

CHAPTER XI: ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE

"I have to go to the bathroom."

Tifa looked over at Kendal, who was sitting at a desk nearby, but he did not turn toward her.

"Hello?" she said.

For a moment more he continued writing something down. Then he slowly turned and looked at her.

"You will address me as sir," he said.

"What?"

He slipped his pen into the pocket of his lab coat.

"When you wish to speak to me, you will call me sir," he repeated.

He turned back and started reading some papers.

Tifa just stared at him for a long time.

"I have to go to the bathroom, sir," she said slowly.

He turned to look at her again. Slowly he got up and walked over to her.

"May I have your permission to go to the bathroom, sir," he said.

Tifa just looked at him. What kind of game was this guy playing?

"If you don't let me go soon," she said. "I'm going to make a mess on your nice clean gurney."

He shrugged.

"If you do, just remember, you're the one who's going to have to lie in it."

He turned and started back to the desk.

Tifa shook her head.

"May I have your permission to go to the bathroom," she said. She paused for just a second. "Sir."

He did not look back.

"I don't think you mean it," he replied.

"What?" she exclaimed.

He sat back down and looked at her again.

"You're saying the words, but you don't sound like you mean them," he replied. "You have to ask like you mean it."

Tifa couldn't believe what she was hearing. What kind of a sick son of a bitch was this guy?

Kendal took the pen back out of his pocket and started to write some more.

Tifa lay there for a long time in silence. There was no clock in the room. She could not tell how much time had passed, she couldn't even tell if it was day or night. She only knew that the urgency of her problem was increasing rapidly.

"May I have permission to go to the bathroom, sir?" she asked again, looking over at Kendal.

He did not look up, did not even seem to have heard her, in fact.

"Please!" she said.

Slowly he glanced up again. He got up and walked over to her once more. He stood there looking at her thoughtfully.

"You have to realize that from now on, I control everything that happens to you. Eating, drinking, sleeping, even going to the bathroom. Everything you do, you do at my whim. I control everything, you control nothing. Do you understand that?"

She hesitated for just a moment, but she didn't want him to go back to that desk again.

"Yes," she said.

He frowned.

"Yes what?"

"Yes sir."

He nodded slowly.

"Good," he said.

He walked over to a control panel on the far side of the room. He pressed a button and the metal restraints that held her wrists retracted into the bed.

"The bathroom is through that door," he replied, indicating a door on the wall near her. "There is no window, and the vent is much too small for you to escape through. The walls are solid concrete. You cannot get away."

He held up his hand and she saw a green materia orb.

"Nor would it be wise to attempt to use force against me," he continued. "I would just have to use this. You've already had a taste of the stun materia, and having to use it again will make me very angry. You have one minute."

She hurried into the bathroom, not because of his time limit, but because she had to go. She looked around once in the bathroom, but didn't see much that would be of any use. There was no mirror or medicine cabinet. The only thing the room contained was the toilet and paper.

She came out a short time later, feeling much better. Kendal had not moved from his position by the control panel. He watched carefully as she reluctantly lay back down on the gurney. The restraints snapped back into place.

Kendal fiddled with a dial on the control panel.

"I'm afraid you were twelve seconds late," he said.

He pressed a button and suddenly Tifa felt agonizing pain. She cried out.

Kendal removed his finger from the button and the pain subsided.

"You're going to have to learn to obey me," he said. "You're going to have to learn that I mean what I say. If you listen and obey, you will be rewarded. If you do not, you will suffer. Do you understand?"

Tifa stared up at the ceiling. She was beginning to hate this man.

"Yes," she replied.

Kendal turned the dial and pressed the button again. Searing pain shot through her, worse than before. She clenched her teeth and this time managed not to cry out. He left it on longer this time, until she almost felt like she was going to pass out, which would have been a relief. When he released the button she lay back, sweat dripping off her forehead.

"Yes what?" he said.

"Yes sir," she answered.

"That's better," he replied. "Now, just to make sure I've left an impression..."

The electricity flowed through her a third time. She went rigid, her whole body trembling. It seemed every cell in her body was crying out in pain. It went on for a long time this time.

But eventually it did stop. She slumped down once again, and she was barely conscious of the fact that someone else had come in the room.

Kendal was talking angrily. It appeared she had missed some of the conversation.

"...won't do her any permanent harm," Kendal was saying.

"It better not," someone said. She looked over and saw another man next to Kendal. He did not appear happy.

"Remember you have direct orders from Gram that's she's not to be injured."

"I'm well aware of President Gram's orders," Kendal replied angrily. "I'm only doing what is necessary for my research."

"I know the kinds of things you've done in the name of your 'research'", the other man replied. He started to walk over to Tifa.

"Stay away from her," Kendal said sharply. "Magnus!"

Magnus walked up beside her and looked down, bending down as if examining her closely. As his face passed close to her cheek she heard him whisper.

"Friends are near."

She just stared at him.

Kendal came over quickly, his face red with rage.

"Leave her alone," he exclaimed. "You're interfering with my research. She is not to have any interaction with anyone but me. I have Gram's complete backing on this."

"As long as you don't injure her," Magnus replied.

"I told you, what I'm doing will not cause any permanent harm," Kendal said, grabbing Magnus by the arm and pulling him away. They both walked back over by the desk.

"This is none of your business," Kendal continued. "You don't know anything about what's going on here. Even if I do hurt her, it's Gram I have to answer to, not you. Now why don't you just run along. I think you've done enough damage here for one day."

"It's my job to make sure Cloud cooperates," Magnus said. "Remember that learning the secret of Mako infusion is our main goal, much more important than any of your other little experiments. I'm just making sure you don't do anything to jeopardize that."

"I'm well aware of our goals," Kendal said. He was almost shouting now. "I'm well aware of the constraints I'm working under. I'm well aware of Gram's conditions. I don't need you to remind me. I'm conducting important research here, no matter how you may feel about it. Now I have a lot of work to do, so why don't you just get out!"

Magnus stared at Kendal for a moment, then he turned and glanced at Tifa one more time. She just looked at him, puzzled. There was something about him, something almost familiar. She could swear she had seen him somewhere before.

Magnus turned and walked out of the room. Kendal stood there unmoving for a moment, then he pressed a button and said something into what was obviously an intercom, but she could not make out what he said. A few minutes later another man came into the room.

"I have a job for you," Kendal said. "I want you to follow Magnus."

The man looked at him in surprise.

"Magnus?" he said.

"Yes," Kendal replied. "Keep an eye on him. He's up to something, I know he is, and I intend to find out exactly what."

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"I can't believe Zack bought it," Reeve said.

Red nodded slowly.

"Poor Aeris," Red said. "All this time she thought he was dead."

He shook his head and fell silent.

Reeve looked at him sharply, a pained expression on his face.

"What about Aeris?" he said suddenly. "And Vincent and Elena? They've been captured by that nut. What are we going to do about it?"

"And Tifa," Rude said softly.

"And Cloud too," Red finished. He wondered if any of the others were nearby, and if they could avoid being captured.

Orlando walked back into the room. He had left them after telling them of Zack's demise, and had been gone about a half hour.

"We've got to help our friends," Rude said, looking at him.

Orlando nodded.

"Yes, I know," he replied. "But it won't be easy. I'd like to mount an assault on the Presidential Palace itself. It would be extremely risky, but if we could get in fast enough we might be able to save your friends, especially if they are not expecting it. But right now we just don't have enough firepower. Good weapons are extremely hard to come by, except for the government itself, of course."

"So does that mean you won't help us?" Reeve asked.

"Not necessarily," Orlando replied. "There is a house not far from the Presidential Palace where we have found out the government is storing a large cache of weapons. The place is lightly guarded because the weapons are stored in a huge vault inside the building. No one can get into the vault without the coded combination, which we have obtained from one of our spies. It shouldn't be too difficult to get into the building and take the weapons. If you'd like to come along, we could use all the help we can get."

Red looked at the others. Nipala nodded slowly. Rude said nothing, but one could tell just from the look on his face that he was ready to go. Reeve was the only one who looked hesitant, but then he too nodded.

Red turned to Orlando.

"Let's go."

About fifteen minutes later Red stepped out of the van and surveyed the dark street around them. Traffic was light, unusually so this close to the center of the city. Around them stood well manicured lawns and large single family homes, some of them quite resplendent. At least the one's they could see. On some of the properties all that could be seen from the road was a wall and gated entrance.

There was one such wall next to them right now. Three more vehicles carrying Orlando's men were parked nearby. Orlando was gathering them together next to the wall.

"This is where we go over the wall," he said. "The house on this property is where the weapons are stored. It's owned by a wealthy friend of the mayor. We'll get as close to the house as we can. Some of the others are going to cause a disturbance at the front gate. That should distract most of the guards. When that happens we head in. Remember, we have to move fast. I don't think we can take the place without someone getting word out. We'll only have a few minutes to get what we need before reinforcements arrive."

He paused and looked at everyone to make sure they understood.

"Okay," he said, satisfied. "Let's move."

Some of the men were boosted up onto the wall, and they helped the others climb over. Soon everyone was gathered on the other side. They stood in the darkness, surrounded by a stand of pine trees.

Orlando led them off silently into the night. Reeve was near the back of the pack, trailing his friends. He was nervous, but determined not to show it. It looked like they were in some kind of garden. They were walking down a stone path amid neatly trimmed hedges. He heard the sound of running water ahead and soon came upon a fountain with the water spraying out of the top of a statue of a dolphin in the center of it. He glanced ahead and saw the twinkling of lights from the house ahead of them.

They stopped suddenly near one particularly tall hedge. Reeve could hear low voices talking for a minute, but then the sound slowly faded. They stood there for what seemed like an agonizingly long time.

Suddenly there were shouts off to the left. For a moment Reeve felt sudden panic as he thought they had been discovered, but then he remembered what Orlando had told him about the little diversion they had planned.

The group moved forward once more. They came to the end of the hedge. Reeve could see the house plainly now. It was huge, its windows brightly illuminated in the darkness. It stood about a hundred yards away, a well manicured lawn between them. He could see a large swimming pool off to the right. There was no more cover.

There were more shouts, and Reeve saw some figures running in the dark, but they were running in the other direction. He could see Orlando now, standing at the head of the group, watching the house carefully. Finally, satisfied that the way was clear, he signaled for them to move forward.

There was no more cover, the time for stealth had passed. Orlando led them at a dead run toward the building. They saw a man standing by an open door, looking off to the right. He turned to look at them suddenly, but then Reeve heard a shot, and the man fell to the ground.

Orlando ran past and into the building. The others followed. Reeve heard more shouts now, and then shots. He heard a bullet ricochet off the side of the building nearby, then he too was inside.

Orlando's men spread out as soon as they entered the mansion. They knew time was of the essence. They had to quell the opposition quickly, get the weapons and get out of there as fast as possible.

Reeve followed his friends, who were in turn following Orlando. They passed through three or four large rooms, all elegantly furnished. What little opposition got in their way was quickly dispatched. They entered another room and Orlando stopped, looking around until he spotted a hallway that led down a narrow flight of stairs.

"This way," he said, quickly running over and plunging down the stairs. The others followed.

There was a long hallway at the bottom of the stairs. Two guards stood in the hallway, but they were apparently unaware of the commotion upstairs. They fell before they even had a chance to react.

There was a closed door at the end of the hallway. Orlando ran up and flung it open. Inside was another large room, larger, in fact, than any they had been in yet. At the far end of it stood a huge metal door.

Orlando looked around, weapon ready, but the room was deserted. He looked at the door.

"This is it," he said.

Three of his men had followed him, along with Reeve and his friends. Now they all slowly walked up to the door. There was a keypad on the wall beside it. Orlando stepped over to it, with Red right behind him. Orlando looked at the others.

"Let's hope our spy had accurate information," he stated as he punched in a series of numbers.

He stepped back. For just a moment nothing happened. Then there was a click and the door slowly swung open.

Orlando turned back toward them, a satisfied look on his face.

"Let's go."

They walked into the vault. It was almost as large as the adjacent room. Long lines of shelves filled it, but most of them were empty. There were seven crates lined up along the bottom of one shelf.

They picked up the crates and transported them out of the vault, laying them on the floor outside. Orlando stood up and looked in the vault when they had completed the task. Then he turned to Rude.

"Better see if there's any more of them in the back of the vault," he said. "We'll start bringing these upstairs."

Rude nodded and walked into the vault, followed by Reeve and Nipala. Red started after them, but then stopped suddenly and swiveled his head, listening carefully. His eyes came to rest on a large desk in one corner of the room. He thought he had heard something.

He slowly walked over to the desk. Orlando and one of his men turned to look at him. The man with Orlando looked back at the vault, then at Red. He seemed about to say something, but Orlando cut him off with a quick gesture.

Red came around the side of the desk, and even before he saw the man crouched behind it, he heard his ragged breathing. The man saw Red and suddenly scrambled up from under the desk, his hands raised in the air. He was an older man with white hair. He was dressed in casual clothes. He did not look like a soldier.

"All...all right," he stammered. "I surrender. Take whatever you want. Just don't hurt me!"

Orlando lifted his gun and pointed it at him. He turned to look back at the vault, then nodded to the man beside him.

"Close it," he said.

The man stepped over to the vault and began to swing it shut. Orlando turned back toward their captive.

"We are not thieves," he said. "We don't want your money. We are warriors fighting for liberation. The government of Mysteele is our enemy, and anyone who assists them. You have let them store their weapons here, you have openly aided and abetted them. You are our enemy, and the sentence for that is death."

"No..." the man blurted out, but was cut off by the sound of gunfire. He fell to the ground.

Red didn't stop to watch, instead he leapt forward and sprinted for the hallway as fast as his legs could carry him. They were closing the vault, with his friends trapped inside. There was only one conclusion he could draw from that. Orlando had an agenda of his own that he had failed to mention to them. He obviously intended to leave them for the government to find once they reopened the vault. Since Red was not in the vault, it seemed reasonable to conclude that Orlando's next bullet would be for him.

Orlando had not expected Red to react so quickly, nor the speed at which Red raced across the room. He managed to get off three shots, and thought he saw Red's body jerk sharply at the third one, but he did not go down, and a moment later had disappeared down the hallway.

The man beside Orlando ran to the entrance and looked down the hall, but by the time he got there it was empty. He turned to look back at Orlando.

"Should we pursue him?"

Orlando came up and stood beside him. He looked down the hall as well, and was satisfied to see a sprinkling of blood on the floor.

"No," he said eventually. "Forget about him. He's hurt and his friends are trapped. What can an animal do all by itself? Let's just get the guns and go. I think we can safely say that there is no longer any chance that they will interfere with our plans."

They both turned away and walked back to the gun crates. The man with Orlando still looked worried.

"It was standing behind you when you opened the vault," he pointed out. "Do you think it could have seen the combination?"

Orlando looked at the man like he had lost his mind.

"What are you, crazy? It was a fourteen digit code. A man couldn't have memorized it that quickly, much less some dumb beast. Now let's get this stuff out of here before the entire Mysteele army comes down on our heads."

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"Hey!" Reeve shouted, turning to see the vault door closing behind him. He ran over to it, but by the time he got there it had already slammed shut. He stood there for a moment in shock, then turned to Rude and Nipala. Their faces held the same expression he suspected was now on his own.

"What the hell!" Rude exclaimed.

He walked over to the door and pushed on it. It did not budge. He pounded on it, but the door did not even shudder. He doubted anyone outside could even hear him. He turned around and looked at the others, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"They tricked us," he said.

"But why?" Nipala growled. He could see her red eyes were dark with anger, and her tail was twitching violently. Her claws were extended, and he had no doubt that if Orlando stood in front of them right now, well, it would not be a pretty sight. Unfortunately they were separated from him by a good foot of solid steel.

"I don't know," Rude replied. "But it looks like this was a set up right from the beginning. I don't think he ever had any intention of helping us."

Nipala growled for real this time.

"So what do we do now?" Reeve said helplessly.

Rude shrugged.

"It doesn't seem that there's much we can do," he replied. "We can't bust out of here. We're just going to have to sit and wait. Don't forget that Red's still out there. I'm afraid it's going to be up to him to spring us."

"But how can he do that?" Reeve said. "Orlando was the only one who knew the combination."

Rude looked at him grimly.

"I'm afraid if that's true, then the next people we are likely to see will be Mysteele soldiers."

They fell silent. Rude sat down with his back against the door. Nipala paced back and forth in front of him, her tail still twitching, maybe even worse now. Reeve just stood where he was, still hardly able to believe what was happening. Couldn't they trust anyone on this damn continent?

The minutes dragged by with agonizing slowness. He looked back at the door. There was no way through it, he knew that. They had no choice but to wait for it to open, to just wait for whatever fate would bring them. There was no way out of here short of a miracle, and he had a sneaking suspicion that he had used all his up.

He didn't know how long they sat there. There was no clock in the vault. It seemed like hours, but Reeve suspected that it was much less time than that. He had just started to pace himself when there was a soft click and the door swung slowly open.

Rude stood up, gun in hand. Reeve clutched his shotgun as well, but then they all saw Red standing in the entrance, looking at them thoughtfully.

"Red!" Rude exclaimed, a grin suddenly appearing on his face.

They practically fell over one another getting out of the vault. Except for Red, the room they entered was now deserted. Rude noted a body lying by a desk to their left. Nipala noticed something else.

"Red," she exclaimed. "You've been hurt!"

Red looked back at his left rear leg, which he was holding off the ground. Blood dripped from it.

"Let me take a look at that," Reeve said.

He crouched down and examined Red's wound.

"Doesn't look too bad," he said. "But we need to stop the bleeding. If we had a cure materia you'd be good as new in no time."

"Unfortunately, we don't," Nipala stated.

"How did you get us out?" Rude asked as Reeve bound up the wound.

"I memorized the code when Ormando opened the door," Red replied. "It wasn't difficult. Just a simple fourteen digits."

Rude smiled grimly.

"Simple for you, maybe," he muttered.

"Was Ormando the one who shot you?" Nipala asked.

"Yes," Red said. "Obviously his plan all along was to leave us trapped in the vault. When I didn't cooperate he attempted to kill me, but when I escaped he knew he wouldn't have time to chase me down. I don't think he thought I was intelligent enough to assist you."

"People do have a tendency to underestimate you two," Rude commented.

"I had to wait for him to leave, then I came back as soon as I could. I'm afraid it took longer than I had hoped. We must leave immediately. I'm sure word got out of this attack. More soldiers could be showing up any minute."

No one was going to argue with that. Reeve stood up.

"All set," he said. "I'm not going to say good as new, but it will do. Now let's get out of here."

They ran down the hallway, Rude in the lead, with Nipala and Red bringing up the rear, Red still favoring the injured leg. But even on three legs he could keep up easily with the two humans.

They quickly mounted the steps. The building was deathly silent. They saw no one as they passed back through the rooms to the exit, at least, no one alive.

The group stepped out once more into the cool night air, hurrying across the lawn toward the garden. They had not gotten very far, however, when they heard the rumble of a vehicle off to the left. They put on a burst of speed but hadn't quite reached the safety of the trees when they were illuminated in the beam of a spotlight.

They heard shouts and the rattle of gunfire, but then they were in the garden and the light was blocked out as they ran

into the shadow of the hedge. It might have blocked the light, but bullets were another matter. They sprayed around them, but none found a target.

They did not pause, running fast back toward the wall. There were more shots, but these were far wide of the mark. Their pursuers were just firing blindly, at least for now. They reached the wall and Reeve boosted Rude up. Rude turned, grabbed Reeve's hand and hauled him over. Nipala sprang to the top without any assistance. Red leaped up, but his rear leg failed him. He barely got off the ground, and fell back, his leg suddenly burning with pain.

"Over here," Rude said, extending a hand. "Hurry!"

Red stood up again, ignoring the pain in his leg. He leapt once more, this time Rude grabbed hold of his front leg. He held on, but Red was too heavy to haul up, until Reeve reached down and took hold of Red as well. Together they pulled him over and dropped down on the other side.

"Thank you," Red said politely.

"Let's get out of here," Rude said.

Reeve looked around. The street around them was deserted. He had half expected to see the road crowded with vehicles filled with soldiers. Quickly they ran across the street and then down a side block. Moments after they had crossed they saw a flash of lights, and then two jeeps did come to a screeching halt, right near the place where they had come over the wall.

They continued down the street, no longer running, trying not to draw attention to themselves. Down the block they saw another jeep pass by, but it did not turn in their direction. They went on, and soon the streets became quiet around them. After a while they stopped, finally convinced that they had gotten away.

"It seems no one can be trusted in this God damn country," Rude exclaimed.

Reeve nodded in agreement. They had come all this way hoping that the Brotherhood would help them, but even they had turned against them. What chance did they have now?

"So what do we do?" he said bitterly.

Rude shook his head, obviously at a loss.

Red had eased himself to the ground, blood discoloring the bandage on his wounded leg.

"We go on without any help," he said quietly.

Reeve and Rude both looked at him.

"It wouldn't be the first time we've had to depend on our own resources," Red continued. "We know we can't trust anyone else, but we can still depend on each other. I'm afraid it's up to us to help our friends. Orlando told us where they were. I don't think he was lying about that."

Red looked up, past Rude and Reeve. They turned slowly. The street dropped out of sight down a hill ahead of them, but then rose up again farther on, up a steep hill rising high over the harbor to their right. At the very top of hill they could see a tall tower blazing with light.

"I think it's time we paid a little visit to the Presidential Palace," Red said.

~*~

Reno opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He lay there for a long time unmoving. Finally he lifted his head, and immediately dropped it back down, regretting it. His head throbbed at the movement and his back felt like someone had used a power sander on it.

"Back among the living?"

Reno looked to his left, trying to move his head as little as possible. Yuffie sat in a chair nearby.

"Hey pest," he said. "What are you doing here?"

He looked around.

"Where is here, anyway?"

"Another hotel," she replied. She stood up, came over to the bed and looked at him. "We didn't think it was a good idea to stay at the one you were in."

"Yeah, well, I can understand that," he said. A connecting door to another room stood open nearby. Reno could hear voices talking quietly through it.

"Is that Cid and Barret I hear cursing in there?" he asked.

"None other," she replied.

"Anybody else with you?"

"Just Mosato," she answered. "He's a kid we picked up along the way. We haven't seen any of the others."

Reno nodded. He slowly pulled himself up in the bed. His head spun for a moment, but then cleared. His back ached, but it was bearable.

"How'd you find me?" he asked.

"We met some Mysteele soldiers who were kind enough to point us in your direction," she said. "They told us that you and Tifa...did you really drug her?"

Reno grinned.

"Yeah, I'm afraid I did. Boy, is she going to be pissed..." he fell silent and the grin vanished.

"I guess I really blew it this time, eh?" he continued soberly. "Remind me to never try anything noble again, it just gets you in trouble."

"Words to live by," she agreed. She pulled out a green materia orb. "Let me take a look at that back of yours. See if you need another 'treatment'".

He turned to his side, the pain in his head far exceeding the pain in his back. Yuffie spent a moment examining him.

"The wounds are healing nicely," she stated. "You'll be back on your feet in no time."

He turned back and looked at her.

"Since when did you turn into Florence Nightingale?" he questioned.

He saw anger flare in her eyes.

"Well excuse me for trying to help," she said dryly. "Maybe we should have just left you drunk and bleeding."

"It's a state I'm well acquainted with," he replied philosophically. "The way you're fawning over me, you'd think you have a thing for me or something."

Yuffie took a step back, and Reno noted with some satisfaction that for a moment she seemed to be at a loss for words.

"A thing for you?" she said in a shocked voice. "Damn, what an ego you've got. To think that I actually felt sorry for you."

She turned and retreated toward the other room.

"I'm getting out of here," she said. "There's not enough space in this room for both me and your head!"

Reno grinned and blew her a kiss.

She stomped into the other room. Barret and Cid both looked at her as she came in. Mosato, who was sitting in front of the television, didn't seem to notice her entrance.

"Jerk," she muttered and plopped down angrily in a chair.

"I take it Reno is feeling much better?" Cid observed.

Yuffie muttered something but Cid could not make it out.

They fell silent, as they had been off and on for some time before Yuffie's entrance. Barret stared blankly at the wall, tapping his gun arm lightly on a nearby table. Cid just sat there and brooded. They had Reno now, but they didn't seem to be any better off. In fact, they might be worse off. Now that they knew Tifa was captured their situation was even more

urgent. They still had not found any allies, and they did not know where either Cloud or Tifa were. The situation hadn't changed, and Cid still hadn't had any brilliant ideas.

The show Mosato was watching on television must have ended, for he got up to change the channel. Cid glanced over at the television. He suddenly jumped up and told Mosato to wait. Both Barret and Yuffie stood up, taking notice of his sudden movement. They all turned to look at the TV.

It was a special news bulletin. They had missed the beginning, but a reporter was standing in front of the Presidential Palace as soldiers led three people inside.

"Vice President Gram has ordered the execution of the spies to take place tomorrow morning before he is officially sworn in as President," the reporter was saying. "In a statement the Vice President said he regrets taking such drastic measures, but he believes they are necessary in light of the circumstances and the ruthless attacks the rebels have made on government installations. More at eleven."

They all stood there staring at the screen as it cut to a commercial. Although the prisoners had only been shown for a few seconds they had all immediately recognized the figures of Aeris, Vincent and Elena.

"Shit!" Barret exclaimed. He turned to look at the other two. "What the hell are we going to do now?"

No one replied. Cid removed his cigarette and crushed it against the table top. He looked around slowly at the others.

"Doesn't seem like we have much choice, now does it. I think it's time we added the Presidential Palace to our little tour."

He turned to look at Yuffie.

"But it might be best if we got a little training first," he continued. "With only the three of us, we're going to need all the firepower we can muster. I think it's time you taught us that little materia trick you've learned."

"Four."

They turned and saw Reno standing in the doorway.

"Don't think you're going to leave me out of this one," he said. "It's my fault that they have Tifa in the first place."

Cid looked at him dubiously, but before he could say anything Mosato spoke up.

"Five."

Barret turned to look at him.

"No way," he said firmly. "I'm not going to put a little kid in danger."

"I'm not so little," Mosato protested.

Barret shook his head, but then Yuffie inexplicably came to Mosato's defense.

"Hell, Barret," she said. "Give him a chance. Like Cid said, we need all the firepower we can get. I'll give him something that he can use from long range."

Barret still seemed to want to protest, but he did not reply, instead he looked at Cid.

Cid wasn't really too pleased with the idea, but something about the look in Mosato's eyes got to him. The boy had certainly been helpful, and they did need all the help they could get.

I He nodded slowly.

Mosato grinned. Yuffie walked over to him and held out a red materia.

"Think you can handle this?" she said.

Mosato's grin grew even wider.

"You bet!"