva, save us all*, she thinks, half obscenity, half prayer, against the rush of memory, and shivers again as the cold seems to get worse.

Against her will, Tifa's gaze moves along the spray, calculating the angles almost absently as part of her remembers the lurching, dizzying sensation of flying across the room, of gravity dragging her downward even as her mind tried to catch up with what had just happened. Memory rushes back in to her, like water rushing in to fill a space dug in the sand when the tide rolls in: it had been like taking a fall off the face of a rock, and she'd been trying -- mind sluggish, body in shock -- to roll in mid-air, the way she had been taught, to take the impact somewhere she would do herself the least damage when she landed, knowing even then it was too late to bother. She'd told Tseng and Rufus it hadn't hurt until she'd hit, but she'd forgotten that grinding, shocking sense of *betrayal*, having those few seconds to try to prepare herself and finding that her body refused to obey her, those few brief seconds that had felt like an eternity in lived time, until it ended and she'd felt her head bounce against the floor like a ripe melon, felt her arm splinter beneath her --

She'd forgotten about the arm, until just now. It's amazing what you can forget. It's amazing what you can remember, later.

Her eyes lift from where she'd landed, tracing the trajectory of her flight. Her fall. Thirty feet up, at least: from atop the stairs,



where Sephiroth had been trying to open the door marked 'Jenova'. *Jenova*, she thinks, and *mother*, she thinks, and she hears Valentine saying *I tried to save Sephiroth, both before he was born and after* and Rufus saying *his mother had been a woman named Jenova, and she died giving birth to him* and she thinks of death and of life and of the voices that have been whispering at them all since they opened this door --

"Tifa, c'mere and --"

Someone's calling her name, looking for her help, but there's something else she has to do first. Something important, something *critical*, and she takes another step (she is climbing the stairs; she does not remember having decided to climb the stairs, but the door is above her and therefore she must climb the stairs to it) and frowns. The door is thick and dense metal, not wood or even metal-clad panels but one slab set flush into the wall as though it had grown there. There's a scanner next to it, the outline of a human hand marked on the face of the glass; she sets her hand on it, but is not surprised when nothing happens. There are no hinges, and she crouches and runs her fingertips along the edgeseam to find nothing but a few chips gouged out of the stone of the wall. The door itself is untouched. (*Remember this*: Sephiroth, the sword he'd taken from her in his hands, hacking desperately at the door and making no headway, shouting -- something. *Remember this*: Cloud, leaning over her, the cowl he'd stripped from over his hair pressed against the gaping wound in her chest to stifle the flow of blood, chanting, "it's all right, it's all right, Tifa, I'm here, it's me, look at me, stay with me, Zack will stop him --")

"Tifa."

Someone hisses, a sharp shushing sound. Unseen hands close on her shoulders, helping her as she stands from her crouch. (Behind her, a voice, beloved, furious: "-- touch someone in the middle of something like this, Leviathan's scales, Rufus, you're going to --" but it's a distant thread of sound behind the pounding of her heart in her ears and the susurrations of her blood in her veins. *Remember. Remember this.*) She tenses against the touch for a moment, *then* blending with *now*, but they aren't Cloud's panicked hands trying to stave off her death: these hands are warm and surprisingly callused, gentle and encouraging, keeping her from falling as her knees threaten to give way beneath her weight. She can hear herself making an absent sound of thanks. She puts her own hands on the door again, fingertips questing along the seams, until she's risen onto the tips of her toes and balanced there, hands stretching far above her to feel. One of her helper's hands slides down her back, spanning the stretch of her spine where it's arched, and stays there with just enough pressure to ground her and not enough to cause her to unbalance. It's so warm, burning like a brand against her skin.

"Stay back," someone says in her ear, voice sharp and commanding, and, "I don't know, but it isn't a fucking flashback, all right? *Look* at her. Let her work."

--didn't say it was a flashback, I know exactly what --" the first voice is saying, but Tifa bites her lip and closes her eyes, trying to block out what's happening around her. The darkness helps for a

second, and then with a sharp twist (like a broken bone being set) that darkness falls away and she feels as though she's looking over her own shoulder: Reeve at the foot of the stairs looking agonized, Tseng half-frozen halfway up the stairs where he had been charging upward to her rescue when Rufus had thrown out a hand to command him to stop, and that means the compact woman with the look of absentminded concentration on her face must be herself. The woman's head turns and her eyes open; she blinks, and the dizzying double-vision collapses. She's looking at Rufus. He's looking at her, calm and confident, and he leaves his hand against the small of her back as an anchor.

"Go on," Rufus says. "I've got you."

Tifa turns her head back again and sinks back down until her feet are once again flat on the floor. "He couldn't get through the door, no matter how much he tried," she hears herself saying. "Not until after Zack charged him. They fought. Up here."

She takes two steps back from the door, turning in place, eyes sliding over the thin landing. *Remember* beats in her ears, in her blood, with her heartbeat. (*Remember this*: the sounds, and Cloud leaning over her, the lights a halo behind his hair, the soft blue-green of his eyes boring urgently into her as he leaned down against the makeshift bandage one-handed while scrabbling at his bracer of materia with the other. *Remember this*: the green glow building up against Cloud's hands, the way he kept chanting "shit, shit, shit" and starting over when he fumbled and lost the spell, the sudden searing burn of the healing magic tearing into her, harsh and painful, so unlike the easy and gentle wash of Rufus's casting. So. It was Cloud who healed her, then. Not Zack. Cloud, and the magic had been too powerful for him, and he'd done it anyway, because he'd needed to. Because she'd needed him. It's another old question answered, and she thinks, distantly, that she must do whatever she can to repay that debt now that Cloud's the one who needs her.)

"They fought," she repeats. Makes herself keep speaking, to reassure them she's still in here, to let them know it's *her* speaking no matter how odd she might feel at the moment. "Sephiroth was shouting. He said --" She turns around again, staring at the door, at the label (epitaph or warning) emblazoned across the top of it. "He said his mother needed him."

*His mother had been a woman named Jenova, and she died giving birth to him.*

*I tried to save Sephiroth, both before he was born and after.*

*Mother, I'm here for you. I've come to save you. Let me in, mother.*

The words tumble in her ears, mingling and melding, falling over each other and tumbling over a precipice into cacophony in her memory. She tilts her head back, as far as it will go, looking up (and up, and up), letting her eyes unfocus as she looks at the inscription. The letters aren't painted there. They're carved into the wall, like letters chipped into a headstone, and she thinks *doors have two sides* and *it wasn't a prison, it was a bunker* and she remembers the

piercing, inhuman sound of Sephiroth screaming as Zack's sword bit into his hand.

*Remember this:* Zack tumbling down the stairs, droplets of his blood following his fall in furious arcs. Cloud sobbing as Sephiroth turned and set his bleeding hand against the palm-scanner that had refused to open for him. The sound of the door: stone against stone, scraping, twisting, as Sephiroth cried out.

*Let me help you, mother. I have come for you. I swear I am of your blood. I swear I am worthy.*

She reaches for more, closes her eyes and breathes in the smell of the place as an aid to memory even though it's missing the stink of blood and despair. The only other thing she can summon is a tiny flash, herself clutching the cowl Cloud had been using to stave the blood and looking down, dizzy and seeing double, to watch her own blood welling up between her fingers from the sodden fibers.

"Give me your knife," she says. It ignites a brief but fierce argument behind her. She tunes them out, closing her eyes, holding on to the fragments surfacing from the depth of her memory and trying to weave them into some unified whole; she's absorbed enough in the task that she starts when Rufus gently unfolds the clenched fingers of her fist, places the hilt of a knife into it, and folds her fingers back over. She sets the blade against her other palm, ready to close her hand on it and draw it through her skin, before pausing. No. If any blood were enough to activate the scanner, it would have opened for Sephiroth the first time he'd tried, when her blood had been sprayed across his skin.

*Blood of the Abomination,* she thinks. Hears. She isn't certain.

Tseng reaches out a hand to her as she steps past him on the stairs, but stops just short of touching her. She frowns at that hand for a second, before realizing what he means by the gesture: he probably thinks she's gone mad by now. Thinking back over the last ten minutes, Tifa's not entirely certain he isn't correct, but she makes herself smile at him anyway. "It's all right," she says, cool and reassuring. His worried look doesn't smooth over, but she doesn't have time to explain. (The words in her ears tumble around each other and form into polished diamonds of *I cannot aid you for much longer, beloved daughter, not without harming you*, and she knows she should be more concerned, but the voice feels *right* somehow, the echo of her own best self that goads her to her moments of greatness.)

It's ridiculously cold in here; her breath is fogging as she exhales it, even through the mask she's still wearing across her mouth and nose.

She kneels down next to the body of the man who died to warn them. "*Little brother, I am sorry, but I have a need,*" she says -- only realizing after she's spoken, after she hears Tseng's shocked inhalation, that she's spoken in Wutaian. He has been dead long enough that his blood will not flow properly, but she makes the cut where gravity has pooled it, and gravity helps her along just enough. Even in his death, his blood is warm on her hand. She climbs the

stairs again, and this time, when she rests her blood-covered palm against the plate glass of the scanner, the door pivots on its axis and lifts, swinging up and away from them, and she looks down at her hand on the scanner and hears, in the voice of her own thoughts, *Sephiroth was the first, but too many have been forced to bear the Abomination in their veins since.*

Then whatever odd numbness has been holding her breaks. Tifa staggers as everything lands on her at once: fear at how she has spent the last ten minutes obeying the voice of some impulse not entirely her own, some atavistic panic at the sight of the gaping maw the door has revealed, terror and pain at the memories she's been reliving. Rufus catches her again, his hands somehow not seeming quite as warm as they had felt only a moment ago, and she stumbles against him and turns to bury her face against his chest. She's shivering, but it isn't from the cold. Not entirely. She can't say what it's from.

"It's clear, go ahead," she hears Tseng saying over her head a moment later, and then he's standing next to her, to them, and resting his hand on the back of her neck. This time, something about his touch is even more reassuring than Rufus's. She can't tell why, but she pulls her face back from Rufus's chest, gasping in air. She feels more exhausted than if she'd just run around the entire edge of the Plate, as drained as though she's been awake for days, and she couldn't possibly say why.

"Tell me what you need," Rufus says -- she can feel the rumble of his voice, conducted through skin and the arms still encircling her. She takes a breath to speak, trying to figure out how to say that she has no idea *what* she needs -- no idea what the fuck even just happened -- but he's not talking to her. He's talking to Tseng, and Tseng is gently but firmly taking charge of her so that she's leaning against him instead of Rufus.

"Up in the first-aid kit," Tseng says, and he isn't talking to her either. "There's an Elixir; we need to get it into her as quickly as we can, before her body realizes how much mana she just burned." She makes a noise of protest -- mana powers magic; she hadn't cast any magic, doesn't know how, has never even touched a materia -- but Rufus slides his arms away from her, having transferred the burden of her weight to Tseng. She can hear him, taking the steps two at a time, down to the floor and then up to the catwalk. "Shh, it's all right," Tseng says, at her protest, and to her eternal shame she can feel her knees buckling.

Tseng shifts with her, bending and twisting until he can get one arm underneath her knees, and lifts her up into a sideways carry, held against his chest as though she weighs nothing. He carries her down two of the steps, then -- rather than taking her down the rest of the flight -- sits back on the landing and arranges her across his lap. "Faster would be better, Rufus," he calls.

"Pack the first-aid kits more sensibly next time, then," Rufus says, from far too close. Tifa opens her eyes (when had she closed them?) to see him holding out an uncapped glass phial. The liquid in it is a thick ruby-red syrup; it clings to the side of the glass. She's never seen an Elixir before. Sometimes the pharmacy in Wall Market will

have a rare Ether or two in stock, kept behind the counter and sold for far too many gil, and she's heard rumors of more powerful versions available in Midgar-Above, but she's never needed one. She reaches out a hand to take it from him, but Tseng redirects her, gently, and takes it instead; with the way her hands are shaking, the way one is still smeared with blood, that's probably wise. He unhooks her mask for her, then holds the phial to her lips and helps her drink it down.

She's expecting it to taste like chalk and sawdust the way a Potion does, but it doesn't; it tastes the way she imagines sunshine might, or happiness, or love. It doesn't burn on the way, but a few seconds after she drinks it, she realizes she's gone from leaning listlessly against Tseng's lap with him supporting her to sitting there under her own power, and a few seconds after that she realizes that she feels better than she has in a long damn time.

"There you are," Rufus says, smiling at her.

He's nothing but kind, but humiliation scalds the back of her throat anyway -- she's spent entirely too much fucking time in the past four or five days being held and comforted, having her tears wiped or her wounds tended. She remembers, belatedly, that Reeve is here too -- someone else to look the fool in front of -- but she can't see him; sounds are coming from behind the door at the top of the stairs that started this whole thing, though.

She rolls off Tseng's lap, ignoring the way his hands flex against her as though he's trying to keep himself from trying to stop her, and winds up in an awkward sort of half-crouch on the step next to them both. She can't bring herself to meet anyone's eyes. "Sorry," she says, throat tight. "I don't know what just -- Go back to what you were doing, I'll be fine now."

She feels, rather than sees, the look Tseng and Rufus exchange, the way they decide between the two of them which one has to deal with her next. Rufus must win; his steps recede, and she hears his voice murmuring something to Reeve a few seconds later. She closes her eyes, steeling herself for pity or irritation or disappointment, and then looks up at Tseng, ready to apologize again.

But he's looking at her, and the look he's giving her is somehow knowing and compassionate and tinged with a hint of sadness for some reason she can't name. "Lady," he says -- somehow not *to* her, but *through* her, acknowledgement or respect, she can't tell -- and she flashes back to this morning, watching him kneeling in grass still damp with the morning dew. He stands. "Come on. The first summon's always the hardest; if you wind up having to do it again, it'll be easier next time. You -- She -- got us into the antechamber; there's not much left in there, but maybe you'll remember something else we can use."

Tifa blinks, then blinks again. She puts her hand in his automatically when he holds his out to her, lets him pull her to her feet, but she still feels like she's swimming through mud when she tries to parse his words. "What?" is all she can manage.

Tseng's eyebrows draw together and he closes his eyes, not in

confusion but in the expression that has always meant he is wishing for patience and the wisdom to say the correct thing. "*Deliver me from unbelievers,*" he says under his breath, words half-muffled by the face mask; then, louder and to her: "Sometimes you don't need a Summon materia to call forth one of the gods, just an affinity and a strong enough need. On your part, or on Theirs." His eyes skitter away from hers, as though he's the one who can't meet her eyes. "Leviathan's been trying to get my attention since we walked in here, but I don't -- I can't -- it's been years since --" He stops himself, breathing deeply. "I'm explaining this badly."

"You really are," Tifa says, slowly. She's heard of Summon materia before, whispered around the edges of the Heaven, but has always thought them nothing more than something from the old stories, brought into modern times as a focus for what-if, something to cling to in desperate times: the idea that a bead of materia could invoke the power of the gods from all those old stories can sustain people when they need it. *I'll go find a Phoenix summon and it will heal my mother. If I could find an Odin summon, I'd make it slice through all those drug dealers who've taken over Lower Two. If I had an Ifrit summon, maybe we wouldn't freeze this winter.* She's never thought they were *real*.

There's a crash from the antechamber a few steps above them; Tseng's head snaps around to follow it, his hand twitching towards his sidearm, but Reeve's voice comes a few seconds later, calling reassurances. Tseng looks back at her. Tifa's breath catches: he looks *ashamed*. "The children of Midgar may swear by the old gods," he says, slowly, sounding as though he is picking through his words one by one, "but to so many, those names are nothing but pleasing syllables. I was ... raised differently. I do not know what you might believe or disbelieve, but I have had it proven to me time and again that it does not matter if you believe in the gods or not; it matters whether They believe in you."

As Tifa watches, trying to make sense of what he's saying -- she cannot believe that he believes what he's saying, but she can't believe he's lying to her, either -- his eyes flick down to the dead man's body: one tiny motion, there and back to her again. She wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't been staring at him. Something in the back of her mind stirs again, the way it had to start this whole thing off, and some left-over shard of knowing surfaces from the whirlwind of her thoughts. "Your training," she says, thinking of the few scattered pieces of his childhood he's given her, thinking of the way she's always sensed him talking around some piece she thought must have been one of their taboos. "You were..."

She trails off, not knowing what word she's searching for. Tseng grimaces, though. "'Priest' is as good a word as any," he admits. "Leviathan's chosen, consecrated at His altar. I left it behind me. Or I tried to." He looks over his shoulder, up towards the antechamber, brief and haunted; she can't say for sure, but she thinks he might not even know he's doing it. "Whatever this is, whatever we're dealing with, it's more than just ..." He trails off as well. "There is a wrongness here," he says, abruptly. "I don't have words for it. I don't know if I would if I hadn't spent the last twenty years trying not to listen to those senses or not, but it's not just someone -- Hojo -- having redirected half the Mako on this continent into this reactor, or

having used it to turn those poor bastards into monsters. It's not just physical. There's something deeper. And whatever it is, it's bad enough that Shiva Herself came to your aid when you called upon Her, and the aid She gave you was to open our way into ... whatever's in there."

"Nothing's in there," Rufus says. His voice is quiet, even, controlled; Tseng and Tifa both startle at the sound of it. She hadn't heard him approach. Judging by the horror in Tseng's eyes, he hadn't heard Rufus either, and for some reason she can't identify, the thought terrifies him. Rufus's eyes flick over them both; he lingers for a moment on Tseng's face, but doesn't say anything other than, "Not anymore. But something was. And I think, whatever it was --"

The last remaining bit of knowledge (that she *will not* believe was placed into her mind by one of the gods made manifest) clicks into place in Tifa's thoughts. "Whatever it was," she says -- feeling sick, feeling *certain* -- "it was what drove Sephiroth mad."

"Right in one," Rufus says. "And if Hojo was the one who put it here originally --"

Tseng closes his eyes. "Then Hojo's the one who knows where it is right now."

It's nothing they hadn't already suspected. Or rather, it's nothing Tifa hasn't been suspecting for at least since last night, and if Tifa suspects it, Rufus and his allies must have been suspecting it for years, must have strategies in place and contingency plans layered ten levels deep. But saying it out loud is apparently enough to make things real, because they all fall silent at once, and the space feels heavier than it should.

"Okay," Rufus finally says, breaking that silence when it becomes clear neither of the other two of them will. "So. Get out of here with as much information as we can get, get back down the mountain, collect everyone and everything from the mansion --" He breaks off, his eyes going distant and narrowed. "Which, if we're not worrying about stealth anymore -- save the objection, Tseng, it's already been noted -- we don't have to fuck around with. Then I'll call over to Beatrice --"

"Secretary," Tseng murmurs to Tifa in explanation. "She's the one who really runs the company."

Rufus gives him an annoyed look and keeps talking. "-- and have her activate the protocols for Crimson Lightning immediately; there's no need to wait until we get back, and it's probably better to give everyone a head start, just in case." His brows draw together; Tifa can tell he's frowning, even though the mask is in the way. "We'll need a base of operations that isn't the Complex. If we're starting this in earnest now, things are going to get rough pretty quickly, and I don't want to have to keep looking over my shoulder. Crimson Lightning might be the most militant of the plans, but it still wasn't set up with all this in mind." His eyes flick around the space they're in again. "And I don't have any fucking clue what Hojo has in place that we're going to have to work around. Not to mention, we've got two wounded we have to find care for."

Tifa takes a deep breath. There's no question; she made her vow with the old words and in full knowledge that keeping it was probably going to hurt like hell. She just hadn't expected the price to come due so quickly, but the fact Rufus is accounting for Cloud (and Zack) in making his plans proves she was right to have offered to pay it. "There's the Heaven," she says, quietly. "It isn't much, but it's safe, it's securable, there's an old bomb shelter under the property that nobody knows about but me --" Tseng startles at that; she can't help the little twinge of satisfaction that prompts. He *hadn't* noticed the hatch underneath the beat-up old pinball machines, then. "And it might be in the slums, and my neighbors and my patrons might be a little too invested in what I'm up to, but -- they're *my* people. If they spot anything odd going on, they'll keep their mouths shut."

Rufus hesitates for just long enough that she can tell he knows precisely what making that offer means to her, and is trying to find a way to let her know that he doesn't take the offer lightly. "Hold that thought," he says. "I'm not saying no; we might need it. I won't know more until we really start digging into things. But --" He grimaces, so vehemently she can tell even behind the mask. "I don't want to burn that until we really need it. And I don't want to put you in that much risk. If this goes badly --"

He breaks off, leaving the end of that sentence unspoken: if this goes badly, they will all be dead, and he doesn't want to risk his father and his father's people deciding to obliterate the Seventh Heaven along with the rest of the cleanup.

"It'll have to be your penthouse, Tseng," Rufus says. "Unless -- Reeve!"

He's raised his voice just enough to be heard, and Reeve appears at the door to the antechamber. Tifa blinks. There's a pattern of ash along the left arm of Reeve's coverall, as though something had caught fire at some point in the minutes she'd lost and he'd beaten out the flames with his bare hands. At least the coverall itself is unburned, just dirty. He's obtained a pair of thick, heavy tan work gloves somewhere and pulled them on over the thin purple gloves he had been wearing. They're stained bright turquoise, in multiple places. He's holding a small nest of wires attached to a block of some unknown metal, and even though he's looking at Rufus, his hands keep moving, twisting some wires and untangling others. Either the fingertips of the gloves are worn away enough that he can do it by touch, or he's done this enough times that he doesn't need the tactile feedback.

"We're activating Crimson Lightning," Rufus tells him, and strangely enough, Reeve's shoulders ease, as though that news is extremely welcome. (Tifa is guessing the phrase is the code-name of one of their sets of plans, set in place a long time ago and only awaiting Rufus's word to put it in motion. She wonders what other plans they've devised over the years, and how far-reaching they might be.) "Except the idiot who designed all the protocols didn't stop to think we might be activating in extremis, and didn't think to arrange a safehouse." From the way Rufus says it, Tifa's certain he himself was that 'idiot'. "Is there any property on UrbDev's books that's unoccupied, and out-of-the-way enough that people won't stumble on it? Someplace defensible. Ideally, with a network drop,



but it won't scuttle the plan if we don't have one."

"There's the -- no, Scarlet took that last quarter, they're starting up the new line of anti-aircraft weaponry any day now. Hang on --" Reeve leans back against the doorframe, clearly running through options in his head. He looks down at the whatever-it-is he's wiring. Just as Tifa's about to ask whether this is something they can decide on the way -- they do, after all, have an nine-hour flight ahead of them to get back to Midgar -- Reeve straightens, as though the answer was waiting for him in among the wires. "There's the old armory in Upper Six. It's got the underplate tunnels to the main complex, so we've been trying to figure out what we can do with it to take advantage of it being connected, but it's *just* far enough out that it was a pain in the ass to get people and equipment back and forth, remember?"

Rufus is nodding; clearly he remembers. "Yeah. Perfect. Okay, now we just have to figure out what to do for those poor bastards we broke out of the basement. Valentine, I'm going to want with us in case he decides it's time to start talking, but the other two are probably going to need some dedicated care for a while, SOLDIER or not, and I don't want to just dump them on the clinic in Upper Three, no matter how used to weird shit they are --"

"I know where to bring them," Tseng says. Tifa's ears prick up at the sound in his voice: he's as hesitant to offer this as she was to offer the Heaven. Something he doesn't want anyone to know about; someone or someplace he doesn't want to place at risk. "There's an abandoned temple down in Lower Five. The woman who's taken it over has ... a way with healing. And growing things. She'll take them." He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. "And she might be able to give us a few suggestions about what all of this is. Or help us figure out what Hojo's up to, if the interest goes both ways."

Tifa isn't sure why such a pronouncement might make Rufus stop in his tracks and stare at Tseng as though Tseng has just confessed to murdering puppies. "You *found her*?"

Tseng flinches. And no, Tifa isn't imagining it: whatever he's just said, it's as significant as his confession a moment ago about gods and summons, and he's just as reluctant to discuss it. "We found her a decade ago," he says, closing his eyes as though he's bracing himself for an explosion.

Rufus closes his eyes. Tifa can see the titanic effort he's making to rein in his temper, to keep from exploding over whatever sins Tseng has just confessed. At least she's not the only one who doesn't know what's going on; Reeve is looking between them, just as lost as she is. "At any point in the last decade, do you think you might have seen it fit to mention to me you found the *fucking fairytale* both Hojo and my father have been chasing for *as long as I've fucking been alive*?"

Tseng winces. "The orders were to --"

"Don't you fucking talk to me about orders." It comes out low and savage, Rufus's temper breaking and spilling over the dam he's placed upon himself, and Tifa's breath catches; for the first time since all of

this started, Rufus looks and sounds as dangerous as she damn well knows him to be. "When were you going to tell me?"

"When it became relevant," Tseng snaps, losing his temper in return. "Such as right now. If we'd told you sooner --"

Even Tifa can identify the mistake there. "'We'," Rufus says. "As in, the overgrown idiot who is your second in command, or as in, the entire Department of Administrative Research?"

This is not going anywhere good. Tifa shoulders in between them, one hand against each man's chest; out of the corner of her eye she can see both of their hands making the telltale flicker that speaks of instinct sending them reaching for a weapon and conscious choice overruling it, but she holds her ground. "Both of you, stop it," she says, and she's proud of how evenly her voice comes out. "Whatever the issue is, now is not the time to deal with it, and you both know that if you keep going with this, one or both of you is going to say or do something you'll regret later. Save it." There's a pause in which both of them take a breath to argue with her; she overrides it with, "Do you *really* want to do our enemies' work for them?"

Another long pause, and she's fighting the urge to grab their heads and bang them together until they see sense when Reeve says, quietly and with excellent timing, "I need another pair of hands to help me reroute the supply stream if we're going to be leaving this reactor in service. I can't undo all the damage Hojo's done without walking all the pipes back to the tap, but I can at least prevent more of the mountain from caving in."

Rufus tears his eyes away from Tseng's face. "Fine. Tseng, help him." He stalks off down the steps, across the floor of the reactor, and back up the steps to the catwalk without looking back. Tifa hesitates for half a second, looking at Reeve and Tseng and then back towards Rufus's retreating back, before sighing and following.

He's out the door by the time she gets up there, and Tifa follows him outside as well; the temperature has dropped enough that she wishes she'd brought the cold-weather gear she'd told everyone was optional, and the sun is hovering just at the edge of the horizon, which means it will only get colder. The sky is beautiful: red and gold and purple painting the sky in broad strokes, precisely the way she remembers. Part of her wants to sit down on the steps of the reactor and just watch. Rufus has taken off his facemask and is already on the phone, pacing back and forth and snapping out orders, heedless of the beauty spread out before him. She leans back against the wall of the reactor, folds her arms and tucks her hands into her armpits to keep them warm, and waits.

The mountain's beautiful. Not like she remembered, but she got to see it again, and she got to climb it again, and even if that climb was more of a struggle than a joy and even if her attempt to get them all up here without breaking the cover they're about to shatter proved to be unnecessary after all, she set herself against the mountain one last time, and she won. Maybe it will help her dreams a little, that her last sight of this mountain won't be from then.

Rufus finally hangs up without saying goodbye -- the mysterious

Beatrice must be used to him -- and rounds on her. "Don't say it," he says.

Tifa holds up her hands, just long enough to make the gesture before folding them back under her arms. "I'm not getting between the two of you. Because I'm not *stupid*."

Rufus blows out a sigh, fogging the air in front of him. "Ten years. My father and Hojo have been looking for the girl for as long as I can remember, and he's known where she was the whole time. Do you have any *idea* how often I told him I wished they'd find her so I could sit down and ask her what the fuck the old man wanted with her?"

That's the heart of the matter, she'd wager. Not that Tseng was keeping Rufus from gaining insight into his father's motives, but the fact Tseng had withheld information from him, and in doing so, made him feel like a fool. But she knows better than to say it, not now, not when Rufus has had a very trying day. "Who is she?"

"I don't know her name. Or even much about her." Rufus pats down the pockets of his BDUs, emerging eventually with a battered pack of cigarettes; he shakes one out and lights it, then automatically redirects his pacing to bring him downwind of her as soon as he sees which direction the smoke is blowing. "Hojo calls her the Last Ancient. Says he wants to study her, to see what he can learn from her. He's convinced my father that the old fairy tale of the Promised Land is real, and that we can get there somehow. The old man's got binders full of plans for his Neo-Midgar project. The perfect city." He takes another drag on his cigarette, purses his lips, blows out a column of smoke. "I'd call it a harmless obsession, except he's been dumping millions of gil into the Science department to fund Hojo's research into it, and it's what got us ... well, that." His gesture with the cigarette encompasses the inside of the reactor, and everything it implies.

Tifa's first impulse is to probe further into the connection, to find out more about the situation -- she still knows very little about Dr. Hojo, except that he seems to *enjoy* his cruelty, if what Valentine says is truth -- but what she said inside applies here, as well: now is not the time. She tries to remember her mother's stories, about gods and Ancients and the days before humankind. "I thought the Ancients died centuries ago."

"Yeah. So does anybody who isn't a complete nutcase. But apparently Hojo has some kind of reason to believe it's all real. He set the Turks on trying to find her, a long time ago. Said the girl's only part Ancient, but it should be enough for his purposes. I don't know whether or not it's true." The undercurrent says: and I would have, if Tseng had told me. Tifa's curious as to what Tseng's reason for keeping the girl from Rufus really were. Could it only be because he'd never found the right time?

Tifa wonders what an Ancient looks like. What powers the girl has, if she really is an Ancient. The stories her mother had told her were always full of strange and mystic abilities, of magic without materia, of gods walking the earth.

If she believes Tseng, they were visited by one of the gods not half an hour ago, and she was the one chosen to help make that god

manifest. She doesn't want to believe him -- the very thought is ludicrous -- but is there really any other explanation for what happened to her?

(*Remember*, says the back of her mind: cold like snow, slick like ice, stark and beautiful. *Remember this.*)

She shivers and makes herself change the subject. "How long do you think it'll take before we can get moving?"

Rufus sighs again, tense and unhappy. "Reno said they've got most everything loaded, so -- half an hour? We'll need to shuffle some people around a bit; he's not competent to fly right now, and we've got some weight limits and fuel issues to deal with. I'll probably have Tseng fly the other chopper back with Reeve on second seat and Valentine riding in back with most of the cargo, and I'll take ours with Rude on second and our other passengers in back. I'll guess you'll want to stick with your friend until we get them settled -- wherever that might turn out to be -- but once we've figured out where they're going, I'll make sure you get back to your bar." He looks off into the distance; his smile is bleak. "And when all this is over, I'll come by and make good on that promise I gave you. If I can."

It takes a few seconds for his words to sink in. Her first impulse is anger -- how *dare* he suggest that she'll abandon him at the first sign of trouble? Then she realizes: of course he expects her to abandon him. Everyone else has. "Yeah, no," she says. "Sorry. You're stuck with me."

Tifa watches the disbelief start to form. "This isn't your fight. And it's going to get messy. We're going up against -- well, a man who'd do that." Again, the gesture towards the inside of the reactor, and the horrors that sleep there. "We're going up against literally every other person on the Shinra board. We're going up against *my father*. I've spent, oh, at least half my life planning this war, and I think I've got a shot at winning it, but they aren't good odds and that's even without factoring in whatever monsters Hojo's apparently been making in his spare time for years now. I've got the Turks, I've got Reeve and a decent chunk of UrbDev who'll follow him, I've got, oh, five percent of the regular army, *maybe* one percent of SOLDIER, scattered pockets of the departments throughout the company that I've worked in, and that's all *if* I'm lucky and if they think I can win, because if they think I'm losing, they'll all save their own necks and go running straight back to the old man. And I can't fucking blame them. We're going up against an entrenched force that outnumbers us, that outguns us, with resources we don't know about and a willingness to do absolutely anything to keep their power, and I may have been planning this for half my life, but we're still way more likely to end up dead than victorious."

The setting sun catches on the line of Rufus's jaw, the auburn stubble on his cheeks. He looks exhausted. He looks like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. He looks like he needs a shower, a gallon of coffee, and ten hours of sleep.

He looks like the future.

"Well," Tifa says. "At least we've got a plan."

