

Void

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Summary: When Vincent is paid a visit by a man he saved six months ago, he finds himself slipping into temptations he no longer wants to fight.

Characters: are based on the FFVII Game, not the movie or any of the other FFVII games branching from the original, except for the clothing and their looks (I like the way they dressed and looked in the movie). There is also no influence or history from any of my other stories either, except for Merciless Shadows, because that's what inspired this.

Headnote: This is just a short story that won't run for very long. I got inspired to write it after writing Merciless Shadows and the question about how it all started popped up, and I wanted to see if I could actually make it work. The only difference between this one though, is that Tseng doesn't have a sister. I actually had no intention to post this one originally, because I don't really know what I think of it, even though I've already finished it and have been sitting on it for a couple of days now. So, what I'm going to do is post a chapter a week. If there's any sign of interest, I might continue with separate instalments, or keep this one open until the bigger picture is done. But due to the fact that Vincent and Tseng are not a popular pairing, even though I've grown to really like them as one, I'm not going to waste too much energy writing a full story unless there's a reason to do so.

As usual, there is some strange quiriness that I like to use to make the characters more unique from other stories, hence, Tseng's sweet-tooth.

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Kalm...

For some reason, I always find my way back here. No matter where I go, or where I try to wind up, I wind up here in the end.

It's been almost half a year since Cloud defeated Kadaj and his brothers, and whatever Rufus is up to still remains to be seen. He claims he's trying to build a new empire, one for the people. Coming from the mouth of a Shinra descendant though, I find it hard to believe. But as far as I'm concerned, they can devour the world, as long as they leave me out of it.

I haven't seen any of the members of Avalanche since the day the rains broke loose and fell from the skies for the first time in a long time, and washed away the hovering darkness infecting the people, and whether I see them again or not, means very little to me.

And with that thought quickly coming and going, I take a look around the streets of Kalm and pay little mind to the atmosphere. It's always cheery, as if they have no connection to the rest of the world. The markets are always busy, and it's as if this town is lost somewhere in time.

But as I look around, I see something that doesn't belong. He belongs as much as I do, shadowy, dark, and cynical. He stands in the darkness of an alley, making his presence all the more fitting, toying with something silver in his hand. It catches the light as if he wants it to, and with narrow eyes, he coolly regards me, as if through a blackness in his soul.

At first, I only stare back at him, caring little about what he wants or why he's here. I can't even bring myself to be concerned about who he is. Then I recognise him, as a memory of something I care little for flashes through my mind, and I sneer under the concealment of my mantle.

He's a Turk; a man I saved, along with his partner, though I could never explain why. Whatever he's up to, I fail to see it as a concern, and I walk to the Inn where I usually stay, and get the room I usually get.

It's the same as I left it, as if the keeper kept it aside for me, making me realise I might be returning more often than I thought. The bed even looks as if I'd just slept in it, and I walk up to it to find one of my own hairs on the pillow. I suppose I should have been offended by the fact that the bedding wasn't changed. But I'm not. Instead, a part of me feels warmed by it.

It makes me feel like I'm home, even though I don't really know what home is anymore.

I remove my cloak and my armour, and as if I'm drawn, I walk to the window to open the curtain, enough to peer out. And I stare at the alley to see the man had left. Why I did it, I don't know. Maybe I'm just curious. Or maybe I'm just territorial, and I don't want him marking in my territory.

A few moments pass, and I actually remember wearing a uniform of similar status. It's the same feeling I had the last time I was around them. A part of me feels a tug toward it. But another part feels repelled, even more so when I hear someone fiddling with the lock on my door.

I pull out my gun and wait, as if it's a habit borne from burden. No thought goes into it, and even less goes into whether or not I'll use it. But for the sake of mercy, I consider it might be the chambermaid, and I hold my fire until the target is identified. Whether or not I'll frighten her, is of little consequence.

And there he is, calmly closing the door behind him and staring at me, unaffected, with charcoal eyes. Either he thinks I won't harm him because I saved him before, or he's simply arrogant and doesn't know the meaning of fear.

"What do you want?" I ask, as I lower my head and keep the gun aimed at him.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he removes a thin pair of leather gloves and takes a look around as if he's gauging me. Then he walks over to the table and runs his forefinger across the dust before he quirks his brow and turns his cold and austere eyes upon me like he's amused.

After that, he smirks, very subtly, and walks up to me with his hands relaxed at his sides. A waft of cologne, light and airy, expensive, fetches my attention, as he looks me in the eye and continues to ignore the gun.

"Vincent Valentine." He says, calmly, and remains still and content, as he looks at me the way a leader would look at those who follow him. "I did some research on you."

Then he turns and walks over to my window to peer out from the side, as if he doesn't want to be seen and closes the curtains like they're his to close.

Arrogant.

With a relaxing sigh, he takes another look around, and smirks at the gun again. "I'm under the impression money is of no worth to you." Then he looks at the bed and the tatters on my cloak that rests over the foot of it, as a sharp glint flashes through his eyes, almost too quick to notice. "Physical comfort doesn't seem to be a concern."

"Hm," He mutters. "I suppose that means a cheque is out of the question." Then he looks at me again and arrogantly states. "I assume you don't have a bank account."

Simple deduction.

I'm still waiting to be impressed by his meagre observations. Then he sets his eyes upon a chain around my neck and quirks his brow. With narrow and slightly slanted eyes, he remains relaxed while he walks up to me again and insolently reaches for the chain, to observe the keepsake hanging from it with an uncharacteristic refinement to his movements.

His fingers are slightly callused, but well-manicured, and his knuckles are scarred from fighting and whatever else he's had his hands into, making his sophistication appear as if it's superficial and meant to mislead.

"Jewellery," He mutters, and almost speaks to himself. "I wouldn't have expected that." Then he lets go and openly runs his eyes over me.

He's clinical in his study, and now that he's close, I'm able to see why his eyes always appear like charcoal. And I find myself studying the shallow and unreadable depth of a brown so dark that it blends with his pupils, leaving me with a strange and uncomfortable feeling, as he studies me back and calmly orders. "Put the gun away."

For some strange reason, I do it, and he watches my hand, keenly, every habitual movement of my fingers as I place it in the holster and latch it, and I ask. "Why are you here?"

"Why are any of us here?"

He's stone-faced as he ignores his own, common, comment and turns his attention over to my armour on the chair, while I stare at him with no attempt to hide the fact that I'm not impressed in the least.

Then he looks back at me and sighs. "Besides the fact that you like gold and necklaces, I'm afraid I'm stumped."

He smirks when he sees my irritation at his words, and arrogantly corrects himself. "I see. Someone gave you the necklace." And for a moment of pause, he fiddles with the gloves he's holding in his left hand, almost mindlessly, as he adjusts them and runs his fingers into the fine leather while he concludes. "A woman."

It would be an understatement to say that he's pissing me off at this point. But he clarifies the reason for his presence soon enough, as if it's meant to set my mind at ease.

"I wanted to thank you."

"Then leave." I tell him, before I walk passed him and open the door to show him the way. But he does something I don't expect. He steps back, calmly but obviously, as if he doesn't want to be seen from the hall. Then I

remember him closing my curtains and realise he hasn't come here under orders. He's acting on his own, albeit, antisocial will.

"You're very rude." He states, factually, almost like he feels I need to be told.

"I never invited you."

"Close the door." He calmly commands, hands still relaxed at his sides, and again, I listen, though I don't know why. Then he surprises me again by nodding and saying. "Thank you."

"You're not welcome."

He doesn't take offence, as if he's used to being spoken to like that, or simply doesn't care. I won't openly admit it, but he's making me more curious about why he's here and is refusing to leave if he's not acting under orders. I'm also beginning to think that he's aware of what I'm thinking as he smirks and properly sits down in the empty chair near the bed.

With a straight back, he crosses his legs, surprising me somewhat, and holds onto his gloves with both hands now, keeping them rested on his knee. He fiddles with them again, mindlessly, caressing the leather, as he remains expressionless and meets my eyes with the same shallow expression.

I'm left with little wonder over why the remnants tortured him to the state I found him in. If it wasn't for his arrogance or toying, it would have been because the man's unreadable, misleading, and callous. I can only imagine that trying to get him to talk must have been a form of torture for them as well.

"My name is Tseng. But you already knew that."

I also don't care, and couldn't make it any more obvious if I was trying.

"You also know that I'm the head of the Turk department, or what used to be the Turk department."

He almost sounds regretful, slipping from his stone exterior for a moment, before he quickly realises he's letting his guard down and recovers. "We've met before. But under undesirable terms."

He says the last part professionally. But he contradicts it by mindlessly fiddling with his gloves again. "I wanted to thank you for saving my life."

"What about your partner." I say in a manner of test, and watch him quirk his brow again before he makes another brash and idiotic comment while keeping a straight face and a cool tone.

"I don't see why I'd need to thank her. From what I recall, you were the one that saved us both."

And I suddenly get it. I realise his comments and behaviour are nothing more than amusement to him, dry humour that only benefits him and no one else. He probably gets off on it and uses it as a tactic to throw others off their guard.

"I thought money might do. But material means little to you. Buying you jewellery or armour would be of little value, since you obviously keep what you have due to sentiment. And as far as weapons go, you seem to be quite fixed on what you already have."

"Jewellery," I say, somewhat stuck on that thought, and surprised that he'd even say it, even more so, that he'd say it like there was nothing odd about it. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to laugh or take him seriously, making me realise I've fallen victim to his cynical amusement.

"If it would express my thanks," He states, and stands before he nods while giving it close to no thought. "Yes."

Then he walks up to me and stares at me with a stone expression again. "I'd buy you flowers if I knew that you liked them. But you don't. So, that's out of the question."

"You could always leave." I tell him, reminding him that I'd be more than willing to accept that as his thanks.

But he just looks at me, like it's not acceptable to him, while that strange glint passes through his gaze again. "Very well," He states. "If that's what you want."

"It is."

And like the arrogant Turk he is, he doesn't wait for me to open the door and brushes passed me to let himself out instead, leaving the air of his cologne in his wake, making me shake my head to get it out of my senses. Then he stops and places his card on the small table by the door and calmly tells me if I change my mind that I know where to find him.

Once he's gone, I find myself standing there with a strange feeling. I can't help but think his real intention was to simply size me up and had nothing to do with thanking me at all. But for the life of me, I don't know why.

With a strong sense of distrust, I carefully inspect the chain Lucrecia gave to me to make sure he didn't take anything, plant anything, or tamper with it in any way. Normally, I would have noticed something like that right

away. But something about the man was distracting, almost hypnotic, making me realise he could have done a number of things without me noticing.

Nothing is out of place though, except for the mark he made in the dust and the card he left, and I protectively return the chain to where it was, underneath my shirt, wondering why I let him touch it in the first place.

Like a servant beckoned by his master, though I'm not sure why, I find myself at the window, watching as he walks out, into the town's square. Slick hair, passed his shoulders, jet black, combed neatly. He's slender, almost suave, black suit, neatly pressed.

He moves with an assuredness, separate from the others, like air. Though he doesn't sway like most men do, he doesn't advertise at all, as if he's comfortable with himself and doesn't need to attract attention to his masculine form, by anyone.

Or maybe he's just not interested.

When he walks to the town's centre, he stops and pulls something from his right pocket. A moment is wasted with him fiddling with something as he has his back to me. Then he looks to his left and turns around to drop a piece of paper into the trash.

It's a chocolate, he was unwrapping, and he pops it into his mouth while closing his eyes as if he's never tasted anything like it before and approves.

After he's done with his initial reward, he puts his gloves back on, and looks up at the starlit sky for a moment. The moonlight makes him seem paler; it makes him seem out of place, like a phantom. Then he looks at my window, out of curiosity at first. But he's quick to notice the curtain is open again, and he's quicker, still, to notice that I'm holding it open, before I abruptly let go.

I can still see him though, through the narrow opening, as he quirks his brow while the rest of his features remain stark. If he's thinking of anything, he's hiding it well. Then he walks away, toying with something in his pocket, and finds himself the most expensive Inn near the outskirts of town.

Tseng...

I remember finding him, left for dead in the realms of the forest, the Forgotten Capital that no one ever forgets, but wishes they could. I never bothered to tend to him. I only used a Restore on him and helped drop him off at the nearest hospice while retrieving what little information I could.

He was with his partner, Elena, small, petite, large brown eyes and a delicate voice, short flaxen-blond hair, baby-fine, and hardly convincing as a Turk. Both of them were left for dead, nearly emptied of all thresholds and life-giving fluids. The woman was easy to revive and responded quickly to the Materia. She claimed they tortured her to get him to talk.

I guess Kadaj wasn't familiar with the cold loyalty of the Turks, more to their leader than to each other, because from the looks of things, he never said a word. Although, after meeting him this evening, I'm beginning to think he did say something, only nothing they wanted to hear.

He must have been more resilient than her, because he was in far worse condition, bloodied, torn, and broken, suggesting he was put under far more stress and abuse. It possibly stemmed more from anger than an attempt to get him to talk. I never had the displeasure of him awakening to find out what he was like then, not that I really cared, but I'm thankful now.

I'm also confused.

Because I don't remember how I wound up in the distant shadows outside the window to his room.

Well, vaguely. Curiosity had something to do with it.

Other than that, I don't know why I'm here. So far, he's only spoken on the phone. After three calls, he seems to finally be done. Then he hangs up, leans against the door and places his hands over his face for a moment.

When he removes them, a different face appears, as if he was wiping the other away, and he let's his gaze fall distant and reflective while he mindlessly toys with the clip on his tie. The rest of him remains stark, as he was before. But his eyes...

They almost appear forlorn.

It's erased in the instance of a heartbeat though. The charcoal-hardened eyes return. Whatever or whoever that was, is gone the moment someone disturbs him by tapping on his door.

He politely opens it, and accepts the covered plate he's handed, before he respectfully bows and places a generous amount of Gil in the small woman's hand and closes the door.

There's a striking glint to his eyes, like the one he had when he was back in my room, as he sets the plate down and takes a moment to fight with himself to wait before removing the lid. It's not obvious. But given the way his fingers tap over the handle, it's apparent.

Instead, almost like he fights for self-control, he removes his blazer, and neatly places it over a soft-edged chair. Then he removes a device from around his wrist with a blade attached to it, making me realise that he could have slit my throat any time he wanted to, if he chose to. The next thing he removes is an extendable cane from a hitch on his belt, thin, and it probably carries a paralyzing sting when struck by it.

He only carries one gun though, a modest model, standard issue, and nothing to brag about. But it doesn't take me long to discover why he's not so concerned about his gun.

He likes sharp objects. There's a knife in his boot, and two on his belt, something I don't recognise on the other side of his holster that appears custom, along with that part of his holster, and several other small and sharp objects that appear mostly disposable.

Once he's unloaded himself, he undoes his tie and neatly folds it as well, before unbuttoning the top three buttons to his shirt, slightly revealing the beginnings and endings of scars. Then he sits properly, in front of the plate, and inspects his fork.

I might not have considered him as neurotic up until this point. But I'm suddenly getting the feeling he might be, especially when he shines the light onto it and ensures there's nothing wrong with it. Either that, or he's one of those people that pays for things and expects exactly what he pays for, leading right back to his arrogant streak.

The latter is probably more accurate. But from what I've seen of him so far, I'm beginning to think there's something more to him.

For a moment, he grimaces and straightens out his leg, like it's bothering him. It's something he hid well when he was in my room, and he reaches down to massage it, just above the knee, while grimacing again. With his other hand, he removes the lid, and appears to forget about whatever ache he was pampering as his eyes light up at the sight.

It's a dessert, a rich one, drizzled in Kalm's finest chocolate and raspberry sauce, and he leans forward to inhale it as if he's deprived. Then he turns the plate, a quarter turn, and dips his middle finger in the sauce to taste it, while closing his eyes and taking a moment to savour the taste.

Something tells me this is a side of him that he doesn't share with anyone, and it sinks in even more when I note that he's alone, in his room, and not in a restaurant.

He treats it like a ritual, an almost erotic experience. Each bite is savoured, sucked on, rolled over his tongue, before he swallows and moves onto the next bite, where he does it all over again. I'm beginning to wonder how long it's been since he's been with a woman, and then I remember the way he walks and wonder if he's ever even been with one at all, or if food is the only indulgence he allows himself.

I shake the thought off though, and I watch him finish and stand up while removing a gold watch from his wrist before he places it on the nightstand by the bed. Then he digs through his bag and drapes something black over his forearm, and he continues to search until he pulls out his personal toiletries.

Apparently, he has preferences, and the Inn doesn't meet them all.

He disappears into the bathroom while undoing his shirt, and he stays in there for almost forty-five minutes. From the sounds I can make out through the slightly open window, he's not taking a shower, he's running a bath.

When he comes out, he's wearing a robe, black, made of heavy silk. The length runs down to his ankles, and the arms billow down, passed his wrists. It doesn't strike me that he chose it for comfort, but more for concealment.

As he walks across the room to pick up his watch and check the time, he crimps a starched white towel over the ends of his hair. Then he quirks his brow and disappears for another moment, to put his towel away, and returns to the small balcony's door and opens it, wide.

He steps up to the railing, and rests his hands on it, far apart, and inhales the fresh scent of the air, as if he's relaxed and can let his guard down. I can't help but notice the room he rented is private, in a corner of the building that juts out from the others and is surrounded by foliage and forest. The rooms above and below are both empty, and I wonder if he went out of his way to set it up like that on purpose, given the private nature he's been exhibiting.

I can't help but feel akin to him in some way. Though, I try to convince myself that there's no similarity between us.

His black robe blows in the wind like heavy waves in the water, but never revealing, and his hair remains stationary, weighted from being damp. His eyes hold that distant emptiness again, and he closes the robe, more, across his neck and holds it to ensure it remains so, as if even the night has no invitation to see what he keeps concealed.

And I become taken with an almost child-like look in his eyes, before I realise I've let my own guard down.

I failed to see the shadow of a man creeping up behind him.

On instinct, alone, and nothing more, I find myself appearing, as if from air, with the claws of my gauntlet digging into the man's neck, as he gasps out and chokes.

Tseng only stands there, pursed lips and wide-eyed, still clasping the robe about his neck. He does and says nothing, as I smash the man's head into the exterior wall and mindlessly toss him over the railing, like a guard-hound protecting its master.

When I turn to see if he's okay, he quirks his brow and returns to the man he was earlier, like stone, and unimpressed. "Why did you do that?" He asks calmly, though his tone demands an answer.

"He was going to attack you." I tell him.

But after seeing the way he just stands there, unreadable and hard as charcoal, I begin to wonder if I'm right. I begin to wonder if I haven't just been set up for his amusement, given the way he was studying me earlier.

Then he leans over the railing and quirks his brow while stating. "I don't need your help." Before he states it was odd for me to show up like I did and concludes as he gauges the dark forests surrounding him. "Why were you watching me?"

I don't know. Maybe I was curious. Or maybe it had to do with some sense of nostalgia over the uniform I used to wear.

Maybe he just caught my attention, too glacial and unmoving to be real, and maybe I just needed to find out who he really was.

When I fail to answer him, he stands, straight from the rail, and openly runs charcoal eyes over my lowered head, as I stare back, silently, through thick and heavy bangs. Then he steps closer, and studies my clothes, the way the cloak falls, and the armour. He silently notes all the things I wasn't wearing earlier and snorts, as a waft of lavender catches my unguarded attention.

"Pack animal." He concludes, still stark, and although I should be insulted, I can't help but notice the scent is coming from his hair, as he states with that same dead tone from whatever deadness he carries inside. "You need to leave."

I do as I'm told, feeling that I went further in the violation of his privacy than he did with mine, and feeling that he'd made the same observation. He only observed from what he was allowed. I took it a step further, and looked into a place where I was never welcome.

I wasn't on a job. He wasn't a target.

And I had no right.

But I couldn't go very far. Why, I don't know, and as soon as I left, I found myself somewhere else where I could observe him from. Like an unhealthy addict, I crouch down and begin to wonder why I'm allowing myself to do this, and I tell myself it's because he's a Turk.

They can't be trusted, and they can't be left alone.

At least, that's what I'm telling myself, as I watch him climb down with his gloves in his hand, before he puts them on and mutters "Cure," over the man I thoughtlessly injured.

Then he kneels beside the man and helps him sit up. With his hair falling forward, the knee he was pampering earlier slides out of his robe, revealing a dangerously deep scar, not very old, before he quickly covers it back up.

He strokes the man's cheek with the backs of his fingers, tenderly, and uncharacteristically asks, in an almost kind tone. "Carl? Are you all right?" And immediately, he's accused of being a traitor, and something else that doesn't get finished.

I don't get to hear the rest, because Tseng's hand is over the man's mouth faster than I could even see it move, like a warning, before he slowly removes his hand and coldly states, as if he's been insulted. "I don't like being disrespected."

For a moment, he merely cups the other man's face in his hands, as he stares at him with an empty shallowness that reflects his feelings on the accusation, piercing. Then he places a gentle kiss upon the man's forehead, before a sharp snap fills the air, and he stands, takes a look around, and adjusts his robe more securely about him again, as the other man falls, lifeless, to the ground from a broken neck.

After that, he bows his head, as if he's paying respect. Then he proceeds to pull the body away from the open, and leaves it in the bushes, hidden, but obvious, like he wants it to be found, but not right away. Then he steps back and mutters out, "Shadow Flare," and smirks when a loud crunch fills the air as the body is crushed by the force, mangled. Then he takes his gloves off.

I understand what they're for now. He carries Enemy Skill Materia in them, the most dangerous materia there is, considering one has to be attacked by the cast in order to be able to contain it. It's also a good way to hide where the source came from, considering they're the natural abilities of our world's most dangerous creatures.

I'm not sure what to think or make of his actions, or what just happened, and I realise he could have tried to kill me, maybe even succeeded if he wanted to, as he climbs back up to his balcony and closes the door behind him. Then he takes another, sharp-eyed, look into the darkness of the woods, almost looking directly at me, before he closes the heavy curtains with a movement that suggests he's in no mood to be interrupted any further this evening.

After meeting Tseng for the first time, I'm finding that I can't tear myself away from the curiosity I've developed over him. I convince myself it's because he's a Turk and because he invaded my space when and where he wasn't welcome. But there's something unusual about him, and the more I learn about him, the more I realise he's someone completely different than who he allows everyone to see.

For over a month now, I've been following him, watching him, forever in the shadows and constantly wondering what the relation between him and the man he killed was about. But unfortunately, he hasn't done anything similar or even mentioned anything about it to anyone. He almost appeared to care about him, but what he did contradicted the thought just as quickly as it came to me.

I doubt I should expect any other kind of behaviour from a Turk though, and to question it is probably irrelevant. From everything I've learned about them after awakening from a thirty-year slumber, they're not the same ilk as we were when I used to be one. They're no longer as interested in investigation and exposing corruption as much as they are in covering everything up and being corrupted.

He left Kalm before the sun rose, the next day, and he travelled to the old Junon site where he spent nearly a week on business before he met up with his partner, Elena, when he left. Nothing of any concern caught my attention while he was there, and it seemed like a typical Turk assignment, given what's left of Shinra. He spent his days going through whatever archives were salvageable and spent his evenings in solitude.

So far, from what I've learned, he follows a soulless routine and lives an empty life, reminding me more and more of myself as each day passes, only I don't know his reasons. He doesn't socialize with anyone outside of work, except for a lengthy phone call that he makes every evening, and when he left Junon to travel to several of the abandoned Mako reactors with Elena, he behaved very much the same.

Much to my surprise though, they're not up to anything suspicious. They're mostly ensuring the reactors are shut down and that no Mako leaks are present. And typically, they collect anything unusual that they come across, most of it being unidentified forms of Materia and rare deposits formed from residual Mako.

Although, he never joins his partner for a drink, even though I'm starting to get the feeling she'd like him to, since she goes out of her way to impress the man, and eagerly follows every order he gives her while he does nothing to show that he appreciates it.

But he does treat her to a meal at the end of every stay. He makes it clear that he's only thanking her though, and that it's nothing more than a simple act of his appreciation for her hard work.

At this point, I'm not sure if he's aware of the fact that she goes out of her way to try and look more attractive to him. I'm not even sure if he notices the subtle flirting or any of her other efforts she makes either, since the only time he appeared to notice her was when he seemed to approve of a certain perfume she was wearing. But other than the brief compliment that came out in a manner of disguise. "What scent is that?" He pays her no mind.

I've come to recognise that his indulgences lay in taste and scent. He likes his sweets, rich and full meals, expensive and subtle colognes, and lightly scented shampoos and soaps. He prefers a bath over a shower, and keeps himself neatly groomed. Every evening, he orders a different dessert, as if he wants to try them all, but he only allows himself one reward an evening and I've yet to see him break from that routine.

He also does the same thing he did when he was back in Kalm. He inspects the platter and cutlery, which I'm beginning to believe is a habit brought on by possible assassination attempts, and then he turns the plate a quarter turn and indulges as if he's deprived.

If he isn't satisfied with what he ordered, he'll return it and exchange it for something else while telling the server everything that was wrong with it, and he doesn't bother to hold back. Then he'll behave as if his entire evening has been ruined, and he'll sourly find something to pick at over the day's work, even if there's nothing to pick at. He's only done that once so far though. But I wouldn't be surprised if it's typical of him, and in a strange sort of way, it was nice to see him affected by something, regardless of how petty it was.

Other than that, his expression rarely changes. It's like he's trained himself so well to be closed and secretive that he's almost forgotten how to be anything else. But after a month, I'm starting to recognise his subtle moods, and I'm starting to wonder if the man is capable of losing his temper, or if he even has one, and I'm starting to entertain the thought of what it would be like even though I'm not really sure why I'd want to see it.

It might be because he appears unfazed by almost everything that happens around him. He acts as if he's seen it all and there's nothing left to shock or impress him, and for some reason, I'm not so convinced that it's true.

At times, I can't help but wonder if he's aware of my presence, and I find myself thinking that I'm doing something wrong and that I should go. There's no reason for me to be watching him, and whenever he's outside or

near a window, he has a tendency to take a look around, with sharp eyes, as if he either knows or senses that he's being watched. But he never seems to focus on any spot for too long, and I wonder if maybe he's just trained himself to be wary of his surroundings by a form of necessary habit.

During the rare nights that he leaves the curtains to his windows open, I've come to discover that he's not as hard as he pretends to be. He sleeps on his sides, curled up, and with his knees pulled in, suggesting that he has a problem with his back. Sometimes he grimaces and wraps his arms under his knees to pull his legs further into his chest, as if it's the only way he can seek comfort, and he has a tendency to toss and turn and wake up frequently, making me wonder how long it's been since he's had a decent night's sleep.

He rarely sleeps on his back, and when he does, he stuffs pillows under his knees, which I'm guessing is to alleviate any pressure he might be putting on his back. He seems to be uncomfortable if his body is straight for too long, and some mornings, he literally crawls out of bed, as if he's in pain and has trouble straightening up. But he's quick to hide it if there's someone present or at his door, and he never gives away the slightest of hints that there's anything wrong with him.

He's trained, whether by circumstance or pride, I'm unsure, and I'm beginning to wonder if his pain has something to do with when Sephiroth stabbed him when he was at the Temple of the Ancients.

He wears black pyjamas, cotton and pressed, long sleeves, and keeps them buttoned all the way to the top. Not even the ghosts or the darkness gets to see what he hides underneath, and I'm reminded of how he clings to the neck of his robe every night after he takes his bath and opens the windows for fresh air. For some reason, I'm beginning to think that modesty has nothing to do with his apparent, dare I say, insecurity.

When he returns to the outskirts of Edge, after making a few other business-related stops with Elena, he makes his way to what appears to be a small farm. It doesn't take me long to discover that it's not really a farm, and that it's the location Rufus has chosen to reside in, along with his Turks. It's a well-planned disguise, and I can see how it keeps their location and presence well-concealed.

I can't help but find myself wondering who the mastermind behind such an idea was, or if it was a collective brainstorm they all had during a slow night at Healin. I'm also not really sure why I'm interested in finding out.

Near the centre, there's a small building they use for their offices where they share most of their resources and space. Scattered about the rest of the land are a few other buildings used for various purposes. Research is conducted in some of them, while others are set aside for the handful of employees Rufus has managed to gather under his employment.

There's even a stretch of land used for farming, and stables where dual horns and chocobos are held, bred, and even sold, along with their eggs, making it seem like nothing more than an ordinary farm that's profited over the hardships of the times to passers-by. And I don't doubt for a second that Shinra is using it as a genuine monetary resource, given the number of regular farm-workers that appear to be employed as well, since Shinra has never been one to turn down a profitable opportunity, no matter how meagre it may seem.

They keep their heavy machinery and equipment concealed from the public eye by keeping it in the large stables near the back of the farm, and from the looks of things, they even set up a small testing ground for their weapons that's surrounded by tall grass and sparse trees to hide the evidence.

They do their training in an area they dug out and covered with an inconspicuous mess of rotting and moss-covered wood which is constantly tended to. But it serves its purpose. No one would ever know, or even suspect, that there was something functional, or even dangerous, underneath.

The relationship between the Turks appears to be one that's evolved, and they work together to strive for the same goals. But they all live separate lives outside of work, and the only two that seem to socialise when they're off the clock is the bald Turk and the redhead.

But for some reason, I care very little about what they're doing or what they're up to at this point, and the moment I see my point of interest open his office window, I put most of my focus on the reason I'm here in the first place.

Unlike when they're out on the field, their relationships are shuffled. Reno, who's seen mostly with his partner, Rude, in the public eye, actually spends most of his time around Tseng when they're working in the offices. He's the most sociable of them all, and probably the friendliest. But I wouldn't trust him as far as he could be thrown. There's something conniving about him, and he's sharp, even though he pretends to be lazy, and I can't help but think he knows I'm here sometimes.

I can only assume the reason they pair up the way they do, on the field, is because they like to keep a balance of skill and ongoing training by keeping the superior ranks with the lesser ones.

I also can't seem to figure out the relationship between Reno and Tseng. They share a lot of silent conversation, mostly looks that they both understand, like they know each other too well. They share private jokes that no one else catches onto, and at times, there seems to be a digging between the two of them, prying, though subtle, which almost contradicts the illusion that they know each other at all.

But it's another day, and on this day, Reno spends most of the morning tinkering with the machines he seems to be fond of, along with his partner, Rude, while they leave Elena to go over the more menial tasks that are the typical pitfalls of being the rookie, before he retires to his and Tseng's office near the end of the day.

He walks in with his EMR slung over his shoulder and grumbles about something, which is routine for him, as Tseng ignores him and goes over the papers Rufus wanted him to look over earlier that day.

The younger man speaks with a lazy drawl and can't be bothered finishing his words off, or even being professional, as he mutters out. "Hey Man," and sits on the corner of Tseng's desk. Then he pulls something out of his EMR and sticks his tongue on it, briefly, so he can grumble, like he always does, about how much better everything worked when they were using Mako to power everything.

"You know how Rufus feels about that option." Tseng calmly replies. He doesn't bother to acknowledge him beyond that, as far as I can tell. And as a result, the redhead sprawls onto the surface of his desk with his chest exposed and adjusts the goggle-style sunglasses he wears under his hairline, more for a fashion statement than as a function, is my assumption, and grunts to get his attention.

"These cells'r dead already." He mutters. Then he tosses it on top of Tseng's papers, and as I've come to expect, Tseng doesn't react. He just pushes it aside without looking up, and continues to read. "Jus fuckin loaded 'em, an they're dead."

"Were they charged?"

"No. Was I supposed ta charge 'em?" The redhead sarcastically asks, as if he's offended by Tseng's suggestion that he'd be dumb enough to overlook something so simple. Then he sits up and jumps to his feet in a limber movement and taps on Tseng's desk with the device. "Thought they were supposed ta jus work, like magic."

With a sigh, Tseng is well-aware of the obvious mockery and grabs the cell to stick his own tongue on it to see if his second-in-command is exaggerating or being forthright. Then he quirks his brow and tosses it back at the man without looking at him and states. "You know we're working on getting a team together to research alternate options."

"Yeah, jus tired'a waitin." The man sighs, before he walks over to one of the cupboards and digs around for a handful of tools. When he appears to be satisfied with what he's found, he slumps down in the chair at his own desk and starts taking his EMR apart.

"What are you doing?"

"Fixin it." The redhead's voice carries a slight crackle to it, like he might have been a smoker at one time. Or it could be because he spends a lot of his time in the pubs during his time off and is over-exposed to the damaging environment of other people's bad habits. His chuckle always sounds conniving and dark, like the one he's expressing now, while he focuses on the mess he's making and starts digging through the inner workings of his device.

"It's not broken."

"Yeah... yeah," Reno mutters, as he picks up one of the pieces and inspects it, while snickering when he says, "Well it is now," before he adds. "Willin ta fix ya up next. But I ain't interested in cleanin up the mess afterwards."

"You'd never get within a foot of me Reno."

"Heh, Everyone sleeps ya know."

"With one eye open when you're around."

They like to play like this. They do it often, a battle of their wits and brawn. It's a constant test for them to see who can out-best the other by making idle threats containing high amounts of testosterone, even though they both know neither of them would ever carry them out.

And after Tseng's comment, that comes out distant-sounding and unconcerned, he lets out a tired sigh. Then he opens his laptop to enter the data from the papers he's been going over, while the redhead pulls something out of his pocket and holds it against the dismantled loading chamber, before he readjusts the chamber to make them line up.

"Do I even want to know what you're doing?"

“No.”

“Hm.”

With nothing more than a sideways glance, Tseng continues with his entries and then sits back after he's gone through two of the pages and adjusts his blazer, as if he's decided it's time to take a break. Then he reaches into his top-right drawer and pulls out a package, before he places it on his desk and pulls out a cookie while the redhead talks to him without taking his attention away from the task he's focused on.

“Where'd ya get those?”

“Elena.”

“She make 'em?”

“Yes. But I've had better.”

“Heh, heard that one before...”

With a sly grin, Tseng folds his hands across his abdomen and turns his chair so he can watch the other man better. He runs his eyes over him in curious study, which is something he does quite often, as if he's gauging him or silently mocking his appearance. Then he turns his attention over to what the man's doing and contently watches for a few moments more.

He's the exact opposite of Tseng. Pierced ear, flaming red hair, long, down to his tail-bone, always tied back with a little girl's elastic, and spiked around the top of his head in a jagged mess. His appearance is loud and he's very outspoken.

Everything about him is like a fashion statement, even the half-moon tattoos, framing the bottom and outer edges of his eyes, that appear to cover up the scars they're overtop. He even goes so far as to refuse to wear a tie, unlike the rest of them. He never finishes doing his shirt up or even bothers to tuck it in, and he leaves his blazer open, as if he's in too much of a hurry or simply overslept and didn't have time to attend to his appearance. His clothes are un-pressed, oversized, and always stained from the machines he works on.

He walks with a sway and advertises his sex-appeal as if he's open for invitation by anyone who's willing. But like Tseng, I've yet to see him with someone. He carries a high energy and fights like a rabid animal when he's in combat. But he's relaxed and laid back when he's in what he calls “Peace-mode,” giving him an advantage by being deceptive.

He only carries one weapon and prefers to use the casts of his natural abilities or materia, saving his physical skills combined with his EMR for when he's recharging his own energies. He seems messy, the way he fights. But it's only because he's too quick for anyone to really see what he's doing.

“I give up.” Tseng finally tells him, as he continues to calmly sit there and watch what he's doing, but making it obvious that his curiosity has gotten the best of him. “You're trying something new. Something you've devised on your own.”

Reno is too focused to look up and simply mutters in a taunting melody. “So far, so good.”

“I want to know what it is.”

“Only if ya give me a cookie.”

With another smirk, Tseng reaches over and pulls one out. Then he looks sideways at it while still facing Reno and toys with it. He turns it with his first two fingers, as if he's contemplating giving up something of worth, before he turns his attention back to the redhead and stares at him, with that glint of his, and offers it for the information. “This one?”

For a moment, the redhead holds his mysterious object in his hand and stares at it while facing forward and resting his elbows on his desk with the object held at eye level. Then he turns his attention to Tseng, who's tauntingly waving the cookie at him, like it's something forbidden, rare, and highly coveted. But he'll part with it if it's worth it.

They share a moment of silent understanding, both sets of eyes intent on the other in a language I've come to discover the two of them have mastered with one another, before the redhead snaps the object into the concealment of his palm, and takes a cautious look around, like he's up to something he shouldn't be.

Then he quickly nods and looks out the partially open window while scanning the area, making me feel like shrinking back as his teal eyes, that almost appear yellow-green in the strong light, sickly and serpentine, quickly and sharply point to the abandoned building I'm in, as if he knows I'm here.

After that, he grins as if he's got a secret and steps quickly across the unpolished, wooden floor to sit on the arm of Tseng's chair, while Tseng rests his hand on the man's hip as if there's nowhere else to put it, and unconsciously moves his thumb in a quick sweep, while the redhead whispers something into his ear and Tseng approvingly smiles.

“Are you sure that will work?” He asks him, in a softer and quieter tone, uncharacteristic of the usual deep and hard tone he speaks in. Then he looks at his co-worker and they both lock eyes in a conniving and secretive manner.

“Dunno.” The other man mutters, as he takes the cookie from Tseng’s hand while he keeps his eyes locked with his and over-grabs for the reward, having to work his way up his superior’s fingers for the prize. “But I’m willin ta find out.”

“You impress me sometimes.”

“At’s why I’m yer second-in-command.” The redhead chortles, once he has the prize in his hand. Then he pushes himself up and pats Tseng on the shoulder in a carefree manner, and takes a bite.

“I thought you were my second-in-command because you passed the academy with honours and proved yourself on the field.”

“Well, that too.” Reno answers, playfully. Then with a slight sneer, he swallows his bite back, as if he’s having trouble, and blurts out. “This tastes like shit,” and he tosses it into the trash by Tseng’s desk while muttering and wiping his mouth. “Can’t believe ya ate that Man.”

“Mm.”

I can’t help but think, after Reno’s reaction and comment, that Tseng only ate the original cookie, knowing he could use it to his own deranged amusement. It might have to do with the fact that he brushes them off his desk so they fall into his trash, suggesting that he agrees with the redhead. He could have done that earlier, and chose not to. He doesn’t laugh though, and he doesn’t even smile, never giving away his true thoughts or intentions.

While Reno returns to redesigning his EMR with something he’s probably not supposed to be using, Tseng returns to his paperwork and continues to go over it. I’ve learned that they’re content to work silently, and alongside one another, and often compliment the other’s habits with a much-needed contrast that seems to not only alleviate Tseng’s mood, but it also seems to ground Reno.

They’re still very different people though, and they’ll banter back and forth in a form of pass-time and play. But they’re both respectful, allowing each other the space they need to get their work done, and even lending a helping hand when needed.

And when Tseng is finally done with his chore, he sits back and pulls a silver object he’s been toying with since the day I first saw him, out of his pocket, and spends a private moment with it as the redhead continues to work silently at his desk.

Nothing more than a sideways glance escapes his second-in-command when he sits forward to run his fingers over it. Then he lets out a sigh and opens the cameo-like object, as if he’s ensuring whatever’s inside is still there and intact. He’s been doing this off and on since I’ve been watching him. But I’ve yet to see what it is.

The redhead seems to know though, or at least, he seems to know about its existence. But he never says anything about it. Instead, he always pays a quick respect by raising his brow, and then he continues with whatever he’s doing at the time.

And like always, it’s closed quickly when the female and Reno’s partner arrive, as if it’s not for them to see. Then it’s quickly hidden in his pocket while he asks Elena how her day went and then grills her about her poor performance over the day’s work. Apparently, she made quite a serious mistake in her paperwork and she was lucky he caught it before Rufus had a chance to see it, and he doesn’t want to see something like that happen again.

She typically apologises as if she doesn’t really know what else to do or say, and she’s about to try and explain herself. But he cuts her off and makes it clear he won’t hear anything of it. All the while, she keeps turning her attention over to Reno, as if she’s hoping he’ll defend her like he sometimes does. But this time, he keeps his attention on his EMR and is refusing to acknowledge her, causing her to take a deep and frustrated breath before she leaves with Rude sympathetically following her.

Their interactions strike me as nothing more than a typical, Turk-driven, environment, and even though Reno did and said nothing while everyone was present, he wastes no time to defend her the moment she leaves, leaving me with little wonder over how or why he’s in the position he’s in.

“That was kind’a, uncalled fer, ya know.” The redhead comments, when the door is closed and he feels he can freely state his opinion without anyone overhearing him. He keeps his attention on his EMR though, and doesn’t bother to look at his superior as he makes his comment. Then he finally looks at the bag of cookies, obviously sitting in the trash, and adds with a slight frown. “She did’n mess up on purpose.”

“Mistakes are never made on purpose.” Tseng answers, coldly, and unaffected by everyone’s reaction. “But that doesn’t make them any less of a mistake.”

“Whatever. She would’a caught it an fixed it if ya did’n snatch it from her like ya did this mornin.” Reno comments, before he finishes reassembling his EMR and securing the last piece while standing up. “She works hard, an ya know she would’a made sure it was perfect before she handed it ta ya. She goes out of her way ta try an make ya happy.”

“I don’t train you people to make me happy.” Tseng calmly defends, without looking up and remaining resolute in his justification.

“No shit.” The redhead mutters, as he taps his EMR on his shoulder and makes no attempt to keep his opinions to himself. “Would be kind’a hard ta train ‘em in a task as impossible as that.”

Then he walks up to the man’s desk and hits the switch on his EMR to spark up the papers on his superior’s desk, knowing all the data’s already been entered, before he’s rewarded with a genuine, “Impressive.” From Tseng, along with a quirked brow as he observes the success of Reno’s secretive project, before he turns his seat and looks up at the man while sitting back. “It works.”

“Apparently so.”

With everything he does, I find myself more confused.

His partner, Elena, he treats well when they're on the field, from what little I've seen of them in the time I've been watching. But he never fails to relent on the things he feels she could have been better at, and he won't hesitate to tell her when she's talking too much, even though he doesn't appear irritated by it.

Maybe he feels she needs to learn to keep her silence, like he does, so there's never a chance anything will slip by accident since mistakes can be fatal in their line of work, and I'm familiar with the concept; Make it a habit, and it becomes second nature.

He's a typical leader, and I get the feeling he genuinely wants to help her improve, though I'm not really sure why I have that feeling at times, since he can be mercilessly degrading.

But he's quick to defend her in public, and he'll stand by her side and take responsibility for her mistakes, without hesitation. He's also quick to push her away when they're not in the public eye, and he turns hard, judgemental, and critical, making his true feelings and opinions of her hard to discern.

I think she might suspect, as much as I do, that he doesn't want anyone getting close to him. It's another concept I'm more than familiar with, and I'm beginning to wonder if I'm looking at a mirror image at times, and I find it compelling, though I don't know why.

He trains her with a calculating efficiency.

Unlike Rude, who trains her in the arts of physical and close combat, and Reno, who trains her in the proper ways of gauging her MP for spell-casting and using Materia as weapons, Tseng trains her in the arts of weaponry.

I've yet to see him handle something he's not masterfully skilled with; whether up close or at a distance, he's adept, with sharp eyes for his targets and an intuitive ability to assume his targets next move. He moves with little effort, and is quick to anticipate an attack, making me wonder what kind of enemies he's been up against when I think about the weaknesses he hides.

You'd never know it though. He moves like air, even his steps are light and ghostly, quiet, and he never shows any sign that he suffers.

He's never out of breath, and he's sleek. His hair is always neat, even after he's done something that should have messed it up. It's thick, strong, and bone-straight, making me think his ancestry comes from either Wutai or Cosmo Canyon, possibly even the natives near the Temple of the Ancients. But given his pale skin, and almost cream-coloured complexion, I'm willing to put my bets on the Northern Regions of Wutai, possibly even the mountains.

When she makes a mistake, he's quick to correct her, and when she does something he feels could risk her life, he turns almost cruel and chastising. He even goes so far as to quickly snap his extended cane at her, stinging, and he usually strikes her on the calf. At times, I can't help but grimace myself, when I think about how much it must hurt.

"You're dead." He'll say. His voice is sharp, like a blade cutting through the air, merciless and absolute, and when she'll fall from the blow, he'll look at her with charcoal eyes, shallow and hard, and ask as if it's death, himself, asking the question. "What are you going to do now?"

He shows no warmth and no compassion, not even a merciful turn to the corner of his mouth. I've come to believe that in his mind, he's doing her a favour, teaching her to stay alive, and I'm quickly reminded of my own experience in the Turks.

If we died during training, we stayed dead. Mercy had no place in our lives, only skill.

She acts and responds like she understands the role. Though, a part of her takes it personally, unlike when Reno trains her and does similar things.

Whether she's upset because she let him down, or upset because he doesn't respond to her the way I suspect she'd like him to, I'm not sure.

But she takes it like a Turk, and she'll do what he says as many times as he demands, regardless of how hard he pushes her, or how tired she gets. She seems to prefer items over weapons, physical combat, and Materia though, and she seems to be fond of using Confusion to give her the upper hand.

Both Reno and Tseng are aware of that fact, and they both agree that her strength lays in her natural talents brought about by her preferences. But they also agree that she'll be better off with more skills under her belt, preferably with enough adeptness to get her out of a tight spot, if and when needed.

There's something nostalgic and sickening, at the same time, about watching them, since not all of my memories are full of content. Some of them, I hold a fondness for, and others simply fill me with something I wish I could no longer feel or remember. And the more time I spend here, the more I find my bloodless hand reaching for the chain around my neck, unconsciously, and making me feel it more than I want to, more often than I want to.

These Turks had nothing to do with that though, and I remind myself of that, constantly, as I watch them. As far as I know, these Turks don't even know what happened over thirty years ago, except for what they're allowed to know, and they probably don't pay it much mind anyway.

It's a different time now, and they have different concerns.

Even the Shinra boss is different now. He's a younger version of his father, and his intentions and ways about attaining his goals are different. He cares little for science, and almost abolishes it on some levels. As far as he's concerned, biological science was the reason Shinra fell in the first place, mindlessly, he might add, over and over.

To him, Geostigma, Sephiroth, Hojo, the remnants, and all the other mutinous creatures running rampant on the planet and breeding, can all be blamed on Hojo's twisted view on science.

Or as he preferred to put it one night:

"Hojo, was a madman. I'm afraid I'm not interested in allowing a single person to ruin everything I've worked for *again*. I'm afraid I'm going to have to fire you."

And when Reno and Rude pulled the dead body out of their President's office after the sound of gunfire, and commenced to bury it, he followed, while musically chanting as if he loved the sound of his own voice. "This is what happens when I catch ingrates practicing scientific studies, *without* my permission, on my *own* animals, in my *own* back yard."

"Sure thing, Boss." Reno muttered, as he nodded and helped Rude shovel a deep hole, while his partner remained silent.

"I won't have it."

"Yup, Science sucks."

"Science sucks. Reno, when you're done, I'd like to speak with you, *Alone*."

Rufus is another one that constantly runs his eyes over the redhead's appearance, as if he's not sure whether he should say anything about it or not. But he never does, surprisingly, and I'm beginning to wonder if it has something to do with Reno's 'yes-man' attitude when he's around him, since he seems to like that.

The man is different from his father in appearance, in so many ways that it's hard to believe he's the old President's son. He keeps his golden-blond hair short and neat at the back, but ragged and longer in the front, as if a part of him is rebellious against everything he stands for, and he likes to peer through unevenly-cut bangs that he incessantly flicks back in irritation. He has eyes like a predator, narrow, icy-blue, and always up to something.

His melodic voice is mocking. It's too calm and soothing to be the voice of a sane man, and he has a tendency to smirk when he's speaking, making everyone think they're the brunt of some kind of joke, and they probably are.

His pleasantness and etiquette border on lunacy, because no one's that pleasant, as he's made it obvious on more than one occasion. He leaves everyone on edge, considering that no one ever knows when they walk through his door, or have to face him, if it will be the last time they ever get the chance to breathe.

And to top it off, as if his personality isn't sketchy enough, he dresses like he wants to get the full use of his entire wardrobe in one sitting.

His pants are billowing and hang like a skirt, and I don't even want to imagine what he's got on underneath. The rest looks like he just woke up and grabbed everything he could find and decided to wear it all at once. Whether it's because he can't make up his mind, or because he's actually crazy, is beyond the thought I care to put into it.

He wears a loose black shirt under a loose white undercoat, both are buttoned only to the chest, and a black leather vest overtop, buckled and well-fitted, pulling everything into form and making him appear shapely. On top of that, he wears another white, longer overcoat. It gets to the point to where it's hard to keep track of, and not worth wanting to know why.

Identity crisis, is the first thing that comes to mind, and I'm not willing to entertain any of the other thoughts at the moment.

He hated his father because he felt the man was stupid, inept, and fat. He coldly states the man deserved to be carved like the roasted pig he was, quite often, and he refuses to be called by the same last name because it's an insult to his intelligence. Although, I don't know what name he'd prefer.

I'm beginning to think he's the type that would shoot at the wind for not knowing which direction to blow in.

But he's smart, if not haphazardly driven toward unrealistic goals and completely off his rocker, and I find myself thinking about the old saying...

There's a fine line between genius and insanity.

Luckily, for Reno, he made it out of the man's office alive and seemed unharmed, not that he actually did anything wrong. But with Rufus, you never know. Although, I'm not really sure if I should be surprised. Even with Rufus being as unpredictable and ungrateful as he is, Reno is definitely capable of handling himself, and probably has a worth that Rufus is well-aware of, despite the fact that he's a mocking yes-man.

But my focus turns back to Tseng, since he's finally out in the open again. He's calmly walking passed the chocobo stables, before he stops and rests his forearms on the railing to the yards. With clasped hands, he scrunches his shoulders and sneers so subtly that it's hardly noticeable. A small ache is the cause, is my guess, and at this point, I'm willing to bet that I'm right.

He's got that strangely forlorn look in his eyes again, making them appear like deep obsidian pools, as they reflect on whatever it is that's going through his mind, and his hair faintly moves from the mild breeze, carrying that mild hint of lavender he sometimes carries, along with his cologne, as it blows to my dangerously close position. I hardly notice that my breath falls deeper than it was for a moment, as the scent lingers and leaves me with a calming feeling.

He's scanning the area, which is a habitual thing for him to do, like he's looking for anything that's out of place. And he almost looks like he's lost in his thoughts, and enjoying the fact that he's alone, and not being bothered by anyone. I'm not surprised by it though; I've come to recognise that he prefers his own company to others.

He looks striking and cultured. And as quickly as I admit that to myself, I realize how strange it sounds.

But he does. Whether it's his colouring that borders on alluring, or if it's the way he carries himself, I don't know. I don't know if I'd say he was an attractive man, since I really don't know what women look for. But if I were to go by Elena's reactions to him, I think I can safely say he's appealing.

His age eludes me though. I'm guessing he's somewhere in his late thirties or early forties, mostly by his behaviour. If I were to go by looks, I'd be even more stumped. Besides the small and random scars near his mouth, hardly visible, and probably from fighting, and the ones near his eyes and on his cheekbones, he bares no markings. He possesses no tell-tale signs of age, except for when he aches.

He looks decades older when he's in pain.

In fact, he could possibly be older than I'm guessing, or even younger, and I suppose I'll never know until I find out. Though, I'm not really sure why I want to know.

And for a moment, I'm lost in the brief smile he actually lets escape when his second-in-command places his arm around his shoulder after coming up behind him; I was so focused on Tseng, that I didn't even see the other man arrive. It's something that's been happening quite often since the first day, and I'm starting to become confused by it.

"Where ya goin fer yer time off?"

"Wherever I feel like going."

It's the typical type of answer I would expect from him, private, and almost bordering on rude.

In fact, he's so private that I almost forgot he requested a week off a while back, and I find myself looking forward to being somewhere other than here, regardless of the fact that there's no real reason for me to be here in the first place.

"Heh, Man'a mystery." Reno taunts, before he quickly massages the man's shoulder with a considerate touch and hops onto the fence to sit on it. "Ya hear 'bout Carl?"

"Carl?" Tseng asks, not showing any sign of thought whatsoever, as he continues to stare at the yards.

"Yeah, Good ol' Turk from back old." Reno reminds him, as he leans onto his knees with his forearms, and pulls his shades down to protect his eyes from the setting sun in the direction he's facing, making me suddenly realise that the lower edges fit over the scars under his eyes perfectly. "Ya know, the queer one?"

"He was gay?" Tseng asks, as if he had no idea, and Reno snickers at his reaction.

“You tell me. Yer the one that always talked ta him.”

“I trained him.”

“Hm.” The redhead mutters, before he sits back and tilts his head to study his superior’s stone expression. Then he returns to the position he was in and shrugs as if a thought came and went, and he decided it wasn’t very important or worth mentioning. “Well, they found ‘is body in Kalm, all ‘is bones were crushed, like ‘e was trampled on’r somethin.”

“I guess he made a mistake.” Tseng calmly muses, as the redhead nods and continues to stare out into the direction of the setting sun and snickers.

“No shit.” Reno starts. Then he shakes his head and nudges Tseng’s arm with his elbow. “Wonder what happened. Would hate ta think that they’re actually startin ta,” For a moment, he pauses, as if he’s thinking twice about what he’s saying, and then he carefully finishes his thoughts with a lowered voice, as if he suspects someone is listening. “Ya know.”

“So many possibilities.” Tseng mutters, as he sighs and carelessly continues to stare at the yards. “Are we investigating it?”

“Nah. Not enough evidence ta say we should.”

“Hm.”

“Hm.” The redhead mutters back. Then he places his sunglasses back to where he always keeps them, below his hairline, and turns to look at his superior, who remains aloof and distant. He studies him often, almost intently, much like I do. Though, I’m not sure what his personal reasons or thoughts are, since I don’t know the full extent to how well he knows him, or thinks he knows him.

I wasn’t really paying much attention to their conversation, since I don’t really know who or what they’re talking about, until it suddenly dawns on me that Tseng called the man I threw over his balcony in Kalm, Carl. And all of the sudden, I recall Tseng showing an initial concern until the man called him a traitor, though I can come to no satisfying conclusion that makes sense, or would explain what the relation is, or why Tseng doesn’t say anything about it either.

To make it even more confusing, I can’t understand why he killed him if he was working for them, unless he knew something the others didn’t. But even then, it doesn’t make sense, because he doesn’t strike me as the type that wouldn’t report something like that.

“Well,” His second-in-command mutters, after they both spend a long moment of silence together, and he lets out a lazy sigh. “Gonna take Rude ta the bar tonight. Get ‘im drunk.”

“What are you going to do to him this time?” Tseng asks, as he takes on a sly grin and turns to the other man sitting at his side.

“Dunno. He ain’t got much space left on his ear ta talk ‘im inta peircin it again. Was thinkin of a tattoo’r somethin.” With a light chuckle, the redhead gives it some thought, before he snickers again and looks impishly at his superior. “That last one ‘e got was pretty funny.”

“I don’t think he thought it was.” Tseng responds, almost like he’s about to laugh about it. Then he shakes his head and lowers his voice. “But I’d still like to know how you got him to do something like that, regardless of how drunk he was.”

“Hehe. Tol’ ‘im if he got Rufus’ face tattooed on ‘is ass that I’d get yours.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Heh. Guess ya’ll never know, eh?” Reno answers, as he starts chuckling and hops off the fence. “Unless ya wanna see proof.” Then he grabs his belt as if he’s willing to undo it and drop his pants right then and there. “I’ll show ya right now. No one’s lookin.”

“I don’t want to see it.” Tseng answers, as he shakes his head and turns away. Then he looks at his watch and mutters out. “I’ve got a midnight ship to catch at Midgar.”

“Wanna ride?”

“I thought you were going to the bar.”

“We’ll bring Rude, lots’a pubs on the way back. We can make a night of it.”

“I believe I’ll pass.” Tseng mutters, as he starts to walk away with a light smile on his face. “If something were to happen to you, I’d have no one left to entertain me. Best if you stay close to the base, where you can’t get into too much trouble.”

From there, he gets Elena to eagerly take him to Junon. I have no idea what goes on during that time, since I find my own way and patiently wait for him. When he arrives, he politely thanks her, and even makes the effort to

give her a small peck on the cheek as a thanks. Then he comments that he has an hour-and-a-half to waste, surprising me, somewhat.

“Have you eaten?” He asks her, making her face light up over the fact that he’s capable of acknowledging her.

But she answers. “Yes. But hours ago, Sir.”

“We’re off the clock now.” He reminds her, as he offers his hand like a gentleman, and helps her step out of the car. “It’s Tseng.” Then he adds as he walks her into what’s left of the old base. “I found a quaint little diner the last time I was here. It’s new. But I wouldn’t mind trying it for a late-night snack or dessert.”

She’s left speechless for a moment, before she restrains herself and professionally nods in reply. I can’t help but start to understand why she leads herself on with him, since I’m beginning to think she might have a chance as well.

He carries a mild charm as he dines with her, and keeps himself under control as he relishes his dish. Although, I notice, he still takes every bite slowly and savours it to its fullest. Though, why he suddenly wants company confuses me. But it’s nice to see, and I find myself actually smiling at the fact that he’s capable of showing a more sensitive side, albeit rare.

When they’re done, he thanks her again, both for the ride and for accompanying him. Then he places another kiss on her cheek and reminds her to drive safely on the way back. It’s dark and she needs to be extra careful. The reminder offends her slightly, possibly because she thinks he’s only saying it because she’s a woman.

But he explains that there’s a possible concern, which he doesn’t elaborate on. And she humbly nods and tells him she’ll be just fine, before he nods back at her, and enters the docks to board the ship that I’ve also purchased a ticket for.

To my knowledge, he’s still unaware of my presence, and he makes his way to a part of the deck that’s hardly populated. His choice of location makes it easy for me to remain unseen, as I stay in the darkness, always blending with the shadows, while he rests his forearms on the railing and focuses on the water until he reaches the shores of Costa Del Sol.

When he sets his foot on the docks, he stops in one of the shops and buys a local keepsake. He chooses an expensive ornament that catches my curious attention as to why he’d buy it, considering it strikes me as something a woman would prefer. And I’ve seen nothing similar to it in the small and conservatively decorated bungalow he resides in on the outskirts of the farm.

After that, he books a room for the evening and retires quickly, where he lays, curled up, pained, and quiet. I almost want to comfort him, let him know that I’m here, and that I know. But I know I can’t, and I’m not really sure why I entertain the thought that letting him know I’m here would be a good thing, or even comforting for that matter.

In the morning, he catches a taxiway to Rocket Town, and again, I find my own way. At this point, I’m not really sure where his final destination is. But I’m aware of where each of his stops are, since I’m listening, and he arrives in the late afternoon.

Little time is wasted once he’s in the town, and from there, he catches another ship to Wutai, a longer trip where I’m lucky enough to get a ticket due to a cancellation, and he does the exact same thing as he did on the other ship. He waits it out in solitude.

When we arrive in Wutai, it’s starting to get dark, but he doesn’t catch a ride from here. Instead, he surprises me by starting his way on foot, and walks, for what I know to be over a two-hour walk to the village. All the while, he carries his heavy luggage, and the bag with the memento from Costa Del Sol in it, while showing little complaint over the burden.

He’s cautious, as he walks through the silvery-green glow of the twilight, with nothing but a readied flashlight to lead his way for when the darkness dominates the night’s sky. And the darker it becomes, the more he turns his attention to the thickening woods, where I’m at, as if he’s listening and watching, maybe even suspecting.

When he nears the village, he stops as if something has caught his attention. He’s cautious again, and he makes a more keen observation of his surroundings, keener than any he’s made since the first day, and his eyes suddenly narrow while he subtly turns the wrist that he keeps one of his blades on.

At first, I’m thinking I’ve slipped up somehow, and that he’s finally caught on to my presence. But then I quickly notice someone laying prone, on the ground, with a readied gun that’s targeted at Tseng, and I react.

And suddenly, like the night I first met him, I’m no longer silent, and I’m no longer quiet, making my presence known since my priorities are no longer based on observation, and I’m suddenly defending him again, as if

he deserves it. I don't even notice him disappear, as I react on instinct, alone, and nothing more, while I quickly and urgently disarm the man by knocking him unconscious, with a trained blow to the head with my gauntlet, before I grab his gun and dump the bullets.

Not a moment more passes, while I'm snapping the firearm to render it useless, when I see another body fall, from the corner of my eye, and somewhere to my left, with something sharp sticking out of his head, and I freeze.

"Normally, men don't pursue me with the type of drive you've exhibited." Comes his voice, hollow and deep, almost like tin, from behind me.

Then he steps out of his own shadows, leaving me speechless, uncertain, and on my knees as I stare straight ahead through heavy bangs, breathing silently into my mantle, and keeping my hand on my gun and ready.

"Hm." He mutters, as he sizes me up in a way that leaves chills. I don't need to turn around to know, because I've seen him do it enough times to know it's what he does. Then he walks up to the man I took down and tilts his head forward. "I guess I should be flattered."

After that, he puts his gloves on and orders me, with little thought, to move out of his way. "Step back, Mr. Valentine. You've saved my life three times now." Then he takes a moment to smirk, as I obey and move back, not really knowing if I approve of what he might do, and avoiding his charcoal gaze while he watches me, and lowers his voice to a malicious-sounding level, while still smirking at me. "I wouldn't want to see you get harmed for doing a good deed."

"You're marked." I say, ignoring the belittling look in his eyes, as I keep my head down and realise the men he's standing over are professionals.

He nods, once, as an answer. Then he turns his attention over to both the men, and steps back while saying "Beta," as a dizzying rumble fills a confined spot, and a purple-red haze surrounds and burns the bodies to ashes. "Ex-Turks." He says, before he looks back over to me and looks me up and down, making it obvious that he knows I used to be one. After that, he turns his attention to our surroundings and takes a look around. "From the looks of things, a number of them reformed and are starting to turn renegade against us."

With another smirk, he pushes some dirt over the ashes with the toe of his boot and removes his gloves while taking a deep breath. "From what I can gather, they're calling us traitors." He tells me, before he takes a moment to think about it and quirks his brow. Then he adds with an almost regretful-sounding tone. "I didn't think it was a problem with just one back in Kalm. But I'm beginning to think I might have a report to fill in when I get back."

Then he bows his head, respectfully, at the remains and turns his full attention over to me, almost intriguingly, and asks. "When was the last time you had a home-cooked meal Mr. Valentine?"

I don't fully understand his question, since it could be an insult toward my unkempt appearance, or it could be a genuine inquiry, and I highly doubt he's offering to cook for me. So, I don't answer him. Instead, I look at him, through strands of black, while keeping my hand on my gun, and keeping cautious over what he just did and what he might still do. He smiles at me like he knows what I'm thinking, before he takes a deep breath and smirks at my gun-hand, making me feel like I'm about to make some kind of deal with the devil.

"I must admit, having you stalk me wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I said I wanted to thank you. But if following me is what you want, I'll allow you one more week, open."

After that, he runs his eyes over me once more, and focuses on my shoulders, before he frowns slightly, and steps up to swipe some loose soil from them. Then he pulls a loose branch that got caught in my thick and unkempt hair, layered from broken strands, and tosses it to the side, like he's not impressed by the fact that he thinks I had to roll around in the dirt like some wild and untamed animal. He doesn't say it. But I can tell by the way he's looking at me that he's thinking it just the same.

"But I'm afraid that's all I can allow." He says, before he wipes his hands off and looks like he wants to wash them. "If you follow me back to the farm after this, I may not be as willing to return any favours."

"You knew." I say, suddenly wondering why he never said or did anything if he knew I'd followed him to Shinra and was watching them all that time.

But he suggests that he didn't know until now by answering, "I do now," as he starts to walk away and motions for me to follow.

We don't exchange words, as he leads me through winding trails that he follows by his light, and we don't enter the town as I suspected we would either. Instead, he guides me for another hour, north of Wutai, to a small and modest home that's surrounded by bush and rock. It's in the midrange of the mountains with a small creek running to the east.

It's a humble place, too modest for his taste, and I'm suddenly wondering why we're here.

Yet, he doesn't bother to knock. He walks in like he owns the place, and beckons for me to follow. Uncertain, I trail behind him, while remaining wary and not sure of what to expect.

Once we're both inside, he closes the door behind me, and I suddenly feel like shrinking back when he calls out. "Mother?"

It's a searching tone, and I pray, to whatever god will take mercy on me, that this is one of his twisted jokes. But as I look around, I'm beginning to realise he's even more twisted than that.

It's the home he grew up in...

Along the walls are pictures of a younger version of the man, handsome and softer, and his eyes aren't as hard or as confident as they are now. His hair is short, with bangs that fall forward and hide his eyes slightly, making him seem almost shy. The smile in all of them doesn't seem genuine, and he appears almost sad, like he's not happy with who or where he is.

As I observe each one, and study them, he changes to a point of being almost desolate, but only for a short period. His bangs become longer and heavier, falling more forward, and he's stopped smiling completely. From what little I can see of his eyes, they sink into a depth of obsidian that becomes abysmal and drowning.

After that, there's a gap, like he didn't return home, or communicate with anyone, for what looks like years, and when he returned, he shut himself off. Nothing but hardened charcoal and an expression of chiselled stone is left.

He watches me study them for a moment, knowing I'm reading him. But he's willing to let me see for some reason, and does nothing to pull my attention away as I do so. He remains stark, as I continue to look about, and when I turn my attention to the rest of the room, he turns his attention to an opening near the back and calls out "Mother?" again.

There's a small fire burning in a woodstove, keeping the place warm. Shelves align the walls, full of trinkets and keepsakes from around the world, and I'm guessing he bought them, considering he's carrying one in the bag he brought with him. The place is cozy and almost cluttered, nothing like the places he usually stays in, and he seems to know what I'm thinking and turns to me and mutters an answer to my silent question. "She won't leave."

"Tseng?" Comes a woman's voice, feeble, from somewhere in the backyard, and it sounds closer the second time it's called, before she walks through the door with an enlightening smile on her face and doesn't appear to notice me at first. "Tseng? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mother." He answers, sounding proper and respectful. Then he hugs the aged woman and kisses her on her dry and parched cheek. They speak in Wutain, as he hands her the bag and she happily accepts and opens it. All the while, he keeps his arm around her and watches.

Despite their Wutain tongue, I understand what they're saying; you couldn't get into the Turks without knowing a minimum of three languages, and Wutai was a popular spot for us back then. But I respect them by keeping my silence, and I'm almost hoping that I'll be ignored altogether.

"You brought company?"

"I did." He answers, before he smirks at me, almost conniving and cruel, and appearing to be aware of the fact that I understand them. Then he kindly turns her around to see me as I shrink back while lowering my face so my mantle can cover as much as it can and hoping my thick and heavy bangs will take care of the rest.

She looks cautious at first, and is nearly taken back by my appearance that is justifiably alarming to her. It's a reaction I've come to expect, even though I've never really learned to accept it; I know how I look. I'm reminded every time someone looks at me for the first time, like now.

Bloodless skin, ageless features, red eyes, and a lack of personal grooming are my main fallbacks. I'm over sixty years old and only months passed twenty-seven, never aging since the day I was altered. My clothes are tattered and soiled, and a musty scent is forever upon them from the places I sleep and hide. Like an animal, as Tseng pointed out, I'm nothing more. There's little point in attempting to try and cover it up, even though I never hesitate to try.

She falters with caution at first, and I expect no less.

The first thought that runs through my mind is that he's punishing me for overstepping, and I probably deserve the humiliation, even though I'd prefer not to face it.

But Tseng surprises me, and takes me off guard. He steps up and says something that I don't expect, and it changes her shock to a near-excitement.

"This man fought alongside Cloud, Mother. He helped defeat Sephiroth." Then he winks at me, while he stands behind her like a threatening shadow, and I'm at a loss on how to react when he adds. "He also fought against the Turks."

I don't know whether I should arm myself now, or simply leave and walk away, while he stares at me with a cruel glint and an amused smirk. Humiliation doesn't even come close to what I'm feeling right now. Until I realise that what he added makes her even happier, and she beckons me to follow her into the small and cluttered kitchen.

She limps ahead, hunched over and with a bad hip. Her salted hair falls coarsely down her back, held by a loose tie, and I follow while feeling uncertain. He walks behind me with a smug look, like it was a joke to him, and he got what he wanted out of it and is satisfied now. He says nothing to explain what's going on though, not that I would expect much more.

When she goes to prepare something to eat, he pulls out a chair for me and hospitably motions his hand for me to take the seat, before he pushes it back when I sit, like a proper host would do. Then he places the palms of his hands on my shoulders and pushes them down, almost like he's correcting my posture, as he leans over and whispers in our central language. "She's an excellent cook."

His cologne lingers, and he keeps his hands on my shoulders when he straightens up and she asks me whether I prefer to be called Vince or Vincent.

I tell her "Vincent," and Tseng slides his hands towards my upper arms, before he pats them both and says. "Vince, it is then," to agitate me on purpose, before he takes a seat and looks at me with that glint again.

She pours us tea as she shakes her head, suggesting that she knows about her sons needling personality, and moves quickly and efficiently for a near-crippled woman. I don't know how often she sees her son. But she's happy he's here, and happy to meet what she believes to be a friend of his.

She chatters away, and is willing to tell me everything she can think of about him, while he mindlessly smothers his tea in sugar, almost making me feel sick by the amount, as I stare at his cup and catch myself unconsciously sneering over it.

They're typical things a mother would say, and his suddenly tense mood strikes me as typical too, making me wonder why he brought me here if he didn't want me knowing anything.

He stays quiet though, and he doesn't ask her to stop or even try to change the subject. Instead, he lets her talk aimlessly about how much of a good boy he is and was, and how much she'd like to see him settle down again, maybe even get married.

For a moment, she pauses as if she's trying to cut herself off from saying something she shouldn't. Then she stares at the back of his head with a motherly compassion over something I know nothing about, as he stares mindlessly at his cup. She'd love a grandchild, she reluctantly says, more to the air than to anyone else, in a lowered and almost saddened voice while he grows quieter, eyes grow deeper, and his look becomes more reflective, like she's wearing his guard down.

Then she shakes her head and tries to lighten the mood, by lightening her tone to a false playfulness, and tells me that, "He never brings a woman home." before she places a generous appetizer on the table to hold us over. After that, she turns to him and smacks his arm with the back of her hand, and demands. "How come you never bring women home anymore?"

"It's impractical in my line of work." He answers, tone falling irritated and tight, before she returns to the counter and he tips his half-empty cup like he's lost interest in it and mumbles. "I travel too much."

She replies as if she's heard that excuse far too often and tells him to get a different job and settle down. She wants him to move back to Wutai and wants to know why he only brings colleagues to her home and never a potential suitor. "You can't run away forever." She tells him, and his eyes turn sharp when he can't stew anymore.

Not a word though. Despite the fact that he's grown tense and his jaw has grown tight, or the fact that he's pursed his lips and his eyes begin to glower like he's trying to set his cup on fire with his mind. But all he does is get up and put his hand in his pocket, and without turning to regard either of us, he calmly says. "I'm going outside."

I want to follow him. But his mother is still talking and serving me, and I don't want to seem rude while she tells me he's always been moody and not to mind him. "He'll come back."

After an hour passes, I'm not as certain as her about Tseng coming back. Although I don't doubt that she knows her son's behaviour, if not the truth about what he does for a living, and I excuse myself to walk outside so I can find him. Much to my comfort and surprise, he didn't go very far.

He's sitting on a stone bench in the dark, and near the creek while holding that silver object of his and toying with it, as if simply holding it is reminding him of something he's lost his thoughts in. He pays it no conscious mind, though, as it catches the light of the moon when he turns it, and he simply looks out, toward nothing.

I take a heavy step on purpose, to let him know I'm here, and he moves over without turning to see who I am and freeing a spot beside him, while concealing the object in his palms.

"She doesn't know you're a Turk." I say, quietly, before I sit down beside him to stare at the creek along with him.

"If you were born and raised in Wutai, would you tell your mother you were a Turk?"

"Probably not."

We both just sit there with our forearms on our knees and our attention on the creek, making it more than obvious that neither of us are adept conversationalists. Then he places what he was concealing back into his pocket and sighs as he continues to look ahead. "She thinks I'm a travelling salesman."

"Who profits well." I add, in a flat tone, always dead, always gruff, and always monotone.

"I'm good at what I do."

He smirks at his comment, knowing that he's right, and sits back to stretch out his knee. He almost looks charming, as he turns slightly, eyes sparkling from the moonlight's reflection on the water, and pale skin that's youthful but wise. Soft contrasts flatter him in the dark, and they make him seem less harsh.

He tilts his head and regards me back with an almost cautious look, though I have no idea what he's thinking or why he even brought me here, before he comments. "You're a man of little words." Then he turns back to the water and rests his forearms on his knees again while quietly adding. "But I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

I apologise and do the same, not really used to being around people for too long, and not really sure how I'm supposed to behave or what I'm supposed to be saying or doing.

"Don't apologise." He tells me, before he mutters. "It's refreshing to be around someone who doesn't talk about everything that's on their mind."

I almost get the feeling that it's because he wants to talk. But he doesn't say anything or even hint at what he'd like to talk about, and for the first time in a long time, I'm uncomfortable by the silence and want to do exactly what he says he doesn't like. But I suppose we're both lucky that I don't know what to say and keep silent due to that fact.

He must know though, because he breaks the silence by saying what's on his own mind. "I must admit that I'm curious about why you've been following me, Vince."

"Vincent." I correct, habitually and irritated from years of having to do it with nearly everyone.

"Vince." He mentions again, with a definitive nod, as if he doesn't care whether it bothers me or not. Or maybe he just likes the fact that it does, and chooses to use it for that purpose alone. "Normally, people who follow me are trying to kill me, especially when they're an ex-Turk, not repetitively save my life."

Then he sighs and snickers while babying his knee. "I'm beginning to wonder how I'll ever be able to repay you in this lifetime."

"I don't want any payment."

"You must want something." He insists. "Every man wants something."

"Everything I wanted is gone." I say, and there's no point in thinking about what's left.

He nods and then turns to look where I keep Lucrecia's chain concealed. A quick glance, thoughtless, but knowing. Then he turns back to the water and mutters. "I'm not sure I believe you." Then he sighs and sits back, straighter, and hides a grimace before he reflects on what he's thinking. "Sometimes, if we lie enough to ourselves, we begin to believe it."

Deep thoughts, he speaks. They sound full of conviction, as if he almost knows what he's talking about.

"But in the end, we realise it's nothing more than a lie, and we're left with nothing, not even a will to pick up the pieces." He nods again and falls distant while he places his hand in his pocket and fiddles with his mysterious object again. "But, I suppose it matters little."

Then with a sigh, he stands up and pats my shoulder. "What harm can be done when you're the only person that needs to believe it."

He's about to walk away, and every fibre of my being wants to stay where I am, where it's quiet and dark. But I want him to stay with me.

So much, that I didn't even realise I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back down, almost forcefully, until it's too late. His look is disapproving, almost angry, at being handled that way, and he states. "All you had to do was say something if you didn't want to go back yet."

"Why did you come to Kalm?"

I can hear the undertone in my own voice, suddenly just as demanding as he is while the claws of my gauntlet are digging into his arm with a tight grip, and he's refusing to show that it hurts him as he answers. "I told you why," making me believe he'll do everything in his power to remain obstinate about giving me a straight answer.

"Why did you wait six months?"

"Because I was trying to find out who you were and where I could find you." His voice carries no hint of a lie, though I'm sure there's more to it. But knowing who he is and what he does for a living, there's no reason why he'd want to thank anyone, least of all, some animal just because it saved his life.

When he tries to pull his arm from my grip, the claws of my gauntlet automatically dig in deeper. But I'm not willing to let go yet. I've been playing his game for long enough, and I want answers. "You said you did research on me. Why?"

"Have you looked in the mirror lately, Vince?"

It's a cold, typical, Turk response, and I assertively correct him without needing to answer. "Vincent."

"Vince." He persists, pissing me off more while he stares at me with no fear. "I needed to know what I was up against by tracking you down." He says, and he remains calm while maintaining his resolve. "All I knew was that some man who didn't look natural took me to the hospice. They said he looked dangerous."

"You wanted to play with fire."

"No." He answers, still calm and not willing to be intimidated. "I genuinely wanted to thank you." Then he looks away and mutters. "And I was genuinely curious about you. I wanted to know why someone with your history would have saved my life."

"My history is none of your business."

"That's funny." He states, as his eyes suddenly go conniving and shallow when he regards me with a questioning accusation of his own and lowers his voice. "Considering I could say the same thing to you."

I immediately let go of him and he snickers, knowing he's got the upper hand again. But he doesn't bother to leave. Instead, he moves so that he's sitting beside me like he was earlier, while he keeps his back straight and makes no complaint about his arm, though I know I've hurt him.

I don't admit to it though, and I try to convince myself that he's less of a man than I am, which doesn't say much. But it gives me a reason not to apologise. Then I'm quickly reminded that he could have tried something to attempt to get away if he wanted to, or even tried something to send me away, and I wonder why he didn't.

We must have sat out there for over an hour, quietly, as if we were sitting alone and had no desire to talk to ourselves. Whether we were contemplating the same questions in our minds or not, I'm not sure.

But what he said made me wonder, and I honestly have no idea why I've been following him or watching him. I have no idea what it is about him that makes me want to, and I have no idea what it is that makes him wonder about me, except that maybe we're both acting out of something neither of us can explain.

And I'm well-aware of the fact that I'm starting to become obsessive over him. Though, I'm not willing to admit it to anyone. But I know I'm looking for any reason to keep him near me or in my sight, and I'm looking for any excuse that suits me, though none of them really do.

When he finally decides the chill in the air is getting to him, he asks me if I'd like to go back inside and he tells me why. He silently notes that I'm unaware of the temperature and regards me curiously again. He doesn't ask, but I know his thoughts. His body language, as subtle as it is, says more than he realises at times, and instead, he asks me how I enjoyed my meal when we walk back.

I'm not willing to tell him I appreciated it more than I care to admit to, and I simply tell him he was right. The woman is a good cook, and he nods, as if he suspected he could break me enough to get me to enjoy something, and sighs as if he actually feels good about it.

When we go back inside, his mother is still awake, and we wind up sitting in the living room. We sit on an old, but comfortable sofa, covered with blankets and plush pillows she made herself. He's in a better mood the

second time around, and it might have something to do with the fact that she's mentioned nothing about girlfriends and children, since I noticed that was when he started to turn more sour than he was to begin with.

Or it could just be because she's made us a dessert that he's still contently savouring while she shows me old photos of him as a child. She claims he was a distant boy, always quiet. He never had any friends and never brought anyone home. She confides that he was probably too embarrassed to bring anyone home because they were poor, and I begin to wonder where his father was during all this time.

There's not a single picture of an adult male, not in any of the ones she's showing me, and not on any of the walls. There's not even any mention of his father at all, like he never existed. It's as if Tseng is her entire world, the only one that matters, and the only one that exists to her, and I'm not sure if I should ask why. So, I don't.

When Tseng takes his plate into the kitchen and starts cleaning up, I find out that he used to come home covered in bruises, nearly every day. "He was always getting into fights with the other boys in the village." She confidently tells me. "I was constantly pounding on their mother's doors. I made enemies with nearly every one of them."

She says it like she's proud though. She even laughs about it. It doesn't upset her, and she doesn't hold him responsible. "He had a rough childhood." She confides, and falls reflective, like she's wondering if she should say why.

Then she gathers herself together and proudly adds. "He held his own well though. If you'd seen the boys he defended himself against;" She pauses like she's at a loss for words. Then she pats me on the knee and leans toward me while she guiltily admits. "They got what they deserved."

"And she wonders why I don't bring people home often." Tseng slyly states, in Wutain, as he appears under the doorframe to the living room and leans against it. He's elegant and calm, and looking at his mother like she means just as much to him as he does to her.

It's a side to the man I never would have expected. Domestic, caring, even loving, and I'm wondering why he's letting me see it. In fact, I'm wondering why he's let me see half of what he has, now that I know he knew I was watching him from the start.

He's suave, the way that he pushes himself from the doorframe and admits that he's tired, before he walks up to her and gives her a kiss on the cheek. Then he tells her he doesn't want her wearing herself down and that she should go to bed. "I'll take care of the rest of the chores and the fire. Get some sleep."

He ensures her he won't stay up late when she protests, and ignores her when she states that he's the guest and doesn't have to tend to anything.

When he returns from escorting her to her room, he admits that she's a stubborn woman. Then he walks over to the woodstove and dampens it while sighing.

"Where's your father?" I ask, watching him intently, as he stiffens slightly at the question and shakes his head.

"I never had one."

His flat tone and the lack of elaboration tells me that I shouldn't pursue the question, and I wonder if it's one of the reasons he fought so much as a child.

Maybe another time, I tell myself, I'll ask him again.

That is, if I ever get the chance.

He made it clear that he'll allow me only one week to observe him further, and he wasn't joking when he said the word 'open'. But I'm not surprised that there are some things he's not willing to share, and I wouldn't have expected him to share as much as he has.

When he's done securing the place and ensuring everything is where it should be, he leads me down a small and narrow hallway to a room with two beds.

"This used to be my room." He tells me, as he goes through a dresser and pulls out a pair of pyjamas to place them in my hands. He looks me over for a moment and then comments while he settles on my hair. "You look about my size, if not a bit taller. These should fit."

Then he brushes my course bang to the side and stares at the soiled headscarf I use to keep my heavy hair from falling too far down. It's uncontrollable and there's no point in trying to fight with it, and he lightly smirks and asks. "When was the last time you took care of yourself?"

And once again, I'm not sure if he's insulting me or genuinely asking while he notes my silence and nods. Then he walks out and tells me to follow him. "I'm well-aware that you don't really need to eat." He admits. "I'm certain that's why you haven't gone hungry during all the time you've been... observing."

After that, he opens a small door and pulls out a towel and smirks at me when he turns and looks like he's deep in thought. "But it never hurts to indulge in the things we don't necessarily need from time to time, especially if we can."

Then he places the towel in my arms and points toward the bathroom while telling me there is no shower, only a bath. He even goes so far as to turn the taps himself and sets the temperature, as I mindlessly follow him.

He admits that he knows I carry no scent from what little records he could find on me, and from the fact that he's standing right next to the proof. But he also admits, as he silently asks for permission to remove my headscarf and I do nothing to stop him, that he thinks I might like it.

"We all need to be taken care of." He says, though I'm not sure why he says it, because he doesn't let anyone take care of him, and he stands close while unwrapping the scarf and being careful not to catch my hair as he does it. All the while, the soft scents of his cologne and lavender lightly touch my senses, and I unconsciously close my eyes, losing myself in it for a moment.

His touch is neither too firm nor too light, and there's nothing violating or intrusive in the way that he handles me. He's not even offending when he comments about my skin being warm before he asks. "Is it from the Lifestream?" While I nod and he loosens my hair with a quick brush from his fingers.

He's almost making it hard to believe that he's capable of behaving as hard as he does at this point, especially when I'm starting to believe that he's so much the opposite. And when he steps away, my eyes open quickly, and a part of me suddenly regrets that he was only tidying me up. Though, I have no idea what I was expecting or wanting him to do.

"There." He says, with a short nod as he looks at the counter and grabs a brush to hand to me. Then he points to the shampoo and whatever else he thinks I'll need, before he shuts the water off and walks out, closing the door softly behind him.

I only stand there for a moment, not fully understanding why I'm feeling the way I'm feeling, except for the fact that I've never felt so alone. I want to follow him instead of giving into the indulgences he's laid out before me, and I begin to realise that the devil, himself, couldn't have been more tempting.

I do as he dictates though, and I brush my hair and bathe. I put on the comfortable nightclothes he lent to me, and I even return to his room where he's already changed into his black and concealing cotton, and ready to get into his own bed. Then he points at the other one and states that it's comfortable, and that he suspects I'll sleep well in it.

As much as I don't want to, I simply nod and climb in, before he turns out the light and curls up in his own private agony while trying to hide it from me as best as he can.

All the while, I hang onto the necklace Lucrecia gave to me, feeling more guilty than I have in a long time, and not fully understanding why.

Every morning he bathes, coming out fresh and with the scent of light cologne and lavender in his hair. It doesn't strike me as strange anymore, not since he saw me watching him when he took the lavender out of his bag the first morning, and explained. "Aromatherapy."

He blushed slightly and let out a boyish smile when he explained it. Then he toyed with the small bottle in his hand and stared at it like he was attempting to erase the fact that he was caught with it, even though I'm sure he knows others can smell it on him.

"I'm not sure which is more embarrassing." He admits. He doesn't elaborate though, and he doesn't need to. I know he's referring to the fact that it's embarrassing to him, both, because he needs it, and that it carries a scent.

He doesn't want to admit to being weak, and he doesn't want to admit that he needs something for his aches. And as he walks out of the room with the bottle concealed in his hand, I can't help but recall that it doesn't only help with pain, it also helps with depression.

But I'm sure he'd never want anyone to think he had problems. So, I don't say anything about it.

As an act of questionable hospitality, he's left his evening ritual for me, insisting that I take advantage of it, and that I enjoy it, even though I don't feel right about it because I know he needs the bath to relax him and help him sleep. He even insists that I sample the fine desserts his mother makes, and ignores me when I tell him I'm not hungry.

"It's very good." He constantly says, in a matter-of-fact way that refuses to take no for an answer. Then he'll ignore my obvious reluctance to try it and serve me a portion anyway, obligating me to eat it because his mother is standing behind him with a hopeful smile.

Sometimes I get the feeling everything he's doing is an attempt to try and break me, to see how far he can pull me away from myself. Though, I'm not exactly sure what his reason for doing it is. Whether it's to thank me, or to mercilessly tempt me away from the things I deny myself, still remains to be discovered.

Even though he was granted a full week from his work, we only stayed four-and-a-half days. He never said why. But part of me thinks it was because he was uncomfortable, too achy and not used to his old bed anymore. And if I felt like kidding myself, I'd say he partially did it for my sake too.

The stay was mostly chore-driven, making it more tolerable than I thought it would be. We chopped wood for the fires, enough to last the woman until his next visit, and we turned the soil in the gardens. We even went over the exterior and interior of her home and fixed anything that needed to be fixed.

As a thank you, she made a fulfilling meal every evening and went out of her way to be generous and hospitable. For a woman that rarely had company, she knew how to lend her home to others and make it as comfortable as she possibly could for us. And Tseng seemed less concerned in taking advantage of it than he was in trying to entice me to want to take advantage of it.

Near the end, he admitted he was glad the woman was a recluse though. It was safer for her, even though he still worried about her and had to check up on her frequently. And after my stay and his confessions, I realise that she's the person he's been phoning every night since I started watching him.

"If something were to happen to her, I don't know what I'd do." He tells me, as we walk along one of the outer paths as if he wants to scout the area and make sure that her presence and existence remains unknown to his enemies.

I simply nod and reflect on my own parents, long gone now, and mildly regretting that I never had the chance to get to know them better and spend enough time with them.

He keeps his questions clinical when he asks me about them though, and doesn't bother to question my short answers further. He never hints or leans toward compassion, and I always answer with the same lack of emotion that he exhibits.

It's preferable to the compassionate attempts from the other people in my life, as sparse as they may be. And he doesn't wallow in the self-pity that others do either, even though I suspect he'd have plenty to wallow about. In many ways, he reminds me of a younger version of myself, though stronger and more resolute in his ways.

But I still don't know whether I should trust him, and he seems to be aware of it, and amused by it just the same.

When we leave, he does the same as he did when we arrived, he places his arm around his mother, hugs her, and kisses her on the cheek. He ensures her he'll be fine and that he'll keep in touch with her often to let her know he's okay. Though, I suspect he'll do it more to ensure she's just as well as he is.

He's careful to make sure that no one sees him leaving, much like he did when he arrived, and he goes so far as to pay my way for the entire trip back. But he never fails to comment on something he disapproves of, and he continues to make little digs about my appearance that I still don't know how to take.

The fact that he remains emotionless and like stone when he speaks doesn't help matters much either. I understand though. I'm not part of his family, and I'm not one of his Turks. So, he has no desire to let me in any more than he needs to.

As we travel further, toward our homes, and across sea and land, I start to reflect on how this will be the end of whatever it is I think I have with this man, and I start to begin to wonder whether I really want it to end. He's made his intentions clear though. He makes it clearer still, by growing harder the closer we get to our destinations, and I'm aware that it would be wrong of me to expect more than what he's already shown me, even if it was only a small taste.

But he's awakened more in me than I care to admit to, and I find myself constantly staring at him with thoughts I'm uncertain of when he's not looking. I almost can't believe that he's real at times, and I find myself listening more to his voice than to him, as if he's not really speaking. And to make matters worse, I find myself shrinking back each time he looks at me, like I'm afraid he'll sense my inner struggles.

We don't part our ways where I thought we would though, and he accompanies me straight to Kalm. I'm under the impression it's not done in etiquette, or even a desire to spend more time with me though. Instead, I'm under the impression that he's doing everything he can to ensure he puts the beast back in its cage, so to speak. So, he can make sure the door is securely closed this time.

He even goes so far as to walk with me to the door, before he makes sure his case is understood.

"Reno used to be in Soldier." He says, like he's about to start a warning and give a reason once the door is closed behind him. "He carries enough Mako in his system to enhance his senses beyond that of a normal person." As if to ensure his words, he nods. Then he walks up to my window and ensures the curtains are closed, like he did the first time. "I know you possess an incredible ability to remain hidden. But I'd like to confess something."

Without asking, I simply stare at him through heavy bangs and watch him with a permanently solemn expression, while he nods as if he expects no less from me.

"The only reason I knew you were watching me the first night, was because you made it obvious. I've been around long enough to know that, *people*, don't just appear the second you're in danger." He lets out a sigh, then, and remains where he is with his hands at his sides as he looks at me through the corner of his dark and slanted eyes, serious, but alluring at the same time. "And if it weren't for Reno, acting like we were being watched when I returned to the farm, I never would have known you were there."

Form a moment, he pauses and sleeks his hair back, before forwardly telling me, "To be honest, I had no idea it was you, because Reno's behaviour was uncertain and he never said anything, which is unusual for him." He takes another pause and looks me over to quirk his brow and regard me with a calm emptiness. "I'm assuming he was confused because you don't give off any natural scents, and you don't wear any unnatural ones."

Then he smirks and his tone turns wry and almost insulting, and I suddenly feel like we're right back to where we started when he adds. "Not that there'd be a point for you to do so."

He senses my sudden guard at his turn of moods and looks down at my gun that I'm sure he suspects I'm ready to reach for the second the circumstance calls for it. But all he does is quirk his brow again, as if he thinks it's an unnecessary action and sighs.

"It wasn't until I saw the signs from the men that were following me in Wutai, and the sound of you attacking one of them, that I knew it was you, for certain. From there, I could only assume that you must have been following me the entire time."

After that, he looks me directly in the eyes and narrows his own. "I'll admit that I think it's strange, Mr. Valentine, and I'll admit that I wasn't exactly turned on by the idea."

"Turned on." I repeat, almost like I'm offended, though I'm not exactly sure why it bothers me, or even why I repeat it like it's supposed to mean something.

And almost like he can read my thoughts, he smirks again and lets out a short snort, before he steps up to me and runs his eyes over me, studying me and ignoring his own assumptions, along with my reaction. "But you did save my life on more than one occasion. And for that, you have my gratitude."

Then he brushes something off my shoulder, and pushes my hair back, while he tilts his head and takes a deep breath as if what he's about to say is difficult for him. "I didn't take you to my home to make a mockery out of you Mr. Valentine. I want you to know that much."

After that, he respectfully bows and lowers his voice as if he doesn't want anyone to listen in on what he's saying. "I enjoyed the time we spent together. It was nice to be around someone who wasn't an overgrown child or a grovelling mess for a change." And when he adds, "Or a disapproving mother who constantly picks at your lifestyle choices," He smiles, genuinely, knowing that I know he lies to her.

"But it ends here." He warns, as he walks to the door and stands in front of it. "If you follow me back to the farm, I can't guarantee that Reno won't find you, and I can't guarantee that you'll see him coming, or that I'll do anything to stop him. It's only fair that I warn you, after everything you've done for me."

"He's the type that will shoot first and ask questions later, Mr. Valentine, and he doesn't care if he'll have to answer for it either."

He lets himself out and doesn't bother to look back, and I don't bother to take my eyes off the door as he leaves. It's as if I really am an animal that's just been locked in its cage, and already, I'm missing my master. Whatever I've let him turn me into, or let myself turn into during the short time I got to know what little I did of him, isn't good.

And knowing that much, I know it would be wrong of me to go to the window to watch him leave, and it would be wrong of me to follow him. So, I remain where I am. But I don't feel like settling in yet, so I keep my armour and cloak on, and I even stay armed. Then I take a look around my meagre dwellings and the small pamphlet on my table that holds the Inn's menu.

It's worn and old, bearing folded creases and thinned out in the areas where I hold it most, even though I never allow myself to order from it. There's even a small kitchen in here, but I never use it. Nor do I ever use the bathroom, and when I think about it, I'm not even sure if the plumbing or lights even work. In fact, I'm suddenly wondering if I even own a bar of soap, and I wind up taking a deep breath when I realise what I'm doing and what I'm thinking about.

I've lived this way ever since I was awakened when Cloud and his friends found me in the basement of the Nibelheim mansion. No one's been able to change it, and I haven't been willing to let anyone try. And there's a small twinge of hope when I remind myself that he didn't break me enough, because he never got me to smile, and all of the sudden, I feel like smiling because of it. But I don't.

Instead, I walk over to the small side-table by the door and look at the card that's still sitting there, with Tseng's name on it, and mindlessly caress the handle of my gun. Then I wonder if he showed me anything at all, or if he was just showing me all the things I could never know about.

It makes me wonder if I should have saved his life in the first place, never mind the other times, and it makes me wonder if I've brought something upon myself, outside of my control and beyond the gates of redemption.

And as I listen to the musical cheer coming from the streets, always loud, I tell myself that I'm only kidding myself by trying to make something out of nothing. I'm aware I'm making a bigger deal out of it than what it was, and I take another deep breath and decide to do what I've always done since the day I first came to Kalm.

I go outside and find my way to the rooftops, no longer concerned about where he is or where he's gone, and I'm somewhat thankful that I can return to my meaningless existence that means nothing to me.

Then I travel to the areas where I've always travelled to, and perch over the alleys where trouble is always expected. It's not much of a life. But it's something that's turned out to be enough, a desire to protect the place I choose to call my home and the people that reside near it. They've become my acceptable penance over the last couple of years.

Though, I doubt it's enough to make up for the wrongs in my life, it suits me for now.

And like clockwork, I'm almost relieved when I hear the beginnings of trouble, not that I look forward to it. But it helps keep my mind clear. It's at the other end of town and will take me a while to pinpoint exactly where it's at, even though I can make a good guess.

From what I can tell at this distance, someone has been taken to the alleys and is probably behind in a payment they owed, or some other underhanded dealing where they didn't perform as expected. It's always the same, and more often than not, the person I save generally doesn't deserve saving, making me wonder why I do this at all.

As I get closer, I can make out the voices and the demands. They sound typical, and I wouldn't be surprised if it's three or more men beating on one of their own, especially from the demands I can overhear.

Someone wants to know where someone is and someone isn't answering, angering the others to the point of becoming brutal. It's the same old thing, and I take a moment to scan the higher ground to ensure that I don't wind up getting caught up in something overwhelming.

I keep my hand on my gun, and I'm confident that it's only a small-time business dealing when there's no evidence of it being anything bigger. Then I lower my head when I hear the musical cheer near the town's square, as if it's a separate world that's unaware of anything dark ever happening in their town.

And I feel an overwhelming twinge when I hear one of the men demand. "Where is he, Tseng?" Then I hear a quick snap, like the crack of a cane against flesh, and I'm moving as if time is running out while he lets out a laboured snicker and nothing more.

A small moment is wasted on arguing, all male voices. A debate on whether they should just kill him and find one of the others is started. They mention the female. But then they all agree he's the best prize and they contemplate a ransom, right before I fall behind one of them and snap his neck. A bullet goes into another, as I protect myself by one coming at me with my gauntlet, and the other two men get away.

Though, I highly doubt their reasons for running have anything to do with fear, if they're party to the same men we found in Wutai, since Turks don't fear. They only leave so they can come back at you again, better prepared, and possibly in bigger numbers.

"Are you all right?" I ask, demanding and low, still charged from whatever false chemicals run through my veins as I take a heavy step forward that sharply echoes through the alley, from the sound of armoured metal against concrete.

He only snickers and tries to move, like the stubborn Turk that he is. But his hands are bound behind his back by his own tie, and he's in too much agony to be moving, and he's possibly even drugged. His cane is on the ground at his side, and his shirt is covered in blood near his stomach, though there are hardly any tears in the cloth.

All he can manage is another grunt as he snickers again, and stares at me like he's gone slightly mad and isn't willing to trust anyone coming near him, even though he tries his best to pretend that he's just fine. "I thought I told you to stop following me, Vince."

"Vincent." I lifelessly correct, as I put my gun back in its holster and kneel down beside him while he snickers and mutters out "Vince" again.

Knowing he's not in any position to be pushing anyone, I grit my teeth and roughly push him over, so his back is to me. I don't bother to be gentle, as a reminder that he's in no position to be playing games right now, and I start undoing the tie while he grunts and mutters out. "I've got to warn the others."

"Not until I get you cleaned up."

"No time. Trouble."

I understand his sense of duty, but I ignore him, nonetheless. He's in no condition to run off to the farm by himself at this moment, and he needs to be tended to. And when I'm done untying him, I stuff the tie in his pocket and sling him over my shoulder, causing him to grunt again while I demand. "What did they give you?"

"Something." He answers, and he snickers again, probably laughing at the stupidity of his own answer.

He far from impresses me right now, and I grip my claw into his leg as a warning when he knees me in the ribs and tries to struggle free. But I'm also aware of the fact that he might be acting on the drug, and I grit my teeth again, without saying a word about it. And for whatever reason I can't come up with, I grab his cane for him and take him to my home.

He protests and struggles the whole time and insists that he needs to get back to his base. And when I practically throw him on my bed, he tries to get up, forcing me to push him back down. "You're in no condition to be going anywhere right now." I tell him, with an enforcing tone, while I push him on the shoulder again to stress my point.

Then he smacks me across the face with the back of his hand and kicks at me, causing me to grunt and grab his arm to pin it down while I climb over top of him to gain some control. But he doesn't give up there; He grabs his own gun with his other hand, forcing me to wrestle it away from him and toss it to the other end of the room where it lands on the floor.

"What the hell did they give you?" I demand again, right before I catch him trying to knee me in the groin and I quickly protect myself, causing us both to fall to the floor.

He's painfully twisted, almost on his stomach, and still snickering like a madman, while I'm laying half-on him from behind and trying to keep him from harming both of us. He mutters out "Loco." before he shakes his head and takes a moment to pant heavily and try to finish his sentence. "Loco weed."

That explains it, I think to myself, as I pull loose strands of his hair that are clinging to the corner of his mouth away. He's confused and delusional, and I have nothing to counteract it with.

He has no idea who the friend or foe is, and all he can do is wait it out, and depending on how much he was given, it could last for a couple of hours or longer than a day. But knowing that, if I let him go, he's liable to kill his own Turks, even though he's trained and doing his best to fight it.

Having dealt with the effect before, several times, I soften my gruff voice as much as I can and talk soothingly into his ear. "I'm going to turn you over." I tell him, while I unconsciously hold his head still by the jaw and neaten his hair behind his ear. "And I need to tend to your wounds. Will you let me?"

Even though he nods with what little movement I allow, I'm still wary of what he'll try next, and I slowly turn him onto his back. He's compliant until the moment I try to undo one of the buttons on his shirt. But his reaction strikes me as a different type of attack than the previous ones, as if it was a purely defensive move on his part and not driven by the drug, even though I react violently to it.

He smashes me over the head with the small lamp from the nightstand at our heads, filling my head with a slight tingling and numbing sensation from the impact, and I grab him and throw him onto the bed. My hand goes into his pocket and I pull his tie back out, and I wind up tying him to the frame of the bed while threatening his life and ripping the bottom part of his blazer off so I can stuff it into his mouth to keep him quiet.

Pure instinct, nothing more, and I shrink back afterwards, not meaning to have done that. I don't apologise though, and he doesn't look frightened.

Instead, he looks angry, and I almost get a feeling of satisfaction out of it, being able to see what those charcoal eyes would look like when they're burning with the fires of hell in them and showing the first signs of a soul that has sparks. But now is not the time to smile about it, even though I want to and don't really know why that is.

So, I brush it off and shake my head to loosen the broken pieces of glass from my hair, before I kick the rest of it under my bed to keep it out of the way and then kick at the bed to vent off my unwanted aggression. Then I climb over top of him and rip his shirt open to see what he was so defensive over, and immediately, I'm wishing I didn't react the way that I did.

He's covered in a roadmap of scars, not a pretty site. Some deep, some shallow, some young, and some old. The majority of them look younger than a year, and I'm reminded of the state I found him in after the remnants tortured him. It takes me only a moment to realise the majority of those scars, deep and shallow, are from that time.

Then I think about the aches and pains I've been seeing him hide, and I'm suddenly realising it's all related. I'm suddenly wishing I'd done more for him then, instead of just slinging him over my shoulder, blood-stained and broken, and dropping him off like a sack of dirt at the nearest hospice.

But I can't be wasting time on how things could have been done, and I turn my focus to the bleeding welts across his stomach and frown. I nod for a moment, knowing what needs to be done now, and I tell him in a softer, yet forced tone. "I'm going to give you a sedative, a double dose."

Then I lean up to him and brush the mess of his hair back before pulling some loose strands out of his mouth again, that are caught between the blazer, and I stroke them behind his ears and neaten it like it should be. "It won't clear your head or stop the hallucinations. But it will calm you down enough to let me tend to you without having to keep you tied up."

He nods like he understands. But he still struggles, and I get the feeling that it's mostly because he wants to cover himself up, more than try to get away, even though I don't help him out in that area.

Instead, I give him the sedatives and wait for him to start relaxing before I tend to his wounds, cleaning and bandaging them, all the while he keeps his eyes averted as if he doesn't want to face the fact that I'm helping him, or probably more accurately, seeing him. Then I fold his torn shirt across his chest, carefully, and regard him with a strange sense of regret. There's no buttons left to do it back up with, since I ripped it, so I just hold it for him by resting my palm on it, lightly, while I loosen his wrists with my other hand.

He curls up after that, with his back to me, and doesn't say a word while refusing to look at me. I don't know what else to do, so I cuddle up behind and cautiously hang onto him, in an attempt to alleviate whatever kind of weight I've managed to bring down upon him. Then I place a Hi-Potion on the pillow in front of him.

When he sits up slightly, to accommodate himself, I sit up with him and refuse to let go. And when he opens the bottle and drinks from it, I ask in a low voice, almost grazing his cheek with my mouth, and wondering why I suddenly feel a strange need to stop myself from doing something I might regret. "Do the others know?"

He only shakes his head and leans away from me to place the bottle on the nightstand, confirming that he never told those he worked with about the state he was left in, before he says in a low and slightly gruff tone while keeping his back to me, "I burned the records," But he doesn't elaborate why.

My guess is that he didn't want them knowing how broken he was after that night. Whether it's because of pride, or because he's afraid, I don't really know. But I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out to be a combination of both.

He snickers every now and then. But I pay it no mind.

Besides the odd attempt to weakly struggle away, he doesn't seem bothered by me holding him. In fact, I'm not even sure if he knows he's being held, or if he's noticed the kiss I've placed on his cheek. I don't even know if he's aware that my mouth lingers longer than it should have afterwards, or the fact that it's daringly close to the corner of his own mouth.

Though I don't know why I'm doing what I'm doing, and I don't know why I want to move my hand lower while I struggle against the urge. I just know that I shouldn't.

He stares straight ahead, like I'm not even here, and it's making me want his attention even more for some reason. He doesn't even react when I take a risk and move closer, pressing my body against his, while inhaling the scents he puts care into, fresh and clean, and tempting.

He's not beautiful, nor is he pretty. His features are handsome in a common way, and almost hard. Though, I admire the contrasts of his colouring, and the thick and full lashes that outline his dark eyes, almost perfectly.

But when I think about it, there's really nothing nice about him, not in appearance, nor in personality. His look is too rough, and he's far too judgemental and insulting. And I hope it's enough to convince myself that there's nothing to find magnetic about him.

He's a Turk, and I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be admiring him against all of my better senses, or turning him over so I can peer down as he looks back up at me with confused and glazed eyes, and I shouldn't be admiring his features or the shape of his mouth.

His lips are almost too thin; too masculine for my taste. There's no reason for me to want to touch them, or see what they would feel like against my own, and there's no reason for me to be removing my gloves so I can trace their chiselled outline, too hard and too tense.

There's too many reasons for me to not climb over him the way that I am, and there's too many reasons not to be placing my leg between his, so that his is between mine. And the fact that he's not fully aware, is making it even worse, because I don't know if he'd let me touch him like this if he had full control of himself, or was fully aware of what was going on.

But I can't stop myself. I've tasted too much from him, and I want more. He's turning into the taste of blood that never fully leaves your system, and a growing temptation that I shouldn't be giving into.

He's still quiet though. His breathing is steady, and he stares with a questioning in his eyes, like he's not sure if he should react to me or not. I'm not even sure if he really knows I'm here, or even who I am. But he moves when I move against him, through clothing that's becoming constricting.

And when he turns his head away, as if he's hit by a moment of lucidity, I turn his attention back to me, eyes deep into his own. My fingers press against his jaw while I keep my thumb against his chin, and I tilt his head and lower my own, despite his subtle protest that's voiced by being tense.

Even though he tries to turn away again, and I stop him by holding his head still, his mouth still opens to my initial persuasion, almost hungered, while he tries to weakly push me back. But his attempts are feeble, and he's too inviting and passive, as our tongues glide against each other's with a subtle metallic taste, while he suckles lightly on mine, urging it further into his mouth with his own, even when I press his wrists to the mattress by his head.

He wants to fight me off. But he contradicts himself by pulling me in, and beckoning me to go further, as his breathing deepens and his mouth becomes more accepting. And when his arms start to relax, I let go of him, freeing myself to explore, before he starts to do the same with smoothing palms and massaging fingers.

His hands travel in separate directions as they feel and explore, and he lets out a soft and arousing moan when my fingers travel over his chest. One of his hands presses on my backside, with strong fingers, and he pushes me more toward him, as he moves toward me and raises his other leg. The other makes its way to the nape of my neck, where strong fingers crawl through the mass of uncombed and tangled hair until his palm is resting passively, yet firm, against the base of my skull, and his fingers begin to lightly massage.

He's drawing me in and breathing deep, while his heart beats steady against me. Our tongues still glide in an almost begging motion, as the movement of our bodies and our breathing becomes more feverish. Feeling bolder, I take my chances and wander my hands more curiously over his torso, studying him and his reactions, while I trace hardened muscles under taught skin. He's built and maintained like a machine, and I find myself wanting to find a way to fit inside of him.

All the while, I'm wanting to stop, yet so wanting...

There's a command to his movements, and a command from his kiss, that is neither too soft, nor too firm, and there's a burning inside of me that's overpowered my better senses. But it's too late to stop now, and I wouldn't stop even if I could, because I don't want to.

There's so much about him that makes me need and want. Though, I don't know why, and there's something inside of him that I need to reach, touch, and feel. And I'm convinced that he needs it too, while his hands move toward my buckles, undoing them like he's used to undoing such things. His fingers are nimble and adept, making my own efforts to undo his belt appear clumsy and fumbling.

His breathing quickens and he pulsates when I touch and caress his delicate skin, smooth and tender, and I find my own breathing matching his when he does the same. I can feel the initial fluid run through my vein when he runs his thumb over it, and I start to mirror what he's doing to me, touching, feeling, and stroking. But unlike him, my hand starts to explore further, more needing and downward, until he stops me by quickly grabbing onto my wrist and pulling my hand away.

Then he breaks the kiss and rolls his eyes back, like he's trying to wake himself up, and he mutters in a low and gruff voice, almost equal to my own, though airy. "I'm not a masochist, Vincent..."

"Vince." I correct, utterly mindless about what I'm arguing with, as I let him pull my hand away and watch him bring it to his mouth, where he runs his tongue over and around my fingers, like he's not a stranger to what he's doing. He does it with a rousing skill and pulls them deep into his mouth, suggestive of other temptations I can only guess he might not be a stranger to.

And I merely watch him, enthralled and burning, and needing more.

But I wait as I hover over him, mesmerized and watching, as our bodies continue to unconsciously move with a growing need, before he releases my hand from the moist warmth of his mouth and slowly guides it downward. "Go slow." He mutters, while he turns his head and I lightly nudge his jaw with my nose. "It's been a long time..."

He talks like he's half-asleep, dreaming, and I nod while trying to mind his request. But inexperience, in this case, causes him to have to guide me.

He hisses when I move too eagerly and make an error in judgement. Then he mutters, "I'm not a woman." to remind me, before he tells me. "It hurts'n I'll bleed if you're not careful." He slurs slightly, and sounds confused. Though, I mind his words and nod while I try to restrain myself better. "I don't like pain..."

I nod again, before I kick both our pants off and remove his shirt entirely. Then I turn him onto his side and adjust myself behind him, where his black hair streams over his shoulders like a slick ocean. His strong strands almost disappear into the shadows, making him seem almost wraith-like and otherworldly, while I brush it to the side so I can monitor his pale profile. Then I place a soft kiss under his jaw and place my hands on his hips so I can adjust us both.

But before I get to do anything, he places an opposing hand near my pelvis to stop me, as if he's suddenly nervous and having second thoughts. "Be gentle." He reminds me, making me realise that he doesn't trust me, even in the state he's in. Then he slowly eases up, letting me know exactly how far he'll let me go before he'll let me in all the way, and I catch myself moaning from a feeling I haven't felt in over thirty years, once the heat of his body fully accepts me.

I'd almost forgotten, if not entirely, how basically needful the primitive sensations were. And my breath turns desperate as a long-lost warmth starts to course through a part of me that I can't identify, while Tseng's suppressed moans keep me focussed and concerned.

His breath has turned ragged, and his mouth has run dry, and he keeps his eyes closed while his fingers grip into the mattress. There's a rasp carried on his breath that I can't discern. I can't tell if it's from discomfort or from something good. I don't know what he's feeling, and he's not saying a word to let me know, and I'm even more afraid to ask him.

I begin to wonder if I should be doing something else for him, or if this is enough. But he answers my unspoken question when he grabs my hand and places it over his neglected erection.

He wraps my fingers around him and starts my hand moving, making me wonder if I should have been doing that from the start. Then I press my lips between his shoulders to silently apologise, before the movement of my hand becomes natural, and in rhythm with myself.

His breath changes from ragged to hitched, and his fingers return to the mattress to dig in harder than they did before, as his mouth opens from silenced cries while his eyes remain closed. Slight sounds are carried on his breath, that become louder and more desirable with each thrust, and I suddenly want to make this last forever.

But I get carried away in my desire to make him feel just as good as I'm feeling, and he orgasms violently, causing his entire body to shudder like he's been deprived for too long. An unfinished and hitched scream almost breaks from his need to control himself, and I find myself admiring the fact that even when he's in the uncontrollable throws of the merciless, he still needs to maintain his stubborn side by not allowing himself to fully break loose.

But I'm not finished yet, and my hand returns to his hip, with a grip full of an unrelenting need, when he makes it clear that he can't take anymore of me touching him. And if he wanted to pull away or stop at this point, I'm afraid there's no way I'd be willing to let him.

I'm too close now, and too far-gone to consider the consequences of what I've started, and too far-gone to care about anything until I've finished. It's a selfish need, and I can't deny that I've allowed it to take precedence.

He doesn't complain about the time it takes me though. Instead, he mutters the words "cum in me," under his breath, almost like he's begging, even though it feels like he's trying to stop himself from pulling away. I'm even less sure of how to interpret his whitening knuckles, as his fingers find their way to the edge of the bed with a cramping grip. "Leviathan, cum inside..."

It doesn't last too much longer though, and I release somewhere inside of him, relentlessly. And for a moment, I'm suddenly conscious about what kind of chemicals I've expelled into him while the sound of relief is carried with his heavy panting. Then he swallows to moisten his mouth. And I suddenly wonder if the only reason he was urging me, was to encourage me to finish sooner, so it would end.

Despite my concerns though, I don't let him pull away when it's over, even though he doesn't bother to try. I don't want to be separated from him just yet, and I want to stay connected to him for as long as I can. Sensing my need, he adjusts himself so his back is resting against my chest. But he doesn't attempt to turn or look at me, and I'm not sure if it's because he's still confused, or if it's because I've done something unforgivably wrong.

Though, I don't doubt the latter, either way.

It's too late to take any of it back though, and all I want to do is trace my hands over his broken body and keep him close, while hoping I didn't hurt him or do any more damage than there already was.

And out of sheer cowardice, I find myself afraid to ask him if he's okay. So, instead, I softly graze his scarred shoulder with my lips and place a tender kiss over a deep scar, before I rest my chin near the crook of his neck and regretfully watch him turn his head away from me.

"Get some sleep." I tell him, with a horse voice, and a sinking feeling of shame, and he nods with his eyes closed, while my hands smooth over his hips and sides, and I contemplate the sudden feeling that this wasn't something new for him, and that I wasn't exactly welcome to find out.

I get my answers in the morning, as far as those questions go, when his head isn't completely cleared, but clear enough to know what's going on, and what happened the night before, by what he wakes up to. He jumps up with a quick breath, as if he overslept an important meeting, and not even a second later, I'm tossed violently onto the floor while he falls to the other side and the sheet quickly follows him after it flows through the dead air of the room.

He conceals himself quickly, wrapping the sheet protectively around him, and fumbles along the floor for his clothes. "I didn't mean for this to happen." He says, like he thinks he's the one at fault while he wipes at his upper lip with the back of his wrist. "I don't know what I did or said. But I didn't mean..."

His eyes are quickly averted when I come around to his side and he sees my naked form. Then he continues to search for his clothes, on the dusty wooden floor, as if he wants to get out as quickly as he can. And when he spots his pants near the foot of the bed, he crawls across the creaking floorboards and grabs them.

"This isn't what I wanted. I wasn't trying to." He pauses like he knows he doesn't really know what he's apologizing for, and he shakes his head to stop himself from saying something he might not want to say. "This isn't what I was after when I..."

"Tseng..."

When I try to come clean and save him from the embarrassment, he lifts his hand in the air to let me know that he doesn't want to hear me speak. He keeps his back to me and refuses to turn around, as he quickly puts his pants on while struggling to keep himself concealed as much as he can by the blanket.

"Tseng." I say again, and chance a bare-footed step toward him, while he finds his shirt and blazer near each other and holds them up like he's surprised by the state they're in. "It wasn't you."

I don't think he hears me though, or doesn't understand. He seems more focused on the garments in his hands and looks down at the bandages on his stomach, and mutters out "Turks," as if he's slowly starting to

remember what happened. Then he quickly throws his shirt on and gets frustrated when he finds no buttons and torn button-holes. "I need to get back to the base."

When he turns around, I'm still standing there, and I haven't done anything to cover myself up yet. He tenses up at the sight, and quickly averts his eyes again, while he grabs his weapons and starts to arm himself from habit. "I don't normally do this, Vince." He says, with his back to me.

I don't bother to correct him this time, and simply watch him throw his tie around his neck and then quickly put his blazer on and zip up what's left of it, while I lower my head. I decide I should grab my own pants to put them on, more for his sake than mine, and I do. He's a mess right now, about the only thing sitting right on him is his hair, strong and not prone to being messed or tangled.

It hangs like it always does, neatly.

But his pants are crooked, his tie is undone, and one of his shirt's sleeves is hanging out further than the other. It's so unlike him, and so making me want to reach out.

But all I do is buckle my pants after doing them up, figuring it's best to leave him be. I can't undo the damage, and he's too busy walking through the steps of what happened the night before while he tries to get his conclusions straight.

Then he suddenly backhands me, more focussed and stinging than the feeble attempts from the night before, and I lose my balance while automatically rubbing at the side of my face. I don't fall over though, but I feel it. He hits like hard steel, sharp, and I can only guess one thing while I try to rub the throbbing away.

He remembers.

His eyes are burning when I slowly raise my attention to him through my bangs, unable to wash away the strong feeling of regret, even though I know my look remains expressionless. Though, his isn't; he's enraged, and his lips are pursed. But he keeps his tone controlled, even though his teeth are clenched when he speaks. "When I said I wanted to thank you, sex was not an option."

"I'm sorry." I say, hoping it doesn't sound as lifeless and dull as I think it does, while I lower my head and stare at the floor. I can't help but feel like I'm repeating myself too often with those words, and I'm beginning to wonder if they mean anything at all while he stares at me for a moment and then shakes his head.

"I don't sleep with straight men." He mutters, as if it's a weak attempt at an apology. Then he starts to walk out, answering all my silent questions about the strange things he does and says, and I'm getting the feeling he's humiliated and feeling like I took advantage of him because he thought I'd figured it out. As much as I'd like to believe he's the one at fault, I'm reminded of how it was me that took advantage of him.

But when he starts to open the door, whatever spell he has over me takes over again, and before I even know what I'm doing, I'm right behind him and slamming it shut in his face. My arm's around the front of his waist to hold him back, and I'm telling him. "I can't let you leave like this."

I tell myself it's because he's too dizzy, an after-effect of the loco weed, and the sedatives I gave to him probably aren't helping much either. That's the only reason I'm stopping him. I can tell by his slight shakiness and unsteady movements that he shouldn't be travelling on his own. But I don't elaborate on any of it. I just give him the order, and whether it's a lie I tell myself to make myself feel better about why I'm stopping him is unimportant.

He snickers for a moment, disbelieving and short, as if he's shocked and can't believe someone has the nerve to tell him what he can or can't do, and he asks "Pardon?" before he frees himself from me with quick and unexpected movements.

Then the base of his palm smashes the bottom of my jaw when he rapidly turns, and I stumble back after biting my tongue and shrinking inward from the sharp pain. It heals instantaneously though. But the ache and the bitter and unwelcome taste of chemicals and a tainted Lifestream linger, and I'm quick to rub at my jaw while staring down the barrel of his gun and unintentionally sneering.

"You are not my vindicator Mr. Valentine."

He's back to the formalities, and back to the stone exterior. The charcoal eyes return and he's calculating, fighting whatever shakiness or uncertainty he hides behind his mask. I take no offence though. He's only doing what he's trained to do, and I'd be a fool to expect him to react or do anything else.

Whether he'll shoot me or not, I don't know. But I'm taking a chance by not arming myself and remaining still while he reaches behind him and fumbles for the latch to open the door, never taking his eyes off me, and never taking the aim of his gun from me.

When he's halfway through, he exaggerates his aim as if he's pointing to get his message across, and he orders "Stay," Like he doesn't trust me not to follow him. And I think he's beginning to suspect, as much as I do, that he's found himself a stray that he doesn't know how to deal with.

He doesn't elaborate beyond the order though, and I'm sure he feels he shouldn't have to. He's the type of person who'll say something once and expect you to remember it, without having to explain it. He bares the typical traits of a leader. Though, one with high expectations.

A little too high, in fact, because if he really wanted me to listen, he should have shot me and made sure I was dead before he left, considering that the moment the door closes, and I hear him hurriedly walking down the hall, I'm quickly moving to finish dressing and arming myself.

I'm afraid I don't care about how capable he is or thinks he is, and I can't seem to care about what he wants or doesn't want. He's stubborn beyond reason and wounded, whether he wants to admit to it or not, and he's not as clear-headed as he'd like to think he is. And if he's right about having ex-Turks as a possible enemy, then he's in a hell of a lot more trouble than he's willing to admit to.

At least, that's what I tell myself, even though I have no clue as to why I'm concerning myself with him while I'm angrily throwing my cloak on and checking the bullets in my gun. And I try to convince myself that he doesn't deserve my help, nor does he need or want it, and the last thing I need to do is get involved in the middle of a Turk-war.

But I ignore all the reasons and find myself crawling on rooftops like a deranged creature, hunting for him under the first lights of dawn and blending with the heavy shadows cast by irregularities and worn-out chimneys and vents. I'm unable to stop myself from being driven by something I can't explain.

And I crouch down, low, like a wild zenene, barely visible to the streets, and watch him hail down a taxiway that he'll probably take to Edge, before he finds a more concealing way to travel back to the farm. Even in the state that he's in, with eyes still slightly glazed and an unkempt suit, he looks dignified and proper, and he respectfully bows to the driver before he gets in.

But he doesn't get in right away. He stops with his hand on the roof of the vehicle, and takes one last look at his surroundings, scouting, to ensure he isn't being watched. He has more to be concerned about now, and he looks suspiciously at all the rooftops, like a part of him knows he didn't get through to me.

His attention even stops near me, like he's getting to know me and anticipate where I might be, and his eyes darken treacherously, like he's angered by my disobedient nature.

I tell myself it's for his protection though. But at this point, I'm beginning to doubt that's the real reason, if not the only reason.

And I can't help but think that he's beginning to suffer from the same madness that's overtaking me, since I'm fully aware that he does nothing to try and stop me, even though he could have tried to kill me, several times over by now.