As the war with Wutai abate, a group with enhanced men grow in its heart. AVALANCHE is already harassing SHinRa, allowing the newcomers to grow and casualties to rise. ShinRa said all was in control. Zack, trusting, never thought Cloud would go down. But it happened. Years later Zack has to face reality anew, Cloud isn’t so down.

Or lovers are separated then find each others anew. No death (of important people).

Everyone is trying their best to help each other and save what can be saved.

or my brain played me to do a penta-pile soulmark slow-burn AU
Look, it's time I acknowledge the truth: I am a fandom hopper. I'll give you 1 to 3 fics then disappear like a fucking cryptid. You're warned.

This is self-indulgent, okay? I formed a plot daydreaming about the angry chocobo and I'm kind of bullshitting the chronologie/canon story/and the rest. So, right now Cloud is one year older than in canon.

ALSO I'm sorry for the mistakes :( But DON't talk to me about having a beta. I know I make mistakes, but I already had betas, we were even friends but it didn't stop me from hating having one. Correcting the chapter, giving it to a beta then doing the corrections noticed by them just give me more work and stress me out. I think I have a good enough grasp on english for you to ignore some mistakes and not put acid in your eyes at each chap. Maybe a beta at the end of the story, but not now.

Cloud left Angeal's office with a folder he was dying to open. If he did he was probably dead for sure. He accepted to give it to the science department for the Commander. Zack told him about the Elite Trinity hatred for this place, even if they were silent about it. Plus Angeal was a cool dude and Cloud was happy to help him a bit when he was almost buried under papers.

Still, the folder was in his hand, asking to be open. Cloud couldn't resist.

“Strife.”

The infantryman almost jumped out of his skin. He turned around and saw Luxiere coming. Damn, he hated how the man could sneak up on him whereas all others SOLDIERS were as discreet as elephants when off duty. Especially since military boots squeaked on the linoleum.

“You're searching Zack again?” asked the man with his calm front.

Cloud sighed, he knew the guy was boiling inside. He had a strange habit of protecting Zack from any perceived dangers. Cloud didn't think he could qualify as a danger for his friend, newly turned First Class.

“I dropped off the registration forms for the SOLDIERS exam in Angeal's office.”

Cloud hoped his honest answer would be enough but Luxiere followed him to the lift.

“And you're taking the exam, uh? Did you ask Zack?”

Cloud bristled and bore a hole in the button of the lift. Where was the damn thing?

“I took the preliminary test, like everyone.”

The lift finally arrived and the doors opened, but Luxiere stepped before him, blocking the path.
“I need to give that to the science department, can you let me pass, sir.”

Luxiere was going to say something but one of the office’s door opened and the two froze. Bo stepped outside, saluted his superior then headed for the lift. He waved at them with a calm smile, much more natural than Luxiere.

“Everyone going down?” he asked, stepping in the lift.

Cloud moved past Luxiere and nodded to Bo, the second class sniffed and refused, letting the two alone. The blond breathed, happy not to have to be too disrespectful to a superior, even if he was a bully. He managed better with others infantrymen for many reasons. The first being that they were still human, so not immunised to a punch or a hit on the knee.

“Thanks,” mumbled Cloud. He didn't like needing help but he knew when it was necessary. The last time he felt hopeless face to face with a bully was at Nibelheim. At the end he did break some noses and gave a good amount of bruises, winning his peace.

“Luxiere is a bit strange but he'll calm down. Someday,” answered Bo. “I think he's jealous of you. Zack doesn't stay with one person as much as with you. He's a social butterfly.”

“Yeah, but he says I use Zack to become SOLDIER.”

“He should know it doesn't work that way, even if you tried. You have a special something with Zack and I'll be happy to know how you hold his attention this long. Though, I'm curious about Luxiere's reaction when Zack will have a lover for more than a month. Or Gods forbid, his soulmate!” Bo laughed. “It's my floor. Bye, Nibelheimer!”

“Bye,” Cloud said back, waving without energy. He chuckled when the doors closed on him again.

“A special something, uh?”

He smiled like a goof, Zack and him were pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing since it was in both of their cultures but if you knew the signs... or people could ask. None of them would lie or hide the truth if only asked, but nobody made the connection yet. It was possible that Bo was suspicious, he was born and lived near Nibelheim. He did know about some strange cultural thingy from the mountain. It was one of the reasons he and Cloud were friendly even if the blond was not fond of socialising.

Angeal should know if he wasn't so overwhelmed and could spend time with Zack – and Cloud.

Cloud stepped outside the lift, arriving at the medical ward and carried on his way to the labs.

“Spike!”

Cloud held his arms in the air before he was lifted in a bear hug by a very gross SOLDIER. Zack put him down, a smile on his lips as Cloud complained about the grim on his uniform. At least the folder was safe and sound. Then Cloud remembered where they were.

“Why are you here? Are you hurt? You okay?”

“Hey, hey Spike, calm down. I'm a First now! Too cool to be hurt. Although Angeal still kicks my ass. But I'm all fine, better now that I saw my best friend. New Corporal, soon to be SOLDIER. And I burnt my tongue on coffee the other day.” Cloud blushed at the praise but let Zack talk. He would give him his answer in all the seemingly unrelated sentences. “Abe, the third Class that was with me, was hurt though. I put him in the doc's hands.”
Cloud breathed in relief. He hit Zack on the nose with the folder, earning Zack's undivided attention. “I need to give that to a scientist then work. Go wash and sleep.”

“You're coming tonight?”

“You'll be sleeping like a hibernating bear.”

“C'mon! And bring something to eat. I'm starved.”

Zack ruffled Cloud's hair and bolted out of the corridor. Some nurses and doctors looked away as Cloud remarked them. He groaned but let it slide, everyone spied on the Firsts Class SOLDIERs like it was a national sport.

In the corridor leading to the labs was a man Cloud never thought he would see. Even if he was with Zack. Sephiroth stood there, leaning against the wall as he waited for something. He frowned at Cloud and the infantryman fumbled with on his own feet to disappear in the lab.

The scientist at the entry desk didn't even spare him a glance. “Sephiroth is already out. Didn't you see him?”

“Uh? Yes?”

“Then you don't need to be here.”

Cloud stayed silent as he tried to understand what was going on. He put the files on the desk with slow movements.

“Lt. General Angeal asked me to give you this.”

“Oh. Thank you, you can go.”

The infantryman nodded and exited the lab. Sephiroth was still here. He glared again. Which, now that Cloud thought about it, was strange for the composed man.

Cloud stopped breathing as his heart decided it was time to panic. He tried to remember everything Zack said about dealing with a wild and angry Sephiroth.

“Mint chocolate chip is his weakness, go for it. If he's angry with you it mellow him enough for you to run for your life. Though, you'll want to put Genesis on his path first. He'll irritate him a bit more and they'll go for a spar. Well, it worked like that before they knew for their bond. So try to irritate Genesis first. Then put him on his path. Then put Angeal and wait for Seph with a bowl of ice cream and Banora apple juice. You'll be fine,” had said Zack, still munching on a pizza. “Except if Genesis and Sephiroth wired up each other and took you as their target. Even Angeal couldn't reason the two without letting them steam off. So if it happens, you're dead.”

Nothing was helpful in this scenario and Cloud hoped Hel would be clement on him. Sephiroth wobbled on his legs, Cloud reached an arm on instinct and held the man still. Sephiroth blinked, expired then opened his mouth to thank him like It was hard to say. Cloud could have taken umbrage if he didn't deal with a Zack very slow and high not three weeks ago.

“Did- did you have a mako booster, sir?” Cloud asked, lips dry.

Sephiroth chuckled a weak sound that didn't carry any joy. He didn't answer, only looked at Cloud. “Will you let me help you?” Cloud murmured. He didn't want to hurt Sephiroth's sensible hearing.
He was a bit dejected. He was sure the man would shake him off and make him remember he was the General. He was not any other SOLDIER, whatever Zack said.

“Please.”

Cloud blinked then staggered as a big body pressed against him. He gritted his teeth and cursed his little frame. He hoped he'll have the growths spurt soon because helping heavy men walking would be a lot easier if they weren't half his size.

Well, he couldn't retract his help now. Cloud would help the man exit the hellish place even if he had to drag him on the ground. Although Cloud was certain leather would stick and squeak on the lino.

“Shit,” Cloud muttered.

Passing by the corridor connecting to the medical bay, Cloud ignored the stares following them. He tried his damnedest not to show how hard it was to support the man. For others, the way Sephiroth stood made him look a bit unstable on his legs. Yet the infantryman was almost crushed under his weight.

“Damn, Zack, why did you go?” whimpered Cloud, pushing the button for the lift. Then he remembered he kind of ordered Zack to take a shower. He cursed himself.

The voyage in the lift was silent and nerve-wrenching for Cloud. Sephiroth leaned on the wall more than on him but Cloud had still the man's arm around his shoulders. He could feel the tremors from Sephiroth and heard his inspirations he tried to even out. The 'ping' of their floor made Cloud jump like a surprised cat, waking up Sephiroth a bit.

They made it off the lift before Cloud thought that he didn't want Sephiroth to be alone in this state. He moistened his lips and took a breath to steady himself.

“Sir, I don't think letting you alone like that is a good idea.”

“And it would be an honour to spend time with me, right?” Sephiroth responded dryly.

Cloud closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe before answering.

“No, I know Zack prefer being with me when he has boosters. Do you want to go to Angeal's or Genesis's apartment? Or I'll help you to yours and fetch one of them. As you want.”

Sephiroth seemed surprised but nodded and pointed to one of the doors in the hall.

“Genesis' home, please,” he said, voice almost pleading.

Cloud all but dragged Sephiroth to the door with Genesis' name. He juggled with his heavy charge for not losing his grip as he knocked on the door.

The door was flung open with an angry “What?” threw at Cloud. Then Genesis froze.

“Seph!” Genesis exclaimed, grabbing the silver General. The redhead turned his eyes to Cloud and frowned. “You're the puppy toy aren't you?”

Cloud scowled and shoved Sephiroth in Genesis' arms. He saw him wince as Sephiroth hold on his shoulder to break his fall. The General straightened the second he heard a sound of pain from Genesis. Sephiroth stood like any SOLDIER under an inspection. Genesis reached for Sephiroth and stroked his cheek, murmuring to the man that he was fine.
In an instant, the infantryman knew some of the rumours were true.

*Genesis is hurt,* they said. *Hollander tried to make him quit ShinRa, taking others SOLDIERS with him. He is not all there in his head. He is placed under a sort of house arrest.*

Genesis was hurt. That Cloud could see it for himself. Dark blood on Genesis' shoulder swept on his shirt. He was pretty sure Sephiroth saw it too. Others rumours could have a part of veracity. Letting a weakened Lt. General go outside was a clear target for the Wutaiian rebels.

Seeing them being intimate made Cloud feel like an outsider looking in. He fidgeted with embarrassment and cleared his throat.

“I'll be leaving now, good day, sirs.”

“Yes, you should already be doing whatever troopers do.”

Cloud nodded, feeling emptier than angry, and headed back for the lift. He shook his head, trying to understand why he felt empty. Zack always wanted to know why he felt some way, and if introspection made Cloud angry or afraid a lot of time, it did help.

“Don't be harsh, Genesis,” Sephiroth whispered.

The infantryman willed himself not to overhear the conversation. But his ears couldn't stop working on demand.

Genesis scoffed, *“Come here, darling, we're putting you to bed and cuddling for the rest of the day.”*

Cloud disappeared in the lift and slammed his hand on the button. He certainly didn't look at the two SOLDIERS embraced. And he understood why he felt empty: he wanted that too. He wanted Zack. Right now he couldn't be bothered by Zack gentle order to bring food and himself to his apartment. He couldn't wait for his working hours to be over.

But first, he needed to finish his work for the day. He headed for the barracks, sighing at the prospect of patrolling the plate.

“Cloud! Where were you?” one of his comrades yelled. “Never mind, follow me. We have new orders, we're packing up.”

“What? We're leaving? For how long?”

“Two weeks max. Don't worry your pretty head, we won't miss the SOLDIERS exams.”

Cloud grumbled, asking the gods why he couldn't spend time with Zack. At snail's pace, he followed his fellow infantryman giving him the details of the mission. He wished he had a PHS to warn Zack.

Sephiroth grabbed his PHS with concealed fury. Genesis had started napping halfway in his book on his lap and he found himself alone with his own thoughts for the first time in weeks. The redhead breath had been a background sound that helped Sephiroth relax during his introspection.

As soon as the rigging started, Genesis stirred, and Sephiroth hoped it was important. Life or death important. If not, he would personally made it as such for the caller.

“Hello Seph.” Angeal's voice calmed the general. Until he thought of the reasons why he would
communicate during a mission. “Zack called me earlier, but I couldn't talk.”

“He is lonely. His trooper friend is on an assignment outside of Midgar,” Sephiroth said, absent-mindedly stroking Genesis' hair. He ignored the pang in his heart at seeing the color fade from the strands.

“Seph, I know him. He wasn't good. He didn't put a fight when I said I couldn't talk.”

Genesis kissed Sephiroth's hand that was resting on his head and stretched.

“Just... find him, please?”

“I will,” Sephiroth sighed. “Be safe.”

He stood when Angeal hung up and called Zack's PHS in hope to reach him but to no avail. Sephiroth wandered into the ShinRa labyrinth, checking all the favorite places of the puppy before Genesis grabbed his hand.

“We can ask Kunsel.”

“You should be at home,” Sephiroth retorted. He squeezed Genesis' hand back before dropping it and followed the advice.

As it was Kunsel had Zack's location, as always, and the two First Class were heading for the army barracks. They weren't happy about it. Both of them thought Zack's friend returned and they were catching up. Or Zack's friend, who was still a mere human, wanted to sleep and didn't give enough attention to the puppy who resorted to wander the halls and call superiors.

Reaching the barracks they noticed the heavy atmosphere around them. Troopers muttered between themselves and wore dark expressions. Genesis asked for Zack's spot, a shaking finger answered him.

They arrived at a dormitory empty of any men except for Zack sitting on a bed. He had a photography in hand and didn't remove his eyes from it.

“Hey.”

Sephiroth and Genesis exchanged a worried glance at the monotonous salutation. Zack looked lifeless.

“Cloud's squad fell in a trap. Explosions everywhere as I heard,” Zack explained. His smile sent shivers to Sephiroth and Genesis. “None of them survived. Even the ones rescued died of their wounds later in medic care.”

Sephiroth knew his face showed nothing of his mental state but something twisted painfully in his stomach as Zack talked. He cleared his throat but Zack continued.

“Man, I don't even know how I'll drop the news to his mother. The poor woman doesn't remember Cloud is in the army half the time.”

Heidegger rarely informed the SOLDIER department of own of his squadron situation if the two departments weren't teaming up at first. It never bothered Sephiroth as it made less papers for him. The squads in difficulties often made it by themselves, having a tendency to disobey Heidegger orders in such case. Sephiroth though about the way Zack's loss could have been averted if only … but “if” didn't change the reality.
Sephiroth tore from his frozen panic and approached the new First. He crouched and squeezed Zack's knee, not trusting his own voice. Even if he did, he hesitated on what to say on such a situation. Behind them Genesis closed the door to give them all privacy.

“I understand your sorrow at losing a dear friend this young. The renewed war is cause of great anguish for us. I – We will help as we can. You already delivered such information for others comrades. You can do the same for your friend.”

Zack snorted then lifted his head to meet the General's eyes. His expression froze Sephiroth to the core. It was the look of a broken man.

“Seph, Cloud is … w-was,” Zack stammered, tears falling from widened eyes. “He was my soulmate.”

Chapter End Notes

at the end too so you know.
I'm sorry for the mistakes, really but DON't talk to me about having a beta. I know I make mistakes, but I already had betas, we were even friends but it didn't stop me from hating having one. Correcting the chapter, giving it to a beta then doing the corrections noticed by them just give me more work and stress me out. I think I have a good enough grasp on english for you to ignore some mistakes and not pour acid in your eyes at each chap. Maybe a beta at the end of the story, but not now
remind: Cloud is one year older than in canon, not that it's so important. I mean AU mean there big changements (or less big) anyway-whatever, good lecture

A cold wind made the squad hunch over themselves, shielding their face from the icy air and floating snow.

"Ah! I understand why the enemy buried themselves here!" John shouted over the wind."Nobody in his right mind would come to this area if not forced."

"Zack seems unbothered," said one of their accompanying trooper. His chattering teeth made him hard to understand, but half the party was of enhanced SOLDIER.

"Bah! I like the snow. Never seen it at my home back in Gongaga. I started hating the heat and even prefer a cool climate now."

Some answers at his comment were lost in the wind but he heard Essai.

"He has a star stuck under his skin, that's why he's full of energy and make the snow melt," Essai joked.

"Well, he doesn't melt only snow," Peter muttered, his throat still aching from a cold. "Remember at Icicle Inn? All the girls were love-struck."

"Boys too!" Sebastian shouted.

They laughed in the face of the terrible weather. Zack kept a smile on his face but all his senses searched for potential threats. There was only snow for miles but Genesis did warn them of monsters master in the art of disguise. Without counting the people they were tracking.

"Was your buddy Cloud a bit like you? He lived too long in a freezing place and started hating it, so he ran off to Midgar?"

Zack froze a second before his smile broadened. He liked thinking about Spike and questions about him kept him alive, somewhere in his heart.

"Nah, Cloud wasn't so shallow to hate a season. He liked all of them. That's why he was so homesick at Midgar."

"Because there are no clear-cut seasons," Tony said, nodding.

He saw the smile on Zack stay for a bit longer and ignored the glare of the older SOLDIERs. They kept saying they shouldn't encourage the First to linger on the past. But younger SOLDIER like him realised how talking about this Cloud dude made Zack happy. Joan, who died not a month ago, lived in Gongaga too and said talking about dead loved ones was pretty normal for them.
When Zack tensed and reached for his sword, his companions reacted swiftly. An attack. Fortunately, it was only some monsters trying to eat them. They weren't smart enough to run for their lives when the SOLDIERS wiped them out. Unfortunately, the battle revealed their location for the enemy. Enhanced guys from the bad side where a bit harder to beat into pulps.

The Watchers' uniform was all black, covering them head to toes when in a mission. It was made to hide identities. Enhanced men like normal ones wore it. Which meant the only way to know if your opponent was enhanced was to look them in the eyes.

*Don't work if they wear glasses!* Zack thought.

He shielded himself against Essai and his barrier. He used the breather to scan the status of the men under his command. He scoffed, not pleased. The Watchers surrounded them. They weren't some lowly opponents. Zack jumped anew in the battle, giving all he got, fighting alongside those men he knew for years now. He smiled, satisfied to see that none of the living ones backed off or faltered.

"Reyes, did you call for back-up?"

A Watchers dipped his sword into the trooper neck. Blood drowned the answer. Zack hitched to fight the man, but he heard enough of Reyes and knew how bad the situation was.

"Retreat!" he shouted, assuring his men some time.

A second wave of fighters cut their retreat.

"Shit!" Zack barely stopped a sword from relieving some of his useful limbs.

*Almost like they planned it*, thought Zack.

The squad held its ground as much as possible with one SOLDIERs for two Watchers. The troopers were since long dead.

Zack was thrown to the ground. He grunted as someone jumped on his back. If they thought he wasn't going down fighting then they were stupid. He rolled over, grabbing one of his army-issued blades. It was a tiny thing next to his broadsword, but the blade was sharp and pushed neatly into the neck of his assailant. He heard his men shouting and fighting. It made him grow a feral grin that died the instant a bullet grazed his shoulder. His heart raced as he tried to find the sniper. There wasn't anyone with a gun near them, so it was a sniper. Yet, with the little vision they had, it should be an enhanced man.

Zack grunted, dodging the blade of another Watcher. A sniper. This was new. And not a good sort of new. His men were thrown off their fights by bullets. Another one grazed his thigh. Only because the swordsman made him stay on the trajectory. He staggered then was put on the ground again. A status spell hit him. Even with all his will, he couldn't fight the sleepiness overcoming him.

A chuckle escaped him. They weren't trying to kill all of them. This was new too.

Zack woke up his cheek pressed on something icy. The odour identified it as metal.

"You're with us, sir?" Essai asked.

Zack grunted, forcing his eyes open even if a migraine was cracking open his skull. Sleep spells
didn't him good. Yet he sat up checking his surroundings and his men. His heart sank in his stomach as he took in the situation. They were in a cell. A cell with bars big enough to hold a SOLDIER, plus the thing holding his hands he couldn't see. On the other side of the cell was what was a lab clearly put together in a rush.

"Well, shit." Soft snickers echoed from his men.

"Our sentiment, sir," Essai answered drily.

Zack would have wanted that the absence of John and the young Tony were because they were only separated from the group. For whatever purpose the Watchers needed them. But he did see their bodies in the blood covered snow earlier.

"Can you fill me?" Zack asked as he warmed up his shoulders.

"We were dragged there and nobody showed up since," Sebastian answered, looking him oddly as he worked his hand under his ass. "The matter of our bonds is resistant to our force, our weapons are nowhere in sight and we're like, deep down in hell."

Zack slipped his hands around his thighs, grunting as his shoulders suffered his manœuvre. But he managed to end up with his hands in front of him.

"What? Cloud had a course on way of breaking bonds. The teacher let them think before the real thingy. He just did that and munched on the bonds. Thought you need to be a bit flexible if you don't want to dislocate a shoulder!"

He grinned, Sebastian continued.

"We think it's the old electric dam abandoned after the spread of SinRa."

"A dam in an area subject to repeated freezing," Peter groaned.

"The river don't froze, apparently," Essai commented.

Zack nodded while testing his bonds. He grimaced at his wounds opening up.

"We're still alive, and we're not alone," Zack encouraged.

Tired smiles answered him. His own smile was strained, but he kept it up. His senses noticed the sound of someone approaching, and he urged everyone to stay silent. A simple human entered, lab coat flung on his arm and tired eyes lingering on them all. He didn't speak as he leaned against a metal bed and light up a cigarette.

The SOLDIERs exchanged worried glance but Zack thought the man was simply dissociating. He did jump like he was caught daydreaming when two Watchers all but dragged a struggling third one between them.

"He's having a pull," said one of them. "That's why he wasn't on the field earlier."

They dropped the third without care. They fell on the ground, a whine escaping their lips. One of the standings Watcher gave them a hit in the shin. He screamed away when the ill person moved to grab his leg. A laugh had escaped the second Watcher before they went out.

"You stop that!" screamed the scientist leaning by the door. "Stop interrupting me when I'm in the lab! You assholes!"
The Watcher in his black uniform covering him head to toes struggled to rise from the ground. He had to lean on a table to stand, yet wobbled like a young fawn.

"You're covered in … gross things," the scientist said before pointing a finger at another door. "Shower!"

The Watcher obeyed silently.

"What are you going to do with us?" Zack asked. "Because I would prefer to know if I'm not going to make it home tonight. I can't sleep without, Mr. Fluff, that's my teddy bear."

The First grinned when he received only blank and shocked stare from both sides. He didn't know himself why he said the last part but, hey, making a connection with people required that he shares some of his personal life stories.

"What?"

"I got it when I was five and you know at this age we aren't really good at naming things. Well, he is green - who make bear green, uh? - and fluffy. Greeny was a bad name, so Mr. Fluff it is! Did you had favourite plushy? I bet you have! What's its name?"

Half-way during his story the scientist shook his head then rummaged in dressers. He put some clothes, all dark and new materials. It looked like a Wutainesse ninja outfit. Which was normal as Watcher were dissident from the Wutaian Empire fighting to 'renew his sense of honour and kick ShinRa ass'. Or something like that.

"Yeah, yeah, I had a rabbit named Carotte." The scientist finally caved. Zack was so elated he didn't look when the door of the shower cracked open but he did when the scientist said: "Are you going to put your trousers on or what?"

Zack blinked, his heart racing at the familiar silhouette. A second he tried to rationalise. It was just a spitting image of him. The real one was dead. Six feet under. But his brain short-circuited and rationality was threw to the four winds.

"Cloud?"

The man, because its was man and not a teen still growing, turned his head an inch toward him. Cloud. Or Cloud-lookalike looked ill and thin. Too thin. He mouthed what Zack thought was 'Cloud', his own name, like he was testing it. The man didn't recognise the name; he barely reacted to it. Which confirmed the part of Zack's brain that screamed he wasn't Cloud. But the crazy hair was recognisable. Then he dropped his mako blue eyes on the trouser the scientist held for him. He wobbled on his legs and gripped the metal table next to him.

Zack stayed mouth agape, eyes wide before the sight of Cloud Strife. Alive, if unsteady, and wearing the black camisole going high on his thighs and up his neck. It was mouth watering. In others circumstances. Because now Zack could only try to reboot his brain and not to panic. His men were right here, looking at him with confusion. He needed to be in control for them.

It had to be a clone or something like that. Or else...

Or else Cloud had been in the Watchers all this time. Which would poses others questions like: Was he forced to fight for them or willing?

"I'm having hallucinations," Cloud said, fighting on pronouncing each word.
Zack pinched his lips closes as a sob threatened to come. It was Cloud's voice. It was his Cloud. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He couldn't be sure. He had to calm his racing heart and uneven breathing. He shouldn't panic; he was a dreadful SOLDIER. Even if it was simultaneously the best and worst day in his life.

*Breathe, dude,* he ordered himself.

"When are you not?" the scientist answered. "What kind?"

Cloud tapped against one ear then his eye before sighing. He put his trousers but stayed oddly still, not looking at the prisoners.

Zack liked his lips, he was doing all his possible to stay calm when he wanted to throw himself at Cloud and hug him out. He couldn't do that in a cell, he remembered. Cloud didn't recognise him apparently. He may be a clone.

"What are you seeing?"

"Friend."

Zack nearly jumped out of his skin. Cloud could remember him; he felt it. He was *his* Cloud!

"Hey, I'm not a hallucination, Spike!"

Cloud turned his head to him at the surname. He frowned, opened his mouth but didn't say a word. Zack wiggled closer from the bars.

"Like hell you're his friend," the scientist huffed. He puffed a cloud of smoke and crossed his arms. Then turned his head toward Cloud. "It is? The guy is your friend?"

The SOLDIERs behind Zack were tense, observing the scene with the same attention as him. Cloud fixed the scientist. Zack realised the guy was far from Cloud's arm length. In this condition he doubted Cloud could stop the scientist from warning others Watchers. Cloud had trouble *standing.* Zack bite his lips, guilt overwhelming him. He may have put Cloud in danger.

Zack snorted, his buddy was in the Watchers. The thing was that he had to be in danger a lot. Maybe more than SOLDIERs. After all they didn't know how the inside worked.

"Doc!"

"Argh!" The scientist jumped, hand to his heart. His cigarette fell to the ground as he turned. Everyone imitated him except for Cloud. His eyes fixated on one point.

The Watcher at the door was dressed up in the uniform, but his head was bare of a mask, letting them saw his blond hair, way more normal than Cloud's.

"What are you doing there, Dirk?"

"Heard Sky is having a pull." He pointed to the SOLDIERs. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Experiences," the doc grumbled.

"Experience," Cloud repeated.

"Well, okay. He's having a pull," Dirk chuckled.
Yeah, also, the First here say he's Sky's friend."

"It's Cloud!" Zack blurted out. His men fidgeted but stayed as silent as fishes as per his order.

The doc lighted another cigarette; he inhaled as Dirk was eyeing them. "How do we know he's telling the truth?"


Dirk opened his palms; he expressed his disbelief silently. When the doc didn't answer his silent question, he threw his arms in the air, "Why me? How do I know? Sky has more conflicting memories than emmental cheese has holes."

The doc waved his hand, more concentrated on his cigarette than Cloud standing like a zombie or the exasperated Dirk. Zack eyed him as he looked over the array of strange instruments on a counter. He took what looked a lot like Reno's weapon. Then he sauntered back to the cell, powering the weapon.

Zack smelled the electricity before the little blue arcs roamed the nightstick. Dirk looked at them, then pressed the weapon to the cell. Zack tensed, heart racing. He couldn't have been prepared enough for the shot of pain that tore through him. A scream escaped his lips. Even if he swore to stay strong. His men echoed his pain.

Zack heard bare feet moving. Then a head hit the bars with force. Despite his zombie-like attitude a second ago Cloud moved as fast as a First. He hit then held Dirk on the ground with easiness. It was an instinctive reaction, Zack thought.

"Wow! You win! You win!" Dirk screamed, his face planted on the ground, Cloud holding him with a death grip. One of the SOLDIER emitted a muttered "damn" that echoed Zack's thoughts. The blond released his hold before his attention was drawn to the doc approaching the nightstick. Dirk demanded: "Wow, don't touch that, doc!"

"I'm only turning it off," he said, doing just that. "See?"

Cloud's body became slack, he staggered from his crouched position and fell on his butt. Zack couldn't resist the urge to grab his hand. He observed Cloud, the way his eyes focused on their hands.

"You're real," Cloud muttered.

Zack chuckled. "So are you."

Cloud lifted his head at that, his eyes mesmerised Zack. Though the greenish veil made his stomach coil. He held the hand tighter when Dirk stood up.

"How in hell it is saying if the man is his friend?" asked the doc.

"Oh! I couldn't verify that, but now, I can assure you he won't let you experiment on them!" Dirk exclaimed. Then he approached Cloud, still on the ground. Zack was terrified, their only help in this situation could easily be removed. Cloud was too sick to think clearly, he reacted at stimulus so when Dirk placed his hand on the blond gently he didn't struggle.

"Don't touch him!" Zack shouted, their hands parting. "Cloud don't-! Do something! Fight!"

"Oh, sush!" Dirk muttered, holding Cloud. Zack was persuaded he would remove him from the
piece but he dropped him in a chair.

Dirk crouched before Cloud and pressed his knee. "So, yes of no questions, as always." He paused, "He's your friend?" A nod answered. "You don't want him here?" Another nod. "You have a plan?" The SOLDIER held their breath as Cloud nodded. "Please, tell me you had it before your pull."

Cloud had a weak smile, lifted a hand, then made a move that looked like sign language. Dirk hummed and turned his head to the SOLDIERs, "Two weeks. You should be happy he isn't putting it off right now."

"What?" Essai blurted out.

"Well, his escape plan of course!"

Zack glanced at the zombie-Cloud, an alive Cloud. The blond looked straight at him even with mako glazing his eyes. An uncontrolled smile spread on Zack's face.

Chapter End Notes

so, as you should have inferred I'm already writing some scenes from next chapters and I need you to understand what happened to me, which explain my "oops ASGZC happened" tag, so story time! (again)
me: damn Gen and Cloud are cute togheter maybe I'll write a strifesodos after that
brain: they're in love
me: no, no, just cute and friendly
brain: they're in love now
me: look, Gen is Angeal and Seph soulmate, Cloud is Zack. They're only friend. Plus I don't want to write some complex thing about polyamory with your soulmate but also with non-soulmate. I'll get confused. I confused myself just now. The point is: they aren't soulmate
brain: … or are they? (°_°)
me, softly: holy shit
“You're saying you're really helping us escape?” Peter asked.

“If so, you should detach us!” Sebastian said.

The doc inhaled smoke from his cigarette, ignoring them. He was excellent at ignoring people it seemed. The silence stretched.

“Ah! I'm not the one doing it, ask Sky.” He pointed to Cloud who was looking at nothing.

“It's Cloud!” Zack corrected without thinking twice.

“And he doesn't look that perky, how will he help us? What if they're just playing with us?” Peter asked his companions.

Zack dug an elbow in Peter's side to silence him. “Hey, can I talk to Cloud?”

“He is having a mako pull, he's too manipulable right now,” the doc commented. It just made Zack more twitchy, what if Peter was right? They might be playing with them. And using Cloud's weakness for that.

“Let me talk to him!”

Dirk ignored him. He spoke to Cloud, “Ok, who do you need?”

“Flore, Lydia.”

“Got it!” Dirk said, standing up. “Doc, put him his shoes.”

“Why?”

“Do you want to go search Flore and Lydia?” Dirk stood in the doorway, his expression showing he didn't believe the doc wanted that. Then he nodded in confirmation of his own comment as the doc grumbled and waved him off.

The man fetched a military boot lying on the ground and grunted as he crouched next to Cloud.

“What if the other guy just went warning his superiors?” Peter whispered.

“Well, won't change our situation too much,” Essai grumbled then addressed Zack. “Thought your buddy could risk sanctions.”

Zack grimaced. “Don't say that.” He closed his eyes at the whiny tone of his voice. With the stress his hand started tapping a rhythm on his knee without thinking. He needed something to distract himself from his swirling thoughts about Cloud and his life here. He listened to the doc grumbles.

“Don't know why you kept coming to me.”

“Don't … experience.”
Zack tensed at Cloud's slow words, an icy shiver roaming his backbone.

“That the thing, kid. I did experiences on you.” Zack bit his lips, he heard Essai's shocked gasp. “You don't remember?”

“Friend.”

“Well, you're hoarding strange friends. But I guess it's been a long time I didn't touch you,” the doc whispered. “Damn, there so many laces on those things!”

When the regular tap-tap of military boots approached Zack was sure he was about to implode. All the possible scenarios were playing in his head. An instant he was sure he could break the bars if the situation needed it. He wouldn't let Cloud be parted from him again. He blocked his shoulder and kept his wrist far from each others. The bonds tensed and pushed painfully in his skin but he needed to weaken them. He endured the pain without a twitch.

“Flore's here! Lydia's coming,” Dirk said. “What do you want from them?”

A little gangly teen girl followed after Dirk but stayed next to him. She looked warily at the SOLDIERs.

“Weapons,” Cloud said as the doc tried to put him the second boot. He tapped his barefoot on the ground, escaping the doc hold. “SOLDIERs weapons. Your rifle.”

“B-but, everyone know you're having a pull. They'll ask questions,” Flore said. “And I can't take all the weapons you want.”

“Tell them it was a short one, and he's pissed. It's should be enough.” Dirk ruffled her short hair.“Do your panicked stare if they ask something more.”

“B-but.”

Another woman, older, entered the piece. “Go, Flore.”

The girl whimpered and went at snail's pace, but she went.

“Faster!” Dirk yelled at the entry door. Zack stayed focused on the new girl that swatted away the doc and proceeded to help Cloud with his boot. He wanted to do that. He wanted to take care of Cloud, to save him.

_Breathe_, he ordered his shocked body. Zack swallowed the ball of mixed feelings threatening to suffocate him.

“Yeah, I would love nothing more than believing you're really trying to help. But maybe detach us? Pretty please?” Zack asked, smile bright.

Lydia waved at the doc smoking like there was no tomorrow. “Keys, doc.”

Cloud leaned toward the girl and caught her eyes, she continued to lace the boot without looking at it. He clearly fought to form a more coherent question, “How long can you fight?”

“Five minutes max.”

He nodded, exhaling a long breath. His eyes fluttered shut, making him look asleep.

“We need something to wake him up a bit, doc,” Dirk demanded.
The man grumbled – again – and left the keys he finally found next to Cloud. Lydia picked them up and approached the SOLDIERs. Her pale blue eyes glowered with mako as much as distrust. On her neck a dark patch of skin made Zack think of Genesis' degradation. Her five minutes of fighting suddenly made more sense.

“Sky trusts you to help,” she said. It was words of hope and a menace at the same time.

Zack fidgeted on the ground, ready to jump on his legs and tackle his Cloud in a hug. Even if he knew he wouldn't do it. He wasn’t as naïve – or even stupid – as people said. He spent years with bone wary SOLDIERs now, there was certain rules for the veterans. Like being sure the guy saw you coming before even brushing past him. Or he would deck you.

He actually learned that from Sephiroth. To be accurate Zack was obligated to update his policy on tackle-hug if he didn't want to end up against a wall. People thought Zack impinged on Sephiroth's personal space without giving him choice and the man resigned himself. People where wrong. After Zack started being more observing of Sephiroth's reactions and backed down many times from his burst of touching spree, the General warmed up to him. It took a few months and many bruises, but it worked out in the end.

The Watchers had the demeanour of hyper-vigilant SOLDIERs; Zack doubted he could touch Cloud without freaking him out. As much as it made his gut twist, he knew how to react to that. Being close to Cloud was still better than having only memories of him. It was a different sort of torture than having his soulmate absent from his life. Yet Zack was gladly jumping on this train of pain.

Flore return distracted him a second. She dropped all the weapons on the ground, smiled mischievously when Dirk howled at the lack of care. He took a sword and verified his integrity. Then the sound of Zack's bond falling on the ground made him jump on his feet. Lydia moved her hand toward her sword, strapped at her back, but resumed her previous task.

Zack stopped at arms length of Cloud, suddenly hesitant. His limbs hurt because of how tense he was. Flore approached and took Cloud's attention. He bit his lips not to whimper at being ignored. He glanced around the room to distract himself. He noticed the two swords Dirk was guarding from the SOLDIERs choosing their weapons on the ground and the doc filling a syringe.

“My rifle isn't useful without a materia, she isn't one with bullets,” she muttered.

Cloud silently asked to be handed the weapon. Under Zack's eyes he rummaged through his hair and pulled out a fire materia hold with a bobby pin. Zack couldn't escape the bubbling laugh that took him. He muffled it behind is gloved hand, sure that hearing a laugh in a lab was more worrying for guards than nasty screams.

One point for Real-Cloud-is-here-holy-shit-fuck!

Zack was recalling how breathing worked as Cloud dismantled the rifle, put the materia in and reformed it. He inhaled a sharp breath; a memory of the little infantryman Cloud had been, in his mind.

“Damn, I was joking when I proposed that!” Zack said cheerfully but voice still shaking.

Cloud wore a smile not diminished by his distant eyes. Zack started to understand that in this state Cloud had problems with moving his body, but his mind seemed less or not affected. He was gladly surprised when Cloud pulled another materia from his mess of hair then handed it to him. The First used the opportunity to hold Cloud's hand. It was as cold as the ice materia. As solid. As real. If not for the spectators and their dire situation, Zack could have cried all the tears he had in stock.
“I think all the people that mocked your hair should be jealous.”

Cloud’s lips quirked up. He withdrew his hand. Again Zack tensed all muscles in his hyperactive body not to whimper like the puppy Angeal always compared him to be. He kept his eyes wide open, noticing the position of all the enhanced people. He jumped out of his skin when Cloud stuck the syringe in his thigh.

The silence that followed made Zack jumpy. He grinned, trying to release everyone tension without much success.

“So we’re all going out for a walk, uh?”

“Not all of us,” Lydia answered.

The SOLDIERs lifted their swords faster than light, Zack made a gesture to calm them but he lost his smile.

“The doc doesn’t want to leave, I’m going to die,” she continued like nothing happened.

“What?” Essai voiced the SOLDIER group sentiment again.

The renegade Watchers didn’t answer as Cloud stood up, his weakness forgotten. They looked at him, waiting for his orders like Zack saw his own men do. Cloud extended his hand, and Dirk threw him the second sword he guarded. Cloud moves where strained but eased as the time passed. He had the same confidence of long time SOLDIER. Although if he survived as a Watcher for two years, he had to be good at fighting.

“How long will it last, doc?”

“Ah! I mixed a bunch of this and that, the stronger the better, right?” the doc said, before crossing Cloud’s eyes. “I don’t know, ten or twenty minutes, who knows? Not me. You’ll have to power through it.”

Cloud whispered but let it slide. Zack wanted to shake the man in hope that he gave of more precise duration.

“Flore, you go to the platforms. Shoot Kevin, not a fatal shot. He needs to ask for help.” Dirk laughed and muttered about the irritating voice of the so-called Kevin. “Dirk you kept her back. Lydia-”

Zack assisted to an exchange all in gazes and expressions, he fidgeted, looked around for a sword, sure he shouldn’t assist to it.

“I do it consciously. Who should I kill?”


Lydia nodded, bounced slightly on her feet. She looked as happy as a person running to her death could. Which was making the SOLDIERs uncomfortable.

“You’re really ordering one of your inferiors to give her life?” Peter asked, disbelief clear in his voice.

None of the Watchers gave him attention. Zack snitched his sword and was ready for some action.

Cloud punched the doc hard. The man staggered then fell on his ass. On the ground he looked at
Cloud with astonished eyes. Like all the others present, except for the Watchers only a bit curious.

“Wha-?” the doc asked.

“Wow, Cloud!” Zack said at the same time.

“Maybe they won't kill you if they believe you didn't help,” Cloud answered before muttering. “And it feels good.”

Zack eyed the blond, still stunned.

“Play dead,” Dirk advised the doc, hitting his legs without much strength. Cloud's lips quirked up then he inspected his party. He nodded, content with what he saw.

“Well, let's mosey.”

Zack snorted. Alright, it was his Cloud.

The realisation made him vibrate with energy. He kept the same pace as Cloud, a step behind since only the blond knew where they went. It was strange to be the one following now, but Zack couldn't be bothered. If he could stick to his Cloud like glue, he was happy.

The First was taken aback by their walk, which was slow even as they exited the lab and entered a corridor with others people. The non-enhanced didn't look at them. They stared at their feet and moved on. Until the group arrived to the end of the corridor. The entry opened on a large room filled with loud machinery sounds, the center of the dam. It was guarded by a Watcher. Mako eyes glowing in the dark turned to them. He pulled his sword a second too late. Cloud leapt at him in a blur. The force of the blond made the Watcher knock against the wall then fall in a heap on the ground. Not a sound was uttered.

“Now,” Cloud ordered.

The SOLDIERs watched as the mutinous Watchers dispersed like a flock of birds. Flore and Dirk all but disappeared on the platforms above the machineries of the dam. Lydia, who was at the end of the group, passed them and continued running out of sight.

“Follow me.”

Zack complied with glee. He whooped, jumping after Cloud in the open room. A part of him wondered if he wasn't having some elaborated hallucination. Yet if it was, he would thank all the gods of Gongaga the time spent with his Cloud. He hated the time he was knocked out and dreamed of making out with a malboro.

The enemy's place was in total chaos. Cloud managed to advance without too much resistance.

For the Watchers a guy was shot at one part of the building; a squad was eliminated at another. Nobody knew what was happening exactly. It was a perfect mess for evading SOLDIERs.

“They're escaping!”

… for a little while at least.

Zack found himself fighting only the guys Cloud ignored in his killing path. There wasn't too much enhanced Watchers so the humans were a mere inconvenience for them. Cloud didn't give all of him in those fights, Zack doubted he could with his strange malady kept at bay by a cocktail of
unidentified meds. Yet Zack found himself mesmerised by Cloud's movement. The way he held his sword, a bit off, showing it wasn't his normal weapon yet still handle it with experience, moving it in beautiful and deadly circular arcs. His feet tapped the ground on a rhythm Zack spent years trying not to forget, fighting a hard battle against time.

Then Cloud stopped, his eyes fixating on Zack before using his sword to open a trapdoor. Under it a wild waterway. He motioned for them to jump in.

“We shouldn't trust him!” Peter shouted. “We're going to freeze outside!”

Zack groaned, “Listen, Peter-”

Two Watchers falling next to them made him tense and mute. Dirk, holding Flore, didn't give him a glance. He ran to the strange exit and jumped.

“Liberty!” he shouted, laughing while Flore screamed.

Zack heard the splash as they entered the water. He nudged against Essai who eyed the exit with a sneer. When Sebastian 'sacrificed' himself for the cause Zack grinned. After that the SOLDIERs all followed their brother in arms' courage. And they were maybe running from Zack's glare. Or the herd of Watchers coming toward them. Looking at the group, they weren't so much thanks to Flore and Lydia's distraction, yet running seemed a good idea.

Following the great example set by Dirk, Zack grabbed Cloud and jumped in the water. A laugh bubbling in his throat as Cloud grabbed him like a cat afraid of water. Too late Zack's remembered his buddy never swam.

Chapter End Notes

so I may have searched 'mosey' in the dictionary and listened to it bc I didn't know what it meant exactly even if I deducted the general sense (yes it's been years I knew about it and never looked, fight me) I hope english people know how funny to hear this word is for me like 'mouseiii' I'm crying please send help
The water was cold. Cold and powerful. Zack ascended to the surface only by sheer will. He breathed air that froze his lungs. Without his consent his muscles clenched and unclenched. His hold on Cloud slipped as the gurgling water yanked them around. He kept Cloud's forearm in his hand, the blond clutching him in return. Until the waterfall.

Zack would have liked to think he played enough in waterfalls at Gongaga to be prepared. He was wrong. The temperature changed everything. His body didn't respond as easily with the frigid water pushing him around. The current was too strong and broke their hold. Zack managed to maintain his head above the water. He saw the SOLDIERS leaving the water further downstream. Yet he focused on Cloud failing miserably at saving himself. He swam to him, intent on not letting his soulmate die under his watch. Cloud grabbed him like a lifeline and Zack lost his breath at his strength.

Essai's hand helped them get out of the freezing water. Now they had to deal with the freezing wind. But first Zack made sure Cloud was alright. Or as alright as he could be in this situation. He rubbed Cloud's back, waiting for his coughing fit to calm down.

“Damn, it's on my to-do list now. Teach Cloud how to swim. And it's not only because seeing you in a swimsuit would be awesome. It's only a bonus,” Zack babbled.

Cloud shook his head and rose to his feet. Zack imitated him, moving from foot to foot. He needed to release his energy.

“Move.”

Zack was a bit vexed by the croaked order. Until the renegades started walking at a good pace, followed by Cloud. He was ordering all of them. And it could, or could not, made Zack all hot inside despite his frozen toes.

“W-we can't move like that!” Peter cried, shaking.

Sebastian sighed but started trotting, “At least it'll warm us up a bit.”

“That's the spirit!” Zack exclaimed, putting an arm around Peter and dragging him.

Before them, Flore handed her rifle to Cloud, who retired the fire materia then cast a low spell on himself and the girl. Dirk shouted about unfair preference but warmed himself with the materia.

“Can you cast the spell on us?” Essai asked.

Dirk glared at them, “Do I look like a fucking humanitarian for you?”

“Hey, we didn't eat or sleep for almost a day now,” Peter said.


“Give it to me. I'll do it,” Zack intervened. Dirk glanced at him. “I'm giving it back.”

He threw the materia to him but kept his eyes on them as they warmed themselves with a very low spell. Essai and Sebastian refused Zack's help, arguing that they could to it themselves. Dirk retrieved the materia and reassembled the rifle with it.

“We should stop a second to rest,” Peter tried.
“You rested in your cell,” Dirk said.

“Walk or die,” Cloud added, voice monotone.

Zack hit Peter's head, “You're a SOLDIER, not a toddler.”

He chuckled at Peter's affronted face but accompanied it by tapping him on the shoulder good-naturedly. He could understand Peter's worry and tiredness. He was feeling the same. But he just had to look at Cloud's spiky head to feel instantly better, full of contained energy. The man was keeping a hard pace, his two buddies eyeing the field of snow with the same attention as Sebastian and Essai. Their presence too was keeping him in check. For Zack, there was no rest for him till they were all safe.

“I'm all for walking for not being caught, but how do we know we're further north?” Sebastian asked.

“Yeah, we should return to Icicle Inn, if we can't find the camp,” Zack commented.

“Nine or more miles in this direction,” Cloud said, pointing before him. “We'll be there in three hours.”

Zack saw Peter open his mouth. He closed it with an audible 'clic' at his superior's glare. Zack smiled, patted the man shoulder and jogged to Cloud who was facing the field of snow without blinking. It was shudder inducing. “How can you know?”

Cloud blinked, at Zack's joy. He caught Zack's eyes, “I know this earth.”

“Uh, sure. You're a born snow-dweller. But can we have an explanation?”

Cloud blinked anew. He murmured, “Sometimes, I hear whispers.”

Zack kept smiling like always, but deep down he was screaming. Cloud's words were perfect for a horror movie. Or in their case, not giving the SOLDIERs the will to follow him. Cloud looked at him, he was pretty sure the boy realised his smile was false.

“Also, our shadow indicates the south is this way.”

Zack exhaled. Behind them, his men muttered about a long forgotten course on this type of situation and how you could orient yourself. Cloud looked at him with a questioning look. Anew Zack thought he would burst into tears at the moment, grabbing Cloud and not letting him go. But he blinked, nodded and blinked, even more, when Cloud smiled, content. They stayed next to each other, nearly brushing until Cloud stopped dead in his tracks.

“They're approaching.” He looked at his two comrades. “You go, I'll take care of them.”

They were going to protest but Zack bet them, “Oh, hell no! I'm not letting you alone!”

“We should all fight.”

“Not everyone as a weapon, Essai,” Peter muttered.

The wind moving the powder snow covered the sounds around them, but Zack finally heard the boots crushing the snow. He counted ten men and the easiness three had to run around designated them as enhanced people. It was an easy feast compared to earlier and the trap hours before.

“You go. You'll give our position to the camp if needed,” Zack ordered his men. “We'll made sure
“But sir,” Peter interjected. “How will you find the camp?”

Zack pointed a finger at Cloud and grinned. It was telling enough for his men. Next to him Cloud pointed straight ahead of him.

“Go this way. If you fell lost, send a medium spell in the air. SOLDIER vision should see it with the clear weather. Understood?”

Flore nodded. She jogged away first. Dirk waved at Cloud and caught up to her. The SOLDIERs hesitated a second more. But the approach of the Watchers decided them.

“So, ready to kick some asses?”

Zack and Cloud changed direction and jogged away from their subordinates. They didn't go to far, as they wanted the Watchers to follow them. As Zack thought a moment earlier the fight was easy. Cloud knew how the enhanced men fought and the others Watchers were only humans. For the both of them, the group of Watchers was too little to hinder them.

“It's only a group of scouts,” Cloud said.

Relieved from a part of his restlessness Zack felt a moment of peace as he looked at Cloud. The wind ruffled his spiky hair, his nose was red from the cold and he still had an air of sickness, but he was there with Zack.

“Did you hear me, Zack?” Cloud asked. He tilted his head to the side, a small smile lifting his lips up.

Zack's heart clenched with joy. He nodded to answer Cloud. The blond grabbed his hand and started running in a completely opposite way as the North they headed toward earlier in search of the scouts. Or Zack thought so. His mind was a mess, and his heart was making feisty moves in his chest. It took him a moment to hear the footsteps from more Watchers coming.

“They won't stay out too long,” Cloud commented. “If we reach the camp before the end of the afternoon, we should be okay.”

“If we reach the camp we're sure to be okay. So, we're going now?” Zack asked, his breath coming out in tiny puff of smoke. “Then I propose we run faster.”

“No.”

Cloud, Zack behind him, dipped under a frozen projection created by the wind. Zack didn't see it at first, he was impressed by Cloud and hoped the Watchers would be fooled too. The both of them huddled in the little place, hearts beating fast and strong. They held their breaths. Zack used the time to observe Cloud. The way his eyes now glowed. The little scar above his left brow and his adult face. It was so strange to see a man when he remembered a teenager. Cloud was approaching his eighteen now. Zack could wish him a happy birthday anew.

The lump in Zack's throat threatened to burst. It would till he let go. But he couldn't cry right there. He needed to stay alert and focused. The nagging voice telling him that sounded a lot like Angeal too. He forced himself to look at anything other than Cloud even if he kept his hand in his. To stay assured Cloud was still there. He regained his composure little by little as he kept his focus on the sound of footsteps going away.
“They're gone.” He sighed in relief.

Cloud didn't respond, so Zack waited for him. They would resume their march when Cloud wanted. The boy knew the place better. A sigh escaped him, he was more tired than he thought.

“Aren't we going?” He whispered, fighting the urge to yawn. “Cloud, c'mon.”

Returning his eyes to Cloud, Zack froze. His first move was to take Cloud's chin and look into his eyes. Empty and glazed like at the enemy's base. His hand trembled, his breath hitched.

“Oh, okay.” He glanced around without reasons. “You are okay, I understand that? But you can't talk. Okay. Shit! We still need to move. Okay, I don't understand everything that's happening to you yet, but I won't let you go. I'm taking care of you now.”

Zack glanced around again. He swore as he understood he was panicking. Cloud's hand squeezed him. He wouldn't have noticed without his hypervigilance. Zack sighed then nodded to himself. He could do it. Shaking his head to clear his trouble Zack thought about the next step. They couldn't stay there, fortunately, they had the ice materia and swords. Although holding both weapons would be hard if he carried Cloud. He mused about it a second, thinking about which carrying position would be better, before shrugging.

Moving Cloud for let him rest on his back was easy, the blond still had some prehension in his hands and thighs. Zack couldn't remember if the tiny-Cloud in his memory was less heavy than the big Cloudy but he was tiny. Now Cloud was goddamn tall. Well, he was average but his dandling legs were awful for walking.

“I could strap them?” He wondered aloud. “Or strap only one. So I can have my hand free if needed.”

Cloud groaned in his neck. Zack chuckled and assured him he wouldn't do it.

Zack continued talking as they where passing snow and more snow. He decided he needed to fill Cloud on the series he missed. During the resume of the god-awful romance Angeal was fond of Cloud started groaning again.

“Well, well, I know it's bad. Believe me, buddy. But it's so horrible it's funny. Except Angeal don't laugh at it and I can't stay in the same room or I'll end up laughing so hard I'll break a rib. And I don't want to make him sad, y'know?” Cloud tapped his forehead to his neck and groaned. “What buddy?”

Zack stopped dead on his track, scanning the endless white panorama. He readied himself for another fight, but nothing come and Cloud tapped him again.

“Not... south.”

“Oh.” Zack breathed. He chuckled, his stress going with the wind ruffling his hair. “Hum, then. Which way?”

Cloud tapped him lightly on the right pectoral.

“We are going to the right, right?” He had to ask, Cloud had his arms crossed over him, he could be confused.

His charge grunted and let his right hand fall to his side. Cloud grabbed Zack's shirt and pulled, clearing all possible misunderstanding.
“Thanks buddy.” Zack nuzzled against the blond's head. “Don't worry, I'm gonna get you home.”

The walk was uneventful, at Zack’s relief. Except for the few times he nearly lost them. But Cloud kept watch. If Zack could say that, because the blond wasn't watching anything, yet he still knew where they went.

The wind blew over them, moving the top of the powder snow. Others part of the panorama glinted in tiny rainbow where the snow started to freeze. Zack didn't feel too cold as he walked, but he was worried about Cloud. Being immobile in this temperature wasn't a good thing. The Watchers apparently had the same cut on the clothes budget than SOLDIERs since Cloud only had the thin black top above the camisole. At least it was long-sleeved. Zack still increased his pace.

The sun started to descend when Zack heard the first signs of a big group. He slowed down, listening intently for anything which could tell it was his camp. Yet it was when he finally had a visual that he recognised the place. He whooped and attracted the guards' attention.

“A squad is already looking around, stop pacing around the camp. You're unnerving everyone.”

“You should be inside,” Angeal answered.

“I know you're mad I came here, but Zack and I were doing fine.”

“Until he was kidnapped.”

Genesis sniffed, his eyes dropping with sleepiness. He shook himself then shuddered. Angeal felt bad about his own attitude. He did take out his frustration on Genesis by lecturing him more harshly. He was too worried for his ex-mentee. Shaking himself from his mussing he decrossed his arms and draped one over Genesis' shoulder.

“Sirs! Lieutenant Fair is in sight.”

Angeal sprinted in the direction the soldier was pointing, clasping him on the shoulder in passing. With his enhancement he saw Zack approaching in a little trot, a big smile on his face.

“Zack!” Angeal clasped the puppy's arm and glanced at his charge. “I hope you know the luck you had, storms start quickly there. And just the nights are hard to survive.”

“I know you were worried, but my buddy here is better than a map,” Zack didn't stop his jog, he headed for the medical barrack. “I lost us a lot of time, without Cloud I would be turning in a circle. And freezing my feet. You can't imagine how cold they are. I hope I didn't lost one or two toes. Do you think Cloud would love me without my toes?”

Angeal opened the flap of the tent. He followed after his smiling mentee with a more sedated pace. He couldn't quite believe what Zack's men said about their escape.

“This is really Cloud?”

“Yup!”

After that, Angeal stayed in the background as medics took care of Zack and the little blond. The SOLDIERs' eyes kept voyaging from Zack to the unresponsive Watcher. One time he glanced as the two others Watchers at the other end of the tent. They were observing them but kept eating under a
“Well, a big meal and a night of sleep should take care of everything for you.” The medic said addressing Zack.

Angeal returned his attention to Zack who was practically bouncing on the bed he was forced to sit on. The puppy pointed to Cloud, on the next bed. The question was clear.

“Him … er, it's quite unconventional. I'm sorry to inform you that he has a grave case of mako poisoning.”

“But he's moving and talking!” Zack exclaimed. “Well, not right now but-”

Angeal dropped a hand on his shoulder, Zack stopped talking and turned pleading eyes to him. He squeezed his shoulder and smiled, but it was a sad quirk of the lips.

“I know it's a harsh news. With mako poisoning, we can't do anything more than wait.” Angeal inhaled, preparing himself for the last sentence. He didn't want to break Zack's heart but he had to.

“You know the rate of recovery is low isn't it, puppy?”

“Damn, don't be so dramatic.”

They turned to the Watchers that approached, their meal in hand. The man – Dirk, the reports said – shook his head at them. The SOLDIER behind them caught Angeal's eyes worriedly. He calmed the man with a single gesture.

“He always had mako pulls as long as I can remember. Always walking it off too.”

“Normally he spent some time sleeping somewhere safe, at the doc's lab lately,” Flore said.

“Safe,” Zack groaned, his hand playing with Cloud's hair distractedly. “The man said he experimented on him!”

“Not for a long time,” Dirk pointed. “Sky said they were friends. Kind of.”

Angeal crossed his arms, frowning. He noticed the slight movements of the duo. The girl moving before the man, keeping him from attacking.

“I doubt someone experienced on would tie an amical relation with their torturer,” Angeal commented.

He saw Dirk glance at him with fire in his eyes then wince as Flore stepped on his foot.

“Well, he and the doc had a strange relationship. Maybe Sky liked him because he would explain what was going on with his body.”

Flore smiled, trying to defuse the situation. She looked at Zack putting aside a strand of hair from Cloud’s forehead. Angeal frowned at the mako blue eyes looking at nothing. It was hard to imagine the guy standing up and recover from that.

“And he helped with the degradation,” Dirk commented.

It draw Angeal's attention like fire caught a butterfly, “Degradation?”

“Yeah, lot of us are affected.” Flore pulled up her left sleeve revealing a dark patch of skin. “I am.”
Angeal reached for her arm, “Can I see?”

“Uh, no. Dirk’s already all tense because of your presence, I don't want him to kill anyone.”

The burly commander eyed Dirk who returned him a glare. Angeal addressed him, “I'm your primary target.” It wasn't a question, so Dirk didn't answer. Angeal turned to the girl, “What yours?”

“Commander Rapsodos!” she chimed.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself Angeal commented, “He never comes on the battlefield.”

“That's why I'm a sniper.”

Dirk dug an elbow on her side. She looked sheepish. Yet it didn't lower the worry knotting in Angeal's stomach. He would definitely keep an eye on the girl. Orders were already given to the SOLDIERS and infantryman to monitor the newcomers. They shouldn't be able to lay an eye on Genesis, but Angeal's would be dishonored if he didn't protect his soulmate himself.

He glanced at Zack, his silence made Angeal uncomfortable. Yet he just had to look at the puppy to understand why he was silent. All Zack's focus was on the blond. It was worrying to see the power the sleeping Watcher already had on Zack. It made Angeal tight with worry as they weren't sure the boy was really the one he pretended to be.

Angeal sighed, where were the Turks when you needed them?

“Zack, you should go to sleep. He isn't going to wake up now. You wouldn't want to be falling asleep when he's waking up, uh?”

Zack looked at Angeal, torn between following his advice or staying a bit longer. He felt bad for manipulating him but it was rapidly washed over by relief when Zack nodded and followed him. Angeal wanted to have him under his supervision for now. He wanted Zack to be in full command of his faculties when facing Cloud again. Must the Lieutenant need to fight against him. It was possibly the darkest turn of event, but someone had to think about it.

Angeal swore to himself must Cloud become an enemy, Zack wouldn't have to fight him if he was there to help.
The center of the tent was overflowing with maps. There was one from their area, one of the dam at his construction and one after his renovation before it was abandoned. They spent the last hour discussing what they should do, who they should sent, if it's was even necessary as the Watchers were surely already off.

Angeal was on the verge of a break down. He had to manage three awful personalities alone. Yet he couldn't blame the two SOLDIERs that choose tactical retreat. Genesis was angry because he was minuted to leave the area the moment relief came by choppers. Sephiroth reacted to Genesis' moodiness by being as moody and finally Zack kept walking like a caged lion. He would approach the tent exit then return to them in hope of finishing the discussion. His constant movement from the exit to the table put Angeal's on his toes. He knew the puppy wanted to leave. He wanted to see his – probable – soulmate.

Angeal tried to subdue Zack's excitement. He tried to make him understand being around Cloud wasn't safe for him. Zack loved Cloud, he couldn't react efficiently if the Watcher decided to stay an enemy and go onto a kill spree. They knew too little about the trio to be complacent.

Although Angeal didn't know when the conversation shifted from the bam to his doubts about Strife. Zack's pacing increased in the last minutes whereas Genesis' and Sephiroth's tension lessened. Now the two of them stayed on their side of the table, observing Zack and Angeal.

“Listen to me puppy.”

“I did!” Zack shouted. “I heard whatever you had to say. All your doubts. The fact that Cloud could be a spy. He could try to kill me. Because maybe I'm his primary target! Maybe he's gonna become batshit crazy for whatever reason and try to kill me anyway. Or he's not Cloud. Or only a clone. Maybe the settlement had one of those shitty Number and either Cloud or his chicks are one and Cloud will defend them before he would defend me!”

Zack's voice cracked. He took a sharp breath and crossed his arms, his eyes fell on the ground as the walked the length of the tent for the umpteenth time.

Angeal pressed the base of his nose, “You forget what we saw on Watchers' backs. Their soulmarks...”

Zack stopped pacing, eyes downcast and humid. Angeal knew he hurt his ex-mentee, but he always felt the need to protect the boy, even if Zack thought he was hurting him more.


“Look, 'Geal,” Zack started, oddly serious for a man so upbeat. “You can order me on a battlefield, but you can't order me about my personal life.”

The dark gleam in Zack's eyes and his tone of voice hurt Angeal as much as a physical punch. Everything in Zack's attitude rejected him right now.
“I wasn't trying to,” Angeal said.

“Yes, you were,” Genesis piped up. “By the Goddess, you're the first who proposed Zack was Cloud's target. Even when the reports from Zack's squad made it clear Cloud reacted violently at the attack on him. Cloud escaped because he didn't want Zack in the Watchers' den. And we should be happy there wasn't a Number who could stop them. Or the two from AVALANCHE.”

Angeal eyelids twitched, he frowned at his lover wearing a smug smirk. That was a low blow.

“Elfé and Shears had not been spotted with the Watcher for more than a year,” commented Sephiroth.

“The Watcher group basically cannibalised AVALANCHE; we know they may be part of those Numbers,” Genesis groaned. “Hiding or something.”

Zack didn't say a word but increased his pacing, holding a hand before his eyes and the other crossed around his middle.

“As I said,” Angeal interrupted the two. “Maybe one of the three Watcher is a Number. We know nothing of them except the fact we gave them stupid nicknames because they could kill Firsts. Cloud could-”

“I doubt someone prone to...” Sephiroth hesitated. “...mako poisoning relapses, could be anything else than a liability on the terrain. Or gain enough power to become a Number.”

The puppy groaned loudly so the Firsts knew he was wound up.

“Zack, we don't even know why he was there. Maybe he was with them willingly.”

“Cloud always wanted to be a SOLDIER, not fight ShinRa!”

“You said he didn't pass the first time, maybe he was approached by a Watcher...”

“We knew nothing of them, but we knew about AVALANCHE and the Ravens. Do you think Cloud was stupid enough to be drafted by a group claiming to make you like a SOLDIER. When on top of that he was going to go through the SOLDIER exam in few weeks?”

“Fear can make you do pretty stupid things!”

“Fear can make you say pretty stupid things!” Zack retorted. He shook his head, trying to calm himself. “Look, you can think what you want. I'm not going to stay away from my soulmate.”

Zack opened his mouth to continue but yells and sounds of fights froze the Firsts in the tent. Zack jumped out, followed by all of them. Angeal saw three SOLDIERs trying to subdue Cloud. They were rolling and kicking at each others, played by Cloud. The soil walked on by a good number of people was mud that stuck to their body. Angeal had the impression of looking at a group of children bickering and dirtying themselves. Except Cloud's kicks and punches were precise and touched each time. They were made to disable temporarily someone.

A fourth SOLDIERs attacked the blond by surprise by jumping on his back. They rolled on the ground, but the SOLDIER kept his hold and blocked Cloud on the ground. The blond was entirely covered in mud which stuck his hair in forms even more wild if it was possible.

“Hey! Spike! Damn, Frau let him go!” Zack exclaimed. He made a shooing motion at the burly SOLDIERs sitting on the struggling Cloud. “C'mon, don't worry. I take care of him.”
The SOLDIER nodded but all the participants of the skirmish hovered around the Watcher.

“Hello, Cloud. Are you better?” Zack asked, leaning over the blond.

Cloud lifted his eyes to meet Zack's. He blinked, “Better.”

Angeal couldn't pinpoint if the boy was only repeating Zack's word or answered him. The blond looked completely lost. Which was logical after his mako poisoning.

“Here, buddy, take my hand. I'm pretty sure you're going to have trouble getting out of there without help.”

True to Zack's words Cloud barely managed to lift his arm from the sticky mud. Behind him a Second Class tried to free his boot but the pit claimed it in and audible 'pop' letting his foot in the air. Zack pulled his blond from the ground with a laugh. He almost clapped Cloud on the shoulder but retracted himself just before.

Angeal looked at the couple with mixed feelings. He could see Zack's happiness, yet he was prepared for a disaster with the Watcher. As he said to Zack, anything could throw Cloud off. Looking at them, Angeal saw the restraint Zack had, maybe because of his words earlier. The boy didn't touch Cloud more than their joined hand and kept his movements rather slow. In fact Zack forgot all about the others SOLDIERs and kept talking to Cloud with his full attention. Angeal couldn't deny that Cloud gave his full attention to the puppy too. The look of pure wonder was bittersweet. They were in their world.

“Oh, I know!” Zack exclaimed. “Shower! You really need a shower right now buddy. I'll show you the place!”

Zack found Angeal's eyes, he smiled like the devil himself.

“How would you have reacted if someone did the same to you?” Sephiroth continued. “I would have fought it.”

“Gonna wash all this.”

Angeal sighed, he knew when his fight was over. He lost. At least Zack could confirm the state of Cloud's back and his soulmark with this pretext.

When they passed them Angeal saw the glint in Cloud's eyes. He knew he was right: Cloud was a threat.

“Well, you should have seen it coming,” Genesis said in a murmur, glee in his eyes. “You tried to prevent the puppy from approaching his soulmate.”

“How would you have reacted if someone did the same to you?” Sephiroth continued. “I would have fought it.”

“You would have tore the bitch apart, you mean,” Genesis cackled.

Sephiroth nodded then returned to the tent, his coat floating behind him. Genesis gently pushed Angeal's side before retreating after Sephiroth.
Watcher controlled themselves, it means they were tense and ready to strick.

“Hum, it should be a good size for you, what do you think?”

Zack held a standard white shirt before Cloud, gauging their size by eyesight. The SOLDIER smiled, his face brightening up in a way Cloud knew by heart. A wave of guilt washed over him. He shouldn't be considering his soulmate a threat. Yet since he first woke up in the Watchers' hands, sort out truths from lies was almost impossible. He didn't know if ShinRa was the real enemy. If Sephiroth killed his mother. In fact he was sure of very few things. One being that he couldn't trust his memories or what informations the Watchers fed him.

He wanted to believe this was his Zack, but what did he know of ShinRa capabilities? Maybe it was Zack's clone like one of the numerous clones of Sephiroth's in his delusion of the silver General becoming mad, forcing him to kill him. Most of the time Cloud believed it was the story the Watcher feed him in order that Sephiroth became his primary target. But doubts held tight.

“Well, that will do!” Zack shrugged, deeming it fitting enough, and finished picking up clothes for Cloud.

The place was a communal bathroom but there was some booths for more privacy. Surely for the people not wanting to expose their soulmark, although he remembered his days as infantryman where him and others just wore the top hiding their marks. The little group were teased for being this prudish until the novelty weared off.

Zack pushed him in one of the booths. He put aside the clothes to stay dry and started stripping.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking off my clothes?” Zack said, head tilted on the side. “You should do it too.”

Cloud nodded but his mind was clumsily catching up. He never thought they would take the shower together. His members still weak after his mako pull, he stripped down to his camisole where the zip didn't agree with his clumsiness. Cloud's heart nearly exploded when Zack's hands automatically found their way to help him. His eyes locked on a point above Zack's head. He didn't think he could manage Zack's touch plus his vision. It was too surreal.

When Zack withdrew his hands Cloud held his defeated sigh.

“Hey,” Zack's voice cracked. Cloud lifted his eyes to him right away. “If you tell me not to touch you ever again because you're uncomfortable or- or whatever, I'll do it.”

Cloud's heartbeat raced, making his hands quiver.

“What?”

“You're tense whenever I touch you. I don't want to make you uncomfortable,” Zack continued.

He was serious. Cloud couldn't believe it.

“No, it's...” Cloud exhaled and closed his eyes, he couldn't form even one intelligible sentence. His mind was a mess oscillating between a blank noise and half-thoughts. “It's just, too much. Everything is too much. I like when you touch me but you're here when- when... I can't.”

Cloud closed his eyes, overwhelmed by shame. That's why he rarely talked except for plans or thoughts he dwelt on for days. He was good when he was angry too, but he couldn't be angry at
Zack. Never.

“So, still touching but not too much or I'm going to have a freaking out chocobo on my arms.”

Cloud scowled, “Don't call me that.”

Somehow they succeeded in undressing themselves without turning their back to each other. Both for different reasons. Cloud had the pervasive thought that someone could take advantage of their vulnerable state for attacking them when Zack worried that one second of inattention would make the blond disappear like smoke.

The water started running, relieving Cloud of the veil of mud drying on his skin.

“Warm.”

Zack chuckled, “SOLDIERs have some advantages, warm showers at the icy hell is one of them. But only for five minutes max.”

Cloud sighed, he forced his eyes to focus on Zack even if his mind pulled him in a memory of the same little moment of intimacy, years before. Zack had shorter hair at that time.

“You let your hair grow,” Cloud mumbled.

“Uh?” Zack seemed to wake up from his own dream. “Yeah, looks cool, no?”

“No.” Cloud's lips quirked up at Zack's shocked expression. “I liked it better short.”

“I kinda forgot you had that in common with Sephiroth.” Zack said, a breathy laugh escaping him.

At Cloud insistent stare he expend. “Sometimes you get honest but, like, in a very blunt way.”

Something twisted in Cloud's stomach, “I hurt you?”

“No! It's just hair, Cloud.” Zack's hand cupped his cheeks. His smile faltered when Cloud pulled away automatically. Zack breath exited him shakily, “I like it. Either your honest little comments are fucking adorable or can straight up kill anyone. Which is badass. And I like it.”

“You're nervous,” Cloud realised.

“Obviously! I got you back not a day ago and now I'm taking a shower with you and I'm trying to ask you to show me your soulmark but I'm a chicken!” Zack yelled, his arms threw in the air. He froze as he realised what he said. “Ah.”

Cloud blinked. His head was still fuzzy and his limbs seemed so far from him. He took surely way more time than what should be considered normal to turn around, his back to Zack. He swallowed the lump in his throat. He should be looking at Zack's back, protecting him, but he refrained.

Fingers on his skin made him jump and wake up a bit. Zack apologised softly, his hand hovering but not touching anymore. Cloud took an inspiration in hope to calm his hyperactive heart and pressed against the hand. He heard Zack trembling breath as he traced the soulmark. He hummed at the sensation of the warm caress he thought he'd never experience again. The hand didn't stop at his soulmark, it traveled to others scars.

Cloud looked at Zack over his shoulder. Perfectly alive and breathing and warm.

“Can I see yours?” Zack frowned then opened his mouth, yet before he could ask Cloud continued. “I … I don't remember it. I kept mine hidden with the camisole and all. The … scientists that
could've seen it I … they're dead. Can I see it?"

“Of course.”

It looked awfully complex, but Cloud couldn't say if it was standard for a soulmark or if this one was particular. He could remember very little. But he remembered the shimmer impossible to reproduce by any scientists and the way the – *his* – soulmark looked on Zack. He remembered the familiar old runes spelling his name in old Nibel lined by the white and black wings.

He let his head fall between the tan shoulder blades. Zack turned around and wrapped him in his arms. Cloud felt like he was on the edge of a breakdown. He concentrated on anything which could help him center. Mostly how the water worked on his naked body.

“Zack, we're naked.”

“Well, duh.” A chuckle escaped Zack and his arms tightened around Cloud. “Never bothered you before.”

“It's not- I... we're-” Cloud failed in expressing his thoughts. He sighed at length.

“Our weenies are touching, that's your problem, uh?” Cloud hit his forehead on Zack's shoulder at his teasing. “*That* never bothered you before. Nor weenies fight for adults.”

Cloud burst out laughing. He took away from Zack, “You're dumb.”

Zack gasped, playing the offended with a hand on his heart. His indigo eyes big with false surprise. Eyes Cloud remembered seeing lose their mako glow as death took over Zack. The sudden memory made the blond shook. The water on his back wasn't warm anymore but biting cold. The booth's walls felt false, like if Cloud pushed them they would fall on the ground to reveal a certain cliff. A cliff where Zack was dying.

Cloud pushed past Zack and took a towel, forgetting about the clothes. He wanted to leave, sure he would burst into tears any time now. If he did, he'd need a place a bit more safe.

He opened the cubicle's door, only a towel around his hips, and was met with a group of human and enhanced soldiers walking in. They eyed each others, until Zack slipped a finger on the rim of the towel and pulled Cloud inside while closing the door.

“Maybe you should dress before facing the frozen hell.”

Cloud scowled at Zack gleeful grin but still followed his advice. Zack choose winter SOLDIER clothes for him, although without the pauldrons and belt. Cloud couldn't care less for the loss; it gave too little defense for it to be useful. Still, wearing the uniform was strange. He remembered an old dream of becoming SOLDIER, but it was like it belonged to someone else. Having a sweater and coat above the base of the uniform made him fell better.

“Now food!” Zack exclaimed.

It caught Cloud's attention like nothing else. He lifted his head to look at Zack searching a trace on his face to show he had heard the dark-haired man just fine.

“Food?”

“Yeah! We're enhanced, we need regular meal to be in top form!”
If the First feed him on top of everything else, Cloud might start revering the ground Zack's walked on, giving him offerings and singing his words of praise. Even if he hated singing.

Zack took Cloud's hand to guide around the camp, smile unwavering. In retrospect, Cloud would make everything for Zack's happiness even without regular meals. Offerings were a good idea. The SOLDIER loved receiving gifts. Or was it just a false memory?

Cloud was even more baffled when Zack brought him back to the medics barrack for a check-up before taking him to a tent where he could sleep. Zack left after that and he tried to sleep, but kept an ear on the two guys outside of the tent. He managed to have little-naps. Yet he spent the most of his time barely grasping reality, staring at the side of the tent and breathing in Zack's smell on the pillow.

He woke up when people entered the tent. He counted three of them. His heart started racing but he kept a steady breathing. It was better if they thought him asleep.

“Be careful.”

The calm voice stirred a hole of dark thoughts in him. He tensed, barely breathing and eyes wide open.

“He saved me, Seph,” Zack answered. “He won't hurt me. Don't be like Geal.”

“Not consciously,” the general said. “But nightmares or flash-backs can mess up one's mind.”

“That's actually why Zack brought Cloud here,” the third person said. “So we could help if... anything went wrong.”

The silence strained longer until Sephiroth said, “I apologise for Angeal's comportment. I believe he was more worried than we thought.”

“Yeah, it was...” Zack trailed off. “It's nothing. G'night, Seph.”

Zack plopped on the mattress without warning. Cloud sprung, sitting in a heartbeat. Zack startled as the other relaxed SOLDIER tensed.

“You weren't sleeping?” Zack breathed. “Uh. Sorry for frightening you.”

The weight of his heart in his throat prevented Cloud from answering verbally. He tensed, barely breathing and eyes wide open.

Cloud looked at him. His fingers drummed on his tight to release the anxiety in him whereas Zack was relaxed. Cloud's heart jumped again when Zack took his other hand in his.

“Okay, try to sleep a little more, okay? G'night, Spike.”

The SOLDIERs sleeping in the tent this night entered one by one, not commenting on Zack sleeping form or the fact Cloud was still sitting without moving an inch. He spent longs minutes fixing Zack's visage in a haze. Until it started worrying him, Zack could be dead. There was too many heartbeat in the tent. Mixing together and confusing Cloud. He couldn't be sure Zack's was okay. Cloud's breath threatened to stay blocked in his throat; he forced the air to come in and out as he moved.
Carefully he put his head on Zack, just above the heart. The steady pulse washed away his anxiety better than anything. He closed his eyes and tightened his hold on Zack's hand who returned the squeeze with a low hum.

Cloud felt safe for the first time in many years. That other SOLDIERs from Zack's squad were sleeping with them in the tent wasn't a big inconvenience for Cloud. One wasn't even sleeping, but feigned it. The blond knew the man was keeping watch in case he attacked Zack. Their will to protect the man was something Cloud could perfectly understand. It even permitted him to let himself go into deeper sleep, knowing that if he woke up during a nightmare and menaced his soulmate, someone would stop him.

It was almost as comforting as Zack's presence.

Chapter End Notes

so many words. So, so many. It's way longer than I planned...
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A recrudescence of movements outside the tent woke up Cloud. He froze, the sensation of the body pressed against his back different from Flore or Dirk. Lydia rarely slept lately. He exhaled as his mind caught up and he recalled where he was. Cloud turned into Zack's arms to face him. Just to be sure.

Zack grumbled in his sleep and his arms clenched harder around Cloud's body. The blond didn't say a word at the slight pain. It was not an inconvenience when it grounded him. The way Zack held him, the pressure of his body against Cloud's, the texture of his skin under Cloud's fingers helped him to stay calm and retrieve his autonomy. Taking back control of his body after a Mako pull was tricky. From one second to the other, either everything overwhelmed him or he was floating away. Zack caged him, but it felt safe and warm. Wonderful. So much it looked like a dream.

In an instant, his heart beat faster, a cold sweat slid down his back. Cloud doubted everything was real. Even Zack's arms seemed like cotton. Sucking in a breath that could've woken up the raven-haired man, Cloud wiggled an arm free. He brushed Zack's cheeks then his nose which made him scrunch it. Cloud smiled at the cute sight then traced his fingertips from the nose to his ear. He buried his hand in the mess of black hair. Was it real? It felt like it was.

Zack's skin was so much warmer than his. He recalled thinking it was a SOLDIER thing due to Mako and hoping his always cold hands would warm up. He wanted them as pleasant for Zack than his soulmate's hands were for him. But they were still cold. Hard and cold. Like growing up in Nilbelheim. Like he had to become to survive. To fight Sephiroth.

Cloud huffed a laugh without joy. Did he fight Sephiroth? As a member of AVALANCHE, maybe not, but he had faint memories of doing it in a Watcher uniform.

"Why did you stop?" Zack mumbled, his words muffled by his pillow. His eyes were still shut.

Amused, Cloud freed his other hands so that he could bury both in the black spikes. He rubbed Zack's skull like he would have done for a dog and an appreciative low hum from Zack recompensed him. He looked ecstatic and was putty in Cloud's hands, like a puppy having a good petting session. Cloud's chest swelled in fondness.

"I didn't sleep this well for years. I love having a personal heater," Zack mumbled. His arms tightened around Cloud as a warm smile spread on his face. "You okay?"

Essai, Sebastian and Peter were in the same tent, awake and listening. Even with great loyalty for Zack, Cloud wasn't going to put his trust in them. He learned at the Watchers that any weakness was an opportunity to attack. Lying was easy. Forgetting the cramps in his stomach, his tension, the strain in his muscles was easy.

"I'm fine. Too pressed though. You take room."

Zack huffed a laugh. He let go of Cloud to stretch. His arms and feet went over the bedframe, he retracted them with a shudder.

"Well, time to rise, soldiers."
Grumbles answered Zack but did nothing to his good mood. Cloud kept his eyes on the man, still unsure about the reality of the moment. When Zack ruffled his hair, and pushed him to move Cloud managed to find the strength to appear normal and not struggling to assure himself he was here with Zack.

The fresh air on his face made him shudder but it felt good. The world could interact with him; he wasn't a ghost passing through things. He closed his eyes and savoured the sensation. Cloud leaned toward Zack when the man grabbed his arm to guide him around, but Zack stopped with an incredulous sound. Cloud opened his eyes for them to fall on a silhouette which made his heart speed up. Next to Cloud, Zack bounced on his heels and waved at the silver haired man. Zack approached the man, still holding on Cloud, mute with stupor and they left Zack's SOLDIERs behind.

“Oh hey, Seph! I forgot to ask yesterday, but why the fuck are you here? I thought you were at Kalm.”

Cloud followed Zack's gaze and noticed the surprise on the General's face. Heart racing, Cloud kept his eyes low. He couldn't determine if it was fear or the urge to fight that went up in him. Maybe both. Ignoring the strong presence of the Silver General was his best idea to keep control.

“I came here for you, Zack.”

The voice made Cloud whole body shudder in disgust. He inhaled deeply, focussing on the way his lungs expended and the way he stood made his sore muscles in his legs hurt a little. He kept his eyes anywhere till they weren't on Sephiroth and fixated on little details like the way the infantryman in passing limped slightly or the coldness’ smell. His eyes stopped roaming around when he saw Dirk, behind him. A SOLDIER stood next to him and they were talking casually. The guardian and the prisoner seemed to be on good terms. Cloud was reassured.

“Lazard send you and Angeal here? He really did that?” Zack asked.

“Don't play dumb, I came on my own.”

“I knew befriending you was a good investment!” Zack exclaimed with a laugh on the tips of his lips. “I love you buddy.”

Cloud turned toward Zack at the comment. He saw his soulmate hugging Sephiroth. The General seemed awkward as he patted one of Zack's shoulder. Cloud found it so strange he kept staring.

“Sephiroth! Put a damn shirt on or so Goddess help me I'll do it myself!”

Startled, Cloud glanced at the man approaching, read leather floating around him. Behind Genesis came Angeal, a small smile on his lips. Another glance at Sephiroth this time confirmed the man was bare chest except for his ridiculous straps and coat. Cloud's eyes returned to Genesis as he realised he saw something off. The man's right arm was held against his stomach by a medical sling tainted red.

A footstep too heavy on the soil then another one informed Cloud of the attack. Sephiroth's hand flew to Masamune hilt, his eyes setting behind Cloud. Whose mind went haywire. If Sephiroth started attacking, Cloud couldn't protect Zack and Dirk. He turned halfway, crossed Dirk eyes. Hard and cold they were. Until Cloud stuck his leg out. It wasn't just to make him trip. He hit hard enough for Dirk to wince as he stumbled. The idiot fell on the muddy ground. Cloud moved so he was standing on the knife taken from the cantina.

The idiot couldn't kill his target in such a setting. Not that it would have worked another way. Dirk's mission always had been a suicidal one. Like Cloud and Flore.
Cloud thought he made it clear to Dirk, but he was still trying.

“Dirk.”

Cloud hoped the man would understand all he didn't said: don't engage, keep low, lie.

“What? Still no hugs?” Dirk asked as he lifted himself from the ground. “I can verify you're still in one piece. I mean, yesterday you woke up from your pull and where smashed on the ground. I was worried!”

A relieved breath escaped Cloud. From the corner of his vision, he saw that Angeal didn't move, maybe too distracted by something to saw the pathetic attack. He met Sephiroth eyes thought. His blood froze in his veins. He had no weapon, and Zack was between them, he couldn't let him be hurt.

“Interactions between the three of you are restricted,” Angeal said. He considered Cloud then Dirk to be sure he was heard. He nodded appreciatively when Dirk back off and returned to his assigned SOLDIER.

Genesis pushed back Angeal and stood before Sephiroth in a threatening manner, “You're putting something on you or I'll find a survival blanket and sew it around you. You're not leaving till you're dressed like a sensible person.”

Zack chuckled and Cloud's lips quirked up when Sephiroth came close to pout. He crossed Cloud's eyes before following diligently his soulmates. When they were far enough Zack squatted. Cloud looked at him with confusion until he moved Cloud's boot and took the knife on the ground. Zack's face was stone cold when he looked back at Cloud who felt his heart come to a halt.

“Don't.” Zack said between his teeth. “You three are threats for now. Don't look at them, don't acknowledge their presence or everyone will think you care about them and will protect them if they attack. I can't let you do that.”

Even if his heart was choking him, Cloud managed to answer Zack. But he still had to look away from the judgement in Zack's eyes.

“Would you?

“Would I have what?”

“Would you have done it? Turned your back on your soldiers? if the Watchers had kept you in...”

“That's not the same-”

“Because Dirk attacked a friend of yours, but what if Peter had attacked Dirk in the dam and you knew he'd been beaten? Would you have let him, do it?”

Only silence answered him for a second. He kept staring at his feet.

“No, and I'm an idiot.” Zack answered. “I... I just don't want people to see you as a Watcher. I want them to be friends with you rather than think you'll gut someone for accidentally shoving you. Or if they took the last sandwich at the cafeteria.”

The lump in Cloud's throat threatened to burst and made him cry. He did the last one. Or something close to the last one. Food was too important when you didn't eat for days; you didn't have all your mind.
“What if ShinRa think we're too dangerous and need to be imprisoned?” Cloud asked. The moment he saw Zack's eyes he regretted his question. “It's okay. I-”

“Cloud,” Zack grabbed his arm. “I'll keep you safe. I-... whatever I have to do for that, I'll do it.”

Image of Zack dying on the cliff flashed before Cloud's eyes. He took Zack's hand to centre himself as the man observed him with a worried frown. This Zack never gave his life to keep him safe, but he was talking about doing it and Cloud couldn't bear this idea. Now it was Cloud's turn to keep Zack safe and happy. But could he do so in detriment of Dirk and Flore safety?

“I'll keep them in check.” Cloud murmured. “I'll be safe.”

Zack seemed to be relaxed by Cloud's words. The blond hoped he could hold them.

Cloud eyed his plate with awe, even if it didn't show on his face. The day before he stuffed as much food he could inside him. He was so sure he wouldn't have another meal so soon. Then he had breakfast. Now a second meal after having done nothing more strenuous than following Zack around as he made idle chat with some infantrymen and SOLDIERs. He went to the radio operator two times to ask about Sephiroth doings out there and dragged Cloud back to the cafeteria after that.

“Are you going to eat?” Zack asked, his mouth full.

It startled Cloud out of his zoning out. He fixed Zack giving the SOLDIER that passed next to him a high-five. Cloud saw the man frowning, close to snarling, but he ignored him for the food. He wasn't craving it, he ate in the morning, but yearned for what this meal entailed. Zack would feed him regularly as he promised.

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

Zack looked perturbed by his answer. Cloud blushed, realising he spent so much time answering that Zack moved on.

“Nothing.” Cloud mumbled. He took a bite of his military meal to hide his shame. “Can I see Flore and Dirk?”

“I don't know, Cloud. Not everyone is comfortable with having you here... and letting you regroup, even less. The Generals are talking about the three of you.”

“Oh, I can see them here?” Cloud asked. “We're surrounded by SOLDIERs and infantrymen.”

Zack opened his mouth only to shut it. He ruffled his hair and sighed, thinking for a moment. He eyed the men present in the cafeteria then shrugged.

“Peter, search for the two, let them come.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, he's right.” Zack shrugged. “With all of us here they can't do anything.”

“But what if it's a trap.”
“Yeah, yeah. I still gave you an order, go.”

Peter, sat at another table, huffed and glared at the blond before obeying, still unwilling.

“Thank you.” Cloud murmured to Zack who smiled back.

All he wanted was to assure himself his two charges were fine. He hadn't the time when he stopped Dirk earlier.

As they walked in, he felt a weight being lifted from his lungs. Their eyes glinted with an easy contentment he never saw in them and they were calm. A strange thing since they were in the enemy's camp. Yet being surrounded by deadly enhanced men wasn't a novelty for them.

“I heard the Holy Trinity want to send us to Midgar,” Dirk said in lieu of salutation. “Are you going?”

“I'm going where I can stay with Zack.” Cloud answered.

Dirk nodded and sat next, letting the chair between them to Flore.

“I've been thinking about what was the best course. Leaving the military that don't have legitimate control over us or the country. Or risking my luck and staying.”

“If we stay, the Watchers won't come after us,” Flore continued. “I don't want to end up like Rein. I won’t do that to you, Sky.”

“Cloud.” Zack corrected. He huffed and leaned over the table. “Two questions: why are you calling him Sky and what happened to Rein?”

“Lydia called him that when I came.” Dirk said with a shrug.

“I was Mako poisoned,” Cloud answered in a low voice. “I couldn't remember who I was, what was my name. But I felt my name was linked to something in the sky. So, Sky it is.”

Zack looked shaken to the core. Cloud couldn't understand why; it was just a name. There were far more important things he forgot about.

“When did you remember your name?”

“The first time? I don't know.” Cloud said. “It complicated. I forget then remember. I-... When you called me it felt real.”

“Oh.” Zack stayed silent a second before murmuring. “Did you remember your name in old Nibel?”

Cloud stared at Zack. The memory of the man whispering his name came to him. The name he only had the right to tell his soulmate outside of the family.

“It's the first thing that came back after I stopped thinking I was someone else,” Cloud confessed. “Mom said the old Nibel was carved into our bones. Our names are in the old tongue so that we'd never lost it. She's right.” Cloud went silent. “She's still alive?”

“Yes,” Zack breathed, eyes shining from something else than Mako. “Sometimes I call her. She's very sweet. She even sent me a recipe for her cookies.”

Cloud nodded but didn't ask more about his mother. Her mention twisted something in him, bitter memories and sweet ones combined resurfaced. Yet he couldn't stop himself from mouthing her
name in old Nibel. Between them the silence lingered, but Cloud wasn't paying attention.

His mother was alive. It matched his thoughts about the world he was in. Sephiroth becoming mad never happened there, only the Watchers and the old AVALANCHE without Barret and Tifa. Cloud still had doubts about others points. Mostly about the Planet and the way the Mako extraction hurt her. He couldn't ask that to Zack. He doubted a SOLDIER, even a First Class, knew about the repercussion of Mako extraction.

“So, Rein,” Flore said after the silence started lingering for too long. “Sky- Cloud and him escaped. Except the Watchers caught up. S- Cloud. Cloud, stayed to hold them. He was captured, but Rein ran off for one week. Before he was killed.”

“Oh.” Zack emitted. He blinked and ruffled his own hair, eyes wide. Witnessing the man being speechless was an experience for Cloud.

Although with his failing memory almost everything was a new experience, he mused.

An infantryman coming their way cut Zack's mutism. He talked about a storm and the Lt. Generals wanting to see him about Sephiroth and his squad still out there. The last information visibly shook Zack. He kept a smile but his legs were bouncing under the table.

“You' okay if I let you with my men, Spike?”

“Yeah, don't worry.”

“Good, I can't stay here. We have a bit to do before the storm hit. I'll see you later.” Zack ruffled Cloud's hair then walked out.

The blond played with the fork in his hand, worrying his lip. He didn't like seeing Zack this distressed. Yet he couldn't do anything to help him. He didn't remember what he did younger to alleviate dark thoughts from his soulmate. He didn't remember if Zack was even sad ever.

Cloud finished his meal then decided to stay outside in the cold wind. Peter, the one watching him for Zack, muttered about Cloud's stupid plan to force him to go away. Cloud didn't give an ear at the man thoughts. He let the fresh air ruffle his hair and lull him away from his worries.

The camp had a surge in movements when Sephiroth’s elite squad returned. Without him. Cloud couldn't stop the surprised chuckle he had when he overheard the men talking to Angeal. It was surreal.

Eyes half-lidded he observed the men come and go in a frenetic dance that went faster as the wind picked up. He caught sight of Zack going into the tent where Sephiroth's squad was. The puppy exited with a defeated stance that pulled at Cloud's heart. The blond wondered about this unit: what would they say to explain they lost Sephiroth, ShinRa prized possession, and they might find his frozen body years later?

There was still hope the man would survive. If he found the camp before the storm hit or a cave to hide for the night. Sephiroth was full of Mako which made him capable of handling far worse temperatures than a human. But if he stayed outside during the storm, he was dead, that's for sure.

Cloud let his eyes wander over the mountains. They were encompassed in dark clouds lapping at their feet. In contrast the camp glinted under a perfectly clear sky, but it was a trap. The wind chased away the little clouds only to push the mass of the storm toward them. The only cues of its arrival were the wind and heavy air pressing on their shoulder. It made it hard to breath yet it grounded Cloud. After a Mako pull, he always had trouble to take back control over himself. Limbs were too
heavy, too clumsy or so far away Cloud doubted he regained his body and wasn't floating above it.

He hunched over himself at the surge of force from the wind. He blinked, faint whispers from his Mako pull echoing in his head. Lifting his eyes Cloud saw Zack talking with the burly First he could recall a bit. Cloud could walk over Zack and touch him without problem. The idea made him snicker. It was so unbelievable it looked like a dream.

But maybe it was…

He still heard the voices in the Mako more strongly than normal. Maybe everything was a dream, some complicated delusion. Exactly like the story of Sephiroth insanity and the bloody path he made to attain Godhood. Maybe Cloud would wake up and find a Watcher ready to feed him lies, to validate him in his story.

“Oh hey, Cloud!”

The blond started at Zack's call. Leaning over him, the man smiled then ruffled his hair.

“Don't stay outside or you'll freeze. Look your nose is already red.”

Zack pinched his nose and chuckled at Cloud's expression. He shooed him away then returned to the Lt. General gazing at them. With a sigh Cloud followed Zack's gentle order at Peter obvious happiness.

They returned to the tent allowed to Zack's squad. Peter dropped on his bed while Cloud stayed on his feet, looking around like he didn't come the night before. It was so strange for him. For years, he believed ShinRa was to be destroyed, his hatred focusing on Sephiroth and Hojo. Yet he never felt so safe than right here even with Peter ready to strick. He did doubt the lies the Watchers gave him, but he had no proofs, only the will to flee a group taking advantage of him. Cloud didn't know where reality started.

What a weird dream he was having.

His eyes caught the shape of emergencies backpacks neatly tucked under the beds. Finding Sephiroth would be easy. Killing him would be another story. Sephiroth was suffering hypothermia now. It was certain. Cloud wasn't going to have a better opportunity to strick.

Cloud moved before the SOLDIER reacted. He grabbed Peter. Rolled on the ground and blocked Peter's throat under his arm. The SOLDIER deprived of oxygen fell unconscious without a word. Cloud left the tent unnoticed.

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so in al honesty I left the last big fandom I was in bc I hated seeing the subscribers going up but having like 2 comments max at each chap. I thought I could try the english side of ffvii bc in the fics I read or saw in passing the comment/kudos/bookmarks rate was less painful to witness but yeah it exactly the same and I'm a soft person so shoutout to neru for being the coolest person here
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sephiroth inhaled, the sharp icy air made his lungs prickle. He lifted his scarf to hide the lower part of his face, passing through it the air was easier to breath. Earlier Genesis bullied him into getting a warmer coat and at least a scarf. Looking at the sky, the man corrected himself, not earlier, but this morning. Now the sun was setting. Not that it could have pierced the frosty fog. He couldn't even see the tip of Masamune. Sephiroth relied on his good internal clock to affirm the time.

Flicking the weapon around he removed the monster's blood covering it. He hesitated to send his precious sword away but decided against it. More monsters could come.

Sephiroth started walking again. When he'll return to the camp Genesis would lecture him in not caving to his demand to wear more fitting clothing. Then it would be Angeal. But what he wore would have been enough for the short trip to the bam. Except after exiting the empty place they were assailed by monsters as the storm descended and he lost his troop. He thought he was not long behind, protecting their back, but he fooled himself.

His sharp hearing picked up the sound of footsteps on the snow. He stopped dead on his track and scanned the area, gripping his sword tight. Coming from behind him he saw a silhouette. It was human, but Sephiroth couldn't choose between making his presence know to the person or risk they pass him and die out there. He couldn't ignore the option the man was out there to kill him. Except the person chose for him.

Mako blue eyes peered at him from afar, two beacons on a humanoid silhouette. Until the fog cleared a few seconds, letting him see a face shielded by a hood and a scarf that didn't hide the killer intent into the man's eyes.

Sephiroth's grip on Masamune tightened. As he could see the man hands were free but maybe he had a weapon on the ready. None of them moved for a long time till the fire in the mako blue eyes flew away.

"Follow me!" the man shouted, the wind muffling his voice.

Sephiroth decided not to move. He preferred building himself a shelter right there on the monsters' territory than following the unknown man. Didn't Angeal say kids shouldn't follow or obey unknown people? He was certainly not a kid but the same advice applied to him in this situation.

The stranger finally moved, his fingers brushing against Masamune's blade. He retired the lower half of his clothes, revealing a face Sephiroth knew, but still didn't thrust.

"You're coming, now." Zack's soulmate said before grabbing his hand.

Sephiroth jerked it away only for the blond to hold it more strongly. His bones grinded against each others but not a sound escaped his dry lips. The man's hand was warm against his, somehow it was more painful than the iron grip.

"C'mon, you've been out too long."

The man tugged on his hand to force him to follow, with a tremble in his arm Sephiroth found himself trailing after the man. He wondered about his willingness and how the blond could orient
himself into this storm, yet uttered no words, his mouth shut to avoid the demeaning clatter it would do. Although he wasn't sure his... guide would hear him above his own string of uninterrupted mutterings.

Sephiroth was surprised to see the mountainside appear under his eyes. Zack's soulmate let his fingers trail over the rocks like they touched Masamune earlier, with a hint of awe mixed to fear as it opened on a wide entry. Which was something Sephiroth wouldn't expect from someone that found a cave for the night.

“There is dragons inside.”

“Dragons,” Sephiroth repeated. He sighed, he was so exhausted. But he had to slice them.

“There a cave a bit farther, do you think you can do it?” The blond looked over Sephiroth and grunted. “You sure as hell can't fight the dragons.”

Without letting Sephiroth talk he pulled him, still holding his hand from earlier, and they made their way to the second cave. It was smaller. Way smaller. It necessitated that they crawl on the layer of snow to enter. At least it protected the interior from the strength of the wind, but their feet were blown on. It was so dark even their enhanced senses where little help and Sephiroth knocked his head on the top. He ended up hunched over in a very uncomfortable position.

Sephiroth looked at the little blond tapping his feet on the ground, crunching something at the same time, but ignoring it as he rummaged into his backpack. He found a torch and scanned the area with it.

“Well, it's little but not much more than a camping tent.”

Silence returned and stayed between them. Sephiroth couldn't remember the man's name. It was a first for him. Genesis was always competing to see which one knew the more employees' names in the Tower. He always won. Yet his mind has drawn to a blank about the blond. Something related to the sky he remembered. Genesis said it was stupid. Bird? Sky? Blue? Storm?

“Cloud.”

The blond turned to him. Sephiroth closed his eyes a second longer than a blink as he realised he talked out loud. He'd just remembered the boy's name. Cloud didn't comment on it. He crouched down, sweeping away some bones and rummaged again in the backpack.

“Put your coat on the ground and sit there. Remove any wet clothes.” Cloud ordered as he pulled out a flask from under his coat. “I don't have a lot of cool water but I can do more.”

Sephiroth crouched face to the blond. It was far more comfortable.

“Are you under the impression I have hypothermia? If so I can assure you I'm fine.”

Cloud pulled out slowly the stove and gas from the bag; his eyes didn't left Sephiroth's.

“Did you hear yourself speak? Your words are slurred. Plus, you're shivering.”

“Only slightly,” Sephiroth said. “You're shaking more.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn't know it was a competition. Now sit down and remove your clothes,” Cloud groaned before sighing. “At least your coat and your boots.”
Cloud took the pot, menaced him with it then worked on finding snow that hadn't been walked on by them. Sephiroth hesitated to follow Cloud's order, but he was exhausted and the ground was cold. Laying his coat on it wasn't stupid. He hesitated longer with his boots, was it a scheme to slow him down in case of pursuit? Or just to hold him there? If so the blond would be surprised.

Returning, Cloud shoved the water flask in his hands. Looking at them, Sephiroth could see the tremor he shouldn't have. Hojo trained him not to show weakness even when terrified. He wasn't terrified right now. His hands were still pale and shaky.

“Drink, now.”

Sephiroth nodded, he was too tired to argument with the little Watcher face to him. Cloud threw him the emergency cover then tried to find something Sephiroth didn't catch in Cloud's mumbles. He wrapped himself in the cover, eyes dropping, but managed to take off his boots. They weren't comfortable, too wet and cold.

“There's no matches.” Cloud said, voice blank. Sephiroth observed him as he eyed the stove, like his anger alone could light it up. The blond was trembling from head to toes. His hands clenched and unclenched. As a way to warm them, Sephiroth thought.

The general sipped on the water, rubbing his toes under the blanket. Then he grabbed his fire materia. “I will do it.”

Cloud looked up. Moving faster than Sephiroth, he snatched the materia from his hand. The general stood, ready to fight, only to knock himself on the roof. He cursed and jerked away when a hand touched his arm. Sephiroth drew a shaking breath and eyed the blond with the materia.

“We only need a sparkle. You're too confused to make the spell.” They stayed silent until Cloud sat down. He mumbled, “Sorry for frightening you, but you frightened me.”

Sephiroth licked his lips, he returned to his coat and observed the man. His shaking body wasn't only due to the cold, but from tension too. He was visibly trying to calm himself before doing the spell. Sephiroth frowned.

“I wasn't frightened. But I'm sorry I made you panic.” Cloud snorted at his apology. “Although I doubt a Watcher know how to use materia in such a precise way.”

Cloud looked blankly at him. A sparkle jumped on the stove. It was a good answer, Sephiroth decided. He stayed cocooned in his blanket even if the wind swept at their feet and observed the blond as he dug out rations bars that he threw at him without kindness. The materia too.

Removing his own coat Cloud used it as a makeshift screen in order to stop the wind. Then he plopped on the far end of Sephiroth's coat. He glared at him, challenging him from removing him. When the general didn't seem to shoo him away Cloud nodded then started munching on his own military ration, a frown constantly on his face as he kept watch of the melting snow.

Sephiroth finally acknowledged he wasn't good, not a second did he find the situation he was on strange. Or strange enough for him to do something against it.

He was taken care by a Watcher.

“How did you find me?”

“Luck?”
Sephiroth frowned. Cloud moved farther and sat at the very edge of the coat. He tucked his knees under his chin and rubbed his hands.

“Uh, it's a family thing.”

It was evident that Cloud didn't want to talk anymore. Unfortunately for the blond Sephiroth's curiosity was a nagging thing.

“Why did you come then?”

Cloud opened his mouth only for it to snap shut. He glanced at Sephiroth before answering, “I'm doing that for Zack.”

“Why?”

“He was freaking out about your absence,” Cloud mumbled, head on his knee. “I just... need him to be okay. For that he has to have you back apparently.”

The silence stretched between them. Zack evocation seemed to have put Cloud into a melancholic state. Sephiroth eyed the backpack then the gears Cloud pulled off the bag. It was ShinRa material. Which was logical since Cloud came from the camp.

“I'm sure he his freaking out about your disappearance too,” Sephiroth remarked, hoping to be supportive. “He may be searching for us in this blizzard.”

Cloud's head jerked back, he fixed Sephiroth as his face morphed into confusion then horror.

“You should stop talking. I'm starting to regret not killing you,” Cloud growled.

Sephiroth's eyes twitched as his hand on the materia. He evened his breath and forced himself to relax. Attacking Cloud now wasn't the best course. He wasn't restored enough and needed all the rest he could have. Though, this night he wouldn't slept may the Watcher try something.

Outside the fiery of the storm prevented him from leaving the place. Not physically, but Sephiroth was reluctant to go outside anew. He preferred to stay snuggled up in the austere place. Even if he had a Watcher next to him.

Cloud kept melting snow until his water flask was full again. Then he turned off the stove and let his head fall on his knees. He stayed still so long the general believed him asleep. Sephiroth moved silently. He wasn't half standing that Cloud opened his eyes and fixed him.

Sephiroth felt the urge to lie, “I'm looking at the state of the storm.”

“I'm pretty sure you can hear it's still here.”

Cloud smiled, an easy motion that took Sephiroth by surprise.

“What? Do you think I'm holding you hostage?”

The blond laughed then shook his head, mirth radiating from him.

“I told you, I'm saving you for Zack.”

“You also told me you regretted not killing me,” Sephiroth recalled him. He inhaled and returned to his place, not seeing the blond as a menace anymore. Cloud was too relaxed, his anger had left him.
“The Watchers made you my primary target,” Cloud confessed, rubbing his hands and feet together. “I think not following their order is a good 'fuck you'.”

“Genesis would agree,” Sephiroth said softly.

“And you're still important for Zack,” Cloud muttered.

Sephiroth found himself glad for Zack's friendship like he never had before. Now warm, fed and hydrated, he could realize how bad he had been when Cloud found him. He wouldn't have went down without a good fight, but killing Cloud might have killed him in return. He remembered enough Watchers risking their lives only to hurt him for it not to be an option.

The General eyed the blond for the following minutes. He wasn't sure how to feel about the man. Cloud went out of the camp to kill him, but changed his mind. Did it warrant fear or gratitude? Sephiroth didn't know. But on the moment he felt pity for the shivering blond.

“You are cold,” Sephiroth remarked.

“You're hogging the blanket, and my coat keeps the place isolated.”

The General nodded and lifted his right arm. Cloud fixed him without moving for a long second.

“Are you … offering me to cuddle with you?” Cloud choked on his words.

“Sharing body heat,” he corrected. “I doubt Zack would consider me his friend if I let you freeze when you helped me.”

Cloud rubbed his foot on the edge of the coat, eyes downcast as he mumbled, “Good point. But I don't like... touching people.”

“Me neither.”

They eyed each other in silence then Cloud sighed loudly.

“For Zack then.”

Cloud was much smaller than Genesis or Angeal. He stayed curled on himself, only pressing his side to Sephiroth but the General found that he appreciated it nonetheless in such a situation.

In the morning the storm wasn’t diminished but Cloud stepped outside despite the absence of visibility. Sephiroth understood Zack’s comment about Cloud being a map. The blond guided them with the same ease than the day before in the heavy fog. In better shape, the General could notice how weird it was.

When he asked Cloud about his way of orienting himself, his answer didn't give any relief to Sephiroth.

“I found you. I can find Zack. Or a big group of people. But I prefer Zack.”

Then Cloud made his mother chocobo toward him, who was apparently his primary target, and watched as Sephiroth was feed and hydrated. Before Cloud, only his own soulmates and Zack were so direct in their attempt to care for him. Sephiroth found that Cloud fitted the original tale of the Watchers more than anyone.
Sephiroth learnt everything he could on the Watchers and their ties to the Wutaian Empire and why
the later didn't support the former, even informally. The Turks found out in fact.

Watcher was a bad translation of the original name of the group in old Wutaianese. A more close
signification would have been Guardian, and it was apparently the inadequate naming of the group
and their methods that angered the Wutaian. The Guardians of Gaia, a mythological clan from
whom the Watcher' group title was derived was very important for the Wutaian. Desecrating their
name by using the same methods as the enemy separated the fallen Empire from the Watchers.

There was not a lot on the original Guardians, except that they weren't Wutaian, lived in a mountain
and were thought to be a peaceful clan that abandoned something of great value and pledged to
protect what might be a cave. Sephiroth never understood the reverence the Wutaian had for the
logically extinct clan they only encountered once in their exploration centuries before.

Hojo even thought they might be Cetras but no trace of them using the distinctive Cetra powers
could confirm the theory.

Cloud corresponded to their description: fair skinned, never lost whenever they where and the eyes
of a predator but choosing kindness over hostility. Although the last one could be challenged, Cloud
seemed to care for him for Zack and out of spite toward the Watchers, not by pure generosity.

Cloud hummed, pulling Sephiroth from his mussing. During their walk the storm did calm down,
clearing their field of vision. The General creased his eyes and identified the black mass in the
distance as their camp.

The guards touring the camp saw them in return and informed others. In no time the camp was
bustling with movements and people. The duo kept walking in a sedated pace, not pressed now that
they were in sight of the camp.

Sephiroth's curiosity was poked when Cloud let his backpack fall on the ground then put his arms in
the air. The guards clearly saw the blond with him, they weren't menacing him.

“What are you doing?”

Cloud caught his eyes a second, looking surprised.

“Uh. I don't know?”

An awful screech was heard. The both of them startled. Zack hurtled toward them, the evil shriek
coming from him. Sephiroth prepared himself for a tackle-hug, a small smile lifting his lips at the
prospect. It was a shock to see Zack grab the petite blond by the waist and hug him tight. Sephiroth
convinced himself he was only surprised and not disappointed. He breathed deeply to unknot the
heaviness around his throat.

“I was so worried! I thought you ran away! But you just found Sephiroth and brought him back!”

“I'm sorry, Zack,” Cloud mumbled, holding the man in return, his feet dangling in the air. “I wasn't
thinking, just moving.”

“I'm not a mere dog who lost itself,” Sephiroth said curtly.

Zack turned his head from the blond neck and looked at him with humid eyes. Sephiroth looked
away, feeling bad.

“You still were lost.”
He let Cloud fall on his feet but kept an arm around his waist. Sephiroth didn't see coming the one-armed hug that pressed him to Cloud and Zack. He was surprised but being second was better than being ignored by Zack. Sephiroth looked around to see if they were observed and tensed as he saw all the SOLDIERs pointing at them. The duo of Lt. Generals approaching didn't help his unease. He couldn't let himself go entirely, but he needed to show Zack he reciprocated the affection. So he patted the puppy on his back.

“I'm hungry, Zack.”

The puppy jumped on the comment with a snake vivacity. Cloud exchanged a glance with Sephiroth telling him silently he did that for Zack to let go of him. The General nodded a silent thank you. Yet he longingly eyed the duo as they got away just as Genesis posted himself before Sephiroth.

“Hello Genesis.”

“Don't 'hello' me,” he hissed. “Do you know how worried we were?”

Sephiroth found the cold hair gave back colours to his fiery lover ready to lecture him. He looked at Angeal and found no help there. His eyes trailed to Zack and Cloud's backs. He should have said he was hungry too.

Chapter End Notes

a tendinitis which healed then a blocked nerve on the same hand make it difficult to use this week. Like, did you ever try to do your daily life with one hand? At least I'm ambidextrous... it's already hard to write with one hand I can't believe what it would be if I was a complet righty
Cloud didn't lose his scowl since the choppers arrival. Not that he had been very upbeat before, but now he had one more reason to glare and look threatening. Flore and Dirk seemed unaffected by his mood, but SOLDIERs eyed him carefully.

“C'mon, don't make this face, Spike,” Zack pleaded.

“Then come with me.” He knew he sounded childish, but he didn't care.

“I can't,” Zack moaned, desperate. “I have to stay here to secure the bam. Angeal's going to Icicle Inn, and Sephiroth is doing Super SOLDIER stuff with his own chopper.”

The Silver General merely raised one eyebrow at Zack's glare and thinly veiled jealousy. Cloud crossed his arms more firmly and scowled. For good measure he hit the ground with his boots and glared at it. A Turk leaned against his chopper eyeing Cloud since he got there. The stranger was noting everything and categorised it in his pesky head. Cloud didn't see others Turks and didn't recognise him. Although the Turks he knew and who were included in his mako delusion should be from his time as infantryman. Which was eons ago. Assuming he hadn't invented any people during his fantasy.

Assuming it was a fantasy, he thought to himself.

Cloud's scowl deepened at his thoughts. Zack whimpered, his hands clenching and unclenching toward the blond but not touching him.

“At least for once I'm not the only one punished and sent home,” Genesis commented.

“You're not punished,” Angeal sighed. “We're trying to protect you. Now everyone stop whining and get on the choppers.”

Zack whined, received a glare from Angeal for it and straightened. Cloud wanted to whine too. He was comforted when Zack hold his hands toward him asking for a hug then went for it anyway. Cloud melted in his embrace and hide his face on his shoulder. His scowl changed for as he fought back tears. He was a grown adult both by Nilbelheim and Midgard standards. He could hold his tears.

Except he wasn't in the Watcher and was face to face with his soulmate. It felt wrong to lie to Zack like that. He wrapped his arms around Zack and reciprocated the hug with as much strength as possible without hurting the First. He couldn't say out loud how he wanted to keep Zack next to him, so he hoped being childishly clingy would get the message across.

Cloud retrieved his composure and his frown when Zack pulled away.

“I'll be calling you,” Zack said.

“How will you do that if he doesn't have a PHS?” Genesis asked.

Angeal shook his head at Genesis, but the redhead ignored the other SOLDIER. He was sulking.
“It will be settled so you can call him,” Angeal said to Zack. “Now, get on the choppers and don’t make me repeat a third time.”

Genesis huffed and climbed first on one machine. Cloud took advantage of Angeal demanding Dirk and Flore to climb on the other chopper. He hopped on the same as Genesis and sat down next to him under the SOLDIERs baffled eyes. Angeal’s opened his mouth but Cloud cut him.

“How do you three Watchers on one chopper?”

The distrust was still clear on the Lt. General eyes yet Cloud didn’t expect Sephiroth to say something.

“He isn’t a threat, Angeal. He knows it isn’t in his interest to attack someone from ShinRa.”

Sephiroth locked eyes with him. The General’s intimidation was as subtle as a brick in the face. Though, the man wasn’t trying to hide it, Cloud was sure. A mentally stable person should have been scared shitless by Sephiroth threatening them. Instead, Cloud resisted the urge to stick his tongue out. He nodded and kept his face as grave as possible.

Zack pressed Cloud’s tight to retrieve his attention as the SOLDIERs coming back home climbed in. He looked pained making Cloud felt guilty for aggravating both of their ache at the separation. He patted his head. Not without cursing himself at his awkwardness.

“I’ll be okay, come back soon.”

Zack chuckled, “I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll watch him,” Genesis added, pulling a smile from Zack.

The pilot warned everyone of the departure as the propeller started in slow motion. Cloud’s heart jumped. He convinced himself it was because of the near experience of motion sickness and not the fact he was purposefully letting Zack behind him.

Seated on the edge of the chopper bench, Cloud fixed Zack until he was only a blurb on the ground. At least he didn't have vertigo or nausea. When they were too far for him to even see the edge of the camp Cloud sunk in his seat and crossed his arms.

He was returning to Midgar. On his own free will. Did the sector 7 plate collapsed? Or was it something that only happened in the dream induced by the Mako? And this Reno wouldn’t owe him money since it was after... after everything, that he started being on friendly terms with the Turks.

Cloud huffed as he knocked his head against the metal. He shouldn't ask himself that. He should only live in the present and trust what his eyes could see now. Cloud had had years to realise that even if it felt real the events that brought him to AVALANCHE and what he did with them never happened.

He just had to deal with a mind playing tricks on him and making him doubt he wasn't dreaming right now.

“So, why did you choose this chopper?”

The blond turned to the Crimson Commander, which mostly commanded from a desk now. Except when he was running away with a First Class commonly nicknamed Zack the puppy. Cloud’s eyes glossed over Genesis' strapped right arm but quickly settled on Genesis' knowing smirk.
“ShinRa won't attack the chopper with you in there.”

“Oh? But the other chopper maybe,” Genesis nudged.

Cloud smirked, he held Genesis' eyes, “Yeah, but this one wouldn't hold much longer then.”

The five others SOLDIERs seated around them tensed, but Genesis smiled and settled more comfortably on his place. He gave a head sign to the Turk.

“I do hope you hadn't in mind firing on the choppers. I think it would be ill advised now.”

The Turk didn't answer though his hands were typing rapidly on his PHS. Either to cancel their plan or note his deductions about Cloud's behaviour. Cloud held his gaze when he glanced at the blond. The Turk tipped his head in acknowledgement then sat staring straight before him.

Cloud hadn't his consideration, he did check on the SOLDIERs before they got up in the chopper but now he observed them carefully. He looked a bit longer at Genesis. His memories were vague, like for anyone else that didn't have a great role in his long fantasy, but he also had some insight on him by Flore. Genesis was her primary target, she needed to know his whereabouts although the redhead rarely left the ShinRa Tower, so the informations given to her were sparse. Cloud knew the man was sick, but looking at him made it clear.

Genesis was reading a leather bond book the blond didn't caught the title. But he was holding it with his left hand as his right was strapped in a medical sling tainted red. The hand Cloud saw was blocked in a perpetual claw-like state. The muscles of the wrist were tight, sometimes twitching. It was signs Genesis' hand was impotent. Though it wasn't the only sign of sickness. His skin was pale and gaunt on too thin limbs. Dark circle stood out under his eyes and the mako hue didn't hide the redness in the white of the eyes.

Then Genesis' hair. They were a dark ginger, the coloration was strange for a degrading SOLDIER and it ticked Cloud off. He squinted as he studied the redhead. Inspecting the base of the hairs Cloud could see they were white. He emitted a sound in his throat, satisfied to have found a solution to the mystery.

Genesis huffed, letting his book fall on his lap as he glared at Cloud, “Yes?”

“Is it dye?”

The man was startled, his hand coming toward his hair but falling on his lap before he touched it. Genesis took his book, not giving another glance toward Cloud who saw his jaw clench and the blush on his cheeks, “This is none of your business.”

Cloud was taken aback, everyone knew the man was sick, pointing it wasn't such a problem, didn't it? The blond pondered a moment on it, glancing at Genesis every few seconds. Was he Zack's friend? He didn't understand, but he could excuse himself, thought it was strange to do so.

“Sorry, I was curious. Talking about degradation is inevitable in the Watchers. Flore isn't as touchy about it.”

“Well, excuse me to be touchy about it!” Genesis snapped.

Cloud panicked, “It's look good on you?”

A SOLDIER snickered as Genesis' eyesbugled, “What? It looks good on me? Degradation looks good on me?”
“Not degradation,” Cloud said, he felt like jumping from the chopper right now. With Hel help he could survive the fall. “The dye.” He closed his eyes then decided nothing could go worse than that. “Though degradation doesn't seem to bother you. I mean, you're still alive after... years. Your tutelary Deity did help, right?”

Cloud was pretty sure Genesis was going to set the chopper aflame until his last words. The redhead smirked and leaned against the wall.

“You could say that. Although she didn't help me in the way you're thinking of.”

The blond nodded then decided not to open his mouth until their arrival. Though he was really curious about the reason the man seemed as healthy as an enhanced man in the early phase of degradation. He couldn't remember exactly the numbers of weeks Lydia had been affected but she wasn't as perky as Genesis. The redhead looked more like Flore who was at the debut.

With no distraction the worry gnawed at his guts without interruption making him nauseated. Or maybe it was motion sickness.

The trip was longer than Cloud expected, but he rarely took choppers to go on mission so he wasn’t expert on the question.

When he first saw a glimpse of Midgar, he had mixed feelings about the metallic structure. Dread was one. He could be walking – or flying – to his prison. Why would the highers up in ShinRa accept three Watchers to walk freely on their ground? Confining them was the best option.

ShinRa was also a known enemy. He wasn't going to trust them like he trusted the Watcher at first. They might try to use his flawed mind to manipulate him. They would realise why he was kept away from the four other strongest enhanced Watchers and the scientists, but still surrounded by enough enhanced people they could stop him from running away.

Cloud paused. He should ask Dirk and Flore to hide this particular part about him. For the element of surprise.

Midgar was also where he met AVALANCHE and Aerith in his Mako poisoned fantasy. Even if they were there, they wouldn't be the ones he grew to like, but a lot of memories where connected to the city. Some happy, sad or full of confusion, echoing in the present.

The chaos of feelings made Cloud's stomach lurch. That or the motion sickness.

Genesis was sick, but he wasn't dead and still had eyes. And a fairly moderate curiosity. Which helped bond with Sephiroth at first. But it wasn't the subject. The subject being Cloud Srife. Infantryman reported K.I.A in 0002 but well alive, with ties still unclear with the group named The Watchers. For all they knew he could be either a Watcher ordered to enter ShinRa or a real renegade.

In all honesty Genesis wouldn't have bothered to look after the blond without some pression. He didn't have the energy for that. But a little something tied him to the blond. Cloud's status was complicated by a secret only the Elite Trinity knew about in the SOLDIER Department: he was Zack's soulmate. And because Genesis had a heart under all his prickles he knew he would be forced to protect Cloud from Shinra, the Turks and everything at Midgar.

After all, during the last year, the trio took care of Zack as much as he did to them during missions or at the Tower. Genesis couldn't count the number of times the boisterous First had been here to be
sure Genesis ate or was fine without his soulmates. Genesis had a debt. Maybe more than one.

Although taking care of Cloud promised to be an ordeal.

After the little mishap about degradation, and being honest about it Genesis found it endearing in its awkwardness after his anger calmed down, Cloud had been silent and docile.

They arrived at Midgar and the Watchers plus a SOLDIER for each of them went to Lazard's office, where Tseng and Rufus waited too. Cloud complied with the Turks about participating in an interview-slash-interrogation and give all informations he had about the Watchers. He accepted a surveillance for the time being too and his little chicks followed his lead.

Then Lazard asked a little thing which changed Cloud from a complying human to a carapaced adamantaimai. Genesis was reminded that Cloud was voluntary trying to be passive and follow orders. Because he was also the guy who wasn't afraid to knock out a SOLDIER, stole part of his supplies and go into a storm to retrieve one person we were asked to kill for – presumably – years.

“We won't go in your labs!”

Lazard eyed his brother whispering with Tseng, but found no help. So he tried to calm the tiny enhanced man, “Understand that-”

“We won't go!” Cloud repeated.

Genesis sighed and leaned in his chair, he wanted to go to sleep. Yet everyone in the piece was tense and ready to jump on their swords. At least he didn't have to warn the boy about the labs; he already had an ingrained fear of them. Which Genesis understood contrary to all the others occupants of the office.

“I think that Lazard want you three to have a check-up,” Genesis started, picking Cloud's attention. He eyes Lazard and smirked, “And doctors can move some stairs. Or better: take lifts. Isn't it?”

Lazard pinched his lips together as Cloud observed him then Genesis. Cloud moved his weight from one leg to the other, considering Genesis' words.

“That will be the only option we'll accept.”

Cloud stormed off with his chicks on his heels, the SOLDIERS, not moving fast enough to hold them. Genesis chuckled, Cloud promised to exhaust him but he liked it. A bit of action wouldn't do him any harm. Quite the opposite. Genesis did sneak out of the tower to rejoin Zack to do something and not go insane.

The SOLDIERS followed after the ex-Watchers except one, a new Third Class completely lost. Rufus and Tseng exited without a sound, like the shadows they were, and Lazard sent away the poor remaining SOLDIER that didn't know what to do.

“Genesis, I need them to go to the labs.”

“You heard them. They don't want.”

“You don't want and still goes.”

“I don't want to die. Clearly not dying isn't high on their priorities list.”

Lazard sighed as he put his head on his joined hands.
“Also you're not allowed near any of the... ex-Watchers without any SOLDIERs in proximity. I promised Angeal.”

“You what now?” Genesis exclaimed, straightening up on his chair.

“He's worried for you,” Lazard said.

“He's paranoiac! They won't do anything to me!”

“Frankly, I'm agreeing with him. You don't seem to think they're dangerous, but the fact is: they're enhanced, you're not and they were enemies not a week ago.”

“I'm still enhanced, just sick,” Genesis hissed. “If I can't be alone with even one of them, they won't trust me and you can say bye bye to their trip to the labs.”

“Genesis, we need them to go for you, like for themselves. Apparently the girl is degrading too, which mean their enhancements are flawed, maybe in the same manner as you. More subjects mean-”

“I know how studies works! I spend half my life under scientists and medics' hands! I learned something during this time.” Genesis stood, reckless energy pouring in even if he still felt like taking a three days nap. He easily lied, “I'll see what I can do. But think about the stupid restraint you're giving me a bit more!”

“Gen-!”

The redhead didn't hear the last of his name; he was already down the hall, fuming with irritation. Angeal did something really shitty. The problem was that it didn't affect only Genesis. He was accustomed to both of his lovers protectiveness even if Angeal's was more and more important, letting him feel caged. But he could deal, or just ignore and step on Angeal's restrictions.

Angeal telltale put a big 'danger' on Cloud's head and his chicks for all the SOLDIERs to see. Genesis promised to himself, and tacitly to Zack, that he would protect the blond. Being far from him wasn't helping.

Everything would've been much simpler if Zack and Cloud weren't following that stupid cultural mutism on their soulmates' names.

Maybe he could let it slip himself? Or pay one of the Turk for that.

Maybe the problem would be resolved at the end of the Turks interview of the Watchers. They would give files about the basic things to know about each Watchers to all the SOLDIERs. Then they would know Cloud was Zack's soulmate and would be all lovey dovey with the blond. Or at least less hostile.

Genesis returned to their shared apartment and sunk into the couch, his head falling on the soft cushion. He closed his eyes and sighed.

What was wrong with Angeal? Before his departure Genesis talked about his willingness to look at Cloud and gave reasons that Sephiroth approved off. Cloud saved Sephiroth, and he was Zack's soulmate. He was to be secured. Genesis thought both of his lovers approved. Though Lazard only talked about Angeal, Sephiroth wasn't involved. He would not be happy about Angeal's move behind their back. It was a little reassurance for the redhead.

“What's wrong with you sweetheart?”
Hojo had had a fit when he found Angeal was degrading during a check up but couldn't say how the degradation affected him or where the sickness started. Genesis revised all the injuries his lover had those past month. Even the paper cut, because degradation was a bitch and didn't care about the gravity of the wound to start growing from it.

Genesis opened his eyes, struck by the answer. He gripped his right arm as his mind blanked. Angeal had been concussed on a fight, two weeks before Hojo's check up. It was too little to even warrant a cure, but apparently it was enough for degradation roots to settle in and start making damages.

Cloud eyed the SOLDIER that was assigned as his roommate for the undetermined future. The one that brought him here stepped aside then went back on his heels. Cloud was left whit the helmeted man seated on one of the two beds eating space in the little quarter.

The man retired his helmet to reveal tan skin and pale ginger hair. The man's face was covered in freckles and his smile was easygoing.

“Do you remember me?”

“No,” Cloud said.

The man's smile didn't disappear to Cloud's curt answer. He chuckled and nodded, seeming as positive as Zack.

“I'm Kusel, Zack's best friend,” he said, extending his hand. When Cloud didn't move from the entrance, he let it fall on his lap and leaned toward Cloud. “Zack warned me of your return. When an order was put for volunteers to present themselves for a mission of underdetermined length I poked around and found it's was about being a roommate for a Watcher. Being yours was easy.”

Cloud moved the mass of his body from one leg to another without saying a word. He didn't like the fact ShinRa employees expected him to sleep alone with a stranger. He should be with Dirk and Flore, watching after them. But they promised to be compliant, as compliant as reasonable, Cloud thought.

“To be honest with you, my goal is to be sure you can sleep soundly. Zack liked- like you very much and I'm doing that for him.” Cloud nodded, it was a reason he could get behind. “I'll be protecting you as I can but I have my limits. If you show yourself too hostile...”

He didn't finish his sentence, but his eyes spoke for him. Did Kusel had tried to be reassuring? He just made Cloud wonder about the reasons why his sleep could have been disrupted and if those reasons could happen to Dirk and Flore.

Cloud lay awake on the bed during all the night. He curled on himself as he realised what he did. He let Zack behind him when he should be watching over his safety then left Flore and Dirk alone in the same manner. He was unreliable. But he didn't let it pull him into a breakdown. He kept all senses turned to the exterior of the bedroom, waiting for a combat to happen.

Chapter End Notes
maybe I won't be able to post next week, you're warned
“Still no Turk,” Kunsel sighed. He turned around to look at Cloud still sat on the bed he didn't sleep in. Kunsel passed a hand in his hair then nodded to himself. “We'll go to the cafeteria. They'll find us if they really want your interview.”

Cloud shrugged, he could go days without food, even with his enhanced body needing more nutrient than a normal human. Maybe a slight hunger was part of the Turk plan for the interrogation. Enhanced people tended to be impulsive and distracted when hungry. The wait let Cloud think about how the interrogation would go, which type of interrogation it would be. The waiting time could have put him on edge if he wasn't so disconnected. Although he was certain the Turk interrogation would be more refined than a Watcher's one. Less physical torture and more mind tricks. Like making them wait to let them stew over the future interrogation and let them be hungry.

If it was a calculated move, a Turk would intercept them before they entered the cafeteria. To frustrate Cloud a bit more.

Though he wasn't going to refuse Kunsel's offer and followed him silently in the corridors. He may have used them in his infantry days for visiting Zack, but no memories came back to him. The place was too linear and impersonal for him to pinpoint an interesting thing that could trigger his memory.

Memorising the plan of the Tower promised to be hard. It was still necessary in case they needed the safest and fastest way of escaping.

The cafeteria was in the same cold colours as the rest of the building Cloud saw. Steel and plastic were the primary materials which made awful sounds on the linoleum. When he and Kunsel him arrived in the room – unstopped at Cloud surprise – all eyes turned to them in seconds. Recognising Cloud, the SOLDIER’s eyes stayed on them. Kunsel didn't seem bothered and went to the queue before the displayed food. Cloud felt out of place and not by his clothes, there was SOLDIERs in casual clothing all around. It was still something he was accustomed to. He was an outsider in the Watchers too.

Looking at the choice of food then his tray, Cloud was torn by indecision. There were too many things for him to choose. Everything made him salivate.

“Are you going to take something?” Kunsel asked, snapping Cloud out of his thoughts.

He nodded and took plat at random, choosing mostly by the colour of the stuffs. He finished with a pale green soup, some pasta and what he hoped was a chocolate dessert. Before they even where seated Flore entered, chatting with a petite blond Turk, a very bored SOLDIER following after them. Flore smiled at Cloud and waved at him with her right hand which was occupied with a small stress ball.

For the following minutes Kunsel and Cloud eat in silence. Well, Cloud at least. Kunsel was talking
with passing SOLDIERs or answering his PHS, but he left Cloud tranquil. The blond was glad for this little miracle, he wasn't alone, but he was at ease.

Cloud was halfway in his meal when a Turk approached them, putting an end at Cloud's relaxed state.

“Hey! I needed to see Cloud Strife twenty minutes ago. We agreed to meet at the dormitory.”

Kunsel turned to the Turk that just arrived, Cloud didn't know him. The blond consciously ignored the man. He wanted to finish his plat, he wouldn't leave till he had food on his tray.

“You were late, buddy.” Kunsel commented. “I was hungry, Cloud was hungry. We decided to go eat and wait for you there.”

“Well, I'm here, we can go.”

“Not before we finish,” Kunsel said then shrugged. Cloud eyed him. Kunsel wasn't the lest intimidated by the Turk next to him. “You don't want enhanced men starving.”

“Yeah, you wouldn't want that,” the petite Turk pipped up. “You just had to be on time.”

Cloud kept is mind on his meal. He was stuffing the more food possible in his mouth without bringing eyes on him. Which was difficult since the table he shared with Kunsel was the center of attention. He hated that. The only thing he wanted right now was a hiding place where he could ate and sleep without prying eyes. He couldn't, of course, because of one of his fuck-ups. Accepting to be trailed by a Turk and sleep with a SOLDIER in the same place.

Between bites he looked at Flore in front of him, just to be sure she was eating too.

His nose picked up a strange fragrance as the cafeteria doors opened. His eyes fluttered shut for an instant as he inhaled. He knew who carried this perfume. Each time the man was near, memories nagged at his brain.

“Good morning, my dears.”

Genesis plopped on a chair next to Cloud, the odour becoming almost too much. He frowned, noticing in the edge of his vision others SOLDIERs pinching their lips but saying nothing. Didn't Genesis have a less noticeable scent at the camp or during their trip in the chopper?

Cloud's eyes fell on Genesis' hand shaking even if put flat on his knee. The logical explanation was that Genesis spilled perfume on himself, the smell becoming overpowering. Frustration build up in Cloud as the odour tugged on his thoughts. He lost himself in his mind, scrapping at this nagging sensation of being within reach of the memory.

“Sir,” the Turk tried to catch their attentions.

“Cloud Strife!” Genesis called, poking his nose.

He jumped, clutching the thing in his hand and looked at Genesis chuckling quietly, his memory slipping away. Slowly he released his grip on his fork and set it aside. Genesis's eyes didn't stray from him. The Lt. General seemed worried.

“Just a memory,” Cloud said for the redhead. “About the perfume.”

Genesis lifted an eyebrow, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, “Banora apple?”
The memory hit Cloud as hard as the bottle that smashed against him all those years ago. A bubbling laugh, a bit shocked, left him. He lifted his hand to his forehead and stated, “You hit me with a bottle of perfume.”

Recognition lightened Genesis’ eyes. He huffed, crossed his free arm above the right one and sunk in his chair.

“I was trying to hit Zack,” Genesis said, the smile now firmly set on his face. “Although I'm happy I didn't. Angeal would have lectured me for days about hitting a SOLDIER with a bottle of perfume. I'm well aware it would have been hell for enhanced senses, but, like losing a full bottle wasn't devastating already I might had have to take care of Zack. So, hitting you was the best scenario.”

“I was knocked out, and Zack didn't come near me for three days,” Cloud mumbled. “It's awful in the eyes.”

“I healed you.”

“You didn't apologise.”

Genesis furrowed his brows then huffed, “I did!”

“You healed me.”

“That what I said.”

Silence fell around them as they eyed each others.

“Sir, I need him for his interview,” the Turk interjected.

Genesis waved a dismissing hand at him without even glancing toward the poor Turk. All things considered he was holding his composure pretty well for someone under so many SOLDIERs’ eyes. At least he kept them from looking at Cloud.

Genesis tried to grab a water bottle on the table but it was on his right side. He moved his right arm instinctively only to be stopped by the red sling. He resorted to his left arm with a frustrated scowl.

“That's the best you can get from him,” Kunsel whispered to Cloud.

He was listening from only one ear, the rest of his mind focused on the way Genesis struggled with his hand. After years he should have been mostly a lefty and don't need to remember to use his working hand. Yet Cloud just witnessed the contrary.

It explained why the red head was nowhere on a battle ground those last years. That, and he was an important face of SOLDIER, they weren't going to throw him in a fight he couldn't win like the Watchers so loved to do. ShinRa even found out how to keep him alive which mean they wanted him to stay like that. Or they were experiencing with him in case degradation started on others SOLDIERs, if they already had a medication it'll save the company enough money to compensate from keeping Genesis alive all those years. They still didn't spent money on physical therapy or Genesis would be using his left hand without thinking.

Cloud thanked Hel he was ambidextrous.

Genesis gulped his water, not without giving a dark look at his useless hand.

“Flore, ball.”
Kunsel tensed, ready to leap at the projectile. Cloud caught it with a smooth move, eyeing the SOLDIER in case he was going to jump on him. But Kunsel relaxed and observed him curiously as he put the ball in Genesis' right hand. The redhead blinked at the object as Cloud arranged his fingers to keep the ball in position. Cloud used the touch to test the strength in the fingers and their response to stimuli. They were fine, even if let unmoving for too long. The blond smiled to himself when Genesis moved his hand to grab the ball more effectively.

“There, you'll use it to muscle your arm.”

“My hand is useless,” Genesis said blandly before anger rose in his voice. He gripped Cloud's wrist, “Are Watchers all stupid? This is the second time you're talking about degradation like you can't understand what it means. Didn't one of your friend is affected? And you still don't understand how degradation work!”

Cloud blinked at the hissed words. He met Genesis' eyes which sparkled with irritation. The Turk came to fetch Cloud moved, wanting to stop any altercation that could happen. He stopped when Cloud pinned him with a glare.

“Do you?” Cloud asked, returning his attention to Genesis. “Do you know what degradation do to you? Do you know why removing the infected tissues does nothing? Flore, come here.”

The teen grunted but stood. She started rolling up her sleeve before being asked. Then she undid the bandage and presented her arm to Genesis. He grimaced at the open wound. Flore moved her fingers, Genesis turned his head away under her laugh. The movements made the muscles shift under the slashed skin darkened by degradation.

“The point is?” Genesis asked. “Except that by displaying your wound like that you're going to push the Science Department to put a hand on you even more.”

“The point is, even with pain the integrity of the limb is intact.”

“The pain is telling enough about how the limb isn't intact,” Genesis answered, leaning toward Cloud so they're face was inches from each others.

“We're full of mako,” Cloud sighed. “Things are a bit different for us, that's why there is a Science Department watching over you, SOLDIERS, with the Medical Department. Also, you'll use your arm. After you muscle it again. Because, yes, it's useless now.”

Genesis inhaled and exhaled, his breath tickling Cloud's cheek. His eyes bored holes in Cloud as he recited in a hushed tone:

“*I don’t listen to monsters I know them and all that they say

I see only beautiful faces

Good faces, sure of themselves

Certain soon to ruin their masters*”

Cloud stared at the read head blankly, still keeping the ball in Genesis' hand. The poem was pretty, but what was it saying exactly?

“You say I'm a monster?” Cloud asked, furrowing. Being insulted like that made him uneasy. He breathed, waiting for a response, but cut Genesis as the old religion from Nibelheim came back. It was always bit and pieces, but it was an easy think to remember. His mother talked a lot about the
Old Gods and the old way, “If so, you need to know that monsters are Deities' warnings where I come from, not mindless beasts killing for the pleasure of spilling blood. Sometime, they are the one giving the warning orally and disappearing.”

Genesis smirked, “Like prophets. Do you think you are one?”

“You recited a poem about monsters. I am one to you?”

“The word monster is used figuratively about someone denatured and unnecessarily cruel in this poem. By that I mean, I think you know nothing about degradation and you are trying to hurt me, either by ignorance or deliberately.”

Cloud spared a thought for the situation he was in. He was having a civil conversation with Genesis Rhapsodos about the sense of ‘monster’ and a poem. He was defending his point without being attacked on the spot. Though, if he was honest, if Genesis ordered it, the SOLDIERs around them would – try to – trample him. It was... refreshing.

He glanced at the people he could see from his spot and smiled. They were all ears, waiting for a sign from Genesis to attack. Others even looked bored or rolled their eyes like Genesis coming to start such conversations in the cafeteria was common.

“Sky—... Cloud is studying it!” Flore said. “He made Lydia live two months more than the average degrading Watcher.”

“You did?” Genesis asked, his interest returning.

Cloud grimaced, Flore gave him an apologetic smile. She was good to keep secrets... when she remembered to keep herself in check.

“I worked with doc on it,” Cloud answered. “It was a bit, hum, laborious since I would forget a lot after a mako pull. But I had everything noted.” He paused, sparing a thought for the now lost knowledge. “I should have taken the notepads.”

When escaping he only thought about Zack. Yet he had a responsibility toward Flore too. Without his notepads his mind was fuzzy about Doc and his theories. The realisation of his fault saddened him. He always found a way to fuck up apparently. Although, the notepads had both his and Doc scrawl, bit and pieces of thinking or even memories. Doc had never said anything about those last texts and writing them helped Cloud remember. Sometimes Doc even had noted in the margins if the specific memory was true or not.

“You know what are the two principals ingredients to form a SOLDIER?” Cloud asked to change his mind from this train of thoughts.

“Just to be clear—” He slid a foot behind Cloud's chair leg. With a swift move he brought Cloud closer so they were face to face. Genesis leaned toward Cloud. “Are you implying you know how to cure degradation?”

“I didn't say I know how, but I was working on it,” Cloud answered leaning toward Genesis too.

“Do you need a lab? I surely can force them to give you one.”

Cloud shook his head, “It was only theories. Beside I won't go to the labs, I told you. I can't help you. I can't help anyone.”

Genesis huffed and sunk in his chair, not releasing Cloud's. The eerie silence was more noticeable
without Genesis’ voice to covert it up. He glanced around and noticed the stare given by the SOLDIERS. He wasn't being discreet.

Talking about being discreet. Cloud thought Genesis hated talking about his degradation, but he was interrogating him in a room full of people. Plus two Turks.

“So what do you know?”

Cloud sighed, he would have liked to go with the Turk now. He preferred being interviewed with only few people observing him rather than an entire cafeteria. Yet Genesis hungry eyes hold him. The man seemed to crave for any knowledge about his degradation.

“It's like... a constant battle between J-Cells and Mako. Both attach themselves to cells in our body. Except Mako hold on more easily, the J-Cells can lose their hold and degradation happen because they kill the cell when leaving it. Then they wander as unattached cells and cause all sort of problem. It's like cancer, a cancer that make you age too fast.” He paused, inhaling. He started missing the notepads more and more now that they had been mentioned. “Sometimes J-Cells are more present than Mako in the body, in this case mutations happen. Yet there a third option...” Cloud trailed off, gripping his left arm.

“It's?”

“Geostigma.” Cloud breathed.

“I never heard of it,” Genesis said. “What does it do?”

Cloud paused. In this reality, did he ever have geostigma? He couldn't be sure. He recalled seeing his arm darkened by the malady, but was he in a Watcher uniform or the modified First? Maybe he was talking about a malady that didn't exist in reality. The notebooks in doc's lab existed for the sole purpose of helping him remember. He liked his lips, rubbed his knee and glanced around. He was still the center of attention with his explications. “It's rare. Anyway, I told you I can't help.”

Genesis grabbed his wrist as he stood. Panic blossomed in Cloud's heart. He grabbed the first sharp thing. His hand stopped the fork a few inches from Genesis' throat. Kunsel's fingers didn't grab Cloud's other wrist, but he felt their brush on his skin. Sounds of abruptly pushed chairs still resonated in the room. Breathing hard Cloud glanced around. He planted the fork in the table and shook his wrist free. Genesis seemed unfazed.

“Anyway, I asked Lazard what he wanted to do about you. He's looking at veteran pensions for you, he'll need to convince Heidegger first. Then, he's unsure about your friends. You should think about a solution before you see him again.”

“When?”

A loud hit against the cafeteria door made them froze. They turned to see a redhead Turk, hands in his pockets.

“Yo! Tseng send me. He's losing patience.”

“After your interview with the pestering Turks,” Genesis answered.

Cloud nodded as the Turk waved at him. He glanced at Flore, caught her eyes and nodded toward the door. He didn't want to let her with a room of SOLDIERS.

“Can you move? We're busy, yo!”
“Reno,” Cloud sighed.

“You remember me!” Reno exclaimed. “Woah, it’s like, the highest praise for someone that forgot himself!”

Cloud closed his eyes and counted to ten, “You owe me money.”

There was a 50% chance Reno really borrowed some cash from him.

Reno gasped loudly then followed Cloud outside, “I see how it is. You’re a materialist. Fuck, I thought you were a cool dude. I preferred you dead.”

Leaving the tense cafeteria was a blessing. Even more when he caught Flore and Elena exiting before he was too far.

Chapter End Notes

*Paul Eluard, The human face, I

well... even with one more week to work on it I still don’t like it. It just feel so unnatural. But I practice the new method: ’I don’t care slap the chapter on people's faces and run fast’ rather than agonise on the chap for three more weeks.
Cloud let himself fall in one of the two chairs in the room. Tseng sat across from him and put a folder on the table but didn't open it at first. Cloud looked around, noting Reno and Tseng places then the camera. He sighed as he crossed arms and legs. He purposefully hit the table with a knee to realise it was fixed to the ground. Tseng send him a look that said he knew what Cloud did that for. The blond stared back.

Behing Tseng, Reno leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets and moving an old toothpick with his mouth. He smiled at Cloud when their eyes meet.

"Are you going to ask questions or are we going to look at each others in silence for the next hour?"

Tseng made what could be seen as a smile then crossed his legs, without uttering a word. Cloud's chest expended as irritation swelled in him. He exhaled and let the silence of the room lull him. If the Turk was trying to test is patience he'll bite his fingers. Cloud could spend days without talking. Not moving wasn't a problem either.

He looked up at the ceiling and lost himself in his thoughts.

"Please, state your full name, your age and you lieu of birth."

"Cloud Strife, 18, Nibelheim."

"It this stated in this report witnesses heard Lieutenant Zack Fair and you talk about Old Nibel names. Can you state them?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It's religious. Anyway my name is Cloud Strife outside of my mother home. Why do you need them?"

"To be sure you are who you say you are."

"Well, except from my mom and Zack, nobody could confirm the names. I can say anything I want, if that makes you happy."

Tseng sighed, he closed his eyes longer than for a blink.

"How long were you part of The Watchers?"
"I'm sure you have a more exact date than me."

Tseng breathed, his chest heaving at the movement.

"Please, Cloud, speak your mind."

"I already do. I don't know the date of my disappearance; I can't give you the length of my... stay."

Tseng nodded and choose to drop this question.

"Did you join them voluntarily?"

"No."

"How were you taken?"

"I was abducted."

"When and how?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"I'm sure you're already aware Mako can mess with your memories."

The silence returned, Reno moved his toothpick an inch. Cloud inhaled, bored.

"What are Dirk and Flore for you?"

"We follow the same chocobo riding classes."

Reno's snort woke up Cloud from being on the moon. He breathed silently and resisted the urge to bite his lips at his impulsive response. Tseng didn't seem to have taken ombrage of the answer, he gave a blasé look and crossed his hands on the table.

"Do not make me repeat."

"I don't know, they're not friends."

"Lovers?"

Cloud shuddered, "No."

"Mentees?"

Cloud paused and shrugged one shoulder, "Close enough."

"What is the life in the Watchers?"

"Terrible."

Tseng kept his eyes on Cloud, unwavering. Cloud waited for the next question. In the other reality induced by his mako poisoning he had a conversation with Yuffie about interrogation tactics. Since she had been arrested a bit too much for such a young girl. At least, she always found a way to run away. Her favorite tactic to deal with was when the cop asked questions and stayed silent until the person face to him filled the uncomfortable silence by speaking at length. Which Yuffie loved. She
talked and talked and often time managed to give the cop a headache.

Curious, Cloud lifted his head from the crucial observation of his own nails. Was this the true reason for those lengthy silences?

“Can you be more specific?” Tseng asked, his tone clipped.

Cloud's lips quirked up a second but he controlled himself not to smile. He was right. Which was disconcerting. He remembered things that never happened from a crazy future and yet hardly remembered his time as a trooper or at Nibelheim.

“Terrific.”

Tseng took a breath. He looked to a point above Cloud's head, and the blond had the certitude Tseng was resisting the urge to roll his eyes. The Turk put his hands on the table, made a sign to Reno and rose. They exited the room under Cloud's curious eyes. Where they going to let him marinate alone until he cracked and became talkative?

“Reno, you're going to ask the questions.”

Cloud was surprised to hear Tseng. He thought the room was designed with SOLDIERs enhancement in mind. Although he was at a First level on this domain, the sound-proofing could be only for lower ranking since he still had to listen carefully, focusing on the faint conversation, but he heard all.

“What? Why me? Not that I refuse, but what's your reasoning, yo?”

“Because you resemble Genesis.”

There was a pregnant pause where Cloud had to force himself not to emit the sound of disbelief that took him. He couldn't saw any similarities between Reno and Genesis; they didn't give the same signature at all in Cloud's mind.

Reno said in a high-pitched tone, “I swear to Shiva if it's because we're red head, I quit! And Genesis isn't even a natural red head anymore!”

“Reno,” Tseng sighed. “I know Rude and Elena tease you too much about it, but there no link with your hair colour. You're both passionate and have a smooth way of moving. When you're not stumbling on your toes.”

“And you think it'll help him talk?”

“Reno, you're a good Turk. Make him talk.”

“Sure sir, I'll make this little shit spit out his darkest secrets.”

Cloud pondered on the conversation. They could be trying to trap him by knowing he could listen. It was a bit convoluted and they didn't say anything remotely important, but Cloud was wary of every action from the Turks. And others people.

Also Reno was right, the only resemblance between him and Genesis was their hair colour and yet it still wasn't truly the same.

They came back, Reno with a spring in his steps.

“So,” Cloud started. “You're doing the serious cop and the flippant one?”
“Isn’t it the good and bad cop normally?” Reno retorqued.

Cloud shrugged, “I’m not an expert. You tell me.”

Reno sprawled on the chair, propped his feet on the table and crossed his hands on his stomach as he started rocking his chair. Behind him, Tseng leaned on the wall, arms crossed and eyes swift.

“Can you describe your life with the all-black dudes? And please give all the gritty details, I love that.”

Cloud decided to be less of an asshole.

“There’s not so much to say. There was a dichotomy between enhanced and non-enhanced soldiers. We had to fight to have enough food. Or hunt when we could be outside. Sometimes we spent months held inside. And then we’d had to go on missions.”

“What were the kind of missions?”

“Fighting against ShinRa troops. Making Mako reactors explodes.”

“Explosions, yeah, that’s cool, but did you ever fight enhanced people?”

“Obviously.”

“Did you kill some?”

“Obviously.”

Reno leaned a few centimeters toward Cloud, returning all the chair legs to the ground in an irritating sound.

“You realise SOLDIERs are prized for the company and you are going to pay for any damages done to those precious jewels-dudes?”

Cloud blinked, his mind going fast, “We weren’t talking about SOLDIERs.”

“C’mon, don’t lie! Yes, we were.”

“You said enhanced people. You could have been more precise.”

Reno leaned back again, considered his words and nodded. He was still on two feet of the chair which tempted Cloud to push Reno's feet enough for him to fall flat on his back.

Reno groaned and rolled his eyes. “Fine, let's say you're a bit more stupid than I thought. Now I'll be precise: Did you kill enhanced Watchers?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Dominance fights, fights for food, fights for comfort,” Cloud listed before stopping. “Do I need to continue?”

“No, I think I understood the pattern. Fight for anything, uh?.” Reno nodded with big movement that made his hair fly in all orientations. “Anyway, there wasn't any authority figure keeping all the Watchers on their toes?” Cloud nodded. “ ‘kay, did you kill SOLDIERs?”
Cloud could lie, it's wasn't like he was against lying. Not in this situation anyway. But he wasn't sure about what Dirk and Flore had said. After leaving Lazard's office the first day, he barely had time to tell them they should restrict all informations about him and his capabilities, especially about his many quarrels with the little group of enhanced Watcher where all the best fighters where gathered. Arguably, Cloud thought the most irritating of the Watchers where in this group.

“It was that or I was killed,” Cloud said in a breath. “Is ShinRa going to ask money for compensation?”

“It could,” Reno answered. “Before you wallow about your futures debts, can you talk to me about the day your squad was attacked.”

Cloud tilted his head and crossed his arms, “I can't remember much.” He paused. “The place was tranquill. I don't know why we were here. But the place was tranquill. Still, we advanced with caution.” He took another inspiration as he forced himself to fish slippery memories. “There were monsters. Not a big deal, but then there was a blast. I- … I thought-” Images of a ShinRa helicopter flashed before his eyes. He held his breath then exhaled, clasping the memory in a part of his brain. He hoped he would remember it until he could write it. “I was confused by the explosion, and the rest is lost. I can't help you.”

Reno hummed without taking his eyes off of Cloud as he rocked his chair. Cloud stopped himself from making his legs jump under the pression and kept the red head gaze. For the first time Cloud felt uneasy under the scrutiny of the Turks, but he couldn't say he saw the ShinRa logo on the chopper. He doubted it himself and saying it out loud could be interpreted as an accusation. A thing ShinRa dealt with swift disappearance if money didn't work first.

An illumination made him grin.

“What ShinRa's going to do to retribute me?”

Reno lost his composure a second then frowned.

“What do you mean, yo?”

“I mean, I was a trooper and I was caught by its enemy, I was tortured to the point of losing my identity and fighting against ShinRa.”

“It will be discussed,” Tseng interrupted. “Though we need all the informations before that.”

Cloud hummed but didn't lost his smile. He wasn't foolish as to think ShinRa would retribute him. It was just to mess with them, even just a bit.

“I understand. Then, what will I receive for all the informations I'm giving you?”

This time again Tseng seemed to be taken aback by Cloud's question. The blond was disappointed, the rumor said Turks could think in advance of all the response their interlocutor could give.

“They are free in exchange for a roof above your materialistic head and food, yo,” Reno interjected.

“No, they aren't free,” Cloud said in the same tone. “Food and a roof aren't a good payback. Do you think I can't live by myself? Also, if I'm considered M.I.A then I will be paid veterans pension. Food and care are also provided. I know I'm a Watcher too. Yet I helped a group of SOLDIERs survive and I'll be giving you much needed informations.”

“Your chicks can give them too, without needing retribution.”
“Are you sure?”

Reno moved his awful toothpick to hide his pout. Apparently he wasn't so sure. Tseng wasn't speaking up either which meant they perfectly knew Dirk and Flore had less informations than him. Cloud hoped it would be in their favor. Reno sighed and crossed his arms.

“None of our SOLDIERs said the escape was prepared-”

“It was. Except it wasn't including some lost SOLDIERs.”

“None of your chicks talked about paid informations, yo!”

“They don't have a lot to bargain for. We were part of a branch shut of the principal Watchers' group and they never read my notepads.”

Reno jumped on the last sentence, “About those notepads. Where were they?”

Cloud blinked, taken by surprise by the sudden interest in those.

“In Doc's lab.”

“Where exactly?”

“Doc could tell you that.” Cloud paused. “Is he dead?”

“Why are you asking us that, yo?”

“If you didn't find the notepads in the bam, then he's either dead and the others scientists stole his works or he left the bam with it.”

Reno made a pout as he thought and played a rhythm on the table by hitting it with his fingers.

“We only found some corpses in the bam. Including a degrading young woman fitting the description made by Lieutenant Zack Fair and his squad.”

“Lydia.” Cloud nodded. Her evocation made his chest tighten. He had given everything to help her. But even that wasn't enough. The worst had been to witness her lose her will to live. She kept saying that she was willingly to give her life to help them escape. It had been a quiet sort of ideation of death until Cloud could see her reflect on killing herself before the degradation did it. The only thing that stopped her had been the idea suicide would help no one she cared about.

She had been so advenced, Cloud had thought she was better dead too.

Reno paused in his little music and looked at Cloud with a frown, his smile vanishing.

“That's all? I tell you one of your chick is dead and you nod?”

“She was ready to make this sacrifice.”

Reno lifted a brow but said nothing more about Lydia.

"Now can you talk to us about he Numbers?"

"Numbers?" Cloud raised his eyebrows. “Numbers are mathematical objects used to count and measure,” Cloud smirked. “I'm sure you heard of it, it starts with 1, 2, 3-”
“You're so funny, look I'm pissing myself laughing,” said Reno, rolling his eyes. "The last sympathiser of the Watchers we found understood our nicknames. Apparently they use them too."

"Well... our settlements were always far away from bigger branches. Informations travel poorly between them."

"Well, those dudes kick ass.” stated Reno opening the previously forgotten folder and throwing it to Cloud. “Even SOLDIERs Firsts' asses. They're the big guys capable of killing Firsts one on one.”

Cloud tilted himself above the table and took a good look at the photographs spread before him. It showed Firsts against enhanced Watchers, thought he only recognised Sephiroth, Angeal and his Zack. He focalised on Sephiroth against a Watcher. A duel wielder. Yet he pointed the one against Angeal first.

“This one I don't know, the sword don't give me hints to identify them. And those... Numbers, change members a lot, because of degradation or good old killing.” then he pointed the lance wielder against Zack. “This is Kira.”

Cloud leaned back in his chair and pondered giving more infos about those Numbers. He knew them and they didn't change members that much. Only one was often changed, the rest was stable in their positions.

"Hum,” sounds of swords clashing echoed in his head. "I know a few dual wielders, but they aren't strong enough for Sephiroth. There was Elio but he changed branch. I dual wield too, sometimes. But I'm no match for Sephiroth."

He wasn't surprised when it picked up the interest of the two Turks. Cloud's heart picked up speed. He ignored it in favour to seem controlled. He was trying to lure them on his strength.

"Oh, really?"

"That's why he was my target. It was a doomed mission. I am just here to serve as an inconvenience until a better fighter than me could take my place. My goal was to hold Sephiroth by all means. Even dying."

Cloud nodded to himself. He had said more than enough about the Watchers to be considered as a cooperating 'prisoner'. He could relax a bit and use his patched memory to look like he couldn't answers others questions.

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Alone in his quiet apartment Genesis glanced through the ex-Watchers' files. He had to give a – metaphorical – arm to the Turks in exchange for it. He sipped his apple juice, giving a melancholic thought to the times he could drink wine without being forcefully stopped by one of his lovers.

He took the last folder; Cloud's.

Sephiroth rubbed off on him. Now he kept the best for the end. In any domain.

Cloud's files were both the best and worse of the trio. It was interesting but also heartbreaking. Cloud had a good position in the Watcher. By that the Turk clarified it meant the blond was strong enough to fight for his food or a place to sleep. Strong enough to protect two younger Watchers and take them under his wing. From what the Turk gathered from the three, Cloud was a mama chocobo. In return his chicks were glued to him and protected him during 'pulls'. 
Another interesting thing. Which would attire the Science Department even more. The boy was subject to relapses in mako poisoning. Harmless enough that they referred it as 'something that happen'.

Genesis muttered it to see if it sounded less stupid aloud, “Mako poisoning is something that happen. No need to panic.”

It didn't work.

For the redhead it still wasn't the worse thing. Cloud's memory was shredded to pieces. He managed to hide it pretty well in his own interview, but his chicks had been less careful. Plus the Turks spied on the Watchers since their arrival and Cloud said a lot. To him mostly. Genesis could find a tiny bit of him sorry for having contributed to pull answers from the ex-Watcher.

At least the Turks assured the interviews proved the three ex-Watchers were renegades and not spies. Although Genesis could have answered that under a minute, who created such stupid plans to spy on people and hoped they worked? Nobody, that is.

The ex-Watchers talked also about the life in the organisation and Genesis was baffled such a disorganised group could hold it's gound against ShinRa.

He took another mouthful from his drink and put the wine glass on the table. The stress ball offered by Cloud rolled a bit and stopped against notepads Genesis took to make notes. He didn't take any notes. Genesis played with a notepad's corner. He had an idea. It wasn't very safe. But the notepads were little. They could be hidden on someone.

“We'll see later!” he said before falling on his couch and pulling out Loveless.

Only to straighten up and grab the notepads. Genesis knew how it was to be incapable of trusting his own mind. He was more susceptible to bout of emotions than memory loss, but whatever. It counted as the same for him.

He found the blond in the SOLDIER’ lounge, huddled in a corner. He clearly was looking at his chicks with the raptness of a mother watching over her kids. It would be funny if not for the tension reigning in the room. Maybe the SOLDIERs reacted to Cloud's tension or the other way around, it didn't change the fact the atmosphere was tense.

Cloud's attention reported on him the instant he stepped on the room. He was wary of him. Genesis grinned, and, maybe, puffed his chest. But he attracted the worried eyes of all his SOLDIERs too. If Cloud was a mama Chocobo, what were the SOLDIERs? Over-eager puppies? Somehow it sounded like an insult to Zack. Although the Puppy™ Angeal took as mentee matured a long time ago. He had to think a new nickname to put in his PHS for Zack's number.

Walking toward Cloud, Genesis pulled out the notepads and scribbled rapidly Zack and his numbers. His mind still half on the nickname for Zack. Or he should just change his analogy with the flock of SOLDIERs. Dogs wanted to please their master, not watch them like he was a prisoner.

Which mean they preferred Angeal. They obeyed him rather than Genesis after all.

Genesis groaned and a frown took place on his face. He stood before a confused blond looking at him. The Lt. General gave him the notepads. The eyes on them irritated him more and more. He thought he learnt to deal with it, but the renewed intensity of their scrutiny grated on his nerves. He wouldn't support that for long each time he wanted to talk to Cloud.
He died to burst them aflame. He wanted them to remember what SOLDIER we had been.

“Here, I don't use them,” Genesis all but barked.

Cloud startled but took the notepads, “Okay... thanks?”

Genesis turned around, anger boiling in his veins, “I won't break only because someone looked at me wrong! Go training rather than slouching here! What are you? SOLDIERs or grandmas?”

They jumped on their feet and flew the room. Cloud passed next to Genesis with a more sedated pace. He looked at the redhead with clear confusion written on his face. Genesis felt the urge to explain his outburst. From the corner of his vision, he saw only Kusuel waiting at the door.

“I hate being observed like a circus freak. I prefer awe to worry,” Genesis said. “I'm going to push Lazard around for him to regularise your status here.”

Cloud nodded, then followed Kusuel. Genesis smiled at the reverence he saw in the blond's eyes as he got away. Alone, Genesis let escape a trembling breath. Another minute under those eyes and paranoia would have kicked his ass. And him theirs.
When Genesis said Lazard wanted to talk to him after the Turks, Cloud expected a long power struggle between the Head of Department and him. That what he got before Rufus arrived. At Lazard's face, Cloud knew the man wasn't happy to see Rufus. Cloud couldn't decide what to feel. He didn't know enough of the man to understand how his presence would change the game.

Rufus swept away game's pieces to put a totally different one in place.

“So, Lazard looked over for a veteran's pension. Know that Heigheger will throw you under the train. He's going to ask the Turk to do something about you. They won't. Because you're going to be our advisor on all Watchers' matters. Don't you?”

Rufus, leaning against Lazard's desk, waited for an answer.

“Uh ?” Cloud shook himself. “What about Dirk and Flore?”

“They too.”

Cloud's mind raced as he examined the blond and Lazard who had his face in his hands. Rufus ShinRa was the son of the President ShinRa. There had to be a trap.

“Lazard was trying to get you there. But he had to pass by complicated ways because he's a complicated man who wants the best end of the deal. I'm being clear. We want everything we can on the Watchers.” Lazard looked at Rufus with disbelief but Rufus keep talking. “Every memory the three of you have, your input about their actual movements and in exchange you'll have access to degradation medicines, though it does not cure it but manage the symptoms, a place to live and a paycheck. What do you think?”

Cloud wanted to be left alone and bug in peace, he couldn't believe the Vice-President was giving him such an opportunity. His mind was flashing him signals of suspicion and urged him to find where the trap was. Yet Lazard had still his head in his hands, he shook it during Rufus' speech.

“When should I give you my answer?”

“Tomo-”

Lazard was cut short by Rufus, “You have one week starting today.”

Cloud couldn't help his little grin when Lazard made an annoyed noise from the bottom of his heart, eyes huge with irritation. Rufus was smiling, content with himself. He had the poise of someone knowing he was giving you the best deal and you wouldn't refuse. Who could give a better proposition than the Vice-President of ShinRa? Rufus could be confident as he wanted, nobody proved him wrong.
Though Cloud was still wondering why his – and his chicks – states interested him. Ordering the Turks to obtain those informations by all means was certainly a good alternative rather than paying him with a contract.

“Thank you.” The words felt weird on his tongue, thanking two powerful men of ShinRa was surreal. “I will give you my answer soon, then.”

He stood awkwardly as he felt so out of place discussing a possible contract, a thing so normal when his life was not. A heartbeat after he straightened to his full height, months of conditioning making him react instinctively so he wasn’t looking weak or even tired. The two men nodded, Rufus even shook his hand with a smile before he left. Cloud let his ears pick up the conversation between the two.

“You've ruined it, Rufus. I could have asked way more from him.”

“He has nothing, Lazard. What more do you want to ask from him? In the reports it was clear any of them could change their mind and leave the Tower overnight. They left the Watchers; they can leave the Tower.”

The only thing Cloud heard from Lazard was a low garble then complaining about the youth of his brother. He still was uneasy, but wasn’t panicking, things just seemed wrong. Door handles were too far, lift buttons too spaced out from one another and the ground moved around. The talk couldn't have made him so anxious as to make him feel ill, the only reason for his sudden weakness was his lack of sleep.

Cloud closed his eyes and leaned against the lift wall. SOLDIERs and un-enhanced people entered or exited and their movements were the only reason he remembered to move too. He went for the lounge since his babysitter, Kunsel, should be here.

The day was nearing its end so a lot more SOLDIERs were there. Turks too at Cloud surprise. And not just Elena and Katana who were following Flore and Dirk respectively. Reno should have been around Cloud, yet he was already here with a lot more Turks than the two cited. Drinks and food were present on the table always full in the corner but also on the others were SOLDIERs played card games normally. In fact, all furnitures had been moved to the center of the room where the people gathered and a white screen rolled out. It looked like preparations for a party.

“Cloud!” The call was followed by Kunsel waving at him from the couch he was on. “It's movie night. Help yourself for a drink or food. Also if you want to leave, just tell me.”

“Wouldn't you want to stay finish the movie?” Cloud asked.

Kunsel shrugged and talked about having seen this movie too much with Zack then resumed his previous conversation with the red head Turk who wasn't Reno. Reno who was at the buffet, filling his mouth and flirting with another Turk. Not far from them Dirk was doing the same minus flirting. Flore was with Elena and two others Turks, talking in ushered tones.

Cloud wanted nothing more than sleep yet a movie night grew on him. Mostly because Kunsel implied Zack loved this movie for having seen it so much. Participating could let him talk with others SOLDIERs but mostly Dirk and Flore. As he came close to Dirk and the food, nobody stopped him. They were too relaxed for monitoring them, or the Turks were enough for them to dissipate their attention and watch over the trio of ex-Watchers in passing rather than a continued surveillance.

The movie night shared with Turks was a novelty for Cloud, but he approved the heap of drinks and food. With a bit of luck, all those SOLDIERs wouldn't eat everything in half an hour and Cloud
could eat later. He liked better eating a little each time but more often.

Without thinking he started scanning the lounge again, noting his 'chicks' emplacements but searching for a certain red head. If Kunsel was occupied and the 'no touching, no talking' was still applied – albeit loosely – for his interaction with Flore and Dirk, he'd like some company.

Reno came close to him, so Cloud took advantage to ask, “Genesis doesn't come?”

“Nope! Now, the guy like sleeping better, yo!” Reno pushed him with his hips so he could reach the plat of mini-pizzas. “What? You're sad? You're already so attached? Wow!”

Cloud sighed, a nice nap without nightmares sounded better than a movie. But he had the bad luck of being incapable to sleep with a person he didn't trust and he was forced to sleep in the same room as Kunsel. If he was a kind guy, Cloud wasn't the trusting type.

He pushed Reno from his path with the same hips blow the red head used. Reno tripped on his own feet and sprawled on the ground, his plate saved from spilling, Cloud took the last chocolate donut the Turk had aimed for. He crossed Reno's eyes, huge with surprise, and smirked as he took a bite of the donut.

“I'm starting to hate you, yo,” Reno mouthed.

Rather than fighting over food with Reno, Cloud went to find a place to eat in relative peace. Which became impossible when the first images started being projected on the white screen. People moved around, raising their voices in excitations before someone was forced to shush them. People found seats where they could, next from friends, but Cloud backed away from the main heap of bodies. He found a place against the wall with pillows – army issued, so not very comfortable but better than the ground – and sat with an eye on the movie and another on the exit.

Dirk came to him first, he was an asshole and didn't make friends because of that. Cloud sometimes wondered who he supported the man. He didn't remember who he ended up with him, but he never doubted Dirk loyalty. Dirk was his asshole. Flore was the social butterfly of the trio – quartet before Lydia's suicide – which worried Cloud when in the Watchers. She'd move away too much, risking being snatched in a fight without one of them to help her. Although her heap of acquaintances did help her in this exact situation. Once. After that, the olders three keep an eye on her at any given time. She made quick friends then stripped them of any informations they had on the others branches of the Watchers. Flore was their own little Turk.

Cloud swept away the hand that tried to steal his food. Dirk frowned then settled back against the wall, his shoulder touching Cloud. It was the most he allowed.

The movie was long started when Flore plopped next to them and tried to steal some food from Cloud too. He pinched her arm and made big eyes at her. She made puppy eyes in hope to mellow him, but he protected his food. Also, Zack made better puppy eyes.

With a quick scan of the piece, Cloud saw that nobody paid them too much attention. Most of them dozed of on the nearest shoulder offered.

Flore scowled, crossed her legs and stretched. In the motion she managed to sign in the baby sign language she had from the orphanage that she had no informations. The logical conclusion was that it linked to the 'contracts' Rufus proposed. Then she let her head fall on Cloud's thigh. He sighed but didn't move her as the thought about those contracts.

The movie couldn't hold his attention much more anyway. The first half was already too bad. The
girl didn't recognise her own soulmark on the handsome hero. She didn't even need glasses.

If producers wanted to play with the soulmark trope they could use the omerta that existed in Gongaga or Nibelheim rather than making their love interest a pair of breasts with a potato brain. Although the omerta concerned others, you could tell the other soulmarked that you had his mark. That's exactly what Zack did.

The stomach full and with the warmth coming from his two super-human-heater, Cloud soon felt asleep, trusting fully his two friends to wake him up if needed.

Chapter End Notes

so yeah... I wasn't home. I had my PC. But I forgot the plug socket for different country... ah ah...
also I'm thinking about publishing every two weeks. I'll give my definitive decision this week-end. (yes, either the 8 or 9)
Chapter 12

Apart from the Turks' watch, Cloud had to be accompanied by a SOLDIER, which, on the SOLDIERS' floors Cloud was allowed on, was easy. He could walk around without problem. Everyone was always keeping an eye on him. It was both a blessing and a curse. Being watched at each movement made his skin crawl, but it didn't change too much from the Watchers. In those circumstances a SOLDIER couldn't single him out without being seen, too. At first it looked like a good protection; the certainty that another person would intervene if Cloud was in danger. But it was unlucky judging by the quiet hostility SOLDIERS showed him. Yet they wouldn't attack him in groups. He hoped.

A minority were amical with him. Starting by Kunsel and finishing with Genesis.

Dirk and Flore had more luck. It must be said that Dirk loved the kitchen. He spent his life there. The Chef and his team adopted him the day he put a foot in there. Flore was so cozy with the young Turk Elena that she could have been one of their own.

They pointed it to him earlier. Lazard, or Rufus, allowed them to eat together under the watchful SOLDIERS when Dirk made the remark. Knowing he had a different treatment than the two didn't faze Cloud. He preferred to be the center of the SOLDIERS' antipathy rather than his friends. With some time, the SOLDIERS would be accustomed to them and, if not like them, stop quietly insult them or try to bore holes in their heads with furious glares.

He could sustain animosity threw at his head with the subtility of a six foot tall SOLDIER.

He could.

Except he hadn't a pause. At the Watchers' hideout he could find a place to hide and breath. He could go to the doc's lab too and stay remotely tranquil for a bit. At the ShinRa Tower he had the bedroom he shared with Kunsel. Or another SOLDIER when Kunsel had a mission. Which didn't happen for now at Cloud relief. He was too unnerved to let anyone sleep in the same room as him without trusting them first. Not that he slept well anyway. Or slept at all.

**Available food but no time out**, Cloud thought. He couldn't choose if it was a good exchange from the 'times out but no food' from the Watcher group.

The only way to relieve his frustration and hope to sleep at night, was to exhaust himself. So Cloud spent almost all his day in the gym. It had been graciously open to the ex-Watchers, but not the VHR rooms. Cloud utilised the treadmill the more since nobody wanted him near anything remotely shaped like a sword. At least it let him think. Which, in retrospect, wasn't so good.

In the safe place that was ShinRa – or safer than a Watcher's hideout – Cloud's mind could wander. He remembered bit and pieces about the building he was in. Like the awful military cafeteria he was exempt off as a prisoner in SOLDIERS floors. Or the heap of paperworks. In rooms full of enhanced men, he noticed that SOLDIERS made they boots squeak near non-enhanced to let their presence be known. He didn't know why this was important to him, but it was.

He hadn't been prepared to be followed in the showers one day. Though, he should have been.

Standing under the water he watched the four SOLDIERS entering and dispatching on the showers
around him. Each looked at his back, wanting to have a glimpse of his soulmark. Cloud was glad he never lost the habit of keeping the top covering it. His stubborness to keep it started mostly because of the terrible stories of people in town capable of reproducing a design in one look then scam you. After being with Zack he did it to avoid opportunists searching his – and by proxy Zack's – approval or the possible accusations of making his way up by his connections. Or worse: the dreadful fans every First had.

He breathed steadily, they were in the shower, as naked at him – more if counting his top – and didn't hide weapons on themselves. Of course they outnumbered him, but four enhanced men where easy for him. None of them should know how to fight in this kind of space too and Reno waited for him outside. They couldn't try to kill him.

“What, Abe, are you trying to see if he's your soulmate?” one of them joked.

The man made a non-committal noise as Cloud made sure he thoroughly covered his body in soap. His feet firmly planted on the slippery tiles.

“I know my soulmate as they knows me,” Cloud commented, his heart beating both by the presence of those men and the translated locution. A poorly translated locution from old Nibel, but with the same connotation.

I am not alone.

“Then why are you here and not with them?” asked a broad man with ash blond hair that ring a bell to Cloud. “You killed them?”

Cloud’s breath hitched.

Why are you here?

He gripped the shower handle eliciting a shrieking sound from the bent metal. He forced himself to let go, to breathe. He waited for Zack to come home. Because the man lived for ShinRa and Cloud couldn't ask Zack to change his mind if he couldn't even sort the truths from the lies in his own mind.

Did you kill them?

Rain pouring on him. Soil soaked, taking a reddish hue. So much blood. Lazily flowing from the man on the ground. Blue eyes starring at the sky without seeing it. Blue eyes. Dead eyes.

Cloud swallowed. He moved his right foot. He felt the tiles on his bare skin. The warmth of the water. He wasn't on a cliff. The scene never happened. He was in a shower, already vulnerable. He needed to be present.

Zack's fine.

"Use your brain," he snapped. He changed his mind and cleaned himself from the soap. He wasn't going to fight there and needed to exit now.

Zack's fine.

He turned off the shower and started dressing. He knew he looked like he was running from them. He didn't care. Running was sometimes better than participating in a fight only to prove himself to some guys.

The man he faintly recalled passed another SOLDIER to approach him. Cloud was halfway dressed,
he retracted his hand from his boots and stood face to face with the man.

Zack's fine.

“I remember you, you know? Even as an infantryman you were trying to play with Zack. And now it's Genesis.”

“Well, I don't remember you and I'm not playing with Genesis. He's the one seeking me out. Not the inverse.”

"You gave him false hope."

"I told him I couldn't help him, clean your ears if you think otherwise."

Cloud was dressed, except for his boots. The nasty things with too many laces that forced him to crouch. But no with a SOLDIER coming at him.

"You're such a little shit."

He moved fast. Not fast enough to touch Cloud. Cloud avoided the grab toward his neck. He walked on an untied lace making Cloud stumble. With a trip Cloud sprawled on the wet ground. So much for his confidence in taking four of them. Rather than frightening him, it made his blood boil.

"Luxiere!" Abe shouted in outrage.

The man was distracted a second by Abe. Cloud grabbed Luxiere slack fingers. His opponent startled and tried to free his hand. Cloud used his hold to push the fingers in a bad position. Luxiere yelped, he moved to put less pression on his hand. The movement permitted Cloud to enter his space, grab his elbow, turn it in Luxiere's back and block him. He waited a second, for the man to realise what happened then made him glid on the ground and hit a wall.

Cloud looked at the others SOLDIERs watching with interest and a bit of awe. He went out in a calm pace exteriorly, but seething interiorly.

Zack's fine.

"We can't trust them! He attacked me!" Cloud heard from the showers.

"You did it first, calm down."

Cloud didn't catch the others' comments. He was too far off.

Reno, leaning against a wall, stretched and walked with him. Hands in pockets he seemed unsurprised by Cloud's state.

"You saw them entering. You didn't stop them," Cloud said in a clipped tone.

Zack's fine.

Cloud ignored his too fast heartbeat. The pain it caused in his chest too. Pain was easy to deal with. You just had to keep breathing until it stopped.

"They're dudes drenched in sweat entering the showers. What do you want me to do? If you want a private shower, you need to go to one, yo!"

Zack's fine.
Cloud blinked away the dizziness that clouded his vision. He breathed deeply.

*Zack's fine,* he thought with more conviction.

He inhaled deeply, retrieving a normal vision.

"Don't play dumb. I thought your presence was to avoid those kind of encounters."

"Nah, dude. I'm here to catch whatever infos you'll throw at me. I can't match in a SOLDIER brawl. If you're worried for yourself say your Zack's soulmate."

"They wouldn't even believe me," Cloud said, a humourless laugh escaping him.

He stopped dead on his track. Then looked at Reno, now few feets farther away. The Turk turned toward him, a questioning look on his face.

“You know?”

“Obviously, we have forms to fill when we find our soulmate, y'know?” Reno shrugged. “I already knew when Zack filled them years ago. We fished everything out to make your profile. Now all the Turks know too.”

“And you didn't tell it to anyone?” Cloud asked. It was surprising.

“Zack forced us to stay silent before that, we decided the demand was still applying.”

Words seemed too hard to pronounce so Cloud nodded. He followed after Reno, keeping on repeating his mantra without appearing distressed. The Turks' silence was strange, as strange as Rufus and Lazard helping the Watchers. Yet Cloud couldn't find a link between all of them except for the day Rufus and Tseng had been together, but Turks were always near the President’ son.

Cloud hated not knowing what exactly was happening.

They arrived to a meeting room. Reno flopped on a chair and composed Zack's number on his own PHS. He put on the loudspeakers then propped his feet on the table.

“Please don't make this conversation boring,” Reno said as salutation. “I can give you starters if you want. Like your sexual fantasies, maybe?”

“No thanks, Reno,” answered Zack. “Give me, Cloud.”

The blond inhaled sharply, Zack was fine. He was talking and living.

“I didn't even prep him, but he's all wet!” Reno chirped.

Zack and Cloud groaned in unison which only made Reno laugh more. Cloud fidgeted with his wet shirt. He felt the notepads under it, tucked in his belt. He cursed silently. He hoped the ink wouldn't bleed. Yet he prepared himself to lose the first inked pages.

They proceeded to ask each others how they were, hiding their worry from Reno and unwilling to adress their shared pain. Which spend his time inserting comments. Some made Cloud smirk, but they only made him more and more irritated by his situation. He would have liked being alone just one minute. One minute with Zack. Even if he wasn't really in the room.

“You look like you spent the last weeks on a battle ground, smile, buddy!” Reno said just after the call was finished.
Cloud scowled, his brows knitted together by his sadness. Talking to Zack was good but it recalled him he hadn't the bubbly First with him. Thinking of that made his stomach twist.

Reno edged closer during Cloud muted thinking. When the blond focused back on reality he startled to see the red head at few centimeters from his face. Cloud backed away from the studying gaze, a sneer on his face. The Turks made him feel like a specimen to be examined.

"It wasn't weeks, but years."

The Turks grimaced at Cloud's tone. The blond passed the door when reno spoke up.

"Cheer up, you'll see him soon enou-"

Cloud cute him by slamming the door in his face. He heard a thump and a moan from the red head before he left for the SOLDIERs floors.

He hoped his impulsion wouldn't cost him too much.

Genesis put another post-it and noted his thoughts on the paragraph. The margins were since long filled to the rime. His first Loveless book was a temple for his devotion. A temple falling to piece and sprouting arborescence of post-its. He needed to glue the cover back too.

Footsteps alerted him of a visitor. Though, he didn't expect the only person who was forbidden to see him alone.

Cloud stood in the entryway. His hands shook at his sides and his eyes roamed the room without fixing on one spot.

"Will you bring me a drink, dear?" Genesis asked. He unconsciously used the voice he used with Sephiroth when he was overwhelmed. At least he didn't use Sephiroth's petname too.

Cloud startled and looked at him. Genesis pointed at the water cooler across from him. Cloud followed his gaze and approached the machine. The blond took one drink and gulped it. Finding some control back. Then Cloud gave him the drink he asked for.

"Thank you." Genesis paused, he kept his eyes on the book but glanced at Cloud from the corner of his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Reno," Cloud started, voice barely audible. He cleared his throat. "I couldn't put up with... their constant watch."

"So you came here." Cloud nodded. "You lost your Turk and came here," Genesis repeated. "Your way higher on the suicidal scale than I thought at first."

Their eyes meet each other. The redhead saw comprehension hitting the blond. Cloud lowered his eyes and played with his pierced ear.

"I thought it would be calm here."

"Well, it is," Genesis accorded crossing his legs on his couch. "But it won't be for too long now that you're here."

Cloud closed his eyes and mumbled, "I'll find another place."
“My friend, do you fly away now?

To a world that abhors you and I?

All that awaits you is a somber morrow

No matter where the winds may blow”

Genesis took a deep breath, eyes closed, as he savoured the words on his tongue.

"Why did you stop?" Cloud asked. "You don't know the rest?"

A bubbling laugh took Genesis. He shook his head and waved his working hand toward his office desk.

"Give me my PHS will you. I'll make sure nobody will burst in to save my purity."

Cloud gave him a bewildered look that made Genesis huff in amusement, but he obeyed.

“Aren't they going to ignore you and come anyway?”

Genesis gasped, outraged, “Put a little faith in me!”

“And if I do kill you?”

The Lt. General wasn't even surprised by the question. He snorted, not intimidated at all. He finished his message for the Turks then put his PHS down, “Well, it won't be my problem anymore.”

“You don't think I can kill you?” Cloud asked, more curious than threatening.

“Oh, I know you can. An expired meal could kill me in this state. I could trip in the stairs where nobody is here to catch me. You could make me laugh and I'll have a stroke. Technically you would have killed me. I can go on.”

“I doubt I could say something funny enough to make you laugh,” Cloud commented. “So, what are you reading?”

Genesis felt the trilling sensation coming with this question. No matter how many times he answered this question, it always excited him.

“Loveless!” he sighed happily. “The best book I laid my eyes upon. The end, mostly. It's the end that drawn me. There so many interpretations. One for each people and how they read all the book. I read a lot of those too. The best one was from a young girl, brilliant mind. She wrote a great continuation, but stopped because of her studies,” he spitted out the last word, shaking his head at the loss. “Loveless reach us all.”

Then reality came back to him. The boy wanted calm and came to him. He needed Cloud to fell safe with him. So he could kept the boy from the labs, whatever Lazard said. It was his way of thanking Zack for what he did. In other circumstances he would have continued without thinking twice. If he started trying to please to everyone he was dead. Right now he forced himself to think of the other one in the room. Being kind to someone that wasn't his soulmate once wouldn't kill him.

Dejected Genesis looked at Cloud, standing above him. The blond didn't say a word for a long time, but his next sentence made Genesis' heart jump.

“You wrote something too?”
“Yes,” Genesis croaked.

“And the poem, it was from the book?” Genesis nodded, mute with surprise, and refusing to open his mouth again if he was going to make unceremonious sounds. “Can you finish it?”

Genesis stared at the blond until he started fidgeting.

“We didn’t have much poetry, or books, at Nibelheim.”

“Well, if you want. Make yourself comfortable.”

Cloud eyed the room; he settled on the chair before just plopping on the ground next to the couch. His sky blue eyes staring at Genesis now at the same height fluttered the redhead. He started straightening up, “I can just mo-”

A hand stopped him. Cloud shook his head and propped his head on his hand. He waited for Genesis to continue. He looked curious and ready to hear a good story. Yet his free hand shook on his thigh and his eyes were dilated. Cloud hide his anxiety pretty well, but Genesis saw him enter in the room earlier. Since then Genesis kept observing little signals from the blond. Cloud was trying to distract himself from his own mind.

I had to distract him before he could calm down and say what bothered him, Zack said one day. Or he would be a Genesis-bis and be all fury and fire. I kind of wanted to see a fight between you two one day. Yeah, strange fantasy, uh? Worked if he was anxious too.

Like Angeal, Genesis found the custom to keep talking about dead people unsettling. Almost unhealthy. It was dwelling on the past. Though, authors did it. But it felt less strange for Genesis. Anyway, right now it was useful beyond words. He really didn't want a freaked out Watcher on his hands. Angeal already made sure the boy was seen as a potential danger; none of them needed it to become true. Even the excuse of panic attacks couldn't protect the blond. So Genesis eased himself and started reciting Loveless.

During his recitation he started talking about the best analysis of passages. Cloud moved closer so his head was resting on his hand on the couch. He didn't talk, but gave all his attention to Genesis. The redhead soaked it up. Spending so much time on his office because of unexpected spike of pain and his chronic tiredness, Genesis hadn't his dose of attention for years now.

Halfway through the book he received a message. He sass Lazard until the man got feed-up and was certain Genesis was okay. Chuckling softly he turned his eyes to Cloud that stayed silent during his exchange. What a sweet boy.

Except he was fast asleep, his head on the brim of the couch. Cloud's breathe tingled Genesis’ unused hand. The sensation plus the extravagant hair at his reach spawn an urge in the redhead. He could move his hand and pat the blond head. Yet his hand was so feeble, it could hit the blond in the head and woke him up. Genesis was torn. In one hand – ah! – the bet made his heart beat pick up. On the other hand he found himself reluctant to wake up Cloud. The truth he showed him by sleeping here made Genesis smile.

The urge still won. Genesis smiled at his little success. His hand was buried in the blond's hair without waking him up. The pitiable thing he had for hand stroke clumsily the soft hairs, but Cloud just leaned in the touch. Was it strange to pet an ex-ennemy? Genesis thought an instant before shrugging. He had a rivalry with Sephiroth that finished in complete love, Genesis was biased.

That was without counting the obvious: Cloud was Zack's soulmate. Zack was part of the few
Genesis called close. He cared for Cloud because he cared for Zack.

Who was he kidding? Cloud was cute. A bit neurotic, but cute. Petting him was therapeutic.

“Maybe we should take another cat?” Genesis murmured to himself. If he felt the urge to ruffle a Watcher’s head he was surely touch starved and needed a pet. Angeal wasn’t here enough to fill his quota of touches. Genesis sighed, he became so needy, where was the independent SOLDIER he had been?

Chapter End Notes

so, so, I'm not going to plan when I post or not. Either it'll be each week-end or one week in two
thanks for all the reviews!
ps: I hadn't planned for Zack to be gone this long. I miss him. *go put posters asking “did you see this puppy?”*
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ex-Watchers weren't here for one full week that some truths were acknowledged by all SOLDIERS and, by default, by Turks too. One, Dirk was a damn fine chef. If you were searching him, you had to go for the kitchen. Second, Elena and Flore were inseparable. So much that Turk envisaged recruiting the little ex-Watcher. But it was hush-hush. Genesis loved gossip as much as Kunsel and they found out by the First' own Fanbase. They were useful sometimes. Third, trying to stop Genesis from seeing Cloud was impossible.

Genesis didn't know if his overprotective SOLDIERS tried to keep Cloud away too. If they did, it didn't work. Cloud wasn't one to cave in face of lame threats. The ex-Watcher seemed unphased by the glaring of the SOLDIERS when they meet. Genesis loved it. He loved irritating the entirety of the Soldier Department and the Turks. He loved how Cloud just talked to him.

Cloud didn't make Genesis felt like a weak little thing near death.

The Chocobo liked Loveless and literature too.

Genesis sighed in contentment.

“This is love!” he singsonged.

The odd stares he received from the people in the hall made him think twice about what he said.

“It was just a turn of phrase,” he muttered, heart beating fast. “Although I am in love. With two very absent person who don't call at all!”

Great, now he was irritated by the two Firsts that called themselves his lovers.

The gym's racket reduced to nothing as Genesis entered the training area, a wide open room with a tall ceiling and mats littering the concrete floor. He paused an instant in the entryway, hand on hips and scanned the area. He saw a lot of embarrassed face, eyes coming and going from his unused arm. They knew why he didn't come to the gym anymore. As degradation settled in, proving to be a long-lasting illness Hojo could only stop but not cure, Genesis shied away from physical efforts. Remembering it made the SOLDIERS uneasy.

Genesis loved it.

He was disabled, and he was going to rub it on their faces until all traces of pity disappeared. He wanted them to see he wasn't as strong as a SOLDIER but he wasn't on his death bed. Mako still ran in his veins, keeping him as perky as a normal human. Not a dying rat.

He should thank Cloud for forcing him to come here the first time.

Spiky blond hair pointed to the man he was searching. Genesis approached and rolled his eyes. Cloud was running again.

“Are you going to try something else than the treadmill?” Genesis asked in guise of salutation. “Or are you preparing for a Marathon? If so, I need to warn you that enhanced men are, sadly, not accepted. Something about grievous advantages.”
Cloud huffed and stopped the sequence so he could walk and talk to Genesis.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Oh, I don't know, maybe a spar?” Genesis designed the two SOLDIERs not too far with stick for swords. They started fighting again at his glance. “Maybe you'll put some sense in those dense heads.”

“You want me to fight your SOLDIERs,” Cloud repeated slowly. He made eye contact with Genesis, searching something on his face. “When they would jump on me at the first sign of hostility.”

“A good spar get you rid of unnecessary hostility,” Genesis said. He sat at the hem of the practice ring the two SOLDIERs with stick where. “I know it from experience.”

“But our experiences aren't the same,” Cloud answered, plopping next to Genesis. “And if I go fight Sephiroth to release 'unnecessary hostility', I'm going to be beaten up too.”

“I'm pretty sure Sephiroth would do it himself, beating you up I mean. But he'll be happy to have another sparring partner. Nobody wants to anymore. Cowards.”

Genesis chuckled, seeing Abe – he thought it was his name – flinch at the insult. Many SOLDIERs were eager to fight with Sephiroth. The first time. Then they refused to make eye contact with the General when he went to the gym asking for a partner. Now, few were still accepting to entertain Sephiroth.

“You can fight Abe if you're unsure about your capacities, a cactuar could kill him.”

Turning his head to the blond, he saw him smirking.

“Bendt, no, Richard. Wait, it is Sasha?” the second sparring SOLDIER nodded at the last name. “Well, Sasha. I could beat his ass even as a lowly human. And with one hand. If they let me and didn't treat me like their aging grandpa.”

Genesis smirked at the faces the SOLDIERs in the room made. The mirrors on one wall were useful. Cloud chuckled. He put his arms around his knee and kept observing.

“Yeah, you can beat him. You still have a mean throw, do you have a perfume bottle on you?”

Cloud's eyes glinted with playfulness. Genesis gasped loudly, like it could hide his mad heart, and put a hand on his chest.

“Please don't evoke such tragedy. I use expensive perfume as weapons only for the best. None of them is going to have even a Banora apple throw at them if they don't protect their right side!”

Both Abe and Sasha moved instinctively to protect their right side, giving an opening on their left. They noticed it and both acted in the same manner again, attacking the other. It was a mess that amused the two observers. Genesis laughed outright while Cloud hide his chuckles behind his hand.

“Abe, your right foot is not firm on its base. Damn, my grandma could beat you with her cane with those awful stances!”

“My mother could too,” Cloud commented in a quiet voice.

“Oh come on!” Genesis exclaimed. “I said grandma; you can find better than a mother to joke
about.”

The blond raised his head from his knees. He seemed surprised at Genesis' comment.

“I wasn't joking. She could do it.”

“Now, that is some interesting fact. Please, tell me more.”

Cloud shrugged. Genesis leaned toward him, excited by the prospect of a new story.

“There nothing interesting. In the mountains there a lot of blizzards, like at the northern area. We are often isolated and need to eat. So we hunt whatever survive there. Winter hares, deers and else. There are always Nibel wolves trying to steal from us, and we had to defend our preys. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more!” Genesis repeated. “Your mother kills Nibel wolves?”

“Not really, we chase them the most,” Cloud corrected. He started playing with the hem of his shirt. “She wouldn't be so good with a sword, but a simple stick or a staff, yes. We hit wolves on the head with it, and they run off.”

“And they run off, he said like Nibel wolves aren't colossal!” Genesis said sounding offended.

“Less than dragons,” Cloud muttered.

“Did your mother fought dragons?” Genesis asked.

“Once,” Cloud answered, blushing for a reason Genesis didn't dwell on. He blinked. “Oh.”

“Oh, what?”

Cloud glanced at Genesis, shrugged but said nothing. He started running his fingers on something under his shirt. Genesis saw the contours of one notepad.

So my little one just remembered that, Genesis thought.

“What happened?” he asked.

A shrug answered him. Genesis eyes were attracted by the constant movement of Cloud's hand on his stomach. An instant he thought the boy was sick, but sounds of paper being crumpled indicated otherwise. Genesis held out a hand toward the blond who looked at him without understanding.

“You're telling me and I'm writing it down, if I let you do it we'll end up with 'Mom fought a dragon, she's cool. End.' and that would be an insult toward her.”

Cloud huffed and drew his knee toward himself becoming a ball. A frown marred his face and he glared at Genesis who smirked back.

“Are you forced to talk about it here?” Cloud hissed.

“You did talk about my degradation like it was the weather.”

Genesis wasn't trying to guilt trip Cloud, but commenting on this little incident did make him feel better. He decided that if Cloud refused he wouldn't insist. Yet the blond didn't make him wait long. Cloud gave him the corned notepad, a deep blush on his features. Genesis couldn't discern if it was from anger or embarrassment.
“Are you fighting or gossiping?” Genesis yelled after Abe and Sasha.

“You're the one gossiping, sir,” Kunsel said.

The redhead turned toward the man who was nowhere in sight five seconds ago. At Genesis constant amazement, Kunsel had his helmet on.

“I'm not hiding it,” he answered. He poked at Cloud with his useful hand. “So, tell me exactly how it happened.”

The blond sighed, but he still told his story with a chilling detachment. He finished by leaned on Genesis, reading what he wrote about his mother.

“Icy blue eyes?” Cloud commented.

“Did she have another eye color?”

“No, it's just...” the blond shrugged but didn't finish his sentence.

“It's more poetic like that.”

“... carrying her heavy charge down the mountain-side... I was a very scranny kid. I doubt I qualify as 'heavy charge'.”

“A kid of your age is heavy,” Genesis sighed, still baffled by the lack of genuine awe Cloud had for his mother. “I don't know the weight of five years olds, twenty or thirty kilogrammes? It's heavy for a woman.”

Cloud looked at him, a part of his weight on his shoulder, but not enough to hurt Genesis. He blinked then squinted his eyes. He leaned back to observe Genesis.

“You're serious.” it was a statement. “When I left Nilbeiheim, my friend could bench press me. My mom too.”

Genesis gasped loudly, his eyes going wide. Then he asked in a hushed tone, “Where you living in a sort of barbaric village where women are stronger than men?”

He planned on his question to be humorous, at least capable of making the blond's lips quirk up. Cloud didn't. The little one seemed less than amused. He frowned and glared with all his might, body tense.

“Well, you never spend time in the slums if you think so,” Kunsel said. “Brendt was actually knocked out by a teenager down there. Because he commented on her when she was choosing a weapon. She tested it on him. Pretty effective.”

Some snickers echoed in the room. It was a well know story apparently. Somehow their conversation prompted the working out men to share stories about their friends, or girlfriends. They actually felt relaxed for the first time in many meeting Genesis had with Cloud, under those SOLDIERs' eyes. For the first time Cloud wasn't an ex-Watcher, just another guy with stories about the women in his life. He was awkward and hesitant at first but eased himself, enjoying himself and sharing with others the little he remembered.

Genesis assisted to it with a found smile. He gave few stories, but it was mostly about Gillian. His own mother had been soft and lenient with him.
Cloud lived in a dream. It was the only explanation.

SOLDIERs had all received definitives orders about the ex-Watchers and the hostility lowered since then. Lazard told him about the results of their medical check-ups and about the lack of gratitude for his service Heigheger had. Cloud had been an infantryman and hurt during his duty, he should have received a veteran help, but the head of the Army said to all Cloud was a traitor. The Turks kept this little tidbit from leaving the PR reunions. Both by Lazard's demand and Rufus as Cloud learned by Elena. The two were up for something. Not that Tseng planned on giving this information anyway, the demand from the two others gave him leverage for the future.

Lazard then proposed him to become a consultant. A consultant. Cloud couldn't believe it. He had to give all infos he remembered on the Watchers and help to bring down their strategies.

Next to it he could find what he wanted to do.

Flore and Dirk future was clear, they refused to become SOLDIERs. Cloud hesitated. So the consultant idea came. Cloud could ask for classes to be held so he could explain Watcher's ways of fighting. He was going to have a paycheck too. Which was as surreal as being in ShinRa in general.

He still hadn't the right to go to Zack's apartment. Reno talked about sensitives informations that could lie around. Cloud agreed it was likely; Zack was prone to bring back documents to his apartment. And since the Turks couldn't enter – only because Zack had a good relationship with them – Cloud was stuck outside.

At least Kusel snored. Till the man made sounds, he wasn't awake, ready to strick. It let it bring down his guard and sleep a little. Though, Genesis' office was the best for a power nap.

Cloud didn’t accept Lazard's proposition yet. It was too strange and he couldn't pinpoint exactly why. That's why he went directly for Genesis' office. He knew the man for one week and was already trusting him.

Cloud stopped near the office. A SOLDIER he lost the name on his heels. Maybe he should just turn on his heels and stop being so friendly with the redhead. He could be on the same board as Rufus and Lazard, manipulating him into joining SOLDIERs and being tied up by ShinRa bureaucracy. Not that it would really hold him up if he wanted to leave.

“My, are you camping before my door now?”

The blond sighed and gave a blase look at Genesis. The man closed the door behind him, a smile on his face.

“I'm going for the helipads, walk with me.”

Cloud followed without complaint. He was too tired to fight the man. Who should be tired whit his degradation, but was still in better shape than Cloud. Life was unfair.

Although this week seemed to have stressed the man as he looked less and less energetic as the days passed.

For a moment only the sound of their boots hitting softly the ground was heard.

“When is Zack coming back?”
“You asked me that yesterday and the day before. Did you already forget?”

“Yes. So?”

It wasn't exactly that he forgot Zack was coming back soon, but his sense of time was off. To the point he forgot when Genesis had said Zack was coming back. Was it only few minutes ago? Or it was the day before? So asking many times a day helped him create some chronology.

“I need an agenda,” Cloud mumbled to himself.

“I'll find you one.”

Cloud didn't know if it was him that influenced Genesis or the inverse, but both of them were very open about their problem with each other. And since Cloud still hadn't the right to be with Genesis alone, a lot of SOLDIERs knew about their problems too. It could be a reason for the tentative acceptance the SOLDIERs had for the ex-Watchers.

“So?” Cloud asked again.

Genesis creased his brows in reflexion, trying to find what exactly Cloud was asking. Cloud gladly supplied a clue.

“Zack.”

“Oh. Tomorrow evening.”

Cloud came to an abrupt halt, joy was fast drown by tension as the SOLDIER behind them stopped too near from him. Genesis' hand naturally found it's way around Cloud neck and made him resume their walk. It stayed there a bit longer than one would consider usual, but Cloud soaked the touch. Even with the reduced hostility toward them, he didn't spent too much time with Dirk and Flore. Even at the Watcher's hideouts, they never had been much for grand gesture of affection. It was slight touch of the wrists, bump in shoulders or sleeping seated on cold floor, the other's back only source of warmth.

Genesis hummed taking Cloud away from his thoughts. They were at the helipads where a chopper was landing. SOLDIERs left the vehicle with eagerness but stayed around the helipads while chatting together. One kept Cloud's attention when the SOLDIER that followed him to Genesis' office went to talk to him. The man hadn't seen Cloud as he was hidden by a pillar and Genesis, but Cloud had a great view on him. The set of the jaws, the big eyes and the crooked nose. The way he stood on his left leg, keeping his helmet under his right arm.

It was familiar.

Something else caught his attention when Genesis sighed in contentment. Leaving the chopper was Tseng in conversation with Sephiroth. Their eyes meet. All the cells in Cloud froze. He took a breath. His chest didn't move at the amount of oxygen. His body minimised all movement as the predator approached. It was foolish to think the man didn't saw him, but his body stayed put. Adrenaline coursed in his veins. In a heartbeat the fear he felt was drowned by an urge to fight. Cloud's hand hitched to find a weapon.

Cloud heart stopped a second when a hand wrapped around the back of his neck.

“Breathe you idiot.”

He blinked then looked at Genesis. From the corner of his eyes he saw Sephiroth stop dead on his
track as he looked at them. Genesis smiled at Cloud and tapped him on the forehead. He laughed at Cloud affronted face then waited right there for Sephiroth to come. The silver-haired man resumed his walk with slower steps. He kept his eyes on Cloud and saluted him by a tip of the head.

“Cloud.”

The blond huffed, crossed his arms and opened his mouth only to stay quiet. How should he talk to the man? He shut his mouth and nodded back. A laugh attracted his attention back to the guy he recalled faintly. He squinted his eyes, irritated. The man turned to them as the other SOLDIER signaled them. The guy dropped his eyes on his shoes the second he met Cloud's. The blond finally recalled him.

“A Watcher,” Cloud breathed.

“I beg your pardon?” Sephiroth asked. He followed Cloud's gaze and frowned. “Clyde his a trusted subordinate. I worked with him for almost a year.”

Sephiroth's voice made Cloud's skin crawl. He shuddered, hold his arms tighter around him and gritted between his teeths, “I remember him.” Cloud paused, knowing it wouldn't be enough but failing to give the information that would make them believe him. “I remember him with a Watcher's outfit. He wasn't enhanced at this time. Do what you want with this information.”

“Well,” Genesis interjected. “You can't deny your memories are flawed.”

Cloud glared at him. Irritation and tension were growing in him. He glanced a last time at the man before turning on his heels and quitting the area. Why did Genesis brought him there anyway? To confirm he wouldn't jump on Sephiroth to kill him? Only because the redhead enjoyed dragging him around?

“Strife.”

The blond inhaled deeply before turning toward Tseng. The Turk came to him then stopped to observe him.

“Would you care to accompany me and talk?”

“If it's only to say my memory is shit. I already know.”

“I wish to confirm or deny your intelligence in a professional way. Until we finish the investigation I will not question the stability of your memory.” Tseng paused. “The contract that is proposed to you asks that you share your intelligence; we take care of proving it.”

“Jeez, thanks,” Cloud mumbled. “It makes me feel way better. Aren't you going to say I gave you false informations and made you lose your time if it isn't confirmed?”

“Please, we took in consideration your mental state. Rufus and Lazard thought your input would exceed the problems you could cause. Now, are you coming? I need to talk about Reno's absence too.”

Tseng didn't wait for an answer to walk away. Cloud sighed but followed.

“Reno said I was boring.”

Tseng glanced at him waiting apparently for Cloud to elaborate. The blond was too tired and irritated for formalating a lie for Reno. His mouth stayed clamped shut. Reno would deal with the man
himself. Even if they both agreed to their parting.

Chapter End Notes

yes, Zack is coming back. It was just... so long... I hadn't planned that. I miss him. Anyway, no chap next week bc reasons (mainly I have another hand bobo, I'm busy, I don't know why but I decided to contribute to SephGen week and I have to little advance left for this fic, which I don't like)
also I inspired some art! :DD look at that: http://neru-nytsu.deviantart.com/art/Genesis-X-Cloud-691927107 (I put it there but if you don't want, I'll remove it)
and hello for the newcomers, it's strange how the subscribers keep coming slowly but surely xD
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sephiroth heard the footsteps in the corridor before the key was even in the lock.

“I'm back!” Angeal called from the entryway.

“I'm in the kitchen,” Sephiroth answered without raising his voice. No need when his lovers were enhanced too.

His lover all but dragged himself in the kitchen, his feet rubbing the ground. Sephiroth recovered a cup of coffee from what Genesis left and offered it to Angeal who took it with a relieved sigh. Dark rings marred his face, his eyelids fell on his dark eyes and his face was pale. Angeal looked awful.

“Where's Genesis?” Angeal asked with a frown. “In bed? It's a bad day?”

“Not closely,” Sephiroth answered. “He's in the gym, commenting the personal training of each SOLDIER with Cloud. Or they moved to the classes to comment the teachers.”

“What? He's with Cloud? You let him?” Angeal asked without breathing. “Wait, sorry, I know it's impossible to stop him from doing things sometimes, but you aren't with them? Watching over him?”

Taken aback by Angeal's reaction Sephiroth blinked and searched a reason for him to be so worried.

“Didn't you see my message about the way Cloud acted with Genesis?”

Angeal waved it off, “It's not important. He may be playing to get closer to Genesis.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Gain power, execute an order, I don't know!”

For all the informations Genesis drowned Sephiroth under when he came back, only one jumped out to him which could explain Angeal's worry. He put down his mug and inhaled. He had to sort thing through.

“Why would he have been ordered to get closer to Genesis?”

“I don't know, it's just a feeling. To gain inside knowledge.”

“Then he would have approached Tseng, Rufus or Lazard. Maybe even the President.”

“Which is impossible like that. So Genesis it is. And maybe later he'll try Lazard and Rufus.”

Sephiroth could see a convoluted logic under all but there was an edge in Angeal's voice which put a dent in his ideas. He observed the man more closely. The way he clenched his fists, how he walked few steps before coming back to face Sephiroth and his eyes flicking around them. It wasn't Angeal's usual behaviour. Wether it be sleep deprivation or long lasting paranoia as Genesis thought, Angeal had a problem and his judgement shouldn't be trusted about the ex-Watchers. Not without proofs.

“Strife wants Genesis to trust him for a reason and I'll find it,” Angeal asserted. “The Watchers refused to go to the labs, it's telling, no? The reports from the bam by Zack's squad made clear Cloud
was friend with a scientist. He isn't as scared as he let Lazard thought. The official report from the Turk said Strife was strong enough to make others Watchers leave him alone most of the time by fear. So he had a good place in the organisation too. I'm certain he's close to the Numbers. Maybe gatter intelligence in the most dangerous way is a rite of passage.”

Angeal paused and turned to Sephiroth as if waiting for him to add something. But Sephiroth was stunned by Angeal's monologue. He frowned and looked around to save himself a few seconds of reflection.

“Are you joking, and you're too into it for me to realise?” Sephiroth asked.

“I know you're bad at reading the mood of people but I thought you knew me well enough for it to be over!” Angeal shook his head in disbelief. “I'm not joking. Can you understand why I'm worried?”

“You are going too far, Geal.”

“What do you mean? You don’t believe me?”

Sephiroth liked his lips then pinched them. Angeal was too nervous and on the offensive. It wasn’t good. And it wasn’t a state he knew how to deal with. A spurt anger would be less of a strain simply because Angeal tended to shout and ask to be left alone must he say something offensive, but Angeal wasn’t angry. Not yet.

“I wish I could but as I said, you are seeing Cloud as an enemy since the start. You didn't see anything positive in him. Which is far from your normal reaction to people.” Sephiroth took a breath before finishing, “I think your degradation touches your mental state more than your body.”

A roar more than a question left Angeal’s throat, “What?”

Sephiroth moved away from the counter so he wouldn’t be blocked if Angeal made it physical. It was the first time Angeal had been so angry and directed all of it toward him. Sephiroth kept an impassible face, as it was his protection since a kid facing this sort of outburst, but his heart pounded in his chest.

“You don’t believe me!”

He closed the distance between them at Sephiroth's dismay. Angeal looked down at the General who meet his eyes even if he wanted to look away. Sometimes, just keeping eye contact made the people calm down.

Genesis said it was because gazing into a straight face made nervous people. Especially if it was the General. It made him look determined and immovable. Sephiroth certainly didn't felt unshakeable right now, but the face was the trick. He breathed and answered.

“No, I’m not. I will repeat you what you said later so you’ll understand.”

“Understand what? That you prefer to believe an enemy than me?”

“Geal, I’m not- ”

“You don’t believe me!” Angeal cried, tapping his own chest. “I try to protect Genesis. I try to protect everyone but you put your faith in the Strife?”

“Please, Geal. You’re not yourself.”
After few minutes Sephiroth realised they were going full circle without having a conversation. He was glad when Angeal finally became so angry he staled off, going for his garden. The silver-haired man hesitated for the course of action. A part of him wanted to make sure Angeal was fine, but another was too full of negative energy not to pick another fight. And if Angeal was degrading, he wouldn’t risk his health only to steam off both of their anger in a swordfight.

He choose to head for the gyms and hope someone would be willing to fight him.

Cloud was enjoying whipping the floor with Kunsel. At first. As Genesis said it differed from the treadmill and the change was good. But Kunsel wasn't an opponent strong enough for the blond. Soon he started being bored and spend most of the time correcting Kunsel stance rather than fighting him. Genesis lifted himself from the ground, announcing he was prospecting to find him a good opponent when Sephiroth came.

“I need an opponent,” the silver-haired man declared.

The gym, made silent at his arrival, started buzzing anew. Genesis clapped the SOLDIERs the nearest from him, a shit eating grin on his face who made Cloud shudder.

“Cloud needs one too! It's perfect!”

The blond eyed Masamune already in the General's hand and shook his head, “I don't want to fight with swords. Only hands-to-hands.”

“And I'm not inclined toward hands-to-hands if not with Angeal.”

“Why don't you ask him?” a SOLDIER asked. “I heard he came back.”

“I fought with him,” Sephiroth said between gritted teeth.

The SOLDIER gulped and disappeared from the man's vision in an instant.

“Come on, I want to see this fight,” Genesis whined at Sephiroth. “I'm sure you can have fun! From what I saw Cloud is at your level in hand-to-hand. And it's been a bit of time you didn't fight like this.”

Genesis turned to Cloud and the blond knew the red-head wouldn't back down. It was certain. The simple presence of the silver-haired man put him on edge but he had spent enough time at the gym tiring himself before that to be relaxed enough. Just enough for him not to try to kill Sephiroth accidentally. He hoped.

“Really? When did you fight hand to hand for the last time?” Cloud asked Sephiroth. “Someone who wasn't Lt. General Hewley.”

“Years ago,” Sephiroth answered dismissively as he scanned the SOLDIERs. “So? Who is coming?”

“Years. I'm pretty sure you're rusted,” Cloud teased. He wiggled his fingers to Sephiroth enjoying greatly the frown that deepened on the man's face. “I've been fighting dirty in the Watchers for years, I'm pretty sure I'll challenge you. Finding a swordman to spar with that'll be matching you, it's unlikely.”
“Don't be so full of yourself.” Sephiroth huffed and looked away, but there was something that told Cloud he was interesting him. “You should learn humility.”

Cloud smiled with amusement. He shook his head and changed his smile for a smirk as he crossed his arms, “Make me.”

Sephiroth's eyes widened imperceptibly. Next to Cloud, Genesis snickered and murmured that Sephiroth was sold. True to the redhead's words Sephiroth made Masamune disappear, which made Cloud exhale a forced steady breathe. The man approached, taking off his coat. Cloud stared at the simple t-shirt on Sephiroth shoulders. It was a perfectly normal shirt, but it was strange to see the man dressed like a sensible person.

“So... what's banned?” Cloud asked, rubbing a foot on the mat.

“Nothing. Give your all.”

Cloud lifted a brow and crossed Sephiroth's eyes a second, “You sure?”

The man nodded but Cloud insisted.

“Every dirty tricks are allowed?”

“As I said,” Sephiroth repeated, sounding irritated.

Cloud shrugged. He let the man warm up and looked at the way he held himself, his shorter hair and his bare feet. Little mimics helped him differentiate from the Sephiroth Cloud affronted in his mind during his mako poisoning. Sephiroth change in clothes helped the most.

Around them the SOLDIERs were flocking toward the mat, curious as cats. Genesis smiled like he had been offered a gift and his eyes glinted with glee. Cloud frowned at him and stopped himself from sticking his tongue out. Genesis met his eyes a second and the red head his smile broadened. Cloud groaned interiorly as Genesis smiled like a dragon ready to play with a running diner. He wasn't even the one that'll fight! But the man seemed really happy to put Cloud face to the great General. Cloud tried to remember if he had a petty fight unresolved with the redhead to no avail.

Genesis would be surprised, Cloud wasn't going to go easy on Sephiroth.

He breathed deeply and willed his hands not to shake when Sephiroth faced him. He wasn't sure he was doing this only to please Genesis. Deep inside there was a need to prove he could surpass Sephiroth. Cloud needed to be sure he could stop the man if he tried something.

Sephiroth nodded and they started. Although they stayed immobile a long time, gauging each other. In the mean time Cloud found his breath. The mad Sephiroth never let him breath or think, he hit and hit and hit, until Cloud was only fighting by instinct. There he relaxed his muscles allowing him to be agile and quick on his feet.

The General made the first move. With remarkable speed he grabbed Cloud's wrist. Cloud's heart jumped in his throats and the next moves were more instinctive than considered. Nimble, Cloud ducked under his opponent arm. He ended in Sephiroth's back. He pulled his wrist free just enough to grab Sephiroth's. He twisted it in the man's back eliciting an inaudible yelp. Holding onto Sephiroth's wrist, Cloud pushed until Sephiroth was unbalanced. Then he tripped the man.

Cloud let go when he saw the man on the ground, holding himself by one hand. Sephiroth's hair made a shining pool around him. Silence was made around them, but Cloud kept his eyes on the actual menace. Sephiroth rose, his hair cascading on his shoulders. The poor guy looked embarrassed
by his quick defeat. Although the clue about Sephiroth's mood was tiny, hidden in the downside of his mouth. He shook his head to clear his eyes from the strands. Cloud followed the movement and knew how he'd made Sephiroth lose next. The man nodded, confirming he was ready for another round. Cloud smiled.

The General seemed to have updated his approach. He went for a good punch. Cloud caught it then imitated him. Sephiroth avoided it easily, smirking at Cloud. The blond smiled back. He opened his hand as it brushed past the man's ear and grabbed a fistful of hair. With a quick pull and another tripping Sephiroth was on the ground.

“You have a very poor balance,” Cloud hummed to himself.

“A poor balance? Him?” came a disbelieving comment from one of the SOLDIERs.

A choked sound came from behind Cloud who turned to see Genesis holding in a laugh. The redhead made a movement and someone gave him his water bottle. Genesis didn't lose his smile.

“Up now.” Cloud ordered the bewildered Sephiroth. Genesis laugh was heard until Sephiroth glared at him and he stifled it. “Come on.” Cloud pushed.

When the silver haired finally stood Cloud met his eyes as he thought. Sephiroth tilted his head to the side, realising Cloud wasn't going to fight. The blond nodded to himself and come closer to Sephiroth, yet still at arm's length. The General made a sign he was going to step back, but Cloud stopped him. He invaded Sephiroth space and if he interpreted the man's body language correctly, Sephiroth wasn't happy about it, but was still curious.

“You move like your gravitational center is here.” Cloud said, pointing under Sephiroth's navel. “But it should be here.” Cloud pointed higher. “It's like you had a growth spurt and didn't adapt.”

“I doubt it's the reason I'm losing to you,” Sephiroth said as he casually put distance between them. “I never had a problem when fighting.”

“You're overcompensating with SOLDIER stamina, strength and speed. Not good. One day an opponent will find you unarmed and you'll need to win,” Cloud said. “I'm going to show you.”

“I'd prefer to learn who you fight,” Sephiroth commented.

“When you'll have good bases. Tie your hair up; it's a fight hazard.”

“Strife, I insist-”

“I'm not showing you anything till you stand correctly,” Cloud hissed. Behind him the continued laughter from Genesis still resonated. He turned to him. “What?”

“You're bossing the great General!”

“He's not so great if he can't stand correctly. Did Angeal really fought with him? And he didn't saw his faults?” Cloud mumbled between his teeth. He returned his eyes to Sephiroth who put his hair in a ponytail. “No! Let me do it, you can't even tie your own hair. What's so great about you if you can't stand or tie your hair.”

Cloud made the puzzled General turn so he could braid his hairs then made a bun. He kept mumbling about everything that bothered him about Sephiroth under Genesis laughter. Which calmed a second only to rise up when Cloud said something that was funny for the red-head. Cloud couldn't fathom what was funny when he talked about Sephiroth's errors which could cost him his
life.

When Cloud was finished, he noticed the pleading eye Sephiroth send toward Genesis. It was kind of cute to see the great General – not so great in Cloud's opinion – search help from his lover. Seeing that only cemented Cloud's stupid impulsion. An impulsion that came after witnessing young enhanced Watchers being beaten up because they didn't know how to fight. Cloud often took them to learn how the basics, until they found they own group or were send in missions for never coming back in Cloud's care. The fact it was Sephiroth didn't make his mind falter in his decision. He needed a teacher and nobody seemed to do that, not even Genesis or Angeal.

The following half hour was spent forcing Sephiroth to learn things Cloud was still baffled he had to teach the man. It was so ridiculous Cloud tried to ask Genesis if Sephiroth was playing with him. But by Sephiroth pinched and serious expression when Cloud showed him something it wasn't just a joke to play with him.

Two times Cloud spent a long moment with the man and two times he found out Sephiroth acted like a proud chocobo who tried to make others forget he had a leg stuck in a hole.

Sephiroth as a chocobo stayed with Cloud and forced him to hide his smile when the man shook his head as he said they had to go. Cloud didn't know if Sephiroth was sick of being taught like an amateur or if he saw Genesis dosing off, his healthy hand cradling his other arm. Surely both.

Looking at the time Cloud suddenly speed up. He was going to be late to the call with Zack. His shower was rushed, his hair still wet went he left to rejoin Reno. If the SOLDIERs went slack on the whole rule of following the ex-Watchers around the three of them still hadn't the right to go on certain levels without babysitters. Heavily armed babysitters.

One waited for him outside the showers. Cloud vaguely remembered him, but his name didn't come to his mind. He shrugged the thought off. The man didn't need to be here anyway.

"I wanted to talk, Strife."

Cloud passed him without glancing at his face, but he hoped the man would be shocked, "Can't. Busy."

He moved by instinct when he heard the other move. The SOLDIERs hand grabbed nothing but air as Cloud faced him. His heart beat faster but he kept his cool and stared down the man.

“What are you trying to do exactly with the Firsts?”

“And you?”

The man made a face, “What?”

Cloud moved away, listening to the strange footsteps coming their way.

“Yo, Cloud! Zack can't talk, they're packing up.” Reno shook Cloud's shoulder then went away.

“Try not to kill anyone today, yo.”

The blond ran his hand in his hair and sighed. Reno wanted him to be beaten up or what? Maybe the Turks had a beating poll on how long he would hold before attacking people. Or being attacked. He glanced with disinterest at the man he still couldn't remember the name. Then walked away. The man made him uncomfortable.

“Strife!”
Cloud didn't stop, “What?”

“I want to talk.”

The man who's name didn't ring a bell for Cloud caught up to him and forced him to stop.

“Not me.”

“I really don't like what you're doing. Or you for that matter.”

“I realised.”

He saw a SOLDIER – Abe he thought – leave the gym and pause in the corridor as he observed them a second. He looked hesitant to approach and step in what could escalate into a brawl. Not that Cloud wanted that to happen since he loved his tranquility more than anything. A fight would destroy the little faith on him the SOLDIERs managed to build which was little, but enough for Cloud to ignore his urge to make his conversation partner swallow his broken teeth.

“Do you want to fight?”

“You could have asked in the gym,” Cloud said.

“Luxiere! You again.” Kunsel voice was a relief for Cloud. “Seriously, Cloud didn't say or do something that could be interpreted as threatening. Why are you on him like that?”

Cloud observed Luxiere as Kunsel came closer with his helmet still on. Luxiere shifted his stance from one leg to another and crossed his arms defensively as he scowled at the Second coming. Cloud almost jumped out of his skin when Kunsel put a hand on his shoulder.

“He's a Watcher.”

“Ex-Watcher,” answered Kunsel, voice icy cold.

Luxiere glanced at Cloud, his eyes carrying something that put Cloud on edge. He didn't even know what the man had against him except he had been a Watcher. Maybe it was enough to hate him so much, but Luxiere made Cloud uncomfortable which didn't stick to the man's hostility. Cloud always responded to those sort of things with calm ignorance until the first blow was thrown. Being uncomfortable face to Luxiere didn't made sense.

“He always had some sort of agenda. Do you remember him and Zack? Zack didn't know him for weeks that he changed attitude drastically toward the troopers.”

“Well, he had a friend, Cloud in them, he wasn't going to keep being a jerk like you. Zack grew up. You should do the same.”

Cloud inhaled. The sudden reminder about Zack's absence hurt him as much as a blow in the plexus. He closed his eyes to keep the emotional turmoil at bay. With no results. His chest heaved without helping in bringing oxygen to his lungs. He wanted to talk to Zack.

“You're such a pain in the ass, Kunsel,” Luxiere said.

“Solid argument,” mumbled Cloud without thinking.

Kunsel chuckled, pressing his shoulder. Luxiere glared at him with fire in his eyes. Luxiere's hand closed and opened as he thought about starting a fight. Cloud moved a few centimeters away from Kunsel. If Luxiere attacked, it was better if he wasn't in Kunsel's feet and vice-versa.
“You have nothing to give to Zack, except more problems.”

Cloud kept a straight face, but the words stung. They touched a dark place in him he tried to keep confined. Being insecure could cost you your life on a battleground. His hands shook at his sides, not from the urge to fight, though. Cloud liked his lips, the anxiety building in him since Luxiere's arrival slowly became an anxiety attack.

“Let me deal with him, Cloud,” Kunsel said before pushing a bit Cloud.

He hesitated, but the moment Luxiere opened his mouth to say something, he was leaving. A fist-fight would have hurt much less than the stupid accusations Luxiere threw at him. The man seemed to say exactly what Cloud's guilt had tried to convince him.

Cloud didn't know where to go. He could return to the dorm. But wouldn't people on the floor thought his return suspicious? Cloud wasn't so sure he would calm down in the room as he waited for a possible interruption. In fact there wasn't any place he could think of where he could calm down without being plagued by the thought someone would find him.

He walked past the communal showers next from the gym and continued to the little square of challway that was never passed, even if there was a door. A supply closet, surely, that no one used. It wasn't the best place to have a breakdown, but a good one to take back his breath.

He hadn't thought he would meet Angeal Hewley there.

Chapter End Notes

sure thing, contribute to the Clack week too! like you hadn't enough to do
also: no I have no idea about the layout of the floors allowed the Soldiers in this fic
Angeal juggled with the bag of compost and the new flower he brought to push the lift button. He saluted Sasha when he climbed at the next floor then stayed silent except for a few sighs.

“You look down,” the man stated.

Angeal gave him a week smile, “Yeah.”

“If it's about the fight with Sephiroth, don't worry too much. He didn't look too angry when he left the gym earlier.”

“You know about the fight,” Angeal repeated, heart thundering. “How did you learn about it?”

Sasha blinked and leaned back. Angeal noticed he had raised his voice. The fact someone outside of his soulmates knew about the fight put him on edge. He had been certain they were watched and Sasha knowledge confirmed it.

“It's okay, sir. It happens.” Sasha said. “Sephiroth entered the gym to find a partner for a spar. Someone proposed you, since you came back and- well, Sephiroth said he fought with you.”

“Oh, I see.” Angeal nodded. He moved his load in his arms so it wasn't slipping anymore. With a little push he forced himself to ask on a lighter note, “Did he found a willing partner?”

Sasha chuckled. They shared a knowing smile, yet Angeal was searching proofs in the man demeanour that Sephiroth didn't say more. The silver-haired man tended to let slip honests, but harsh comments and SOLDIERs were not the gentlest men alive. They joked about inappropriate things and sometimes went too far with their teasing. Angeal had tried to drill honour in those men, but he knew some of them hated his demeanour and weren't against slandering him.

“Actually one of the Watchers challenged him. Well, it's more Genesis who challenged both of them to fight against each others.”

The First breathed as anger rose in him. Sephiroth had said Genesis was with Cloud and rather than coming to find him he went to their lover and the Watcher. It was pretty unsettling.

“Cloud- er Strife, spent the rest of the hour trying to correct Sephiroth's stance,” Sasha continued.

“What?”

Sasha seemed a lot more uneasy now. He chuckled nervously, moved his weight from one foot to another and scratched his nose without looking at Angeal.

“Strife said Sephiroth had a very poor balance and decided to correct that.” Sasha glanced at Angeal before look straight before him. “Er- did you know, sir? About Sephiroth imbalance? I should say I never realised until Cloud pointed it. But the General is way faster than me and I'm not a match so it never came to mind he was-”

“Sasha.” Angeal groaned. He gained the man's silence and breathed. “I knew. I tried to correct it subtly.”
Angeal paused. He tried for his help to be unnoticed because he knew how anxiety inducing being told he was wrong made Sephiroth feels. He had noticed a change, until he was too accustomed to it he started forgetting it. Then problems piled up and Angeal stopped trying to correct Sephiroth's stance. The man was already the strongest.

He made a mental note to ask Sephiroth about his feelings about it. He hoped he didn't felt so down.

The lift rang announcing their arrival. Sasha dashed out of the lift and joined his friends in the lounge. Angeal went his way toward the end of the corridor but still heard Sasha said something to his friend.

“Dude, I crossed Angeal. He was pretty weird!”

“Yeah, happened one time to me too. Maybe stress-”

Angeal didn't hear the last of the sentence but enough had been said. He inhaled slowly to calm his heart, an uneasiness creeping on him. But his eyes caught the silhouette of one Cloud Strife leaning near the door of his personal local. Strife had his eyes shut and kept still yet his sole presence irritated Angeal. He exhaled, and the blond startled, jumping into a focused stance.

The First frowned and shifted his hold on his things, so he had a hand free. The blond kept his eyes on him, following each of his movements like a hawk. If he wasn't in a defending position, he was still taut.

“What are you doing here?” Angeal asked.

“Hiding.” Cloud answered before shifting his stance from one foot to another. “Although it didn't last long.”

“Hiding from what?” Angeal persisted.

“Witnesses.”

All sort of terrible things flashed in Angeal's head. Mostly the Watcher attacking him and going for the kill. Cloud's stance, the dilated pupils, his heart speeding up and the fact he breathed more slowly. Strife was preparing to attack. The First clenched his fist. Strife looked at it then crossed Angeal's eyes.

“Mental breakdown are best deal alone in the Watchers if you don't want to be attacked.” Cloud said, his eyes still in Angeal's. “Seems identic here.”

The words struck Angeal hard. Dumbfounded, he looked as the blond moved from the wall, eyes never leaving Angeal. Cloud went to the other side of the corridor in a way to put space between them. Angeal stayed mute. Mixed feelings were breaking hell in him. His brain still didn't trust Strife but the way Cloud acted showed fear. Angeal wasn't accustomed to people seeing him as a threat outside of a battlefield.

“Wait!”

Angeal grabbed the blond's arm. Cloud jerked away and knocked against the wall. The First could hear the shortness of breath Cloud was hiding seconds ago. He gritted his teeth, cursing softly at his own idiocy. The blond had a hesitant move which looked more like a spasm than something else. Cloud kept his hand still hovering above his chest in a defensive manner, but seemed frozen on the spot.
“Sorry,” Angeal said with the low voice he used naturally for freaked out SOLDIERs. “It's my garden here. The place is calm. If—”

He didn't finish his sentence. The blond wasn't going to jump on the proposition. Not after the way he had acted with Strife all along.

“Sorry, again. I'm not holding you here.” Angeal murmured.

Cloud didn't move. He stared at Angeal.

Angeal opened his mouth to add something but kept it shut as he looked at the man's face. Fear made Cloud's pupil as little as the end of a pin, making his eyes huge. They were a pretty sky blue, which explained his nickname in the Watchers. For a brief second Angeal saw an apparition of green but the moment passed. The fear displayed by Cloud made Angeal uneasy, he wasn't trying to be intimidating. Yet his stature and his creased brown seemed to have worked against him again. His mind corrected him, a few seconds ago he had been ready to hit. Cloud noticed it.

Angeal deflated on himself. He had attributed ill thoughts to the ex-Watcher before Cloud had showed any signs of aggression. In fact Cloud had reacted to Angeal's own aggressivity. This thought calmed his paranoia. Cloud blinked and all fear left him letting the First caught off guard.

Laughs at the end of the corridor made them look. The blond sighed and made a hand move toward the door next to Angeal.

“It's still—” Cloud started before coughing on his word.

Angeal was taken aback by the ask. He thought the boy would run from him at the first occasion.

“Come in.”

He opened the door with his free hand, still glad he chose never to close the door and turned on the switch. The light flicked on revealing his garden in good shape. Angeal forgot who he put in charge during his absence but he made good work.

The room wasn't very big. Angeal had to play with the shelves spots to save the more room possible. Genesis often joked Angeal had spent much more time arranging the furnitures positions rather than tending to his plants.

Angeal had found true wood for his shelves rather than cold metal and adapted lamps for plants growth. He didn't have a big collection for now, only common plants from around Midgard or some he had managed to take during a mission, without them dying during the transport. SOLDIERs always snickered when they saw him with a tiny green thing on his lap as they returned home.

Angeal turned toward Cloud. The boy entered the room then didn't move. His eyes were lost somewhere else than the tip of his boots.

“So, what's happening to you?”

Angeal put his hands on his hips, waiting for the answer.

Cloud lifted his eyes and crossed Angeal's. He seemed blank, “I can't talk to Zack.”

“Is that—”

Angeal was cut off by a sob then a stream of tears on the blond's face which didn't move from its
blankness. Angeal was a bit impressed to see Cloud cry but stay mostly composed, yet a bit afraid too. The only reason would be that Cloud was still holding himself, which was heartbreaking but understandable. They were not friends and Cloud wasn't feeling at ease with him. Which prompted the question: why did Cloud accept to come in a little room with a guy that had been hostile toward him a second ago?

“I can't talk to Zack,” Cloud repeated. “I'm always watched. I can't sleep. I can't- I want Zack.”

The blond dissolved into tears as he tried to talk again but failed miserably. He breathed in quick, swallow burst. Cloud pushed his palms against his eyes, like he was trying to hold the tears, the breakdown, back. He let himself slip in a crouched position, holding on his head which protected it from any possible hit. The only word understandable was Zack's name between bouts of another language.

Angeal closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to calm the guilt building in him. Obviously Cloud could be dangerous, but he was also a victim. Or he was a good actor, a little voice commented. Which made the First pinch his lips and shook his head. He wasn't going this road again, not till Cloud didn't give him a reason to.

He walked up to the ex-Watcher who curled on himself. Cloud's sobs were quieted by the position. They were stopped entirely as Angeal stood next to Cloud. He thought he had been cheated, that Cloud was playing with him, until Angeal realised the blond had stopped breathing altogether. He extended a hand, worried, but it was batted away by a trembling hand. Angeal fixed the ex-Watcher and noted the swollen and red eyes. For a second Cloud seemed to have stopped crying but he blinked one, two times and more tears hurtled down the scrunched face.

“I'm going to find a drink for you,” Angeal said, removing his sweat-shirt. “Cry all you want, but not on the flowers. Salted water isn't good for them.”

He smiled hesitantly at Cloud who gazed at him blankly, not even quirking up his lips at Angeal's joke. The First let fall his sweat-shirt on the blond head and took off. He saluted some SOLDIERs hanging out in the hall rather than the lounge for the, mostly, quiet space then entered the communal room. He wasn't here for two seconds that a young Third Class came to him shyly.

“Er, sir, can I talk to you?”

“I'm sorry, kid,” He clapped the boy's shoulder and smiled, “but I already have someone to take care of right now.”

“Ah... I understand, sir. It can wait when you're in your office.”

“Good.” Angeal smiled at him again before the boy returned to his group of friends.

Angeal had worked hard for not being seen as harsh like Genesis or stone cold like Sephiroth. Obviously they weren't so one dimensional, but the lower ranks and younger soldiers seemed to ignore that. With his perpetual frown, gift of worrying too much for his troublesome friends and lovers, people had assumed for months, maybe years that he was the worst of the trio. Genesis still teased him about the rumors which were started in the past. That why Cloud's fear had hurt so much.

Yes, Angeal didn't trust the man. Yes, he was jumpy and uneasy around the ex-Watchers, but making them fear him when they were already mentally scared didn't make Angeal feel good. Far from it.

Feet dragging with the heaviness of his unbelievable behaviour, he went to the table in the corner.
The cafeteria wasn't far. He would just have to continue and turn at the first angle, but warm drinks weren't the cafeteria speciality. Plus the SOLDIERs were lazy, so they put some homemade drinks available for all in a corner of the lounge.

He looked at what left and rolled his eyes at the badly hidden bottle of whisky behind the coffee machine. He could take it and offer it to Cloud but somehow the blond didn't stick him at a guy fond of alcohol. Angeal took a cup of coffee for himself and one of hot chocolate for the blond. You couldn't do wrong with hot chocolate, he learned.

When he returned to his garden, he paused a second behind the door, listening. Ragged breath then sobs immediately muted by a hand or something else to the point Angeal doubted and instant the blond was still breathing but a long exhale reassured him. Angeal pushed the door with his shoulder, stepping inside he took a good look at Cloud. The ex-Watcher was still curled on himself and tried to hold himself from making too much sounds.

Angeal put he chocolate mug next to Cloud's feet, he lingered a second as he tried to see Cloud's face but it was securely held between arms and knees.

“Wait a second,” Angeal murmured as he crouched down.

He took his PHS and tapped Zack's number. His movement had the advantage of making Cloud lift his head. Angeal's heart sank at the fear still present in Cloud's features. He returned his attention to his PHS in part to escape this expression and made the call.

“Yo, Angeal!” came the puppy's answer.

Angeal smiled derisively to himself, he had Cloud full attention now. He was certain the boy would have wiggled his tail if he had been a puppy. Maybe he should nickname him like that too.

“Hello, Zack. You can talk?”

He heard a lot of winds and the palms of choppers.

“Yup! I'm in the chopper though. Texts would be better.”

“I'm with Cloud, apparently you couldn't talk before and... it upset him.”

“Cloud!” Zack yelled with delight. “Pass him, pass him!”

Angeal chuckled and gave his PHS to Cloud who took it hesitantly. He looked at Angeal with a questioning look. As Cloud hesitated, Zack tried to grab his attention.

“Hey, chocobo-head! You hear me? Chocobo?”

Cloud made a noise that sounded a lot like a chocobo affronted wark.

The First returned to his plants, glad he had helped another SOLDIER in pain. Maybe Cloud wasn't SOLDIER, but he was enhanced and his experience had similarities with SOLDIERs. After all the garden existed solely for him to have a 'base' for those type of crisis. SOLDIERs became more calm when they helped him work too.

Although he had dealt with Cloud without yells and trashing. Which made him one of the easiest man to take care of.

He repoted a little tree he was trying to turn into a bonzaï and pampered it, but he couldn't help
himself from overhearing Cloud and Zack's conversation.


“Zack,” Cloud grumbled, his nose in the crook of his arm. He took a breath then said, “Not okay.”

There was a pregnant pause before Zack emitted a long whine. Angeal closed his eyes, sure the boy would make Cloud more twitchy without wanting to.

“Cloud?” Zack called softly. “You're here buddy?”

“Yes.”

“What do you really need?”

“Don't know,” Cloud mumbled. “Just. I wanted to hear you.”

“Well, I sure can talk until your sick of me if that's what you want!” Zack chuckled, yet Angeal was pretty surprised by the way his ex-mentee reacted to Cloud ask. He himself had trouble to understand why Sephiroth preferred method to calm down was to be silent and alone, or just listening to others.

The boy started telling Cloud about some fall Sebastian had, that lead to a series of falls in the others, like a giant domino. Peter complained loud enough for even Angeal to hear, while the others laughed. Stories about the squad were told one after another until Zack ran out of steam and started talking about banal, but annoying problems when cleaning a camp.

Apparently it was enough for Cloud to calm down. At the end he was still crouched on the ground, head on his knee, but played absent-mindedly with one of his boots' lace, a small smile on his lips.

The call finally ended as Zack hadn't more things to tell, or even battery on his PHS. Cloud stood up, he fumbled with the PHS before handing it to Angeal with a thanks. He always ran away from the room, taking his drink with him.

“Cloud,” Angeal called. The blond turned toward him. “Why did you accept to come in when I had been aggressive just before?”

Cloud tilted his head to the side, “One-on-one are easier than fighting against a group. Especially if I don't have all my head in the fight.”

Angeal nodded, yet his heart clenched so painfully he had to take a second to retrieve a normal breathing. He didn't say to Cloud that he still had his sweat-shirt on him.

Cloud wasn't sleeping. Not at the moment at least. He hadn't a full night of rest since he left Zack. Back then it had been a novelty after years in the Watchers where he feared an attack during his sleep. Even making friend with Kusel didn't give him the trust necessary to go into a full cycle of sleep. He took naps or dozed off without sleeping. Which was the cause of a great tiredness somehow worse than in the Watcher group. The lack of Dirk, Flore or Lydia next to him was what troubled him the most.

Lack of sleep made his mind fuzzy and slow. He hated that and really tried to sleep a bit more. Sometimes it worked, he could shut of his brain. But mostly his body was conditioned to wake up
anytime someone approached him in his sleep, breathed too loud or moved. If he was alone, defenceless.

Cloud had been glad when he returned to the dorm to find it devoid of Kunsel presence. It was the only way he could sleep more profoundly. And he did. But even after his breakdown Cloud couldn't fight against this reaction. When he heard the door he woke up from his uneasy sleep. His eyes still felt heavy from both sleep and his crying not long ago, even closed. His ears were listening intently.

"He's sleeping."

Cloud's heart jumped in his chest. He turned toward the door and blinked at the silhouette cut in negative by the light behind him. He would have recognised Zack anywhere.

The First saw him awake and hummed as he swallowed the space between them.

“Hey, buddy!”

“Hey, Zack.”

Zack hummed again, rocking back and forth on his heels to contain his energy. His voice dissipated the anxiety Cloud had started feeling when the door opened.

"So, want to crash at my home?"

Even in the dark Cloud see Zack's smile. He returned the smile then tried to lift himself in a seated position even if his body felt heavy and wrong. He breathed and closed his eyes to calm down the wave of nausea.

"You don't look well, buddy. Need a lift?"

"What?"

Cloud opened his eyes to Zack extending his arms with a smile broader than before. He looked like he wanted Cloud to accept the offer. Which was exactly what the blond wanted.

He opened his arms too, and Zack jumped on the tacit answer. Cloud wrapped his arms around Zack's shoulder as the dark haired lifted him with a pleased sound. Cloud nuzzled against his soulmate neck a bubble of happiness expending in his chest. He trusted Zack more than anyone, being held by someone else would have panicked him but Zack was warm and safe.

"Thanks for taking care of him, Kunsel."

"I did my best with what he let me do and what didn't felt too overbearing. Well, I'll be putting myself to bed too."

Zack's chuckle vibrated into him, jolting a bit Cloud, but he was already half asleep and didn't care. Zack's smell and the natural way he held Cloud remembered him the full year in Mako coma he had been taken care of by other-Zack. Evidences suggested it was a fantasy. Zack hadn't been here to take care of him during his Mako poisoning. But his brain had been right in the way Zack hold him. Maybe because Cloud, in his Mako coma, had remembered Zack holding him when he was still an infantryman. After all, Zack loved to hold, hug and touch him.

Cloud let himself being lulled by Zack's slight balancing as he walked and his comforting smell. He didn't felt the need to look around for threats even when he heard people in the hall.
He woke up disoriented when Zack's hold loosened around him. Cloud tightened his hold on Zack's neck, a desperate noise escaping him.

"Oh!" Zack emitted at the strength of Cloud hold. "Hey, it's okay. I'm just undressing, babe."

Cloud looked around, not recognising the place even if he felt the bed under him. A caress on his forehead brought his attention back to Zack, half on the bed. The SOLDIER held himself above Cloud since he had a vice grip on Zack's neck. His warm hand mapped a path on Cloud's face with featherlike touches.


As the time passed without Cloud letting go, Zack removed his boots. He rolled over Cloud, dragging his lover in the movement and flopped on the bed, Cloud on him. Zack nuzzled Cloud's neck, holding his waist with a firm grip. He kept giving reassurance and telling Cloud how glad he was to be back, to have Cloud back. Ultimately, Cloud fell asleep, someone ready to protecting him near.

Chapter End Notes

hello newcomers, I'm happy you're enjoying my giant self-indulgent fic
what do you mean Angeal change his mind too quickly? XD yeah it's a fic and I can't have him be all meany to my Cloud too long ><
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zack groaned as he woke up. He extended his arms to stretch but was blocked by someone lying on his left arm. Which didn't have any sensations anymore. Rather than being irritated a big smile spread on his lips and his heart melted at Cloud's cute face. He looked far less on edge with mussed hair, all curled up and clinging to Zack's arm.

The First kissed lightly the blond not to wake him up. Cloud sighed and moved. Zack held his breath, praying he hadn't woke up his cutie and breathed only when Cloud curled a bit more on himself. Zach had luck, Cloud moved until his head wasn't on Zack's arm anymore, freeing him. With the stealth of a Turk the dark haired left the bed. Tip-toeing around, he took out some clothes for Cloud and put them on the bed.

He exited the bedroom, took a moment for the pins and needles in his arm to calm down and breathed deeply. He had work to do. Yesterday he swore to the Turks he had cleaned his apartment from all possible compromising informations about ShinRa, but he lied.

Zack made the less noise possible as he cleaned the papers scattered around, lifted his couch to examine the ground and made the more important clean up of the last six months. The state of the apartment after one hour baffled him. He also recovered two materia he had misplaced for an underdetermined time, some gils and a lonely sock. He could say proudly to Angeal he hadn't find any leftovers starting their own civilisations of mold.

On a roll he decided to make breakfast. Normally he went bothering however was at the Trinity's apartment with Genesis, but he wanted to be alone with Cloud. And show off his incredible pancake skills.

He was just starting cooking the pancakes when he heard shuffling and walking around in the bedroom. His heart jumped in his chest and he grinned. Seeing Cloud again, even when he left him not so long ago, made his day and gave him a lot of joyful energy. Zack had to jump on his heels to focus on what he was doing so he wouldn't concentrate on Cloud's movements rather than his frying pancake.

Then silence fell on the bedroom. Zack kept his ears open to localise where Cloud was, but the silence put him on edge. He listened, a hand still on his frying-pan and eyes unfocused when he noticed the breathing behind him. Zack turned faster than if he had been jabbed in the ribs to see Cloud standing at the doorway of the kitchen.

Zack breathed, his heart thundering in his chest.

“I scared myself,” Zack chuckled, making his pancake turn with a swift wrist motion. “You slept well? I'm making pancakes!”

“Zack.”

The First glanced at Cloud above his shoulder with a worried frown. The way Cloud spoke his name was strange. He scanned his little blond for any indications of injuries. Cloud drowned in Zack's shirt and pants. He was still thin, too thin for a healthy SOLDIER. It broke Zack's heart, but it wasn't the only problem. Cloud looked exhausted. Dark circles ran under his dropping eyes and tremors roamed
his body. The worst was the expression in his eyes: haunted.

Zack put down the frying-pan and took the second he looked away to take a calming breath. Cloud's state brought him to tears and now he was alone with him, without SOLDIERs to look at him funny, resisting the urge to bawl his eyes out and hug his soulmate proven difficult.

He cleared his throat and glanced again at Cloud who didn't move a single eyelash since he arrived.

“You okay there, buddy?” Zack asked, worry clawing at him. “You don't look perky, you should sit down. The pancakes are almost done."


Zack turned to his soulmate, his heart squeezing at the helpless tone. When Cloud started tearing up a black hole swallowed Zack's heart. A cold shudder ran down his spine.

“What- are you hurt?” he asked, his panicked thoughts made him fumble.

“Zack.” With that Cloud broke into tears on his spot.

Zack rushed to Cloud who sobbed without moving an inch. He stopped at arm's length, knowing full well how aggressively emotional SOLDIER could react. His skin crawled with the need to comfort Cloud, to hold him close and keep him safe, but he stayed away, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"Can I hug you? Can I touch you, please?" Zack blurted in one breath.

Cloud choked up, but closed the distance separating them at Zack's relief. He hadn't lifted half-way his arms that Zack embrassed him. He gripped Zack's shoulder and pressed his head against Zack's chest.

The First held Cloud close, breathing deeply his scent. He moved him just enough for the blond's head to be in the crook of his neck rather than awkwardly pressed against his chest. Zack's soaked up the feeling of Cloud's skin against his and rocked the both of them as he caressed his soulmate back.

Cloud hold onto his shirt with all his strength, not letting go even if his body was shook by heavy sobs.


"Shh, I got you. We're together now," Zack murmured against Cloud's ear. "You're safe, baby."

"I don't- I can't live without you again, Zack." Cloud tightened his hold on Zack. "Please, don't leave me again."

Zack control over himself broke without more. A full body spasm was the first sign of the incoming waterfall. He had spent too much time ignoring Cloud's state, even with the daily updates because he knew that if he allowed himself a second to think about it, he would break down. Zack held back those tears for days now, so he cried without care. He cried over Cloud and with him.

The minutes passed, Zack kept murmuring promises and sweet nothings as much to reassure himself than Cloud.

"Whatever happen, I'm with you baby. I'll keep you safe. Okay?"

He backed away just enough to cradle Cloud's cheeks in his hands. His thumbs moved in a
reassuring caress as he looked at Cloud.

“Your face is all red and puffed,” Zack chuckled.

Cloud sniffled and mumbled with a low voice because of his blocked nose, “Yours too. Nobody would kiss this face.”

A laugh escaped Zack. He pressed Cloud's cheeks between his hands and went for a kiss even if he was more a smooch of their faces than anything else. Zack pecked Cloud's lips feeling joy bubbling in him as Cloud huffed and smiled under his smooches attack, but didn't avoid it.

“You wouldn’t kiss me?” Zack said between kisses. “I'll tell you I'm handsome. People have wet dreams about kissing me. Even if only once.”

“They would stop if they saw you now. You're terrible, face wise.”

“You aren't stopping me right now,” Zack whispered against Cloud's lips. His kisses changed for something less amusing and more sensual, holding the blond close who was melting in his arms. “I couldn't be so horrible.”

Cloud huffed, he was smiling ear to ear now, which was a very good improvement from earlier in Zack's book. He wrapped his arms around Zack's neck, “You're lucky I like you.”

“I like you too. Like, a lot.” Zack leaned on Cloud, kissing the gape of his neck. “A lot, lot. A lot more than anything.”

Cloud didn't answer, he kept smiling, eyes half lidded and Zack knew he had changed his little chocobo into goo. They stayed body flushed against the other, arms wrapped around until Cloud made a face, then jumped out of Zack’s arms.

“The frying-pan!”

He hadn't finished talking that Zack turned around and saw the flames coming from the burned pancake left on the fire. With his nose stuffed by his tears he didn't smell the burned thing. Zack ran to the frying-pan and hovered around it. He grabbed the towel threw at him by Cloud, knocked the bowl of pancake mix in the sink by accident and put the towel on the fire. It died almost instantly, letting Zack enough time to mourn his bowl emptying in the sink.

“My pancakes,” Zack whined. “I didn't go grocery shopping. I have nothing in my cupboards.” Zack put his hands on his hips. “Well, guess I'll need to remedy to that!”

A hand hesitantly grabbed his forearm. He dropped his eyes on Cloud.

“You're going out like that?”

Zack looked at himself. He wore a dark jogging and a simple t-shirt, “We're just going to the cafeteria, not the fancy restaurant Gen loves. He would throw at me the nearest thing at hand if I went like that. But you've been to the cafet', some SOLDIER even go in with only theirs boxers.”

Cloud hummed as comprehension hit him, “I just never saw Firsts there. Except Genesis.”

“Yeah, we prefer our own cooking, but after a mission or just before one, it's convenient to go there.” Zack draped an arm around Cloud. “Now I'm going to feed you because you have the silhouette of a baby bird.”
Cloud frowned, then huffed, but it was chased away by Zack smooching him. He made a comment about their lack of shoes and Zack proposed to carry him again without pausing to grab the boots just at the entrance. As they walked and chatted – Zack mostly – the First kept bumping into Cloud, squeezing a hand or an arm and simply standing close. If Cloud was tense at first, he quickly warmed up at Zack delight.

They took their meals, Cloud sighing before the pile of sweets and anything with a bit of sugar that Zack took. Zack only smiled at Cloud's scowl, then waved at his squad half-sleeping on their meal on another table.

The both of them choose a free table for them alone. He tried not to scowl too at the simple fruit salad his soulmate took and eat in seconds, but he couldn't repress the twist in his gut. Fortunately, he didn't take all this food only for himself and started pushing half of his meal in Cloud's hands as he eat. He kept the blond entertained so he didn't remark what Zack did.

Movement behind him made Zack turn his head around. Adam smiled sweetly at him. Zack kept smiling, but he felt like an impending doom was looming over his head.

“Hello, Zack.”

“Hey, buddy. What's up?”

Zack broke a donut in two and put one half in Cloud's hand.

“Hum, nothing new.” Adam shrugged. “I'm free tonight. Want to go have a go?”

Zack choked up on his part of the donut. He glanced at Cloud who looked at him with surprise and naturally extended a hand to tap him in the back. Zack hoped the blond hadn't understood the euphemism.

“Adam, dude!” Zack exclaimed. “I'm with Cloud!”

“With him...” Adam frowned, his mind jarring. “You mean. You're dating him?”

Zack wanted to hit his head on the table. Now Cloud couldn't ignore Adam had been propositioning to him. Looking at the blond's face confirmed it.

“Yes! I was already with him before, I mean with the number of times a day I talked about him I thought it was clear!”

“You didn't talk this much about him,” Adam mumbled, crossing his arms.

Zack let his mouth hang open, he glanced at Cloud again to see him bite his lips and furrow his brows. The SOLDIER had been sure his way of showing affection to Cloud, even when he was a trooper, had made their relationship clear. His squad saved him, the men he worked the most with, as they burst out laughing.

“We see you don't work often with Zack,” shouted Essai from his corner, “he's talking about Cloud at least one time during one conversation.”

“Even more now that he's back,” Peter sighed.

“Like, Zack try not to evoke any of his ex or one night stand with anyone, but Cloud... man, he can't shut up.”
“Hey!” Zack exclaimed without energy. It was true.

All the other conversations in the cafeteria slowly died as the attention drew to Zack and Cloud's table where Adam was still waiting. He tried to have another word, but his complaint was cut short by Genesis opening the doors with strength. They nearly hit him in their back and forth moves. He walked on them in all his glorious scowl. Zack was surprised to see the man's right arm off of his sling and holding a stress ball.

“Well, care to explain this ambiance?” Genesis asked, waving his left hand around.

Zack felt the hair in the back of his neck bristle at Genesis' tone. It was barely a whisper, heard by all in the silent cafeteria. There was an edge in the murmur, though. Something dangerous, prodding for something and waiting to strike.

It was his tone when he was angry, but wanted to hurt the offender before going to seethe in a corner for the day.

“Hum, I made sexual advances to Zack,” Adam answered. “Though, I didn't know about his relationship with Strife.”

“Is that so?”

“What do you want, Genesis?” Zack asked.

“Talk with, Cloud, isn't it obvious?” he answered before turning to Adam, completely ignoring Cloud. “Well, finish your discussion. I wouldn't want to interrupt more. It's rude.”

“Er-,” Adam looked around, searching in Zack's eyes the answer to his silent question.

Zack didn't pay him too much attention as he studied Genesis and Cloud. The latter crunched his face at Genesis, but didn't look mad. He was reacting to the obvious ignorance from Genesis who had crossed his arms and looked everywhere except for Cloud. The blond meet Zack's gaze in a silent question.

"Well, I don't understand why you resume your relationship with him this early. Maybe you were together back then, but he surely changed.”

Zack groaned, closing his eyes at Adam's comment. He should just have walked away and keep his mouth shut. Didn't SOLDIERs needed to pass IQ tests before applying? With Adam, Zack was wondering. He glared at the SOLDIER trying to convey all the good he was thinking of him right now. From the updates he received on Cloud during their parting he knew the SOLDIERs weren't hot for the Watcher living in the Tower with them, but Adam's comment questioned Zack's decision about Cloud. Which Adam had no right to do, it wasn't even like Zack and him were close.

"I don't ask you to understand, but to be respect my choice."  

"But-"

"Get a clue, Adam. They're soulmates,” Genesis said.

Cloud choked up and Zack let his mouth hang open. He stared at the red-head with shock, seeing from the corner of his eyes Cloud being in the same state.
Cloud swallowed with difficulty the thing that just happened. Genesis said to all he and Zack were soulmate. He couldn't believe it. Yet his heart was racing and a cold sweat went down his spine. There was a reason for Nibelheimer to keep silent, mostly about others. There was a reason that Cloud was not remembering.

And Zack's upbringing stopped him from saying out loud he was Cloud's soulmate.

“This is all?” Genesis asked Adam, catching back Cloud’s attention. “Well, on your way now.”

Genesis shooed him away then, turned to Cloud with a furious glare. He held up the stress ball before Cloud's eyes, "That?" Genesis jabbed the ball on the table. "-don't work. I quit."

"You said it. That Zack and me were-"

"Well, you promised it'll work.” Genesis tapped the table next to the table. “It didn't so you can forget my own promise."

Cloud hunched over himself at Genesis' harsh tone.

"I didn't promise anything," he hissed, glaring at the red-head. "You didn't promise anything either. But decency would have make you keep your mouth shut!"

Zack made some unconcittal noises and jumped on his feet.

"My, my, why don't you calm down? It's done now. It isn't the death of us. I only did it because it's natural back home, but I don't mind too much."

"Listen to the big guy, Cloud."

"No! It is important. Old Nibel stories talk about this, about revealing the bond that isn't yours. This is not good. This is not okay. Why did you say that?"

A hand on his hip, Genesis waved him off.

"I'm sick of it making my life more complicated." He turned to Zack. "Everybody was shitty with him and by proxy with me. Even if they knew Cloud had ties with you. Now, it's out. There's no turning back," he turned to Cloud again, "Like there's no turning back with my hand. It's not working."

With that he lifted his chin and turned on his heels, stalking back toward the entry of the cafeteria. Cloud glared at his back before grabbing the stress ball. He pressed it, his anger boiling in his veins.

“Hey, buddy,” Zack called softly.

Cloud frowned, ignoring Zack's attempt to catch his attention. With swift movements he turned around. He aimed precisely as he called, “Gen!”

SOLDIERs rose to their feet as the red-head spun and caught the stress ball by instinct. With his right hand. Genesis stared at his own hand. The SOLDIERs standing, that had tried to stop the projectile before realising what it was looked at each others. None had deemed necessary to stop a ball that had been aimed to low to hurt badly the redhead.

"Not working, uh?" Cloud spit out.

He glared at Genesis. The guy was dumbfounded, he opened his mouth and pettily, Cloud gave him his back. Cloud couldn't see the redhead, but he heard him walk off in silence, without trying to calm
down Cloud.

"Uh, sorry then." Adam said, running his hand in his hair. "Not that... Cloud should mind. I mean, he was gone for what two years? A bit more? He knows how hard it becomes without sex. Watchers have needs too."

"Shut it, Adam," Zack groaned. "You're not helping."

Cloud growled, "You don't fucking know what I think. Watchers have needs, but sex isn't a need. Not when you're starving or search a safe place to sleep if you don't want to be killed during the night. Sex isn't a need. It's a commodity."

"Spike," Zack called softly. He reached for Cloud's hand shaking around his drink. "We'll talk about that later, okay?" He looked around. "It's a bit crowded for a private talk, uh?"

"What would it matter? I'm always watched even if by camera. And SOLDIERs around here seem to know you more intimately than me anyway," Cloud hissed.

Zack's strangled gasp made him lift his head. The hold on his hand made his bones grind against each others. Cloud saw Zack's eyes going wide and humid. The SOLDIER closed them a second and shook his head, his expression became pinched and harsh. Zack's brows were furrowed and his lips quirked downward. Cloud felt all his blood being absorbed by a hole where his stomach should be. Zack was mad because of him, because he hurt him.

A tremor took Cloud's hands. He breathed deeply to calm himself. Meeting Zack's eyes, all of his control diluted in his budding panic.

"We're going," Zack said in a commanding voice.

The First's cold voice made Cloud shudder. His breath hitched when Zack used his hold on his hands to pull him to his feet. He grabbed his elbows to stabilise him, then kept his hold as he dragged Cloud out of the cafeteria and in the corridor.

The silence observed by the normally cheerful First did nothing to alleviate Cloud's anxiety. The hall was less hot than the cafeteria with the mass of bodies moving around. Yet his body shot up in temperature, making him shudder as cold air touched his skin.

Why did he anger Zack? Why did he do such a stupid thing?

Zack went down the hall and opened the staircase that Cloud never thought about using. He kept his head low so he couldn't cross Zack's eyes by chance and see the anger in them.

Cloud lifted a hand to his ear, his heartbeat echoed in them, driving him mad. His heart stopped a second when Zack pushed him against a wall.

"I'm sorry, Zack. I'm sorry."

Warm hands caged his cheeks and Cloud was forced to look at Zack in the eyes. He exhaled when he saw only worry in Zack.

"Hey, Cloud. Spike," Zack whispered as his thumbs stroked Cloud's cheeks. "Hey, be good, breathe babe." He leaned down to catch Cloud's eyes again. "Just breath. We'll talk later."

"Y-you're not mad?"
"That you implied I sleep with every SOLDIER in the cafet'?" Zack chuckled. "A bit, but hey, you said that to hide the fact you felt bad that you weren't here those last years. You weren't with me. And I did sleep with a lot of people when I finally ended my depression."

Cloud pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes. He was an idiot. He panicked for nothing when a few months ago, even weeks, he would have lived something far worse than a frown.

"I'm sorry. I'm stupid. This is stupid," Cloud chocked up on his words. "I'm sorry. I wanted. I- I thought you were dead, but I still wanted I'd have spent more time with you. I-

And he was spouting nonsense. Cloud couldn't clear his own thoughts. He wanted to express what he felt to Zack, but nothing made sense.

Zack wrapped his hands around Cloud's, he came closer so he was flush against Cloud. He kissed his forehead and shushed Cloud.

"It's okay to break down now, I understand," he managed to remove Cloud's hands from his eyes and smiled at the blonde. "You know I wanted that too? To have more time with you. I'm so happy to have you back. I don't care if you do dumb shit, if I can do them with you I'm fine with it."

Cloud cracked a poor smile that made Zack beam.

"Do you need to stay here a bit more or can we go back to the apartment to cuddle?"

Cloud thought about it, "I... I need to do something because of Genesis."

"'kay. What is it?"

"I... don't know?"

Zack made a sound in his throat and a strange pout but shook this expression away and grinned, "Let me know when you remember. C'mon, we're going back to my place."

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why I started writing in Cloud's POV at the end, but I was too lazy to change back, so mote it be. Also next chapter you'll see how zack and cloud see the soulmarks and omerta thingy going on.

also, unrelated note, and I don't know if people already know, but I can see the number of people that subscribed to this story. I'm happy there enough people for you to play football (american or not) since a moment - with a third equip on the side - though what's disheartening is to see that there only one person that comment. Two sometimes. So if it's too bad to comment, don't subscribe.
Chapter 17

I'm sorry for the mistakes, really but DON't talk to me about having a beta. This is so unnecessary to bring up. I know I make mistakes, but I already had betas, we were even friends. It didn't stop me from hating having one. Correcting the chapter, giving it to a beta then doing the corrections noticed by them just give me more work and stress me out. I think I have a good enough grasp on english for you to ignore some mistakes and not pour acid in your eyes at each chap. Maybe a beta at the end of the story, but not now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sephiroth walked with energy down the hall, until he approached Zack's apartment. Hesitation slowly rose in him. Zack certainly didn't want to deal with Sephiroth's problem right now. His steps faltered and he found himself standing in front of the slightly ajar door, listening intently.


Sephiroth blocked his left knee in an invisible nervous tic. He forgot Cloud was with Zack and now his thoughts of a private conversation with the First were cut short. He exhaled slowly in a not-quite sigh, then turned on his heel to go away.

The door opening wide startled him. He glanced at Cloud who looked at him, a scowl on his face. Zack appeared behind the blond, a big smile spreading on his face when he saw Sephiroth.

“Hey, Seph. You need somethin’?”

His answer was cut short when Cloud grabbed him by his elbow and pulled him in the apartment, he pushed him against Zack before the man could get out of the way.

“I need you. You stay,” Cloud said.

Sephiroth sent a questioning look in Zack's direction as Cloud pushed him in the living room only to receive a nonchalant shrug.

“Please, just roll with it. Cloud needs it.”

“Roll with what?”

“He talked about some sort of ritual to appease the gods. His gods.” Zack said before leaning toward Sephiroth and whispering. “That what I caught between his rants in nibel.”

Sephiroth stared at the dark-haired man whose mouth quirked up in an almost-smile. He nodded slowly and Zack's relieved smile made his heart flutter. He turned his head toward Cloud who was assembling an array of unrelated objects and even food.

“Genesis is a believer too, maybe he would be more at ease in such a setting.”

Zack closed in eyes like he was in pain, drawing Sephiroth's attention to him rather than Cloud until
the blond hissed, “Didn't his parents taught him manners?”

Sephiroth was taken aback by the hostility. The night before, Genesis had talked about the days with the Watchers. And by Watchers, it was mostly about Cloud he talked. From Genesis description Sephiroth understood his lover's friendship was reciprocated, but Cloud's actual mood contradicted the supposition.

“Aw calm down, Spike. Gen' was frustrated with his hand, y'know?”

Cloud turned toward Zack, glaring and breathing heavily with anger.

“I know! That's not an excuse!” Cloud stamped, glaring at the ground now.

Sephiroth brought his head closer to Zack's and murmured, “What happened?”

"Gen said we were soulmates at the cafeteria."

"Oh...” Sephiroth blinked, he couldn't see where the problem was. “Is that so terrible?”

"Well, kinda. For me it's like he spilled the truth on a secret party I was organising and it cuts the fun, but it's no big deal-"

"You'd have revealed the truth yourself?"

"No, people should have known by themselves. It's a bit the whole purpose y'know? If people can't see you're in love for the whole eternity, then you're doing something wrong."

Zack shifted his stance and pinched his lips on one side. It was a quirk Sephiroth knew said Zack was saddened by something.

“What's the matter?” Sephiroth asked.

“Well... I thought it was clear I loved Cloud, even when he was an infantryman. I thought everyone knew. I mean. They always teased me about him when we started our relationship, they said I spent all my time with him and-” Zack shrugged. “I guess I'm bummed that wasn't the case. Nobody knew. Except for the Turk, but I had to fill the form so... yeah.”

“We knew because you told us,” Sephiroth remarked. “You didn't act differently than with another partner.”

Zack sighed and passed a hand through his hair, “That's the thing. I thought I did. Because Cloud is different than any other lover.”

Zack met Sephiroth eyes, urging him silently to understand what dejected him. The silver-haired lowered his head, so Zack's eyes weren't pushing him to answer when he was still thinking.

"Your cultural tradition seems biased, even harmful, for people who don't show affection in public. Or ones that are known for being more tactile than a lambda person."

"Yeah, it's traditions for you. Sometimes they sucks."

“I don't think you did something bad in your way of showing affection to Cloud. You love with everything you have. You loved your ex-lovers and it showed. You love Cloud and it shows. The difference is in the duration of your love, not its nature or strength.”

“Aw, Seph become all poetic!” Zack nudged his side. He beamed at him, “Thanks.”
Cloud came back from the bedroom. He eyed the blankets thrown on the couch, then the food on the table, frowning.

"Why it is important for you then?"

Confusion appeared on Cloud's face, "What?"

"Keeping the fact you are Zack's soulmate a secret. Why it is important for you?"

"Oh. Uh." Cloud paused in the middle of the living room, staring at nothing. His eyes light up after a few second of thinking. "Ah!"

"Memory?" Zack asked, a fond smile on his lips.

"Yes, I know how to correct that."

"Finally," Zack groaned. "You moved half my apartment in the living room." he looked up and down Cloud's form, frowning. He pulled slightly on Cloud's red shirt that Sephiroth recognised as one of Zack, "And changed clothes?"

Cloud glanced at the chaos, "Hum. I didn't know who I was going to ask for the correction."

"But why does it need to be corrected?" Sephiroth asked, curious.

"It's nibel traditions, you don't reveal the bond between others, because it shows it for other people in a setting they didn't choose. They're surprised so the bond is left unprotected-"

"-by what?" Sephiroth questioned.

Cloud shrugged, "Your attention I suppose. Well, if you don't look at something people use your inattention to strick, no?"

"The bond between soulmate is immaterial. You can't focus on it. And other people can't see it."

A nudge from Zack made him huff, "Religion aren't always set in scientific bases. But some customs are created in reaction to something."

Sephiroth pinched his lips together in an almost pout as Cloud put down on the carpet a drink of juice, some biscuits left from Zack's cupboards and a single fruit that somehow survived Zack's absence. Religion was a matter that escaped his comprehension. He liked the lore, but found no interest in those customs Zack talked about.

"And what would it do to the bond? And who, or what, is it?"

"Well, deities and demons mostly. They are the one capable of manipulating a bond or even breaking it. Loki, god of mischief and Chaos, is recurrent in the stories. It was said the nibelheimers lives too near from him not to fear the possible attacks." Cloud sat on the ground, face to the food assembled there, he patted the ground, telling them to sit too.

Zack eagerly joined him, tried to take a biscuit only for his hand to be swatted away. Sephiroth sighed, but sat down.

“So this Loki is a villain god,” he said.

Cloud made a confused face, “No? He's a trickster.”
“But he's god of chaos you said, it's a bad thing.”

“Mischief, like when you play a trick on someone, ditto: trickster. Loki tends to mess with people more often than hurt them. He changes the soulmarks for exemple. He rarely hurt anyone when doing so, just making them throw some fits. And when he hurt someone, it's because the person deserved it.” Cloud nodded decisively at his own comment.

“And Chaos?” Zack nudged Cloud. He tried to grab the food again, but Cloud pinched him.

“Chaos is a demonic beast that he's keeping prisoner in his daughter realm.”

“Wait,” Zack drawled as his eyes got huge, but Cloud ignored him as he didn't say anything after this word.

“He bound him, so he can't go too far from him,” Cloud continued. “And yeah, he had to take his place to keep a balance.”

“But-” Sephiroth started.

“Ah! Stop with the questions, Seph!” Zack shouted.

“But-”

Zack's hand on his face cut him. “Shhh.”

“I don't mind telling him about my gods,” Cloud remarked.

Sephiroth lifted a brow at Zack's attention, then smiled under his hand. The raven-haired rolled his eyes, “Yeah, I noticed. But I have something on my mind. A question. Wait. It's a bit a mess in my head. But you said someone shouldn't talk about the bond of someone else, right?” he waited for Cloud to nod to continue, “But in Nibelheim, you can reveal your own bond to others?”

Cloud blinked, “Well, yes. People often did it during big gatherings, like festivities. So the more knew in one go.”

“Why you didn't do it then?”

“Now or before?”

“Now!” Zack exclaimed, still leaning toward Sephiroth, his hands on his face. “But I'd like to know for 'before' too, if you remember.”

“I don't know for 'before', but for now the thing is that I'm a Watcher for all the SOLDIERs.”

“Yeah, and?”

Sephiroth grabbed Zack's hand and put it down so he could speak, “It would be a distasteful tactic to gather sympathy in the mind of our soldiers, none of them would believe Cloud. Except maybe Kusel.”

Cloud nodded emphatically, yet Zack seemed put off.

“But that's true! Genesis could have confirmed it for all of them.”

“I-... at first I-” Cloud started, clearly shook by Zack's comment, “I didn't think Genesis was-,” he paused biting his lips, “-on my side?”
“The Turks would have confirmed it too,” Zack groaned. “Why didn't they put it in the files given to the SOLDIERs anyway?”

“They said they owed you and decided to let it stay secret,” Cloud said slowly. “They thought... and me. We thought it was important to you.”

“No it isn't. I just went with the flow. Fuck! It complicated our lives for nothing then?” Zack leaned back, a groan escaping him. “That's so stupid! We're too stupid! Like we could just have talked about it, isn't it?”

Sephiroth agreed somewhere. He couldn't understand how a norm like keeping secret your soulmate came to be. But he could understand the need for some people to use it. He and his own soulmates had tried to keep silent the longer possible to avoid fans and curiosity about falling outside the common pattern of a couple of bonded people.

The two boys didn't make a mistake for Sephiroth. There was enough digging into the SOLDIERs' lives by civilians to let such a secret be heard. Also, failing to communicate as teens was pretty normal, Sephiroth knew it.

Although Zack wasn't on his page if Sephiroth went by the mumbles and groans from the puppy. Sephiroth glanced at Cloud to see him clearly upset, he didn't relax as Zack continued to complain from their combined stupidity.

“Zack,” Sephiroth called, harsh enough to make the brunette lift his head and sent him a questioning look. Sephiroth tilted his head toward Cloud, hunched over himself and brow knitted, deep in thoughts. Unpleasant by the look of it. “You were very afraid of your newest fans, and only seventeen. Keeping silent about the bond kept both of you safe from their... passion. It's better to face them now when you are older.”

Zack's eyes stayed on Cloud as Sephiroth talked, but he nodded with energy, “Yeah. Yeah, you're right Seph. It was for the best. No need to worry about that. And it's in the past, isn't it!”

A sigh of relief escaped Zack when Cloud relaxed and lifted his head toward him. He smiled at the blonde and clasped his shoulder.

“Do your thing then and hope SOLDIER will keep their mouth shut and not gossip to one of my fan.”

He grimaced at the thought. Sephiroth's brow wrinkled. It was already too late, he was sure. Informations about the SOLDIERs were more securised, but not impossible to find.

“Will the gossip of the SOLDIER... weaken your 'focus' on your bond?”

Zack let his shoulder fall as he groaned, his head rolling to the side, “Too curious, Seph. If it continues we'll never leave my living room. Ever, ever.”

Cloud smiled at both of them, he put his hands on his knees and straightened up, “It's comprised in the demand of protection I'll be doing.”

Sephiroth opened his mouth again. Zack beat him, his hand finding it's way to block Sephiroth's mouth again.

“I'll hold him, Cloud,” Zack proclaimed. “Go, go, go!”

Sephiroth rolled his eyes. His lovers and Zack always complained he didn't talk enough, but when he
was interested in something they stopped him from asking questions. Cloud used the time to close his eyes and start reciting something in his mother tongue, Sephiroth deducted. Sephiroth met Zack's eyes to ask silently if they needed to do something, but the First shrugged and shook his head. He wasn't letting go of Sephiroth either.

A few minutes after the debut, Cloud opened his eyes, made some sort of sign – against evil? – and exhaled. He motioned toward the food before them, “You can eat it. I don't need it anymore.”

“That's it?”

Sephiroth and Zack glanced at each other, having said the same thing at the same time. Cloud smiled and shrugged.

“Our presence, the food's spiritual energy and a prayer. Yes, that's all.”

Zack emitted a sound low in his throat, staring at the plate. A question itched Sephiroth's mind about 'spiritual energy'. Never had he heard of it. Genesis tended to give flowers to his goddess altar. He wore Her colour too, and declared his spontaneous bout of poem recitation to be in Her name. There was also the daily prayer he made often to tell his day, using the time to complain loudly about people, Angeal and Sephiroth too. Although to be fair, Genesis gushed about Angeal and him a lot too. It was his silent prayer that made Sephiroth worry.

It was easy to note Genesis' little act of faith since they were all for one goddess. It was unclear for Cloud. Another question to add to the list.

“Then, if it's all, I'll leave,” Sephiroth announced, standing suddenly. Cloud even startled at that.


“It's not urgent,” Sephiroth eluded. He nodded at the two younger men and turned on his heel.

"Seph, wait! You know you can talk to me."

He did, but he'd wanted to leave the instant he remembered Zack was spending time with Cloud. Sephiroth stayed only because he had been asked.

"Yes, but this is for Cloud I'm leaving." He partially lied before addressing Cloud. "I will not stay if I made you uncomfortable in your own home."

They stared at each other. Sephiroth fidgeted under Cloud's gaze, it was like he was searching something on his features.

"It's Zack's home and I need to talk to Genesis anyway."

"He talked to us about your interactions. He likes you,” Sephiroth confessed. “He is quick to anger, but it doesn't last long. I believe he is pacing in his office trying to find a way to talk to you without looking like a damn fool.”

Cloud scowled, “Too late.”

“So he talked to you and Angeal!” Zack exclaimed. “Geal's fine with letting Gen spend time with Spike?”

Sephiroth frowned, remembering the conversation. He looked at the blond who fidgeted under his gaze, “No. He's sure Cloud has an hidden agenda.”
"Man, he's weird. It's like stress is eating all his common sense or something else."

"Or something else..." Sephiroth repeated in a murmur.

Cloud stood and Sephiroth sat down slowly. Zack grabbed the blond before he could step away and pressed their faces together in a childish way that made them both giggle. Zack pressed another chaste kiss on his lips.

Sephiroth noticed he observed them for too long and turned his eyes to his hand lying on his thigh. Seeing Zack smile like that and being silly made Sephiroth happy too, but there was still an uneasy feel inside of him. He didn't know if it was because he felt he intruded or jealousy. Sephiroth had long since stopped being jealous of people kissing Zack, those last years he had a lot of flings.

Cloud finally extracted himself from Zack glue-grip. He nodded at Sephiroth and exited. When the silver-haired looked at Zack he saw his eyes still fixed on the place Cloud was last seen. That was it, wasn't it? Cloud wasn't just a fling. It changed everything.

Zack wasn't going to go to a one night stand and crash at their apartment to tell his story or complain nobody waited for him home so he was lonely. Because Cloud was there and he'd stole Zack's attention more surely than a baby chocobo, which Zack loved.

He exhaled, closing his eyes until Zack plopped next to him.

“So?” Zack nudged him. “What's the matter?”

“Nothing.” Lying was easy. “How things are going with Cloud?”

Zack opened his mouth and shut it, he slumped against Sephiroth and shrugged, “I just come back. I only managed two of his freak-outs. I'm not-... Don't ask that.”

“Fine,” Sephiroth answered in a whisper.

He put his chin on Zack's head as the young man seemed to mould his side without hugging him. Sephiroth savoured his time with Zack. Those times would surely get rarer as Cloud settled and his mind scars healed. Sephiroth hoped he could still talk to Zack about his own problems about Angeal and Genesis.

Genesis stopped his pacing when the door opened on a blonde head supporting an irritated face. Cloud stepped inside, then closed behind him without losing any bit of his scowl. He scanned Genesis who smirked derisively.

“You look like shit,” Cloud remarked.

Genesis' heart was racing, waiting for the blonde to tell him he would never excuse his behavior and he needed to stay away from him. Except in work situations.

“So poetic, so admiring of my person. I feel loved!”

Cloud rolled his eyes and sighed, not fazed by his heated comment. It was more than what SOLDIERs could say. At the first sign of his anger, they scattered away like crawling bugs unshielded from their rock. Cloud just stood there, arms crossed.

“I'm mad if you didn't understand,” he said. “This isn't just some silly tradition for us- me. In
Nibelheim saying to others who is your soulmate isn't appreciated, but what you did is far worse. In fact, you would have been seen as a pariah in the community.”

“Really, a pariah?” Genesis smirked. “Sure I'm an outcast, I'm godless and lawless,” he said sarcastically before changing for an attack. “So some neighbours could spend their life not knowing a couple was soulmated? That's mad, normally you shouldn't hide that kind of bond. You should be proud of it and rub it in the face of people that still didn't find their soulmate. And I'm the pariah? If it's by rejecting such a stupid norm, so mote it be!”

Cloud pinched his lips and lifted a brow, telling him he was being stupid, “One, defying a norm that hurt no one, except me in this situation, maybe, isn't something to be so proud. Two, people end up knowing, either by us telling them – we we want – or by deducting or friends nudged them and gave them 'the look'. Nibelheim is tiny, everyone ends up knowing everything on everyone else.”

Genesis sniffed and straightened, looking down at the blonde.

“Yes, but here there's too many people for this omerta not to complicate even more your life. Part of me is glad I did it. Now the SOLDIERs won't treat you like an hazard.”

“But I am one, and this is not an apologise!” Cloud shouted.

“I know!” Genesis shouted back. “I was never wrong in anything I've done when I was young. My parents made me like that—”

Cloud interrupted him, “I'm not here to hear about your upbringing.”

Crossing his arms, Genesis sighed with irritation, “I understand.”

“Then why—”

“Give me a minute will you!” Cloud startled visibly. Genesis went behind his desk so there was plenty of space between them. “Please, stay. I didn't- you said degradation had little tolls on me, but the more time spend after a shot of medication the more I'm like that, moody, irascible and other symptoms I prefer not to talk about. It's not helping I grew up as an asshole and need to break down my own stupidity.”

Cloud huffed, “Gen—”

“I come to it, give me a minute.”

Cloud breathed deeply as he crossed his arms, but followed Genesis’ ask and kept silent. His action made the redhead smile to himself.

Genesis leaned over his table, palms flat on the cold material as he breathed evenly. Irritation was prickling his skin at the mere idea of apologising. Even years after leaving his parent's home and becoming SOLDIER, he had trouble for such a simple task. At least Cloud stayed silent and still, not worsening Genesis’ disgust at the task. Angeal's lectures only added fuel to the fire in Genesis.

He straightened and meet Cloud's eyes who tilted his head to the side when Genesis stayed mute. He inhaled and jumped in the particularly difficult task of fixing his wrongdoing.

“Cloud, I apologise for the trouble I caused in speaking when I had no right to do so. It was inappropriate of me.” Genesis exhaled with relief, the worst was done. He smirked, “I would say I wouldn't do it anymore, but I fear it won't change the fact that every person in ShinRa knows now, SOLDIERs are the worst gossipers.”
A twitch of the lips and a twinkle in Cloud's eyes answered Genesis, relieving him, before the blond said anything out loud about the apology.

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

Genesis kept his gaze steady on the blond, studying Cloud's change of emotions. Relief overcame him when Cloud's smile finally broke his previous stern visage. Genesis was taken aback by his own reaction, but admitted seeing a smiling Cloud – even slightly – was better for his heart than one looking at him like he was no better than a common object he crossed every day.

Genesis toured his desk to stand face to face with the blond. He saw his eyes flicker to his hand. The one that neared a complete atrophy not too long ago. The change was radical. So much it made Genesis uneasy. But the smile Cloud had when Genesis waved his fingers eased this sensation. On a whim Genesis took Cloud's hand with his weaker one then squeezed.

“I couldn't do two this weeks ago.”

Cloud nodded, he looked at Genesis, squeezing back with a soft smile that curved his lips into asking to be kissed. Genesis' heart skipped a beat as he realised what he just thought. The red-head released Cloud's hand and took a step back as he assured himself everything was fine. Wanting to kiss attractive people was normal. He didn't act on it, so he wasn't in the wrong.

Although he had another idea, maybe less wrong, or that he could back with valid arguments that didn't make him look like a crushing teenager.

“I was going for a nap before you came.”

“Oh, right.” Cloud waved at the general direction of the door. “Then I'll be going-” a huge yawn cut him. He blinked owlishly. Genesis smirked, making Cloud huff.

“Well, why don't you join me?”

Cloud stared at him, “What? How? You only have one couch and I'm not sleeping on the ground.”

“Oh, dear!” Genesis shook his head then chuckled. “Let me introduce you to a wonderful concept called 'cuddles',”

Cloud blinked but kept staring, “What?”

“Well-”

“No, I mean. Zack is my soulmate! Even if he was just a friend, it's Zack. Don't you think I know what cuddles means? But why are you-? Why do you want to cuddle with me?” Cloud paused, his brows knitting together. “That's surrealist.”

“We're friends,”

“You cuddle with all your friends?”

“No.” They looked at each other in silence for a few seconds. “Fine. Look, I'm maybe less cuddly at prima facie, but I am. And my terrible soulmates are either stoïc ice cub uncomfortable with long cuddle, or locked away in their garden tending to their stupid little green things while I deperish!”

Genesis huffed, he had proposed at Angeal to come to his office so they could stay on the couch to make their respective papers together, but he refused. He didn't bother ask Sephiroth, he knew the
man would have refused.

Also, his little plan to use Cloud as a teddy bear seemed to be on the wrong path. He sighed.

“So you're soliciting me?”

“Please, don't word it like that. It seems like I'm demanding sex.” Genesis huffed. He leaned toward Cloud and whispered. “And I'm proposing cuddle therapy!”

Cloud's frown deepened as he stared back at Genesis, their faces mere centimeters from each others, before a smile cracked down his sour mood. He started laughing at Genesis' face, confusing him.

“You're adorable sometimes.”

Cloud shook his head with a fond smile, then plopped on the couch, taking all the space. Yet Genesis didn't move, his heart seemed to have come to a halt and froze him on the spot. Him adorable?

When Sephiroth and Zack made their way to Genesis’ office, worried that Cloud and him were killing each other, they didn't expect the two to be cuddling on the couch. Genesis was sitting, his long legs serving as pillows for Cloud. He stopped spinning the fork in his right hand to look at them.

Zack made a strangled noise, Sephiroth resorted for the eyebrow raise.

“You aren't gutting each others!” Zack exclaimed.

If it was unsuspected considering Cloud's anger when Sephiroth went to Zack's home. Yet Sephiroth was more surprised by how comfortable the two seemed to be. Cloud wasn't entirely on Genesis. He was more squished between Genesis' leg and the back of the couch, a cheek on Genesis' thigh and sound asleep. Cloud stirred and automatically, Genesis' hand found its way to stroke his head. Such intimacy wasn't surprising from Sephiroth's lovers with Zack, but not another one. Even if Cloud was Zack's soulmate.

“We made up,” Genesis claimed.

The comment caught Sephiroth's attention. Now the lack of shouting between Cloud and Genesis stunned him.

“Making up with you after a fight take hours, if not days.” Sephiroth observed closely the two. That Cloud didn't wake up at their conversation worried him. “Did you hit him and he fell unconscious?”

Genesis blinked and burst out laughing at the same time as Zack. Sephiroth frowned, but felt rather happy to see them enjoy whatever funny they found in his question. At last Cloud grumbled, straightened his legs that stuck out from the couch, and blinked at them.

“We did made up quickly,” Genesis said, grinning. “Apparently you calmed him before he came to me, thank you, love.” Sephiroth nodded, gazing curiously at the blond that stayed squished on the couch, maybe to hide from Zack cooing.

“And you cuddled,” Zack said. He grinned, but his last word faltered just enough to make Sephiroth stand straighter.
“Well, he’s sleeping better with someone awake next to him.” Genesis carefully said, picking up his book. “And he likes poetry.”

Zack blinked, gazed at Cloud and plopped on the edge of the couch to be able to play with Cloud’s hair, “He does?”

“I was surprised too!”

Sephiroth approached, his stomach squeezing at the scene before him. There was something bothering him, but he couldn’t pinpoint what.

“So, someone awake and talking to him?” Zack nodded.

“If there is someone awake, it means they can defend the ones sleeping,” Cloud muttered.

“Oh.” Zack stopped a second in his petting. “So, how’s your hand Gen?”

“Working. I lack dexterity and prehension, but it’s better than not being able to move my fingers.”

Longs fingers waved around as a smile played on Genesis’ face. Sephiroth couldn’t hold the urge to extend his own hand and grab Genesis’. The redhead chuckled at his impulsion and squeezed back. Making Sephiroth’s heart hurt rather than his hand, in a good way.

“Did he... fell asleep again?” Zack asked softly.

They turned their gaze to the blond.

“Look at him, Zack. Even napping here, I bet he hasn't had a full night of sleep since you left him.” Zack smiled without much joy at Genesis’ comment. “Unrelated to that, I was thinking about making Cloud meet Bo. He was in the medical ward and never participated on the hostile atmosphere the boys created toward Cloud. Who isn't going to trust a SOLDIER any time soon. So Bo might work.”

Again, something in Sephiroth’s stomach made him uneasy.

“You want Cloud to make new friends!” Zack exclaimed with a big smile. “You like him!”

“He likes poetry,” Genesis grumbled.

_He likes him_, Sephiroth thought. His unease made sense. Genesis liked Cloud. Maybe more if he interpreted Genesis’ soft smile correctly.

A ball formed in Sephiroth throat, he wanted to be relaxed, but dread filled him. He liked Zack himself, blaming Genesis would only be hypocrite. More so that Genesis was known for his multiple crush that didn’t last long. Yet he couldn’t just smile at Genesis’ new crush like he always did, sure of his soulmate love for him, because Cloud took too much place in Zack’s life already.

Sephiroth didn’t know how to react if Cloud took Genesis and Zack’s time from him. Genesis and Angeal were his soulmates, but he couldn’t talk to them like he did with Zack.

Sephiroth inhaled slowly to chase the prickling at his eyes. Cloud arrival broke the routine that existed between all of them for years. There was no coming back. They only could hope everything would work out in the end.
whaddya mean this isn't realistic or close to canon\'s characterisation? What do I care? I'm enjoying my fucking writing of a budding relationship before I hit with a stick on my idiots again. And then I'll need to re-read myself bc I feel like I contradicted myself about the soulmates on other chapters.... that the problem about not planning enough in advance I don't post next week /!\ I only have 2 chapters (mostly written) in advance. Which stress me because I like taking my time to fill the holes in the chap. And I'm moving house. Though with 5k this is my longest chapter for now, it's a good place to let you breath >>
“Zack.”

The sleeping First groaned at Cloud's whisper. He held tighter on the warm body next to him, making Cloud huff in slight pain. Then Zack started snoring again, his breath tickling Cloud's neck. He had been awake for a long moment now and couldn't bring himself to withdraw from Zack's arms. He did enjoy those long minutes of calm, but started being hungry and bored.

Zack had already forced him to go to bed last night even though he had slept enough at Genesis' office. Well, Zack had let him wander his apartment, watch television for a bit as he himself slept. Except he woke up during the night to find Cloud still watching the television and dragged him to the bed where he took all Cloud's means of escape by cuddling.

“Zack.”

“What's the time?” Zack finally mumbled.

“I don't know.”

Zack huffed, Cloud couldn't see his face, but felt Zack's lips curve into a smile on his neck. Zack found Cloud's hands resting on his waist and moved them so Cloud was the one embracing Zack. The blond hold tight when he understood the silent ask, a smile of his own on his face. Cloud was content to stay here a bit more, ignoring hunger wasn't new for him.

The beeping PHS finally made Zack move. He groaned, huffed and complained, but rolled around and took it.

“Ugh... Lazard wants to talk to me.” Zack rolled back toward Cloud and tugged him closer so he could kiss his nose. “Hello, chocobo-head.”

Cloud was going to answer, but his stomach was faster than him by making an awful gargle. At least it made Zack laughs.

“Wow, okay, okay! I understand why you woke me up.” Zack paused, his eyes examining Cloud with a softness that made the blond flush. Then Zack lost his smile for a grimace. “I still don't have anything to eat here. We'll have to go to the mess.”

Cloud grimaced too, eliciting a chuckle from the dark haired.

“Yeah, after yesterday I'm not too hot. We can order in again.” Zack made a thoughtful noise. “I never ordered breakfast. I don't even know if it exists. Oh, wait! We can eat at Seph's place! That's what I always do normally. I don't think he'll mind if he have another freeloader.”

During Zack's babble-thinking, Cloud rolled on his stomach to hide his head in his pillow. He didn't want to see Sephiroth. He never wanted. Though he had to admit the man had been controlled and less scary than Cloud imagined he would be in a day to day basis.

Zack jumped from the bed and stretched. He was without shirt, so when he lifted his arms above his head, it highlighted his back muscles. Cloud stared with a hum of appreciation. When Zack turned to...
him, he winked comically, making Cloud chuckle.

The dark-haired leaned his forearms on the bed and kissed Cloud's ear.

“Wanna eat with Seph and the others?”

“Do I have the choice?”

“I'll always give you the choice,” Zack answered. His tone made Cloud look back at him. Zack wasn't softening his words with a smile, he was dead serious. “Always. I promise.”

The honest comment made Cloud's heart clench. He took a deep breath and blinked several times to chase the impromptu tears forming in his eyes. Then he grabbed Zack by his neck and his waist and pulled him with his enhanced force. Zack crashed on Cloud, firmly held against him.

“Wow, oh, you know you have bones?” Zack joked, a slight pain where Cloud's hipbone hit him. Cloud only held tighter so Zack melted on Cloud and served as a cover for a few minutes before whispering next to Cloud's ear, “I'm going to fall asleep again if we stay here.”

The blond let go of Zack, who grabbed his hands and helped him stand up. Zack kissed him when he was on his feet before freezing, eyes wide. Cloud started panicking when a big smile broke Zack immobility. The raven haired hugged Cloud close at his utmost confusion. Not that he was complaining.

“Uh, Zack?”

“You hugged me!” Zack blurted, a smile lighting his face.

“Uh, yeah? We already did it before,” Cloud said as his confusion grew.

“It's the first time you engaged a hug! You hugged me first!” Zack corrected.

Cloud smiled then shook his head at Zack's simple pleasure. He hugged back Zack, then stood on his tiptoe so they were nose to nose. Zack squinted, making the blond chuckle. He kissed him, just a press of the lips then he bumped his head against Zack who devolved into a goofy smile.

“I'm still hungry Zack.”

The First sighed, but kept a smile. More appeased than anything else. Still beautiful for Cloud.

Again Zack left his apartment in his sleeping wears, Cloud on his heels, their hands intertwined. He didn't even knock at Sephiroth's door, only opened and shouted he was coming to raid the fridge.

Cloud clamped on Zack, his heart racing like a mad bunny. His soulmate smiled at him, gave a squeeze to his hand then entered the apartment, pulling him inside.

Zack guided them to the kitchen where Sephiroth and Angeal were. Sephiroth was at the table nursing a cup of hot tea, his head deep in a newspaper, without even glancing at Angeal who was leaning against the counter, a cup in his hand.

“Hello, big guy,” Zack exclaimed. He pushed Cloud on a chair at the end of the table so there was a place between him and Sephiroth and they weren't facing. “Hello, pretty head.”

Sephiroth yawned before mumbling a simple 'hi' whereas Angeal looked at both of them, “Hello, Zack.” He paused as he met Cloud's eyes then nodded. “Cloud.”

Cloud hunched over himself as Zack raided the apartment for something to drink. He rubbed his
clammy hands on his – Zack's – sweatpants and glanced around. Sephiroth was still on the same newspaper page, his eyes dropping before he opened them wide and straightened a bit. It went for a few seconds before Cloud smiled to himself and looked at Zack using a microwave. He met Angeal's eyes and they kept eye contact in silence. Angeal seemed to study him which made Cloud's skin crawl.

“Well, we have guests?” Cloud looked at Genesis who arrived in his sleepwears too. He dragged his feet to the table and sat on the nearest chair, next to Cloud and facing Sephiroth at the other end. Genesis put his arm on the table and dropped his head in the palm of his hand, a sleepy smile adoring his lips. “Hello, dear. You look awful.”

Cloud scoffed, “Thanks, you too.”

“We match then.”

The earnest comment made Cloud smile. He lifted his eyes from Genesis to three pair of eyes studying him. His smile became some nervous grimace under those stares. At least Zack moved and put down a drink in front of Cloud. Zack pushed his mug of coffee he had one gulp of in Genesis hands, made a tea for Cloud and made himself another coffee that Cloud stole before he could put his lips on the cup.

“Why?” Zack mouthe'd.

“Like, you're the more hyperactive SOLDIER existing. I don't think coffee is good for you.”

“I would need to drink liters for it to do anything to me!” Zack whined, putting his bent leg on Cloud's lap as he tried to take back his mug. “I love coffee!”

“Since when? You find it too bitter.”

“It's been years!” Zack exclaimed, half-leaning on Cloud. He froze and glanced at Cloud who furrowed his brows.

“Did I forget or you changed your mind?” Cloud asked, barely above a whisper and his eyes firmly set on the mug he brought closer him.

“Err... it's a change of mind,” Zack said as he sit down on Cloud's thigh, one of his legs still under him. “And I like my coffee with lot of sugar and milk. But still less sugar than Seph.” He kissed Cloud's nose making him scrunch it, the public display of affection made him nervous. “As a trooper you worked on coffee. But you always forgot it so I had to finish it everytime. When you were away the smell made me think-”

Zack paused, kneading Cloud's shoulder as his eyes were lost in his cup.

“-of Cloud?” Genesis finished for him.

“Uh, yeah.”

Their eyes meet. Cloud felt like he was in another universe where everything was a bit twerked to the side, just enough for him to be unbalanced. He had the hazy memory of Zack complaining about making a mistake and taking a sip of Cloud's coffee. He sighed, at least he had a memory and not just a blank place in his mind. Though, to be honest spending time at the Tower and most importantly, with Zack, had helped him remember things from before the Watchers, before he started dreaming another world to escape from his current life.
They startled like deers caught in a flashlight when Angeal cleared his throat.

“I'm going to make pancakes. The mix should be good now. How many do you want?”

The SOLDIERs gave their numbers without thinking twice, even Sephiroth as he was half-asleep. Angeal turned back to Cloud when he didn't hear him. The blond didn't know what to say, especially to the burly First that had been more hostile toward him than Sephiroth, so he shrugged and occupied his hands with the warm cup of tea Zack made for him. The boy seated on him served as a good buffer between him and the rest of the people in the piece.

The ringing from Zack's PHS attracted the attention to him.

“Hello~ ”

“Zack, I want you to my office in five minutes.” Lazard's voice sounded stern and a bit irritated.

“Oh, man! Can you let me take a breakfast before?”

“Five minutes, Zack.”

Lazard hung as Zack whined loudly, leaning back so half of his body was angled above the ground. The arm slung around Cloud's shoulders tightened, Zack slumped on himself, his head in the crook of Cloud's neck, “I don't wanna.”

Cloud neither, he was tense and worried around Sephiroth and Angeal, Genesis and Zack's presences composed for theirs.

“Zack,” Angeal said sternly, without even turning toward his ex-mentee.

“What does he want anyway?” the man groaned into Cloud's skin.

“Zack.”

The name uttered flatly by the three others First made Zack huff, but forced him to stand, a scowl on his face. He harrumphed yet none of the Firsts reacted to it. They knew he was just expressing his mood and wasn't going to throw a tantrum like it looked like. Instead, he leaned down, grasped Cloud's cheeks and smooched him. Cloud chuckled, causing a big smile on Zack.

“Bye bye everyone. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!”

“Then we will not work for the day,” Angeal muttered as Zack left.

“I heard that! I'm a very serious employee, you'll know!”

Cloud burst out laughing at Zack mock-vexed voice coming from the hall like an ethereal thing. The derisive comment was met with more laughter than it deserved, but Cloud's nerves ran tight as one of his buffer disappeared.

“You're laughing for that? When I worked so hard for a chuckle?”

Genesis sounded annoyed by that. His behaviour and crossed arms only made Cloud grin, “Jealous?”

“Yes!”

The honest and positive answer took Cloud by surprise. For a second he didn't know how to react.
Sephiroth was still half-asleep, Angeal dutifully made a tower of pancakes.

“Well, you're waxing poetry most of the time, and it's not funny. It's just going to make me sleep.”

“Poetry can be fun!”

Cloud made a face, “You sure?”

“Is it a challenge?”

Cloud shrugged, keeping part of his attention on his two potential adversary, “Whatever you recite, you're just going to make me fall asleep.”

Sephiroth looked at Angeal, who glanced at Cloud then Genesis.

“Am I that boring?”

“You're not boring, you conditioned me to fall asleep when you start reciting something.”

Genesis rolled his eyes, “Whatever. At least if you attack me, I have a secret weapon that disable you.”

Cloud chuckled, the good hearted banter helped him relax. The smell of fresh pancakes too.

“I wanted to ask you something, Cloud,” Angeal said.

The blond blinked at the man as he leaned over to put a few pancakes on his plate. Angeal stood, looking at him expectantly.

“Uh, yes?”

“Can you not correct Sephiroth's so openly?”

Cloud blinked again. He gazed at the silver-haired who fixed Angeal with knitted brows. Genesis leaned back in his chair, cradling his weak arm by instinct.

“People look up to him,” Genesis commented. “I should have stopped you from correcting him the other day. SOLDIERs shouldn't know Sephiroth has problems.”

“People have flaws,” Cloud stated, still surprised by the situation. “What if Sephiroth needs help on a battlefield? They would shrug it off because that's not possible?”

“Well, no-” commented Angeal.

“But that's what you're training them to do if they saw him as the immortal SOLDIER.” Cloud glanced at Sephiroth. “You should be capable to be open about your flaws in battle with your SOLDIER. You should be able to trust them.”

Sephiroth sighed, then peeked at his lovers from under his hair before looking at Cloud, a small smile on his lips, “They are trying to hide the fact that I'm very anxious when corrected for something. Especially in public.”

“Very anxious,” Cloud repeated. “Like. Difficulty to breath, heart rate elevated and even shaking?”

Sephiroth titled his head a second, then nodded.
“Oh.” Cloud fumbled with the hem of his sweatshirt, the one he wore since yesterday. “Sorry then.”

Angeal turned away from the stove to put some of the warm food on Genesis and Sephiroth's plates. Cloud was a bit jealous that Genesis had a cook as a lover, Zack was too easily distracted to do complicated things. Or even pancakes. Though the last time, the death of the pancakes was partly his fault.

“Then it is resolved, isn't it?” Angeal glanced at Cloud for an answer.

The first thing Cloud wanted to say was a firm 'no', but he knew enough about Sephiroth for staying silent. The man was always watched, as him, and need to meet expectations from his employers.

“Maybe,” Cloud started hesitantly. He met Sephiroth's eyes a second before ducking his head. “Maybe we can train somewhere else, without witnesses?”

There was a moment of silence where only Angeal made sound as he moved around before Genesis tapped Cloud on the temple, “Are you proposing to correct Seph's flaws in hands to hands when you are afraid to death of him?”

Cloud spluttered, “It- I'm not afraid to death!”

Genesis snickered, a grin growing on his lips that Cloud wanted to slap away, “Only a little bit then.”

The ex-Watcher huffed and hunched over himself. He attacked his pancake with concealed irritation and purposefully avoided Sephiroth's eyes. He only glanced away from his plat once and saw Angeal making a frowning face at Sephiroth who's own expression stayed blank. The poor General wasn't reading Angeal's mind, not even a bit. Angeal saw Cloud looking at him and smiled softly.

Cloud let his eyes fall on his empty plate.

“So, what are your projects for today?”

Cloud was taken aback by Angeal question. The man had been less than friendly until the day before. Cloud squirmed under all three stares. He glanced at Genesis before catching himself.

“Uh,” the question surprised him. Almost as much as the huge yawn from Sephiroth who blinked his cat-like eyes like the action stunned him too. It made Cloud smile. He took a second to reboot his brain, still easily paralysed by unexpected things. Which happened a lot at the Tower. “Running I think.”

Genesis sighed and flopped back in his chair, “Not again.”

“What do you want me to do?” Cloud retorted. “It's not like I'm allowed to do... anything.”

“Why don't you accept Lazard and Rufus' contract?”

Cloud stared at Angeal who was making small talk with him. Nervously, Cloud glanced at Sephiroth. Was he going to talk to him? Cloud had proposed to help him correct his problems, but it wasn't an invitation to talk to him. If Sephiroth accepted, and his silence until now seemed to lower this possibility, Cloud would prefer if they could train without talking to each other. Or the less possible.

“You know your chicks are waiting for you to do the first move?” Genesis continued.

“You have a great influence on them,” Sephiroth commented before going mute again.
“What?” Cloud blinked. “I'm waiting for them to decide, so I won't influence them.”

“Well, you could have done nothing for months in such a mindset,” Angeal said, his voice still soft. Cloud didn't know if the man talked like that every time, or just because of him. “You should talk to them.”

“Yes.” Genesis nodded emphatically. “Just talk to them, you'll be set.”

“But- I can't. That's not allowed.”

Cloud searched Genesis’ eyes. Why was he pushing him to talk to Flore and Dirk when it had been clear since day one he couldn't? Genesis caught his lost eyes and sighed.

“Since the contract had been proposed, every SOLDIER knew about it. They are the worst gossips, don't you remember?” Genesis right hand reached for him and his fingertips grazed his maw a second, barely enough for Cloud to feel it. It was like Genesis had wanted to comfort him and remembered at the end that Cloud hated people to touch him, “Obviously you don't remember that. Your memory is shit.”

Cloud scowled at that. Sharply, he looked away and met Sephiroth's eyes that pierced him. The barely touch from Genesis took another meaning through the General's eyes. It had been intimate, even in its shortness.

“If it's okay, I'm going,” Cloud said, jumping on his feet.

He was out of the room before someone could try to stop him. He still heard Angeal complain he had eaten too little for his needs. Yet, Cloud feel full enough. And very afraid of Sephiroth.

Chapter End Notes

what do you mean I said I would post in two weeks at my last chapter? well, I don't think you'll complain if I post that sooner... now bye I'm going to bed! comments to say I'm an unreliable author if you want also, hello follower-bots, happy to see you around. You screw up the statistics of one comment every three followers, but do your thing, follow and bot around
Fishing out Dirk and Flore was easy. Talking to them a bit less. Five minutes after finding a table in
the cafeteria where they could speak and Cloud was still wracking his mind to find how to address it.

“So,” he finally said. “For the contracts-”

“What are you choosing?” Flore asked.

“Yeah, what are you choosing?”

Cloud huffed and fell back against his chair backrest, “You need to make your own decisions.”

“I suck at this game,” Dirk answered.

“I can't choose.” Flore shrugged. “But I want to stay near you, so you can choose for us.”

She slid a paper to him that he deciphered despite her horrible scribble.

'No connection Turk/SOLDIER
need blunt strength for missions
we're the solution'

What did it mean? Flore wasn't giving him that for nothing. It has a link to their conversation. Cloud
sighed, letting his mind work on the problem as he answered.

“I don't even have the mental stability to make sound decisions for myself,” Cloud grumbled. “Do it
yourself.”

“Okay,” said Flore. “Then what is your decision?”

“Nuh-hu,” Cloud emitted while shaking his head. “Doesn't work like that. You do you, without my
input.”

Oh, there was no connection between Turks and SOLDIER. Which was confusing because Cloud
saw them work together. The Turks came at the northern continent the moment the three of them
walked into the Shinra camp, Cloud knew they worked together often. Did Flore had a moment of
confusion while writing this? Pain from degradation could make you blackout and confused you, or
easily trigger a dissociative state, and then Flore wrote this strange text.

Though Cloud gave her the benefit of the doubt and kept searching.

Dirk was bugging and stared at Cloud, “You want me to adult?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh.”

Cloud glared at him. From the three of them, he was the only one with a job – or experience in
kitchen and cooking – that could open him doors everywhere in the world. Flore and him... they only knew how to fight.

“Ugh, yes,” Flore said.

Silence returned to the table as they stared at nothing.

“Well, I'm going to sign then,” Flore said first.


“I'm degrading, they're the only one that can save me. Possibly. And I like the Turks.”

Dirk knocked his back on the back of his chair, arms crossed, “Well, I might be degrading in ne week or months or years. Does it mean I should base my decision on that?”

“We all have different priorities,” Cloud said flatly.

“Ugh.” was the clever answer from Dirk. “I can choose later, no?”

Flore and Cloud shrugged.

“But if I say i'll stay, won't it influence you, Cloud?”

It was a legitimate concern. In fact it was evident that their decisions would influence his. Dirk seemed to have realised that because he proposed for them to yell their choice – 'stay' or 'leave' – at the same time. So they were there, in the cafeteria, with a few SOLDIERs as it was between the serving hours, standing face to face with an expression of determination. Except for Flore, delighted by the game.

“One, two, three,” Flore started, “Go!”

“I stay!”

Cloud drew back from his leaning position, sighing. He carded a hand through his hair, “Well, we're all staying then.”

“Anyway, I was learning a new dish with the Chef. We have leftovers that need to be eaten.” Dirk stood and without giving them the choice said: “You'll eat it.”

Cloud smiled to himself at Dirk grumpiness and very badly hidden care for them. He didn't protest, any food put before him was eaten. Except when he was full, but the leftovers weren't too much. After that, they went to Lazard who seemed to be waiting for them, unsurprisingly. He smiled at them and handed them each a contract with a joy non dissimulated.

The contract was short, at Cloud surprise and there were no unfair term carefully hidden at the end of the document. Though, trying to put something illegible to trap them was impossible with their enhanced eyesight. His hours were normal desk-jobs hours, his pay acceptable and his duties were listed: give intelligences to the Turks & SOLDIERs, hold some classes to help SOLDIERs fights against the Watchers and participe to some missions when SOLDIERs are missing and in dear need.

“There's a possibility to change your contract for a standard SOLDIER one,” Lazard said. “We would welcome you might you change your mind and decide to join us. Though, you're new position is invaluable for us.”

He smiled again at the three of them. Cloud hummed without really listening to him, his pen
hovering above the paper. A contract for three years... was he ready for that? He wanted to stay with Zack badly, being a burden wasn't his goal and he needed a job for that. He couldn't be sure to find one in the city or the slums. Would the Turks let him? He was too precious, he and his scattered informations, for them to let him go.

A contract would bind him to the company he hated. Even without the 'killing the planet by stealing her lifeblood', Shinra was shady at best and a den of money-worshippers creatures at worst. The kind of creatures that would kill anything for one more gil.

“Mister Strife?”

Cloud startled at Lazard call. Apparently he had started zoning out. He blinked and focused on the paper again. Which was that. Paper. It could burn, get soaked and the words would disappear. The paper wasn't holding him to anything. It was the people: Lazard, Rufus, even Tseng. But if they modified their thinking, even one bit, Cloud wouldn't be held to them except by “you've signed a contract”, words on paper that somehow should always stay true? When his own mind healed, changing so much. That was ridiculous. Even his gods didn't expect from the humans to sign a contract to live and worship only one for all their life. If they weren't being dicks.

“It said there that we are neither SOLDIER nor Turk, yet we are under both Department.”

Lazard tilted his head, “Yes.”

“Who's our boss then?”

“Me and Tseng,” Lazard said.

That was stupid, and he told him.

“What if you gave two opposite order?” Cloud asked, Flore humming approvingly behind him while Dirk snorted.

Lazard lifted his eyebrows and considered it, “I guess it need to be addressed between all of us. But for now and until it is decided otherwise, Tseng will have precedence.”

Cloud slide the three contracts, Dirk being slightly different than Cloud and Flore, and waited for Lazard to add that, before even signing. He smiled to Lazard as he signed. None of the guy that made the contract was a god, so Cloud felt safe about signing and agreeing to everything. Cloud was walking alongside Lazard and Rufus in their secret plan. For now.

They exited the office room to find Reno leaning against the wall outside. Cloud decided to ignore him, now he was free to go around as he wanted. Well, almost. Lazard told them to wait for their ID cards before leaving the Tower. And Cloud was certain that signing the contract wasn't the end of the Turks' watch. But it would be less obvious and continue.

“You, sunshine!” Reno exclaimed, startling Cloud. He put a PHS in Cloud's hands, then handed two other to Dirk and Flore, “Shinra issued phones. I put Zack, your chicks and my phone numbers in yours, Cloud. Flore has all the Turks and Dirk... only you two. Anyway, you'll have ID cards at the end of the day too. Hope Shinra will treat you right, it is the most successful company in the world. You couldn't have chosen better.”

Somehow Reno's two last sentences sounded a lot like something rehearsed. His blank expression has he said only confirmed Cloud's suspicion.

“Did you walk around with all those phones for days?” Flore asked.
Reno only winked for sole answer. Then disappeared into another hall, Cloud saw him open a door and heard footstep on stairs. Dirk waved at them and took off too, letting Cloud and Flore alone.

“I'm going to go to the labs,” Flore said when Dirk left for his kitchen again.

Something caught in Cloud's throat, causing a coughing fit that Flore waited patiently to finish.


Flore pointed her PHS at Cloud, “Adult decision, remember? You can't heal me. This Hojo can make me survive a bit longer.”

Cloud shuddered at the name. He despised the man and all the things linked to him, labs too. It was the place he had been tortured for 'experiment', by Hojo in the not-so-real-mako-dream but also by Watchers. Flore had been too. Less, because Cloud had watched over her, so she just had the shot that made her enhanced, but he thought she was as wary of the labs at him after he told her what happened to him.

“But—”

“The Turks likes me, nothing will happen to me down there,” Flore said with conviction. “Nothing will happen to me, Sky.” She lowered her voice. “And if it happens... I know you.”

Cloud huffed with amusement. The Watchers had suffered an enormous loss of scientists because of him. Cloud still didn't understand why they didn't kill him for that, but it was a thought of the past.

He kept his eyes on Flore until the lift she took closed. Even if she didn't lose her smile, Cloud's chest was compressed. He waited for another lift to come while thinking about everything except from Flore going to the labs. A shot of adrenaline made him jump: why didn't he go with her? What was wrong with him?

A hand on his shoulder startled him to death. He turned around and saw Reno. Short of breath and signaling to Cloud to wait a second as he took his breath back.

“What?”

Reno straightened, then bent backward, groaning. “We need you, order from Tseng.”

“Can I refuse?” was the first question out of his mouth. “What it is?”

“There's a group enrolling slums' guys to enter the Watcher. We were just observing them except one of ours, a rookie idiot, was caught. So it's a rescue mission,” Reno said, throwing an ID card for guest at Cloud, “If I lose you, you'll be able to return to the Tower with that.”

The Turk walked away from the lift, making a sign to Cloud to follow him.

Cloud bristled, “Reno, what do you want from me?”

The other opened a door overlooking the staircase. He turned toward Cloud with a grin, “You're gonna be our ram, battering ram. Deal?”

Their footsteps echoed in the staircase, as much as Cloud's sigh, “Yeah. Though, why don't you ask a SOLDIER?”

“Too many forms to fill,” Reno answered. “Actually, we have to thinks days before an operation if we need a SOLDIER or we don't. Someone doesn't want the two best divisions to work smoothly
together. But you aren't a SOLDIER. You're a 'consultant'. Flore too, but she's degrading, so we won't take her to missions.”

Cloud felt relieved at that, “She's going to the labs.”

He didn't know why he said that, what he wanted to hear from Reno.

“Shuriken is down there,” Reno turned around just enough to see Cloud and made quotes with his hands, “-for an 'inspection', so don't worry your pretty head. Flore's one of us now.”

Cloud grumbled. There was nothing that would completely stop him from worrying for Flore at this instant, but knowing Turks were looking after her was still a relief. Now occupying himself with the Turks' affair seemed to be a good idea for the rest of the day. He used his new and shiny PHS to send a message to Zack. It was a bit short and formal, but at least the SOLDIER knew with who he was if not where.

“I'll be going like that?” Cloud asked, pointing to his casual clothes.

Reno didn't answer as they encountered Rude, with neatly folded clothes in his arms, a pair of shiny shoes on top. He gave them to Cloud and grabbed Reno's neck so he was turning toward the wall with him. Cloud sighed, but started dressing.

“Turk's uniform? Really?”

He extended his arms, showing to the two others how uncomfortable the thing was. And how stupid it made him feel.

“It's the best choice in such a short notice,” Rude answered before opening the door of this level.

“Why not a SOLDIER uniform?”

“Do you think SOLDIER uniforms lie around the Turk office?”

Cloud gave them that. Although he'd never gone to the Turk's offices, so he couldn't know.

He had been on the lowers part of the Shinra Tower from the military side, but never on the public side. The two Turks passed by the big door, using the mass of awed visitors to disappear. Cloud followed them clumsily, knocking into a few people as he admired the big open reception.

Everything was shiny and made to give the visitors the image of a perfect company. The level seemed to be a big museum about Shinra, painting it in a positive light in every aspect. Cloud wasn't surprised to see a restaurant in this part that seemed above any of the military or SOLDIER canteens.

But the stranger was to see so much civilian. They were from the upper plate, obviously, so they were well clothed and surely never had problems in their life more hard than being beaten at taking the best bottle of wine from the store. No one spared a glance for the trio.

The Turks guided Cloud through the streets, then caught a train.

“So, I'm just going to be a battering ram?” Cloud asked as he stood next to a window. “Nothing more? And with which weapons? If I have weapons...”

“Standard broad sword,” Rude said.

“Katana took one from a SOLDIER finishing his shift,” added Reno. He jumped on his feet as the train slowed. “That's our stop, yo!”
They were under the plate now, in a zone filled with half-constructed buildings. Most of them were used as they were, a minority were still in construction. People passed their group, but unlike the civilians in the Tower, those people purposefully ignored the Turks that weren't trying to hide themselves right now.

Cloud saw a lot of flyers glued to the walls or any remotely flat surfaces. Flyers to attract people in a meeting held to talk about the Watchers' group. He grimaced, Dirk had fallen for those stupid trap. At this time his relationship with his parents where borderline abusive and, being near his majority, he tried to find a job. He made a bad decision and ended up in a worse situation than with his parents.

The duo stopped before an intersection of streets, there was a low building on the right with the same flyers that Rude pointed with a sign of the head. The angle cut part of the building from Cloud's vision, though the place looked less than sufficiently protected. On the second floor there was a window with glass darkened by dirt, though with his enhanced vision Cloud had sight of a chair with a person seated on, his hands tied in the back.

Rude went ahead of them, letting Cloud and Reno alone, the last one explaining what was needed of Cloud.

“The doors are on the other side, you'll follow me. They aren't closed, not even since one of the supporter saw us. We've observed them for a few weeks, so they think it's a normal day where we let people come and go.” Reno nodded at his own words. “What you have to do is: charge the door, take down the few guys there and we take care of the rest. Understood?”

Looking at the buildings around by instinct, Cloud noticed a sniper on the opposite of the window.

“Do I kill, or that's a no?”

“Whatever you feel like, yo.”

Cloud hummed thoughtfully. The window caught his attention again. He called back Reno and pointed it.

“Why don't you go by the window? There is a sniper there that can break the pane.”

“Yes, she's here to kill Rod if needed.”

Cloud blinked, “What?”

“Also, we can't save him first, the supporters of the Watchers will kill themselves or run away, if they can, the moment they think they are compromised. Saving Rod first will sabotage our mission. Which is: caught the more people possible.”

“But... if we enter by the door, won't they kill him?”

Reno rubbed the tip of his nose, shrugging, “Possibly.”

“What if the sniper shot the pane, I enter, take the guy and came back while you go for the door? It isn't closed as you said.”

Reno blinked, then looked at the same window. He sighed, muttered something in a language Cloud didn't understand then crouched on the ground while tipping on his PHS.

“We'll do that, chocobo-head.” He shot him a grin, then put the PHS at his ear. “Listen everybody!
Chocobo's succeeded. Plan 2, prepare for a synchronised assault.”

The quick change of plan made Cloud’s head spin, a change like that shouldn’t occur a few seconds before an operation, during, maybe, but not just before if nothing dangerous requested it. Though, he was content he could save this Rod. Reno’s reaction and the ‘plan 2’ made Cloud grow suspicious.

“Wait for Cissnei, she’ll give you the signal. And stay under cover when you got Rod.” He glanced at Cloud. “You won’t run away, yo?”

“Wait, Reno! It was a test wasn’t it?” Cloud asked. The redhead didn’t answer, he only flashed him a smile above his shoulder and turned at an angle. “Reno!”

he was left alone in the back of the building, in the little street and waited anxiously for this Cissnei. She didn’t take long and came with two others Turks. Inside, he noticed an increase in movements, before Cissnei could salute him, he told her of his observation. She nodded, took her PHS, then her watch.

“Now.”

The bullet song accompanied Cissnei signal, Cloud applauded mentally their synchronicity, jumping on movement. He came to the wall that he kicked to jump higher as the pane shattered above him. A guy screamed to run in Wutaiian. Cloud found a crack wide enough to hold on the wall, helping him attaining the window.

A man, skin too dark and eyes too wide for a Wutaiian, froze at the entry of the room. He ran off, letting the Wutaiian shouting seconds ago and the Turks tied to the chair, facing the armed Watcher supporter. This one lifted his heavy gun toward Cloud and shot, the Turk between the two of them.

Cloud knocked the chair on the ground, then leapt at the enemy, filling his personal space in seconds. The man had a instinctive reaction, backing away, but fell flat on the ground at Cloud's hit on his solar plexus. Cloud hoped he didn't kill the man, though the others Turks he heard downstairs, fighting and shouting, should had captured enough people.

For Cloud the job was done. He grabbed the Turk and his chair, held them above his head and jumped outside, the fall being around six meters – something easy fro a SOLDIER – under a trio of speechless Turks that rushed to Rod when his chair was on the ground.

Cloud waited for the end of the mission, distractedly listening to the fights sounds inside. He thought about proposing his help for the inside, but couldn't muster the energy to ask. He walked around, exploring, but stayed in the Turks field of vision when he caught sight of someone in an adjacent street observing them.

He blinked without believing his eyes, Tifa held a bunch of flyers in her hand, but making no signs of going to the building. Although, if she stood there for a moment it was logical she didn't go there. She caught him staring and frowned. They stared at each other for a few seconds before he heard Reno's return. He hesitated, but ended returning toward the Turk, not without shaking his head at Tifa to make her go. With a bit of luck, she understood and went away.

Yet, the flyers in her hands worried him. They weren't teared off.

“Well, that was perfect, yo!” Reno tapped Cloud on his shoulder a few times, even when the blond glared at him. “Rufus and Lazard got us the best deal. You can't imagine the number of Turk we could have saved if we didn't have to do all the paperwork to get a SOLDIER on a mission.”

Cloud's brow creased, he glanced at Cissnei, helping Rod. “That was the goal of the contracts, isn't
“Yes,” she nodded. “Thank you for your help. We always ask SOLDIER to do it in exchanges for favours, but they sometimes get hurt and ShinRa don't cover their health problems. We're lucky SOLDIERs are good enough with materia. It covers most of the wounds they got.”

He nodded, understanding Flore's cryptic message from earlier. This moment his PHS rung with a new message from her.

“You'll need to turn off the ringbell during your next missions,” Cissnei commented.

Cloud nodded as he walked behind her toward the Tower, looking at the photo with Flore in a Turk uniform, another of them behind her. He sighed with relief, she wasn't in the labs anymore.

A terrified whine came from Cloud as he tensed. Zack looked away from the mission files he was reading and down on Cloud that used his lap as a pillow. Not that he complained, the blond made a great cover for his legs. He scratched Cloud's head while murmuring soft nothing. The wrinkled face of his lover slowly eased back into a relaxed one. Zack smiled to himself, Genesis was right Cloud preferred to have someone awake next to him.

“Soft chocobo,” he murmured, starting to be short on things to say.

Zack smiled to himself, then returned to his files about his next mission. He had said nothing about it to Cloud yet, but hoped the blond's new job would help him occupy his day with something else than thinking about his loneliness. Plus Genesis was fond of Cloud, he wouldn't let him wallow in sadness when Zack would be away. With a little push, Kunsel would look on Cloud too. The SOLDIER liked him anyway. The mission wasn't even that long, Zack only feared the separation. He wasn't sure who would react the more badly between him and Cloud.

Lazard hadn't accepted to put someone else on the mission. No other First was free apparently. Not even Angeal since he had another mission. Lazard had said nothing about Sephiroth, but it was a different case.

A knock on the door resonated in the quiet apartment. Zack took a second to yawn, scratching Cloud's head absent-mindedly.

“Come!” Zack yelled. He cursed himself just after Cloud jumped awake. He carded his hand through Cloud's hair, “I'm sorry buddy, I'm too accustomed to be alone here. I didn't want to wake you up.”

Cloud, that had started to straighten, let his head fall back on Zack's thigh. He huffed and made a face, but didn't seem angry at Zack.

Someone clearing their throat brought back Zack's attention toward the lounge door. Standing awkwardly at the entrance was Luxiere, Abe and Adam. By Kunsel and Genesis' information, they had been the one that where the less accommodating to the ex-Watchers, Luxiere even targeting Cloud for stupid dissing.

Zack sniffed and let his back fall on the couch armrest. He eyed them in silence and they started glancing at each others, clearly upset by his lack of smile or greeting.

“Hello, Zack,” Luxiere started.
“Hello.” he answered flatly.

“We wanted to apologise,” Luxiere continued. “We're sorry for critizing your soulmate.”

“You're sorry for criticizing my soulmate. Bad word choice. Like I'm the one you wronged. Like you only criticized. You don't find something strange in your thinking, Luxiere?”

Luxiere squinted his eyes. He looked at Cloud, but didn't talk again.

“I'm sorry for implying you made a bad choice by coming back together with Cloud yesterday!”

Adam said nervously. “Now I'll let you, okay? I'll say sorry to Cloud later, okay?”

Zack had not even finished to nod at Adam's question that he dashed out of the room. Abe was going to talk next, but Sephiroth arriving behind cut him. Luxiere and Abe glanced at the General, exchanged a look, then left with murmured goodbyes. They didn't see Sephiroth knitted eyebrows as their reactions.

“You don't want them for friends anyway,” Zack commented distractedly. “Didn't you start a friendship with Ama? The First Class, not the Third.”

Sephiroth lifted a shoulder without responding orally. He stood in the entryway, observing them until Zack talk again.

“What's the matter? You don't look good.”

“I don't think I should talk about it with Cloud in the same place.”

Zack frowned, “This is about him? A problem?”

“No. It's more…” Sephiroth paused, his eyes fixated on his own hand. “A problem for me. About Genesis. And myself.” Sephiroth straightened and cleared his throat. “I will come back later.”

“Oh,” Zack emitted, glancing at Cloud to see him dead to the world anew. Zack was a bit impressed.

“You know he's sound asleep? You can talk to me. Promise.”

Sephiroth seemed to consider the proposition. He sighed and walked to the comfy armchair he always used when he came to see Zack.

“Genesis is infatuated with Cloud.”

Zack choked on his own saliva. He coughed a few times then stopped himself as to not wake up the sleeping blond on him.

“Well, he always have crushes,” Zack answered, his voice roughed up by his cough. “It's no big deal.” He broke into a grin. “I can understand his crush.”

Sephiroth scowled, “It's not like his others crush, Cloud is growing on him.”

“Well, you should talk to him then. So he knows he shouldn't act on his sentiments. You want tips? That's why you're here?”

“I will sound hypocrite, implying he can't control himself.”

“You will be hypocrite only if you have a crush and acted on your feelings,” Zack said, habituated to explain simple social things to Sephiroth.
“I have a crush, but I doubt I acted on my feelings.”

“What? Uh... you have a crush on someone and don't know if you wooed them?”

“Genesis is easier to read than myself, it took me a long time to realise I had a crush and then... I was in love,” Sephiroth blushed and looked away. “Sometimes friendship acts and romantic ones are blurred for me. I don't know if I acted friendly or more.”

Zack whistled, “Wow. Can I know the name of the mysterious person? Or that's confidential, even for me?”

“It's you.”

Zack blinked, a strangled sound coming from his throat. He stared at Sephiroth, who stared back. He liked his lips.

“Uh.”

He chuckled to himself, then smiled at Sephiroth, straight as a i, “C'mon, don't play with me. I know you aren't serious!”

Except Sephiroth's face scrunched into this little pout he made when awfully vexed, yet still tried to control himself. He stood up, glanced at Zack from above, the pout still on his lips and left the apartment without a word.

Zack felt like he had been slapped. Sephiroth was in love with him and he just made fun of him. He gritted his teeth and stood up too, quietly apologising to Cloud that woke up at his movements.

“Seph', wait!” Zack called after the General. He exited the apartment and caught up to him, “Wait, seriously.” Zack caught Sephiroth's forearm and tried to meet his eyes without results. “I'm sorry for laughing, you took me by surprise, but I'm not mocking you, okay? I'm just... that really surprising.”

Sephiroth lowered his head, his eyes staring at a point far from Zack, “I'm sorry, you can forget I even said anything.”

“Hey, no. Don't make this sad face, I hate it.” Zack shuffled, rubbing his chin with his other hand absent-mindedly. “I'm sorry I laughed. It was the nerves I think. Seph, you really-?”

He didn't finish his sentence, and almost jumped out of his skin when he heard Cloud's sleepy voice call him from the entryway.

“Zack?”

“Sorry, Cloud. I'm just helping Seph with a problem,” he turned back to see the General taking the lift. “Not fair, Seph!”

Zack pouted and crossed his arms vehemently, not that it stopped Sephiroth, already far gone. The pitty patter of Cloud's feet made him turn around to notice the blond yawning, then lean heavily on him.

“What's happening?”

“Aw, it's just Gen having another crush and it worry Seph','” Zack answered. He kissed Cloud's forehead and put his head on his. The other little thing Sephiroth confessed was running around in Zack's head. He didn't know how to address it, even to himselft, so to Cloud? He'd have to think a
bit more, sort his own feelings.

“Gen has a crush? On who?”

Zack smiled, obviously Cloud didn't remark, he was blind when people were interested in him, “Dunno. You'll have to find yourself.”

Chapter End Notes

DJSKHSG HOW DID I MANAGE TO DELETE THE CHAP WHEN I WANTED TO UPDATE IT ???
anyway... I almost never go on my outlook linked to ao3, so it was cluttered and I also noticed the kudos that slowly went on this fic (yeah I'm very blind to numbers => didn't help at all for math exercises) and that's cool, people kudos-(ed). Thanks, lovelies.

/
!
classes start next week, so I'm not lying again by saying the chaps will be posted every two weeks. (except if I have a sudden rush of energy but let's not fool ourself).
When Cloud had helped the Turks, Zack had used the time to fill his fridge and cupboards with food. With that, this morning, Cloud had the first breakfast without being watched by other people. Except for Zack, but he had been more interested in the movie to look at him. The peace was enjoyable.

The best thing was to spend most of the day with Zack, eating when they feel like it and playing a series of video games as they tried to sabotage each others with all possible dirty tricks. Cloud lost the last game when Zack started tickling his foot at his fingertips and they ended on the ground in a pile of giggling grown men. Zack didn't stop his tickling attack, enjoying himself.

“Zack, please!” Cloud wailed, almost crying of laughter.

“Okay, fine. I stop.”

With that, Zack let himself fall on Cloud. The blond groaned as air was taken from his lungs. Zack only chuckled, then poked his nose. Cloud didn't try to get out from under Zack, he was fine there. And the First was too, since he didn't move for a long time, even closing his eyes, his chin resting on Cloud's plexus.

“What do we eat tonight?” Zack mumbled.

“It's in a few hours,” Cloud commented distractedly.

“But... I think about it now.” Zack whined, rolling his head on Cloud. “So?”

“I don't know. You're the one that has a bunch of flyers from restaurants lying around.”

“Well, take them and chose.”

A beeping sound made Zack move. He looked at the two PHS on the table, took his, and sighed before letting himself fall back on Cloud torso.

“I'm sent to deal with a few monsters in the city,” Zack said.

“I thought your day was free?”

“Free from office work and all the paperwork, not from last minute missions.” Zack sighed into Cloud's neck before standing. “It'll take me one hour max. What will you do?”

Cloud shrugged as he observed Zack move around to find his things.

“I'll be running I guess.”

“A bit of physical effort, uh? You can't rest for one full day.” Zack grinned. “Wait, I'll find you the spare entry card. I don't want you to end up stuck outside.”

Cloud nodded, his thoughts coming back to the gym where there were all the SOLDIERs that weren't doing more serious effort in the VHR rooms. A nest of gossipers. One would know the answer to the question that nagged at his mind since the day before.
Zack sniffed a knitted top that lay on the armchair, shrugged and put it. He continued his search that took just a few minutes and handed the card to him. Zack stood at Cloud's feet and made a motion with his hand that let Cloud confused.

“Up,” Zack added, rolling his eyes.

Cloud did as asked, yawning before he met Zack's eyes. The raven-haired grinned and leaned down to kiss him.

“Bye, see you soon.”

The action seemed a bit strange for Cloud, but the way Zack glowed made him smile too. A fuzzy feeling took him when Zack closed his eyes a second, rocking on his heels just to express the emotion he was feeling himself. Zack hummed happily, then finally took off, by traipsing, making Cloud chuckle.

Cloud made his way to the gym. Zack was right, he couldn't spend one day without exercising a bit. He had worked on so little energy for so long that resting all day made him restless and even anxious. Zack and he had played mock-fight, but it wasn't enough for Cloud. In this state he couldn't sleep even one hour later that day.

In the hall, Cloud was uneasy with the lack of Turk following him around. It took him a bit of time to see one and he headed toward Rude, still with his sun-glasses, that exited the SOLDIERs' cafeteria. Turks seemed to use it frequently since they hadn't their own and Cloud couldn't imagine someone wanting to go to the lower rankings' mess.

“Hey,” Cloud called before freezing, realising what he had been ready to ask.

Rude paused and looked at him, lifting a brow, “Yes?”

“Er... nothing. It's stupid. Goodbye.”

“Strife. What do you want?”

Cloud rubbed his chin with the other and made a face, “I wanted to ask if you knew on whom Genesis had a crush. See? Stupid.”

Rude didn't move for a second, but answered, “The last I remember was the compositor Railey Perkins. But it was four weeks ago.”

Cloud blinked as Rude left, so the Turks knew everything.

At the gym, SOLDIERs looked at him funny, but didn't start conversations in hushed tones like the other days. They returned to their own workout without giving him too much attention. Cloud waited for one of the treadmill to be left, looking around and asking himself, who could possibly know who Genesis had a crush on.

“It's free.”

Cloud startled at the SOLDIER that just left the treadmill and addressed him. The guy opened his mouth again, but shook his head and left him alone. As Cloud ran, his mind wandered. The day before Genesis didn't leave his apartment, which was understandable as Sephiroth and Angeal had returned. They took Genesis' work office part to let him rest longer that day, the redhead had told Cloud.
Today, Cloud didn't know if Genesis had left his apartment to work at his office, but he certainly didn't send a text to Cloud. It was disconcerting. Cloud had spent most of his days at Shinra with Genesis and now he didn't see him one minute.

A beeping sound startled Cloud. The SOLDIER on the next treadmill was startled by his reaction and Cloud whispered an apology. The treadmill just had signalled he was half-way through his miles goal.

Cloud tried to empty his mind after that. He thought about his notepads, the last things he wrote and what he wanted to write now, about Zack mostly. And Genesis. Interpretations on who was the mysterious person Genesis crushed on. Cloud frowned, then leaned toward the other SOLDIER before hesitating. He sighed, then mustered his courage, and cleared his throat.

“Hey,” Cloud called the other SOLDIER that looked at him with huge eyes. “Do you know if Genesis went to his office?”

The guy seemed to relax at the question, he shook his head, “Nah, stayed home again. I think he's on the end of his last injection controlling the degradation, so he's more tired and all.”

“Oh.” Cloud frowned. “And all?”

The man chuckled, “He start to be as emotionally instable as a teenager. Or a pregnant woman. Whatever. He has been friendly and fun with you, but I swear if you go see him now, he'll find a way to start a fight with you.”

Cloud didn't doubt it. It was only two days ago that Genesis tracked him down to complain about his hand and reveal that Zack and Cloud were soulmates. Maybe his anger had been pushed by his sickness. Or he just had been an asshole. Though he did apologise.

After that Cloud ran in silence, his mind becoming almost blank as he focused on his feet hitting the treadmill.

A beep made him reach for his PHS clumsily. With very careful movements, still worried he would crush the machine, he opened it to see a new message.

Cloud's heart jumped in his chest as he saw who was the sender. He fumbled with the machine he still didn't know how to use easily, a smile on his face. Then he realised what was happening in him. He was excited because Genesis send him a text. Flustered, he looked around to see if someone had been observing him. Though, they would assume it was Zack that made him smile. He hoped.

[Hello dear, can you do something for me?]

The sweet petname had started by making Cloud feel uneasy, but with the number of time Genesis used it casually, it grew on him. That Genesis wanted him to do something, even if he'd possibly contacted someone else before who refused, made Cloud giddy. Without hesitation, he said he was free to help Genesis.

[Go down to my office to retrieve some files, I asked Sephiroth, but he still didn't leave his own office.]

Cloud agreed just as Genesis sent him another text.

[Also, walk by his door and tell him what you're doing here]

Cloud chuckled, it was petty and so Genesis.
He didn't linger in the gym and even skipped the shower. It was just as he exited the lift that he remembered offices were closed by a card key. Sighing, Cloud moved to the side so he wasn't in the way and send a message to Genesis. Though there was no one in the floor. In the hallway anyway.

A door closed and then Sephiroth's voice came, “Cole.”

The name made Cloud raise his head. He walked to the corner of the hall so he could hear without being seen. Who was Cole again?

"Sir, you know about the investigation...?"

Sephiroth didn't answer to the question. At least not verbally, until he sighed, “Yes?”

“What will happen?”

“The Turks are investigating you. Either they will find you guilty, or not.”

“I know that!” hissed the man.

Sephiroth stayed silent for a few seconds, again, “What do you want then?”

Cloud was taken aback by Sephiroth softness, it hadn't been an exasperated question. He seemed genuine in wanting to know the answer.

“I want to know if you trust me when I said I'm not a Watcher.”

Cloud made a face, the souvenir of the guy – Cole – coming back.

“I trust you,” Sephiroth answered as Cloud moved closer, not intending to stay unseen.

"Yeah, you always had been the trusting type, even if you tried to pass as a though guy. We just had to jump the walls and then-“ Cole laughed, not in a tender way.

Sephiroth caught Cloud's eyes and tilted his head to the side. The blond didn't know what to do, advance and do what Genesis had asked of him or go away? Cole turned around too. He scowled and for a second Cloud felt like Cole's grimace was a way for him to bare his teeth. Except Cloud's focus was more on Sephiroth, who he saw wavering on his feet. He frowned, then shifted his stance. Sephiroth wavering and a guy baring his teeth like an animal, was he hallucinating?

"Yeah, so trusting,” Cole added. “Maybe too much.”

The glint of the blade was the first thing Cloud saw. Then Cole leapt at Sephiroth. The General stumbled back in surprise.

Cole aimed for Sephiroth's throat, but was cut short by Masamune. The General made a slashing motion and ended up with his sword stuck in a wall. Cloud made a disbelieving sound while hesitating to put a fot in the fight. Cole, that had backed away not to be sliced, jumped on Sephiroth again. He entered his space, close enough for hand to hand, yet Sephiroth missed Cole's wrist trying to catch him. The long knife slashed Sephiroth forearm before he managed to stay out of Cole's range.

The way Sephiroth moved was so clumsy that Cloud had a second of inaction, his brain short-circuiting. But he shook himself and acted. The silver-haired man was in dire need of a helping hand. At least, Cloud wasn't risking to be slashed by Masamune now.

Cole saw him come closer and seemed only more febrile. He pounced on Sephiroth, this time
managing to stab him.

Cloud froze at the pained sound coming from Sephiroth. The lingering he had apathy face to the strange situation evaporated. His heart rate picked up and a cold shudder ran down his spine. Either from adrenaline or fear. He advanced on Cole. The man turned around, aiming to slice his face. Cloud dodged the blow then sneaked his arm around the forearm. The palm of his hand ended just under the elbow. With a quick push on it, Cole's arm was blocked.

Eyes huge with surprise, Cole realised he couldn't escape. He went for an old punch in the face. Holding his breath, Cloud advanced, making Cole graze his neck rather than his face. The blond backed away just enough for his hand to slide under Cole's wrist holding the knife. With his free hand, he disarmed the man. Still holding Cole, he tripped him. His adversary struggled to stand up quickly. Cloud held him by his hair and knocked his face on the ground a few time.

"Don't kill him!"

Cloud stopped at Sephiroth's order, he glanced at him, noticing the blood flowing from his abdomen.

"Why?"

"The Turks need to interrogate him."

Cloud shrugged. He didn't want to kill Cole per se. He just could. Cole was very bad at defending himself.

"Watchers are better at hand to hand normally," Cloud remarked.

Or he was just a level above anyone? Cloud blinked. Yeah, he was. He tended to forget it.

He breathed loudly, but not more than Sephiroth or Cole, who was struggling to breath with his broken nose. Cloud stayed immobile a moment until two Turks appeared, gun in hands.

"We saw the attack, sir," one said to Sephiroth.

The other crouched next to him. "Do I need to drop you in the medical yard?"

"No," Sephiroth said between two difficult inhalation.

"But sir-"

Sephiroth rose from his crouched position and glared at the man. Cloud was certain the General was feigning being okay. With the patch of blood on him, even hidden partly by his dark clothes, it was evident.

"Cloud, come with me."

"But sir, we need to question him."

Sephiroth glared at the Turk and made a motion toward Cloud. Whatever he was going to say was cut by the second Turk, apparently more accommodating with Sephiroth, "We take care of him sir. We'll take your and Cloud's deposition at a later date."

The General nodded, his face showing no trace of the pain he was certainly feeling. He strode away and Cloud trotted after him, disoriented by the last events. The lift didn't take long in coming, but by observing Sephiroth knitted brows and the way he slightly hunched over himself, it was taking longer in Sephiroth's mind. He stepped inside, followed by Cloud and let himself lean against a wall.
Cloud felt strange, a bit out of his body, and his mind experienced a heavy deja-vu.

At least the wound wasn't serious enough to kill the silver-haired. That's what he gathered.

Cloud shifted his stance, uneasy, then glanced at Sephiroth who's back was against the wall, his head leaned back. A thin film of sweat covered his forehead, sticking hair to his face. Cloud cocked his head to the right so he could see the wound and grimaced when he saw fresh blood still spilling from under Sephiroth's hand.

Cloud licked his lips and took a calming breath. His voice still shook when he talked, “You sure you don't want to see someone for that?”

If he was more in touch with himself, he would have noticed sooner he was at the other end of the lift. The farthest away from Sephiroth.

“I had worse.”

“Sure. Sure. Me too.” Cloud babbled. He grimaced at the wound he saw when Sephiroth lifted his hand a second to look at it. “But you can be healed here. Why do you refuse?”

Sephiroth emitted a pained sigh, "If i go down, the Science Department will know and-" Sephiroth bit the inside of his cheeks, going silent. Cloud blinked when he saw humidity form in his eyes. “I do not want to return there so soon. I did it for Gen but- not today.”

“But you're bleeding all over!” Cloud screeched.

His own outburst took him by surprise. The lift went to a stop and opened on a First SOLDIER. His eyes went between Sephiroth and Cloud then zeroed on Cloud's hand. Cloud looked at it and saw the knife still in it. He groaned.

“It's not what it looks like.”

The man tilted his head, the white of his eyes going huge, emphasized by his dark skin.

“Step aside, Strife,” the man said, stepping closer.

Cloud stepped back, his heart in his throat.

“No, really,” Cloud added in a little voice. He glared at Sephiroth, “Why didn't you tell me I still had the knife.”

“Not my first priority,” Sephiroth answered.

He squeaked when Sephiroth moved. The General stood up from his hunched position, took Cloud's knife and put it in the SOLDIER's hand. The man blinked at the bloodied blade and opened his mouth.

“Give that to the Turks. They'll explain what happened.”

Sephiroth wavered on his feet, both Cloud and the man extended a securing hand. But Sephiroth grabbed Cloud's shoulder to steady himself. He waved at the SOLDIER to move and let his weight fall on Cloud who groaned.

“Bring me home,” Sephiroth ordered.

Cloud wanted to tell him to fuck off, he wasn't his SOLDIER. But he wanted to be away from the
other SOLDIER too. And also to bury himself under Zack's cover and not move for the rest of the day. So he moved.

He opened the apartment, holding Sephiroth's waist and dragged him without thinking too much about his comfort. Speed was his goal, not Sephiroth's wellness. He dropped him on the kitchen chair and blinked awake when Sephiroth talked again.

"Zack's apartment? I told you to bring me home."

"It's home! Zack's home. My home." Cloud said in a high pitched voice. "I panicked, okay? But he's a First. There should be materia somewhere."

Full of nervous energy, Cloud started rummaging around, his feet stomping more than necessary, and biting his lips. He started in the kitchen then headed for the living room. He had no idea where Zack put his own materias. If he had some sparse one too and didn't take everything to his mission.

"You hope to find something in... this chaos?" Sephiroth said from the kitchen.

"Can you die in silence?" Cloud shot back, almost yelling even if it was not necessary. When he didn't hear an answer, he paused in his rummaging and called, "You're not really dead, right?"

"No."

Yet Sephiroth's voice was wheezing. Cloud grew more worried and started letting everything open. Like that he knew where he had looked and didn't lose time, even if it put the apartment in more chaos.

Cloud almost wept when he found out a restore materia in Zack's sock drawer, with others globs. He returned to Sephiroth, who wasn't dead and even started healing thanks to his SOLDIER's nature. Though the cura helped finish the job. After that, they stared at each other a moment.

“I'll use the bathroom,” Sephiroth said.

Cloud nodded and let him go wash most of the blood. He did the same for his hands, taking the time to take controlled breath to calm himself. Then stayed there, staring at nothing until Sephiroth came back in clean clothes. Cloud scrunched his nose at them, they fitted perfectly, like they were Sephiroth's. The man entered the kitchen again and went for the freezer where he took a bowl of ice-cream. He took a spoon for himself, paused, then glanced at Cloud.

“Do you want some?”

Cloud blinked, lifted a shoulder in an almost shrug, then followed Sephiroth when he went to the living room. Sephiroth fell on the couch and put his feet on it. He light up the television and started eating the mint-chocolate ice-cream. Cloud stood aghast, Sephiroth seemed awfully comfortable with using Zack's apartment.

Tentatively, Cloud sat on the couch too. Sephiroth put the box between them when he had been nursing it against his stomach. After that, he stared at the screen without moving except for taking a spoonful of his ice-cream. Cloud imitated him, feeling out of reality after all that.

He didn't think about warning Genesis or Zack.
Zack was humming distractedly as the lift ascended. He touched the food box to verify if it was warm enough to eat now or if he needed to warm them. Not that it was too important. He glanced at his PHS to see if Cloud had sent him a message to know when he returned. But the blond seemed not to care.

A yawn escaped him just as the lift opened to the cafeteria and gym level. Eyes closed, he heard someone barreling down to catch the lift before it went up again.

“Zack!”

The raven-haired startled at Angeal angry shout. He looked at him, stunned by his ex-mentor tone. Mentor that looked furious. Zack had a second of worry as Angeal came nearer, Genesis and Ama, a First, on his heels.

“Where is Cloud?”

Zack was taken aback by Angeal's question, “What?”

“Geal!” Genesis hissed, though his voice felt breathless.

Angeal didn't listen to Genesis' warning, he stepped inside the lift and took Zack's pauldrons straps to pull him close. Zack squeaked, more confused than afraid.

“Where is Cloud?” Angeal repeated, insisting on each word.

“Wha- why?”

Zack peered at Genesis, but he had one arm braced against the wall and was breathing with difficulty. Ama was glancing between him and Angeal, torn on what to do.

“Just answer!” Angeal barked.

“I don't know!” Zack shouted back, though is tone was higher with confusion rather than anger.

He rarely had to face Angeal when angry. The man had been disappointed, irritated or saddened by him. Or in his presence. But seeing Angeal being angry and focusing his attention on him made Zack shudder.

“He attacked Sephiroth,” Angeal said, his face inches from Zack.

“No!” Ama said, but his voice was drowned by Angeal angry bark.

“I need to know where they are!”


His words were cut short when Angeal used his grip to shake him. The strength behind the movement made the younger's heart come to a halt. He remember Angeal could easily hurt him if he wanted. The man had the strength and Zack was too confused to react properly if it happened. Confused and a bit afraid by Angeal's demeanor.

“Angeal, leave the kid or he'll shut down,” Genesis called.

“Sir,” Ama added. “I'll need you to step away. You are spreading a lie. Cloud didn't attack Sephiroth.”
Angeal turned his head to the First, “You said you saw both of them bloodied, Cloud had a knife and it was Sephiroth who was hurt!”

Zack shook his head, then slid his arms between Angeal to make him let go. The man turned an angry sneer at him and Zack, rather childishly, made a face. He exited the lift and went next to Genesis, evading Angeal grabby hands. In the hall, others SOLDIERs were fumbling and murmuring between themselves.

“Zack, I-” Angeal hissed just as Ama tried to cut him. “Sir!”

“Shut up!” Zack yelled, throwing his arms in the air. “Shut up! Shut up! Look, everyone is looking at you and you just make them freak out! You're freaking me out! Now, Ama tell me what I need to know.”

“Cloud didn't attack Sephiroth,” Ama said, he glanced at Angeal who was pacing in front of the lift. “I thought so when I meet them, but by talking with the Turks they showed me the recordings. Cole was the culprit, Cloud helped Sephiroth and, by reflex I think, he took and kept Cole's knife.”

Zack whined, that was just so stupid! Well, Angeal's outburst was stupid. He could've waited for Ama to finish his explanation and Zack would've avoided being shaken like a tree.

He put a hand behind Genesis back and meet his eyes, “Are you okay?”

“Just an asthma crisis. The idiot made me run everywhere,” Genesis said, glaring at Angeal.

Zack pinched his lips, glancing at Angeal whose naturally knitted eyebrows were almost touching in confusion. He took his PHS and called Cloud there and then.

“Hey, Cloud.”

“Hey.” the boy sounded half-asleep.

A glance toward Angeal showed he was listening intently. It made Zack fidget. The last time he had to bear it, he'd done something stupid and Angeal was going to lecture him.

“Hum... are you okay?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know where Seph is?”

“Next to me.”

“Tell him to buy mint-chocolate ice cream if he's still outside,” Sephiroth said, making Zack sigh of relief.

“Shut up,” Cloud said to Sephiroth. “And put back the other movie.”

“It's bad.”

“You're at my apart'?” Zack asked, cutting through the argument.

“Yeah.”

“You didn't attack Seph?”
“Not yet,” Cloud groaned. Zack made big eyes at Angeal when he came closer with the clear intention to steal his PHS. Angeal glanced behind Zack, at Genesis, and the younger knew the redhead was issuing a silent warning to Angeal too. “If he continues to change channels every second I might.”

Zack chuckled, he could imagine Cloud’s glare with only his grumpy voice. He told Cloud he was coming back and hang on the call.

“So? Everything’s okay.” Zack specifically looked at Angeal when he said that. He shifted toward the SOLDIERs in the hall. “Now go back to your business.”

He glanced over Genesis, not trusting Angeal to give a rational directive on what to do now.

“Go back to them, puppy,” Genesis said, grabbing Angeal forearm with a death grip. “We need to talk.”

Zack rolled his eyes at the petname, did everyone adopted it as his universal nickname?

He eyed the both of them, the confusion on Angeal and the worried tilt of Genesis’ head.

“You sure?”

“Go. We’ll fetch Sephiroth later.”

Zack looked at Angeal, but the guy wouldn’t let him cross his eyes. He seemed ashamed and weak, like his precedent outburst had sapped all the energy in him.

[You'll have to get down to see us] - Reno

Cloud frowned at the message. For a short moment, he’d thought it was Genesis. Reno was quite the disappointment. He sat on the bed and eyed the electronic clock next to the bed. Zack told him he’d never supported the tic-tac while non-enhanced, and the sound drove him crazy after his first mako shot.

Apparently, Cloud fell asleep the night before and Zack moved him because he had no memory of moving from the couch.

“What you're doing?” Zack mumbled, his face in the pillow.

“I need to see the Turks, I'll go now.”

“It's too early,” Zack complained, one of his arms wrapping around Cloud’s waist. “What time it is?”

Cloud snorted, then hit gently Zack’s forehead for him to let him go, “I'll come back for breakfast.”

“‘kay,” Zack didn't open his eyes for the quick conversation and seemed to be sleeping, though said, “Don't freak out, Seph's still here. Gen decided to have a night with Angeal.”

Half-dressed, Cloud frowned. He was going to answer, but Zack’s snores cut him and he left the bedroom in silence. He could understand Genesis wanted times with one of his lover, but Sephiroth had been hurt, letting him at Zakc’s apartment let Cloud dumbfounded. Did they trust Zack so much? They put a wounded Sephiroth’s on his hands.
Cloud moved silently, he crossed the living room and paused to glance at Sephiroth. The couch was too short for him, so he was curled on himself. A strange sight for such a collected man. The cover had slipped lower during the night, and Cloud moved it back on his shoulders before he could think. And he thought a lot when green cat-like eyes stared at him.

He sputtered, then left quickly in a reasonable tactical retreat.

If the Turks were waiting for him to come later, they didn't show it. Everything was prepared for him in minutes, a form to explain what happened yesterday was given to him and another file that Tseng kept under hand while Cloud wrote. Tseng had isolated the both of them in a little room, not quite like the one Cloud was interrogated in, but resembling, if not as soundproofed. Cloud deducted the place was chosen more for its calm than for a formal interrogation, Tseng was too casual for one.

“You didn't ask Sephiroth to come too,” Cloud remarked.

“He'll send us his report soon enough,” Tseng answered just as Reno burst into the little room they were in.

“Sunshine! You had my message!” Reno exclaimed, Rude on his tail. “The recordings were cool, yo! The moment you decided to stop being a tree rooted in the middle of the hall, I mean! You're good, sunshine! Now we need to know more about how you identified Cole.” Cloud send a questioning look to Tseng, who lifted a brow and tilted his head in a silent 'as he said'. Cloud frowned, remembering the casual interrogation when he'd recognised Cole – or thought he'd recognised Cole – that had contained questions about the reasons Cloud identified Cole as a Watcher.

“I didn't do it the first time I identified him?”

“Yes, but it's standard to go over some unclear answers,” Tseng added.

“They won't be clearer with my memory,” Cloud mumbled, but shrugged to let them know he wasn't against it.

It didn't last long since they were just going over Cloud's answers, as he didn't change his mind one bit.

“Then, we have SOLDIER's organisation chart with photographs, would you be able to identify the one from the WATCHERS?”

Cloud made a face, “My memory. You know it's shit, right?”

“We know, yo!” Reno said, leaning on Cloud's chair.

“Ugh.”

Tseng waited for Cloud to continue, but ended sliding the pictures to him. With the numbers of people dying and moving and arriving in the Watcher, Cloud never learnt people's faces. It was almost pathological how he'd never recognise a person he had seen countless time. His memory of faces was proportional to the number of fucks he gave to certain persons.

Reno circled him – them – with a little spring in his steps, it looked like he was forcefully keeping his mouth shut as Cloud studied the countless photographs. The numbers of faces made Cloud wince, there were some that reminded him something, but like that? He couldn't say if they were people he saw in the Watchers, or only people he had seen when he was still a trooper. And he told the Turks,
preferring being honest than misleading them.

“Then, this is by Cole's behavior that you recognised him?” Tseng verified.

Cloud nodded, “Yeah, just his face wouldn't have helped much. But seeing him in real time, with his mimics and all helped.”

“That's make it difficult for us, yo!” Reno said, before putting his hands on Tseng's backchair and looming above him. “What you told us about Cole's behavior isn't specific, it necessitate you and the thought-to-be-Watcher to be there. That's suck.”

Cloud shrugged, he couldn't change the way his memory worked on the spot. Cole entire demeanor, plus his face, had been necessary for him to have a doubt. It's true that after Cole was interrogated, Cloud had more faith in his identification, but the clues were thin. Cole had looked away, he stood like someone trained in one of the martial art the Watchers used and Cloud vaguely recalled him. Pretty thin, even for him.

Reno made another circle around Cloud, nudging his shoulder in passing, “You're not very helpful, yo!”

Cloud sighed, he didn't answer except for tripping Reno. At least it made him stop sauntering around for a short moment.

“What happened to him?” Cloud asked to no one.

“Coffee. Real coffee.” was Rude answer, with a deep sigh from Tseng.

A smile crept on Cloud's face, their pain at Reno's hyperactivity made him chuckle. Tseng took back the photographs and stood.

“We'll have to figure something out, in the mean time, you're free. Thank you for your help.” Tseng slightly leaned forward, a little tilt of the head and shoulder, not noticeable except for the fine observators. Maybe a rest from his upbringing? He looked wutaiin after all.

Cloud stood too, gritting his teeth when Reno circled him again like a hyperactive puppy, then returned home. To Zack.

Chapter End Notes

1) longest chapter! \o/
2) what the fuck I'm doing with this story? it never was meant to be this long or convoluted or... that
3) next fic will be with a OT3 max do you hear me, me? stop going into ASGZC when you're not good at writing everyone, jeez
4) how are you, dear reader, since we left? did school start again for you too? I had an english class in uni, it was risible I'm gonna ace it!

See you in two weeks! either 30 sept or 1 oct
Angeal dug with the energy of a man trying to bury his own thoughts into some activity. The last two days it had been his goal, bury all of his thoughts, his problems. The talk with Genesis after his outburst at Zack made some things clear. He was going to lose his commanding position the moment Lazard knew how degradation affected him. Like it wasn't enough, his brain was decaying. Hojo had not been pleased to know another person would need injection based on Sephiroth's active cells. Angeal neither.

Genesis had been stripped of his right to fight, Angeal had been sure the degradation would affect him in the same manner. But he was still strong while his mind deteriorated. Genesis lost his temper because of the pain and the fatigue it caused, not because his brain was slowly turning to goo. Angeal wasn't prone to believe in gods like Genesis, he was as neutral as Zack on the subject, but he could believe the situation was some divine punishment. Both of them lost what they preferred – if not loved – to do. Genesis his fights and his use of materias, him his commanding position.

The man sighed, hands deep in the soil. He had to excuse himself to Zack and Cloud too. The rough talk – with Genesis it couldn't be otherwise – and the trip to the lab had shaken him. He spent the two days listless in bed, refusing to go down to his office and make paperworks for fear that he would snap at another SOLDIER.

Footsteps warned him of someone's arrival. He looked up when the door was slightly open. Blond hair and huge blue eyes stared at him. Cloud waited a second before stepping inside, closing behind him and sitting next to the door. He still looked at Angeal in silence.

"Are you okay?" the First asked slowly, confused by Cloud's presence.

Cloud made a noncommital sound and shrugged. Angeal waited for a more explicit answer, but understood after a moment that Cloud needed a push if he wanted to hear why Cloud was here. For now Cloud was just staring at nothing, his cheek on his knee.

"What happened to you?"

"First class held about the Watchers," Cloud mumbled in his knee.

"It didn't go well, I gather." Angeal said, he waited for an answer again, only had a hum in return. He sighed. "They annoyed you about something?"

"No, I stood there and couldn't stay under their gaze longer. So I left." Cloud explained.

Angeal moved his feet so he wasn't cutting his circulation anymore, "You mean... you left the class before it started?"

"Yes."

The First wondered why the blond had been so upset as to leave the class if it was just the staring the problem. SOLDIERS and Turks had watched him those last weeks and Cloud didn't have a breakdown for it. Angeal shook his head at his own thoughts, Cloud took longer to break down before, but he did. Today might have recalled him this short but intense period.
Looking over the blond, Angeal decided not to verify his idea. Cloud seemed upset enough like that, frowning at a plant, but not seeing it. It was surprising Cloud came here rather than Genesis' office or Zack's apartment. Angeal wasn't going to chase him by drowning him under questions for all that.

Though, there was something Angeal had to say. He turned toward Cloud, trying to catch his eyes without results.

“I wanted to apologise for my reaction at Sephiroth's wound,” Angeal started. “There was no reason for me to accuse you before knowing the full report. And treat Zack like I did.”

Cloud shrugged, a hum on his lips.

“It's okay.”

“No,” Angeal claimed, voice hard, which startled Cloud. Angeal took a calming inspiration and lowered his voice, “No, it's not okay. It seems I am decided on finding you faults when there are none.”

“Yeah, it's okay,” Cloud repeated. “It happens when you hate someone. And sometimes there no real reason for you to hate them.”

“I don't hate you,” Angeal exclaimed, stunned and a bit pained. “I... I'm sick. I-...” he sighed. “I don't hate you, I'm afraid of you. For no reasons.”

Cloud blinked at him. Angeal waited for the blond's expression to change, but the boy only shrugged.

“I was afraid of Sephiroth for no real reasons too.”

“Not anymore?”

Cloud tilted his head to the side, his eyes losing themselves on a point above Angeal's head, “A bit. Sometimes I'll have a relapse, but it'll pass.”

Angeal nodded, his eyes coming back on the plant he cut for it to become a bonzaï. He stroked one of the leaves, lost in his thoughts.

“Then I can ask you to take care of Genesis, and Sephiroth, when I'm away?”

It was a tentative trust he put in the blond, like a test, and his heartbeat picked up as he waited for the answer. Cloud's eyes pierced him, a small smile gracing his face.

“If I can trust you to keep Zack safe.”

Angeal couldn't stop the smile that spread on his face. He shook his head and returned to his plants, letting Cloud enjoy of the calm of the tiny garden.

Zack felt like he was going to explode soon. Next to his hyperactive self, Cloud was seated on the bed with calm. The blond looked him wander around in a hurry then return to make his package, holding Zack's sword on his knees and tapping some rhythm on the metal. There was still the hint of a smile on Cloud's lips from the fit of laughter he had when Zack told him the name of the sword.

Slashy-slash delighted Cloud, he had spent a good ten minutes laughing, then snickering each time...
he murmured the name to himself. Zack couldn't regret letting the SOLDIERs and Turks make a betting pool to name his sword when he proved incapable to. Angeal found the name dumb, sometimes Zack was a bit bashful of it, but most often he found it as funny as Cloud.

“ Aren't you supposed to learn to do this thing in ten or so minutes?” Cloud asked.

“ Yeah! But I feel like I'm forgetting something important!”

Zack stood before Cloud, moving his hands up and down like his missing thought could transfer to Cloud and the blond would help him. It didn't work. Cloud stared at him, sipping on his juice box.

A loud groan escaped Zack, then he let himself fall face first on his bed. Cloud patted his head, but said nothing. Zack couldn't pinpoint if his lover was staying silent because he was anxious or sad that Zack left, or because he didn't care.

Zack made a pained sound, his heart stinging from his previous thought. Cloud moved, putting down his drink, then flopping on his side on Zack's back. Zack didn't turn around, but managed to wrap an arm around Cloud's flank.

“I said to Angeal to watch your ass for me,” Cloud mumbled. Instinctively Zack tightened his hold on Cloud at Angeal's name. He couldn't stop the urge to protect Cloud after Angeal's outburst. He took a calming breath, knowing that with Cloud here, perfectly healthy, nothing bad had happened.

He could say to Cloud not to approach Angeal if he wasn't there too, but he saw how that worked for Genesis about Cloud. It would only push Cloud to talk to the big guy. At least Angeal wouldn't cross Cloud's path since he came on the mission with him. Zack intended on using this time to question Angeal.

Zack felt a hand pull rhythmically on his top. Cloud mouth opened before a sniff was heard, “ Watch your own ass for me.”

Zack rolled over and closed his arms around Cloud who laid across Zack's stomach. Cloud's cheek was on the bed and his face was half hidden by the cover, but Zack saw the pout and scrunched nose, “Sure I'll watch it. My eyes will never leave my perfect posterior.”

Cloud snorted, echoed by Zack's chuckle, then silence fell between them. They didn't move from their strange hug before Zack murmured.

“ Maybe I forgot to put you in the bag.”

“ I don't think I fit in, you dork.”

“ I know!” Zack roared, sitting up.

Cloud jumped at his shout and moved when Zack went to the side of the bed. Zack inclined toward the ground, he rummaged under his bed before taking out a metal box. Cloud observed him with curiosity when he sat cross-legged face to Cloud and opened it with a small smile.

“ There aren't a lot of things I saved. You weren't the type to buy objects, more food.”

Cloud stared at the box without touching it. He glanced at Zack with a frown.

“ That's all I could keep after your, uh, death,” Zack said softly. “ I have one of your uniform too.”

The SOLDIER knew his eyes were humid and that's why Cloud looked so intently at him. All those
little objects had so much value for Zack. Sometimes he would take them on mission, to remember, but after nearly losing the ring put on a necklace, he never did that again.

Actually, Cloud took this ring and spined it in his hands, “That's Hel name on the outside, mine inside. It's to show our link, that she's my goddess. It's our tutelary deity from mom's side.”

Zack took the leather necklace with a hammer carved of patterns, “And that?”

“Möjlnir, a universal symbol of protection unrelated to one's tutelary deity,” Cloud said, taking the hammer in his hand. “That was my father's.”

Zack smiled brightly. He froze when Cloud put the necklace around his neck and adjusted it, staring at the jewelry that fell against Zack's plexus.

“But it's your father's! And there's another here,” Zack rummaged through the little box and handed another Möjlnir to him, “I'll take this one so you have your father's one.”

Cloud stared so long at the necklace that Zack started to worry.

“I think I wanted to give you one of them before—... before I was taken,” Cloud mumbled. “Keep it, silver isn't my colour anyway.”

Zack chuckled at Cloud false offhand attitude. He lifted a hand to cup Cloud's cheek, the blond send him a questioning look and warmth spread in Zack. Touching and staring at the blond was so good after years of filling the void Cloud left with one-night-stands or nights at the Holy Trinity's apartment, accusing any sort of movies for his tears.

He leaned down and smiled when his movement was met halfway by Cloud. Their lips meet, slow and gentle. Zack felt Cloud's lips stretch into a smile that made his stomach tighten with pleasure. Cloud's arm wrapped loosely around his shoulder and pulled them together. Zack didn't break the kiss, but did as Cloud's silent ask, though he did it with his own vision. Zack sprawled on Cloud, chuckling when Cloud groaned and bit lightly Zack's lip in punishment.

Zack hummed, pressing harder his lips on Cloud and holding him close, basking in his warmth. He nipped at Cloud's lower lip in a silent plea to deepen the kiss, his hands caressing Cloud's flank.

A knock on the door startled them, they broke the kiss and turned toward the door when someone entered, uninvited.

“By all the gods, Zack,” Angeal groaned. “You're fifteen minutes late. We're going. Now.”

He glared reproachfully at Zack, who smiled sheepishly. He sighed and looked less tense, then unfolded his arms and nodded at Cloud.

Zack jumped to his feet and followed after Angeal, Cloud on his heel. The blond took the only shoes he had and exited the apartment with them. Angeal smiled at them and handed a paper to Cloud saying it could help. Zack draped his arm around Cloud to look at the paper. Cloud leaned back against him.

It was simply pointers for the classes he should give to the SOLDIERs and Turks. To be honest Cloud wanted to give them to Flore, most of them at least. So he would be free of this anxiety inducing task and Flore would be occupied. Like that she wouldn't even complain about not being
picked up for the missions Cloud was going to do for the Turks. Though the help was kind from Angeal.

“Why is Angeal coming with you?” Cloud asked, when Zack had talked about the mission, Zack was the only First appointed.

Zack squeezed his shoulder and smiled, “He's coming to monitor Norris, he's recommended to become First.” Zack sighed loudly. “Man, the guy just had his third recommendation, he almost took less time than me to become First!”

“But he stayed a Third Class longer and is older,” Angeal commented. “Don't worry, except for Sephiroth, you're still the SOLDIER that rose to First Class the faster.”

“Yeah, but still.” Zack mumbled. “It's like Lazard is afraid to be short on First soon!”

Angeal made a sad smile that he hide from Zack.

The trip to the helipads was too fast for Cloud, he wanted to cling to Zack a bit longer. His departure made Cloud dejected, but he still used this second trip to note the path. He really needed to find a map of the Tower. Cloud was certain Flore already had found one.

Before they arrived to the helipads they crossed path with Sephiroth and Genesis. Cloud frowned at Genesis' appearance. The man was more wan and tired than the other days. Wasn't he monitored for one of those injections soon?

Angeal went to them and put a hand on Genesis’ back. Zack stayed in the middle of the hall, just before the door, so Cloud stayed there too. Even if his ears were on the conversation.

“How did it went?”

“Good,” Genesis said, shrugging. “I'll be sick all day before it goes better, like always.”

Angeal nodded and leaned to kiss the redhead. Genesis' hand ghosted over Angeal's cheekbone, a tired smile on his lips.

“Don't worry too much, I'll be sleeping most of the day, holding our darling Sephiroth hostage,” Genesis chuckled. “Now, you are late. Both of you. I think the SOLDIERs waiting for you will start to go on a hunting.”

He motioned toward the door and they followed Genesis' silent order. Cloud was lost, he wanted to hold onto Zack, but knew better than that. Distracted, he looked as Genesis caressed Angeal's chin and maw with one hand, murmuring him to be prudent. Angeal smiled sweetly and hugged the redhead. Cloud noticed that one of Sephiroth's finger was clinging to Angeal's belt like a little kid who needed attention but knew it's guardian was occupied. Angeal took Sephiroth's hand and squeezed it gently.

“Stop staring at them, I'll be jealous,” Zack said. “Why don't we say goodbye like them?”

“We already did it, rikki lüt,” Cloud huffed, amused.

Cloud stared at the SOLDIERs in the chopper, trying to see if he recognised one. He felt more than he saw Zack freeze. He uncrossed his arms and turned to him, the First stared at him, mouth slightly agape.

“What?”
“What did you say?”

Cloud scrunched his nose, “What?”

“No! Not that, before.”

Zack grabbed him by the shoulders and met his eyes.

“We already said goodbye.”


“Oh...” Cloud shifted his stance. “I won't use it again if you want.”

“No!” Zack yelled and this time Cloud jumped. “Sorry Chocobo-head. The petname, you used it a lot before you disappeared.”

“Oh. It just felt normal I guess.”

Zack's soft smile made Cloud fidget, there was such happiness in Zack's eyes that Cloud felt it bubbling in him too.

“Are you going to tell me what it means now?”

“Absolutely not,” Cloud answered a flush spreading on his face.

“Aw, that's something sexy then!” Zack teased.

Cloud shook his head, he just stole the petname from Angeal and translated it the best he could. He was a bit ashamed of naming Zack 'puppy' in another language.

“Rakki lítt,” Zack said.

Cloud cut whatever the man was going to say by laughing out loud, “Your accent is awful!”

“Sorry to interrupt, but we need to go,” Angeal called, his own goodbyes long since done.

Zack grabbed Cloud's face and kissed him before running to his ex-mentor, letting Cloud stunned. He could only wave at him when the vehicle started.

Genesis was standing next to him and leaned slightly against Sephiroth.

“There's no reason to worry,” Sephiroth said. “The mission is to keep engineers and scientists safe as they repair a circuit in Corel's mako reactor.”

“I know,” Genesis said. He turned to Cloud who hesitated to leave the place. He sighed from the bottom of his lungs, holding a hand against his heart, “We just have to wait for our lovers to return from war.”

Sephiroth lifted a brow and cleared his throat, “You know I am still here, Genesis?”

“Obviously, love!” Genesis exclaimed, a laugh on his lips. He caressed Sephiroth's cheek. “And don't worry, I will have the same reaction when you leave.”

He spun toward Cloud, paused a second as his eyes clearly unfocused. Sephiroth balanced him when he wavered. Genesis murmured a thank you and finally focused on Cloud.
“And you! Go see Kunsel at the medical yard reception.”

Cloud lifted his eyebrows, surprised, “Why?”

“Because you need friends!”

Genesis patted his cheek in passing and left him alone with Sephiroth, greatly confused. He murmured to himself ‘friends?’ and startled when Sephiroth moved.

“Genesis think you can get on with a SOLDIER that was in the medical yard since before your arrival. You wouldn't have ill feelings toward him since he didn't monitor you.”

Cloud gave a soft ‘oh’ and nodded, but Sephiroth didn't leave. He cleared his throat and met Cloud's eyes.

“I should have done this sooner, but I thank you for your help with Cole.”

“It's nothing. He couldn't have hurt you too much anyway.”

“He could have manipulated the rest of the group during a battle for me to be isolated,” Sephiroth said.

Cloud stared into the green and blue eyes, feeling like the man was talking about a specific moment. A soft 'oh' escaped him again when he remembered the storm at Icicle. Cloud never knew the specifics of how the squad had lost Sephiroth, but it happened, letting the General in danger.

“Thank you. For both times,” Sephiroth said. “Cole machinations didn't hurt me,” he smiled with amusement, “too much, thanks to you.”

Cloud huffed with a smile, “Next time you're in danger I'll save you before you're hurt.”

Sephiroth blinked, he did smile at that after a second of surprise. Cloud fidgeted, realising what he had said.

“I understand your situation is hard to live, you could have decided not to help.”

Eyes on the ground, Cloud mumbled, “We're... okay here. Maybe even happy.”

He glanced at Sephiroth to see him nod. Cloud stood there, facing Sephiroth for a few more seconds as none of them spoke.

“Well, then... bye bye.”

Cloud skipped away with his cheeks burning shame even if Sephiroth had nodded in all seriousness.

Cloud hated the smell of the medical yard. Yet he was there. He dragged his feet to the secretary at the entrance and mumbled, “Do you know where Kunsel is?”

The woman scrunched her nose and an instant Cloud was certain she didn't know how Kunsel was and would ask his last name.

“Chamber 6,” she said, returning to her paperwork while mumbling. “With the number of times SOLDIERs came here to ask that, I demanded that it was said to everyone so I wouldn't have to say
Cloud made a face at her, even if she had her nose in the stack of papers. He sighed and made his way to the chamber 6, while asking another nurse where it was. This one was nicer and lead him to it. Though by the shouting he heard, Cloud decided to wait at the door.

“Go the fuck out Kunsel! Let me alone for once!”

Something heavy hit against the door, Kunsel yelped, then opened the door to flee just as a glass was thrown at his head. He leaned against the closed door, chest heaving, before smiling at Cloud.

“That's why you always have your helmet on?” Cloud asked.

The nurse next to him excused herself, said she needed to give Bo his medications and went in the room, fearless. All the while, Kunsel chuckled good heartedly. He pulled his helmet and ran a hand in his hair.

“One of the reasons, yeah.”

Cloud nodded, then stood idly there, his eyes unfocused. He snapped out of it when Kunsel let himself fall on a bench, the only thing cluttering the too empty hall. Cloud sat next to him. He was free for a few hours, so he could stay there and not bother Genesis who might be with Sephiroth.

“I try to make Bo leave his room, but as you've seen...” Kunsel grimaced. “He can't fight like before. Not right now anyway. He still has a problem with his prosthesis.” Kunsel paused, rubbing his chin. “I'm trying to make him take a position in the signal corps till he gets better with his prosthesis, so he'd move, you know? Move and talk with people rather than spend his time alone here. But he feels like it's a sub-category or the army, like it's an insult to him.”

Cloud nodded, but the first thing that came to him at 'signal corps' was a group of person responsible for military communications. It was less awe inspiring than a SOLDIER on the battlefields.

“You think that too, uh?” Kunsel smiled crookedly at him. “Well, everyone thinks that. But I'm good there, I fight too. Sure less than any other SOLDIERs, but I have some while keeping everyone connected.” Kunsel paused then leaned against the wall. “Anyway, in this state, Bo can only choose between becoming an instructor or the signal corps. But he's just brooding and staying in his bedroom.”

Cloud lifted a shoulder. What could he say?

“The worst is that he doesn't want to see his own sister, Linn is kind of pissed at me too for that. She's equal level on Lt. General Rhaspodos in term of prickliness. No, scratch that, she's the prickliest soulmate ever.” Kunsel seemed to have found a good ear for his stories in Cloud, who just sat there, wondering what he was doing here, “She wanted to eat at a restaurant with the both of us, booked the table and all. But Bo refused at the last second.”

“What happened to him?”

“Explosion,” Kunsel sighed. “Nothing could save his legs at this point. And now he hides inside and chase any SOLDIER coming in to talk to him.”

“I don't need pity! Or 'get well soon' stupid statement!” Bo yelled from inside. “Go chit-chat somewhere else. There's no getting better for me, I'm useless!”

“You wouldn't be if you'd chose the signal corps!” Kunsel yelled toward the door.
A heavy 'tunk' resonated against the door, making Kunsel chuckle. Cloud was mulling over Bo's comment. The man felt useless, yet made no move to change. He felt trapped. Cloud knew well this sensation. Though, rather than being apathetic toward it, Bo was angry.

“That's not a bad thing, he didn't accompany you to the restaurant,” Cloud said softly. Kunsel shot him a questioning look. “What if there was an explosion and you protected Linn, because she's your soulmate right? Imagine you were hurt too. Bo would have been useless. Even if he chose the signal corps. It's better to let him there if he don't want ”

Kunsel frowned, “Well, now you're just being rude, Cloud.”

Cloud didn't feel vexed by the comment, he wanted to see if Bo would react and if so, in which manner.

“But he said he's useless, you said he can't even walk with his prosthesis. I heard he didn't even try.”

“What are you saying, you punk?”

Cloud lifted his head toward the man that just threw open the door. Bo was in a medical pyjamas, balanced on one leg and the doorframe.

“You're a SOLDIER, does a prosthesis will stop you from fighting? Really?”

“What do you know about disability, you blond spiky haired-” the man trailed off. “Do I know you?”

Cloud stood and shrugged, intent on staying on track, “My memories are in shreds, ask anyone you want. Sometimes I think I'm in another world, I doubt who are my friends and who are my enemies, often after the mako in me do weird thing and send me in short mako coma. I hate talking to people here, or anywhere, and I'm still socialising and fighting to find ways to deal with all that, because I have things to do, people to protect.” Cloud took an inspiration, still staring above Bo's shoulder, but not his eyes. “I'd like missing a leg better than doubting who I am. Maybe you'd like my problem better?”

He met Bo's eyes, who bowed his head sheepishly, “SOLDIERs seem to be more and more fucked up. Sorry.” he sighed, “Come inside, then.”

Bo turned away, hopping to his bed, his back was exposed, the string of the medical shirt open. Cloud blinked at the soulmark.

Kunself glanced inside, clearly reminded of all the time Bo's threw something at his head, while Cloud stood idly in the doorway.

“I'm not a SOLDIER.”

“Cloud was a trooper declared K.I.A, but Watchers picked him up. And years later, Cloud saved Zack.”

Something illuminated Bo's eyes, “You're Spike, Zack's soulmate! I remember you, Nibelheimer.”

“I don't,” Cloud mumbled. He stared at the corner of the doorframe, then glanced back at Bo and Kunsel who stepped hesitantly inside. “Bye.”

They shot him a stunned look, but didn't stop him from leaving. The moment Cloud parted from Kunsel, he took his PHS and send a gentle command at Flore to go down met Bo when she could.
He didn't specify why and she didn't ask either, though she confirmed she'll be doing it one day.

At lunchtime, just before the end of a class on Watchers' warfare strategies, Cloud received a message from Genesis. He smiled at his PHS as he opened it, his smile only broadened when the redhead invited him to take lunch at his office, he was ordering Wutaian and he needed Cloud's order. Completely lost about the last part of the message, Cloud let Genesis chose for him.

He heard a snort and glanced up at the three SOLDIER in the class. It wasn't obligatory, except for Third, and since it was new, nobody wanted to come.

“What?”

“Someone you like?” the SOLDIER that snorted earlier asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Cloud frowned, he wasn't sure the man was gently teasing, or mocking him. He shrugged so he hadn't to answer out loud, though his mind replayed the question. He liked Genesis, sure, but an eyebrow wiggle indicated something lewd and Cloud sure hasn't done that with Genesis, or even thought—... yeah, maybe he thought about it. A dream about a redhead reaching for his cheek and finally holding him, then leaning down for a kiss that deepened before he woke up. It wasn't to sexual a dream, but it did leave Cloud uneasy when Zack was sleeping next to him.

A deep blush spread on his cheeks, he felt it and he knew the men were observing him rather than the educational movie. He stood quickly.

“It's finished.”

“No, it's not,” said another SOLDIER, frowning and looking at Cloud like he'd lost his mind.

Cloud narrowed his eyes and pushed the off button on the remote, “Yes, it is. Half your class is absent anyway, you'll have to come back.”

They all groaned at that while Cloud left, his stomach gurgling with want. With a bit of luck Genesis had already ordered the food now and it wouldn't take long to arrive.

At Genesis' office, he froze at the entry, eyeing Sephiroth who just opened the door. The man stepped aside and glanced inside a second before coming back to Cloud.

“I'll be gone tonight,” Sephiroth said. “Will you keep Genesis company?”

A mission again, Cloud couldn't form a pattern of Sephiroth's work time. He seemed to always do something. Did he even have days off? Sephiroth went into short missions at the last minutes, hopping from one place to another like a grasshopper.

Cloud fidgeted, “If he want, sure.”

Sephiroth's lips quirked up, “I have no doubt.”

A secretary came with the wanted food and handed the bags to Sephiroth, she smiled sweetly at the both of them, then left them to their food. Genesis woke up groggily when Sephiroth shook him from the couch. After that they eat in silence, though there was no tension. Sephiroth was far from a conversationalist, Genesis was tired and Cloud had his mouth filled to the brim didn't help the life expectancy of any discussions. Though, none of them seemed to push for one.
The night, Cloud was welcomed by a tipsy Genesis in casual clothes who was far, far more tactile than normal. It made him uneasy, both because he wasn't accustomed to so much tactile affection that wasn't from Zack, and because he enjoyed it a lot.

Apparently Genesis had started drinking before Sephiroth told him, a bit late, that Cloud would come. The redhead whined that he felt bad to present himself like that.

Cloud took a moment to understand that Genesis reaction to alcohol was the problem, and not his comportment. Enhanced people metabolised quickly the poison, a drink didn't do anything to them, they needed to align shots to outpace their metabolism and feel a buzz. Genesis was drunk with two drinks of wine, because he was sick.

Cloud enjoyed having Genesis like that, more when they ended in front of a film, Genesis leaning on him and commenting each frame. He didn't realise when they ended talking more than watching the movie, anyway, his eyes were dropping and talking, rather emitting sounds at Genesis speech, was easier.

“He spent so much time helping me,” Genesis slurred before pausing, “Helping us. Sometimes it felt like he was one of us. One of our soulmate. Even if he-he's not, I care for him,” Genesis hiccuped, Cloud opened one eye perking up at the new subject. “I- I shouldn't tell you, isn't it? But you're sweet and so, so worried about Zack. He wasn't alone. He tried letting us alone, but we all like him.”

“I know,” Cloud murmured. He should have been jealous, like with Adam, but he felt content to know Zack had them, Genesis, Angeal and Sephiroth.

“Angeal was infatuated with him, it lasted years!” Genesis chuckled. “He's sad Zack wasn't his soulmate I think. But you're good to him. I'm sad you aren't both our soulmate.”

Cloud chuckled, Genesis was a really, really sappy drunk. It was adorable, “We can't have four soulmates.”

Genesis huffed, “That's sad.”

The blond smiled to himself.

“I'm so jealous of you for having Zack. We became so close I-” Genesis made a sad whine. “I'm so jealous of him too. For taking your time and attention. I'm sick of those feelings, Cloud.”

Genesis' head fell on Cloud's shoulder and rolled a bit on it. A cold shudder ran down Cloud's back, he couldn't answer anything and stood up. Genesis' worried eyes made him lick his lips and hesitate.

“I'm going to find you a drink of water.”

He left the living room on Genesis pleading call of his name. He ignored it and went to the kitchen. He was short of breath, his hands shook on the edge of the sink. That's wasn't normal, but a fear reaction.

Cloud chuckled nervously, he was afraid. Afraid of Genesis' feelings. Afraid because he felt the same. He wanted to take Genesis' attention from Sephiroth and Angeal. He wanted Genesis.
I was pretty sure there would be more fights in this story, but my 1st outline ended at chap 19 and my 2nd went in a different direction and... anyway... I wonder what happened here
Three days after Zack’s departure, Cloud found the strength to do something that he wanted to do since his return at Midgar. His new contract permitted him to go around the city as a – relatively – free man. He wasn’t so stupid as to think the Turks wouldn’t be following him. But till he stayed away from dark and shady areas, he would be okay.

Except in the slums those areas where the norm. Not that it would stop him from going down to see Aerith.

The streets were crowded, but not enough for the Turk following him to lose his sight. Cloud let him do. He wanted to see how they reacted around Aerith.

*And if Aerith is really here,* whispered a voice in the back of his head.

The streets were so loud Cloud was often distracted by shouts, things banging and bit and pieces of discussions. After being in The Watchers, listening intently to every shift of movements, murmurs between tandem and rarely the sound of machinery, the slum street made his skin crawl. In the background, without a second of interruption, was the low hum of Mako reactors.

Cloud didn’t know why he heard it better here rather than on the plate, but the fact was here. He doubted he could stay in the slum for long without starting to hate this low hum. It sounded like white noise, but *something* was wrong. Maybe it was just his memories about the consequences caused by the mako reactors that interfered with his feeling for the sound.

He shook his head as he walked, it wasn’t important and he was just trying to distract himself from the ball of doubts in his guts. He was heading to Aerith’s church, what had been her church in the other reality, and didn’t know what would await him.

Then his eyes fell on what he was looking for. The emplacement of Aerith’s church, which was standing nicely in the same way that he saw it in the other reality. Only the sign saying ‘free clothes’ above a basket of clothes at the base of the stairs was new.

From the corner of his eyes, he caught sight of a Turk. Rude didn’t move, surely because he thought Cloud didn’t see him. The blond made no move to prove otherwise. He stood in front of the church pondering what he should do. Every scenario filled him with anxiety: Enter and he would saw the church empty. There were flowers and Aerith presence. Return on his previous way and he could miss Aerith.

Cloud walked straight ahead, his mind blanks with dread. What if Aerith was there?

"Hello?"

Cloud paused on the threshold of the church, his eyes were drawn to the girl in the back. She rose, cleaning her hands on an apron she never had in his memories from the mako-delusion. But everything else was the same with her. The sweet pink dress with boots good for running or kicking, the same curly brown hair actually falling on her face and her piercing green eyes. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and rubbed her nose, leaving a smudge of dirt just above her lip.

"Hello," Cloud croaked. He searched something to add, but his words were blocked his throat.
She cocked her head and smiled, which drew a small smile from Cloud. He breathed and found a tad of courage lying deep inside. He advanced slowly until he was at the edge of the flowers' patch, then extended his hand.

"Cloud Strife."

"Aerith Gainsborough," she said as she took the offered hand. A playful smile played on her lips and she leaned toward him, "Although, we both already knew each other names."

"We... did?"

She chuckled and danced around Cloud.

"Of course! We met when you were younger. A cute little trooper all confused by being dragged here by Zack! Don't you remember?"

Cloud opened his mouth to say yes because he couldn't bear hurting her, but she would certainly realise he had been lying and there, she would be hurt.

He shifted his stance from one foot to another, eyes downcast. Turks didn't ask him nicely not to talk about his time in the Watchers, he had spent his time with SOLDIERS and if the more knew about Watchers practices, the better. But now he was out and surely they were shitting themselves he was throwing secrets around. Or meeting some agent from the group.

He shook his head, Turks knew Aerith was in this church. They wouldn't take her for a supporter of The Watchers only because he met her once, right?

“Cloud to Planet, Cloud to Planet,” Aerith called, waving a hand before his eyes.

He flinched and backed away automatically before his brain caught up. He had no reasons to be afraid of Aerith, “Uh, sorry.”

“So,” she said, crossing her arms. “You don't remember me. It's no problem, we only meet once.”

“It's not- it's..." Cloud stuttered. He sighed, lifting his eyes, he met green ones. “It's more complicated.”

“Why don't you tell me and help me with my flowers? Being productive is always a good thing. Tell me what happened, why Zack thought you dead.”

Cloud let her boss him around, showing what he needed to do with the seemingly delicate flowers. He forgot to explain himself as the work calmed him down. A thought crossed his mind: would doing that with Angeal be this calming too?

“Do you dream, Cloud?”

Hands fully in the soil he paused at the strange question. Looking at Aerith, he saw curiosity and an intensity out of place for such a question. He started tending to the flowers again, only to avoid her intense gaze.

“Not too much. I... I don't sleep enough to dream. Or have nightmares,” he whispered.

“And years ago?”

He stopped anew, but didn't lift his head, “I had a long dream.”
“I had some too. Not every night, but they seemed to be connected.”

They shared a glance. Cloud felt they were both being elusive for nothing, seeing the amused smile on Aerith's lips spread confirmed it. Her smile warmed him inside, he felt safe here with the flowers and the flower girl. With Zack, it would be perfect.

He shook his head and settled on telling the whole story. He talked about the precision of everything that happened in the Mako induced delusion, how he couldn't remember his life before that, and then talked at length of the things that happened in the delusion. Aerith listened without interruption, she ended seated on the ground, a few centimetres from Cloud.

“That's quite the story. You saved the Planet from Sephiroth, but you didn't say how it ended. Did the last-minute plan worked?”

“What do you mean?” Cloud asked with confusion. “Meteor was stopped; Holy thwarted armageddon; the Planet survived. That's it.”

“Yeah, but what happened to you and the rest of this AVALANCHE group?”

Cloud was struck mute. His eyes fell on his hands covered in mud like they would hold a physical form of his memory.

“I don't know,” he answered slowly. “I don't know. Everything feels real, precise, even lively in this other reality, but I don't know if we survived. If I survived.”

A long lasting silence stretched between them. Aerith's eyes were unfocused. She was lost in her own thoughts.

“Why are you so interested in this?” Cloud asked. “I told you it was false.”

The young woman stared at him. Cloud fidgeted with the rake in his hand.

“But I saw it. Part of it,” she finally answered. “So, maybe I saw it because of this feeling we had at our first meeting. Or something else.”

Cloud choked on his own saliva while lifting his head. Stunned, he stared at her. Her cheek in her hand, she smiled at him with something devilish. Somehow, she found the situation amusing. Which was better than being wracked with anxiety in Cloud's mind.

An alarm made them both startle. Cloud took his PHS and chuckled, “Sorry, I put that to remember to go back to the Tower.”

“You need to remember to go home?” she said with amusement.

“It's not really home for me. It's Zack's. I don't think I'll have a place I'll ever call home again.”

Aerith let her head fall on her knees with a groan, “I can't tease you. You make everything turn dark and depressing.”

“Sorry?” Cloud mumbled. “I'm sure I'm depressed after my life.”

Aerith patted his cheek, “I know. I'll tease you when you'll be better. Promise.”

Cloud frowned, that wasn't a promise he would hold her to. Shaking his head again, he stood with her and cleaned his hands on her apron. He made a face, daring her to stop him, but she only chuckled.
Before Cloud left the church, Aerith shouted at him, “One day you'll have to tell me the secret you said you'd share with me the first time we met!”

Confused, Cloud could only nod.

“All, you'll need to met my soulmate!”

Cloud nodded again. The two things seemed to hold importance to her. Although he couldn't understand why a promise to tell her a secret was so serious for her. He had no idea of what she talked about. His life as a trooper or even a kid had been almost entirely lost. It was like his mako delusion took the place needed to store his memories and left nothing for his childhood. Or some later encounters.

Now he only needed to go shopping.

Cloud sighed, already tired.

Sephiroth roamed the halls in search of a certain spiky head. After looking around for too long, he stopped at the lounge where SOLDIERs prepared for one of their movie nights. He doubted Cloud was there willingly to partake in the preparations, but Kusel might have dragged him there.

"Sir," called one of the SOLDIER. Abe he remembered. "You've been walking around for quite some time now. Do you need help?"

A second Sephiroth felt like his tongue was tied, but his need was greater than his anxiety.

He exhaled and answered, "Cloud. I'm searching Cloud."

"He's not with Genesis?" asked another man.

Sephiroth tilted his head, “Genesis left sooner to shop in the city.”

When he left, he had not mentioned Cloud except to say he had sent a message to him not to search him in his office. Apparently, his favorite library had a new book that might interest him by the owner words.

Sephiroth knew Genesis would take advantage of being near the shops to buy a lot more than a book. Even with a SOLDIER on his heel to protect him, and discreetly try to stop him from buying too much.

"Bo?" Said Luxiere. "Or Kusel."

"No," Sephiroth sighed.

"You tried his PHS?" Abe questioned.

"He doesn't answer."

"Maybe he's having a pull and hiding in an airway," said Flore.

Sephiroth looked closer at her. She seemed to be unperturbed by the consequence her theory could bring.
"Or he's just using his free time to look for clothes."

Sephiroth swirled around and glanced at the blond with a few bags in his hands. He didn't realise he was there with the constant back and forth from other SOLDIER and Turks.

Cloud fidgeted under his gaze.

"Zack told me to do it. Genesis helped me."

Sephiroth hummed. If Genesis fell on Cloud in the city, then his 'help' was certain. That Cloud managed to come back with only four bags was awe inspiring. Sephiroth couldn't say the same, he caved too much to Genesis' will in all clothing matters.

Cloud motioned toward Flore and dropped a bag in her hands. She looked around and lifted some underwear without shame. She looked at them one after the others and stopped at the lingerie.

“Did you try them?” she said cheekily.

“Obviously. It's evident I needed to try those things to determine if they would fit a girl who isn't my weight or height,” Cloud said sarcastically. “Also, blame Genesis. He thinks you'll need them.”

Sephiroth snorted, it was Genesis all over.

“Hum,” Flore looked Cloud up and down. “Yeah, anyway, I think Zack would rock it better.”

Cloud choked as a deep flush spread on his cheeks. Flore burst out laughing while Cloud desperately tried to hide his red face. Sephiroth shifted his stance, hoped his own blush wasn't as visible as Genesis said it was and cleared his throat. He met Cloud's eyes and couldn't shake away the thought that they just had shared the same mind-image. Or close to it.

“I wanted to know if you are amenable to a spar?”

Cloud cleared his throat, made a sound that said nothing, then nodded with energy.

“I'm not doing your errands ever again,” Cloud said to Flore. He shifted to look at Sephiroth. “Now we're going, right? There are other training rooms, right? Without people.”

Cloud babbled as he walked down the hall without looking to see if Sephiroth followed. He caught up with him in a few strides.

“Private training rooms are on the floor with the VHRs rooms,” Sephiroth said. “Not this one. Here, there is only the communal part of the SOLDIER Department.”

Cloud stopped dead on his tracks, on his way to the gym, “Oh, that makes sense.”

He turned to Sephiroth and balanced from foot to foot, then he motioned at Sephiroth to show the way. Which he did.

The floor they went on had been closed to the ex-Watchers for obvious reasons. All the swords and other weapons were available here. SOLDIERs had another depot for swords to replace the ones that were broken here or on the battlefields, but this floor had still a great mass of it.

They didn't go to the armoury, but Sephiroth couldn't help himself in watching Cloud who watched the place. He mumbled something to himself about needing a plan. Sephiroth smiled at that, the boy had been perfectly fine in the wild without any map, but he needed one for the Tower. It was fun for him.
In the room Sephiroth choose, they stood watching idly at each other for a while.

Cloud cleared his throat and balanced from one foot to the other. He nodded to nothing in particular and motioned toward a corner.

“T'll put my things in there and... yeah.”

Sephiroth was curious about the things Cloud had brought, surely pushed by Genesis happy to choose for him. It was time the blond found his own things after being in Shinra issued clothes or Zack's. Like he was today. Cloud wasn't in the First's uniform, only jogging and a T-shirt.

Not long ago Sephiroth overheard Lazard speaking about a uniform to recognise the ex-Watchers, even if with only three it was easy to spot them.

“So...” Cloud said, sheltered in his corner. He looked at the door a second before looking back at Sephiroth. “What do you want to do?”

“You said my hand-to-hand was bad,” Cloud snorted at that, “and accepted to teach me.” Sephiroth noticed Cloud glancing at the door again. “You are nervous.”

The blond looked at him, he shrugged like the feeling wasn't important. Sephiroth sighed at that.

“It's okay, you can refuse and go away. I feel anxious when there are too many people observing us, but you feel anxious when we are alone. Maybe we can ask someone you – we – trust to be there for another time.”

Cloud's eyes showed an emotion Sephiroth couldn't pinpoint. He smiled and approached, his nervousness calmed, “We'll make no progress if we do that. I doubt we have many people we both trust.”

“Genesis and Zack,” Sephiroth answered automatically.

“Zack isn't here and Genesis went for a nap,” Cloud said. “Though, it's kind of you to propose that. Maybe later. For today I'll be fine.”

Sephiroth nodded, reassured that Cloud wasn't going to leave him now. He had spent the day sitting on a chair and wanted to move.

He tried to tie his hair in a quick braid but found himself doing it again and again as it pulled on some hairs, or felt unbalanced in his back. The day only continued, since the morning he had trouble finding how to put his hairs. Nothing pleased him today.

“Let me help. Maybe?”

Sephiroth glanced at Cloud, surprised by the proposition. The blond had braided his hair once, although without asking. This time, Sephiroth allowed it plainly. He nodded and sat down when Cloud asked him to.

Having someone else touching his hair that wasn't someone he trusted always made him felt uneasy, but focusing on the little tugs and movements he felt, his discomfort gradually dissipated. Cloud wasn't just doing a simple braid he realised after a moment when the time lingered. Though he didn't stop Cloud. He even felt good with his hair touched and – most importantly – out of his face.

“Oh.”
Sephiroth turned around to glance at Cloud, curious about the flat sound, “Is there a problem?”

“I made you a nibel-braid,” Cloud said, blushing. “One for a woman. At least it's not the grieving one.” Cloud bit his lips and played with his hands. “I guess my hands remembered the countless time I did my mother's hair.”

Sephiroth moved his head around to test the braid. His face was free of hair and they weren't put into a high ponytail that would pull too much on his head. Was he ready to undo everything and risk never finding back the comfort he had now?

“Would someone realise the difference?” he asked before asking himself if it bothered him too much that someone could notice this.

“No. Except if there's someone from Nibelheim around. And even, they should be respecting old traditions.”

“Thank you, I will keep it.”

Sephiroth stood and glanced at Cloud who observed him with piercing eyes. He lifted a brow at the blond who shook himself and followed him.

Finally, Sephiroth could move and warm up after being seated, writing forms and signing missions all day long.

Cloud felt like he dreamt again. He had braided Sephiroth's hairs, finding some peace in the movements. Then he had fun teaching Sephiroth. Fun. Sephiroth hadn't been per se refusing to follow Cloud's instructions, but he did so like a reluctant chocobo.

The man even proposed for them to stop at the lounge to eat something.

Really, there was only one explanation: he was dreaming.

Now he observed Sephiroth talk awkwardly with an excited SOLDIER Third Class.

“I think you would look awesome in a cute blue dress.”

“Yeah,” Cloud mumbled.

The roaring laughter from the people next to him made him jump. He stared at his chicks and Reno, who were holding their sides. His brain caught up with the last comment from Flore. He scowled, then shook his head at their antics.

“Yeah, but I'd like a dark red better,” Cloud said with a straight face.

Dirk and Reno frowned, but he knew Flore realised he wasn't only playing. Her smile was bright and her eyes light up.

“Are you serious?” Reno chocked up.

“You should see the clothes at Nibelheim. Well, the one from my family and some other.”

The start of the film saved him from the trio. Reno joined his own friends and Cloud found the same place as the other time to sit at. He spent the first half of the movie alone, sometimes visited by Flore
while he kept an eye on Sephiroth, who was still held by the Third. When the General glanced in his
direction Cloud motioned him to come closer. What he did with the speed of a man trying to leave a
conversation.

“Yes, what?”

Cloud thought about telling the truth, but the Third looked at them like Sephiroth would be coming
back. So he took the cards abandoned near him and waved them, “Do you want to play? I'm not
watching the movie.”

The offer wasn't refused, far from it. Sephiroth glanced at the exit, then the Third waiting, and sat
down in front of Cloud.

“One match, then I need to go home.”

Cloud shrugged as for him it wasn't a problem. He just hoped the poor General wouldn't be snagged
by the Third when he would leave. Though Cloud saw the boy leave his place with a dejected face.
Cloud sniffled, the boy had taken more than ten minutes of the General's time, he should be happy
with that. Shaking his head, he put the boy behind him and kept playing with Sephiroth. Although
the man was recalling him rules almost every minute.

Again, Cloud enjoyed his time with Sephiroth. Weird. Like a dream.

Sometime during the movie, Cloud stopped playing, but Sephiroth didn't leave. The man kept
playing. Kusiel lost to him, Flore too – then she decided to nap on Cloud – and even Luxiere. The
man spent most of the time glancing at Cloud with nervousness, seemingly trying to talk to him.

What Cloud didn't expect was Genesis to come down, searching for Sephiroth, and start another
game that drew most of the SOLDIERS' attention to them. Apparently, the two had spent countless
hours playing cards games during the Wutaiian war.

Cloud dosed off, waking up a bit when cheers and laughs erupted around him. He definitely woke
up when the thigh he used as pillow jerked. He blinked a few times just as a hand shook his
shoulder.

“I'm sorry, but Genesis and I need to get down to see Angeal, he's hurt.”

“Oh,” Cloud emitted before his brain caught up. The voice above him was Sephiroth. He jumped to
his feet, fully awake. Sephiroth looked at him with knowledge behind his eyes. Cloud fidgeted under
this gaze before mumbling, “Is Zack here?”

“I guess he stayed with Angeal,” Genesis answered.

Around them, people were sleeping on piles, but some woke up and murmured between them,
already spreading the news.

Since Zack might be with Angeal - for Genesis it was certain - Cloud followed after the two First,
still half-asleep.

In the lift, he leaned against the first source of warmth. Genesis chuckled and put his hand on Cloud's
neck to make him move when needed. Genesis played with the hem of Cloud's necklace and lifted
the pendant. The redhead hummed thoughtfully.

"Bo has one," murmured Sephiroth.
"It's Mjölnir," Cloud said, eyes closed. "Bo grew up near Nibelheim."

"So you share some cultural resemblance," Sephiroth said to himself.

When the lift arrived, Genesis guided Cloud around. He let the redhead do, trusting him. And Genesis was warm, he wanted to keep close from the human heater.

"Hey, everyone."

Zack saluted them with a soft voice, barely a whisper. He sat on the edge of Angeal's bed who smiled hesitantly at them. Zack moved his fingers to catch Cloud's attention. The blond obeyed the silent ask to come closer with eagerness. Zack took Cloud's cheek and kissed him lightly, which made Cloud melt at the soft sign of affection. He didn't pay attention to Angeal.

The man sat up and reached out. Cloud's eyes glanced at him a second before he gave back Zack his attention. A hand grabbed his necklace and pulled. Cloud made a choked up sound as the leather lace sunk painfully into his neck. Angeal took a hold near Cloud's skin, effectively strangling him. Cloud stumbled toward Angeal, his heart missing a beat.

“That's a Number's necklace!”

Cloud tried to break the hold of the man. He saw from the corner of his eyes Sephiroth and Genesis move. Zack grabbed Angeal's wrist to lessen the pull on Cloud's neck.

“Let go Angeal!”

“It's a-”

“Angeal!” Genesis shouted, his voice carrying evident worry.

Sephiroth broke both Angeal and Zack's hold. Cloud didn't pay much attention to the rest, he took a deep inhalation and was taken by a coughing fit. Someone – Zack by the smell – moved him out of the room and made him sat down on a bench.

Two hands on his cheeks forced him to straighten up. Swallowing made him cough again, irritating more his throat. Cloud blinked and met Zack's worried eyes.

“You're okay babe? Are you- my gods. Fuck- I... I. By all the gods, I'm sorry, Cloud. I'm so sorry.”

Zack pressed his forehead against his. Cloud felt Zack's shaking echo in him.

“Yeah,” he coughed at the spike of pain, then tugged on Zack's ear. “It's okay.”

“It's not!” Zack exclaimed. “What was-...? I never saw Angeal react like that! That's not okay! Did he attack you for a piece of jewellery? That's mad!”

Zack pressed his forehead harder to Cloud, his hands on Cloud were taken by heavy tremors and his breath was uneven. Cloud couldn't see Zack's eyes, as they were closed, but he was certain Zack's pupils would be blown wide with fear.

“Zack, you're panicking.”

“Obviously I am! He was strangling you!”

Genesis appeared at the door, he opened his mouth, but was cut by Zack, “I'm not talking to you!”
Zack stood up, taking Cloud with him and holding him with one arm under his thighs. Cloud took a second to stabilise at the sudden change, then glanced at Genesis. The redhead looked dejected with his wrinkled forehead and his eyebrows knitted together.

Cloud waved at him and Genesis gave a sad smile but waved back. The blond let his cheek fall on Zack's shoulder, then made the sign to call him. Genesis blinked with surprise before his smile became more genuine.

Cloud needed to know if he could say to Zack what happened to Angeal. Signs of degradation were clear for him, but the puppy – with his attachment for Angeal – might not have seen it.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter 4 or 5 nov
With materia and potions Angeal left the medical wing rapidly. Zack was both happy and extremely anxious about it. Happy because he cared a lot for the burly First, there was no denying it. And anxious because he felt like Angeal would hunt down Cloud to finish the job. Which contradicted so much with the man he knew that it made him more anxious. No amount of reassurances and promises to be prudent from Cloud managed to calm him down.

When Zack was away, Cloud had spent countless hours thinking about spending the most time possible with the brunette. Now he had to abscond, so he wouldn't have to deal with Zack's anxieties and mixed feelings about Angeal. Doing that only made Cloud feel guilty and ashamed. It was that, or having Zack worsening his own insecurities. No choice was good for Cloud.

The worst was that Genesis asked him not to say anything about Angeal degradation, by Angeal own demands. The redhead had been surprised that Cloud knew before understanding that Cloud spent a lot of time with enhanced Watchers getting it. Cloud could have broken his promise not to say anything – at least the situation pushed him to it – but he kept remembering the speech he had given the redhead after revealing Zack and his bond.

Nothing was good for Cloud. And nobody was there to help him. Genesis was worried sick with Angeal, even if he left the medical wing. Sephiroth was worried for everyone, and that Zack would hold a grudge against the trio. Cloud wasn't going to talk to any of those later events to someone else, Flore had to deal with her own degradation and Dirk had the emotional empathy of a potato.

Cloud decided to hide by doing one of the things his contract wanted him to do. Teaching.

“That's all?” a SOLDIER Third Class asked.

His cheek in his hand, Cloud blinked to chase away his dissociation. He turned to the screen that was blank. The informational movie concocted by Shinra itself was finished.

“Yeah.”

“It's just a fucking educational movie. We could have seen it without you,” groaned another Third Class. Cloud was almost sure he had a class with only Third Class today.

“Yeah. But if you have questions I can answer,” he said, yawning after that. “Probably.”

Since the classes started – the day after they signed the contract – Flore had been subtly pushed toward it so her time was occupied and she wouldn't be used as SOLDIER' replacement without the terrible forms accompanying them. Cloud was content with the setting.

Though Flore accepted to give him some of her classes scheduled today. He wondered what she was really doing during all this free time, she couldn't watch the three different movies for Watchers' battle strategies, hand-to-hand and way of life every damn time.

“Just one question then, Strife.” the Third the neared said before freezing, “Er- sir...”

“Whatever, just tell me.”
“Why do you wear a sign of the Numbers if you're not a Watcher anymore?”

Cloud blinked, “A sign?”

“Bo wears one of them too,” whispered the boy's comrade.

It clicked in Cloud's head and he took his pendant between his fingers, “That's Möjlnir. It's a symbol of protection for Nibelheimer, and people around Nibelheim that share some of our beliefs.”

Cloud stayed silent as the information clicked again in his head, “The Numbers wears them?”

“From the latest photographs of them we have, yes.”

Cloud hummed, eyes fixated on his pendant. None of the 'Numbers' as they were called here had worn Möljnir the last time he saw them, or even one of them.

It made him uneasy, it was a symbol that belonged to him, to his people. None of the Numbers where nordic. If there was at least one, it would make more sense. The Numbers would've wanted to protect his 'friends' with this little thing. Cloud certainly wasn't the guy that gave that to them.

Except for Kira. Sometimes they got along well.

Maybe one of the Numbers changed? It must be that.

“Goodbye Cloud er- sir.”

The comment made Cloud startle, he looked over the guys standing next to the door, surely waiting for him to dismiss them. He glanced at the clock and nodded at them, seeing it was time to let them go.

He stood too and headed for the door. No other classes were prepared for the morning. It was too early for dinner, but Cloud still wanted a snack. He didn't go to the cafeteria, but to the lounge. SOLDIERs always kept little things to eat there that were often prepared by hand. Cloud loved those snacks.

There were only two SOLDIERs there, talking about some squabble between lovers. Cloud edged toward the table and took two cookies.

He started to walk away only to return on his heels and take a third one that he put in his mouth immediately. He sighed at the chocolate and sugar, mixing on his tongue. Glancing at the two SOLDIERs he flushed at their amused smiled. Cloud left the place in a hurry, not wanting to eat under their gaze.

In the hall he hesitated on his direction while he stuffed the delicious cookies in his mouth. He walked toward the lift, deciding he could go to the offices, either Zack's or Genesis' and sleep. Though he fell on Angeal leaving the lift with two heavy bags of soil. The man made a slight smile, weak and uneasy.

“Hello, Cloud.”

“Hello.” He stayed silent a second before adding. "Zack told me to be careful about you. I think he wanted to keep me away from you, but didn't say so."

"With the way I reacted, it's only fair." Angeal said with a sad smile. "Telling you not to do something would have worked as much as it did with Genesis, I feel it."
They stared at each other a second while Cloud's mind jarred his thoughts. The outline of an idea crossing his head made him ask impulsively if Angeal needed help. The First blinked at him, then stepped out of the lift as it closed. Angeal stood next to Cloud with the two bags of composts in his hands. Slowly, he handed one to Cloud.

“Thank you.”

Cloud nodded. If he was honest with himself, the fear he had for Sephiroth seemed to have jumped on Angeal. But he managed to talk with Sephiroth without showing his bone deep dread, he could do it with Angeal while keeping an eye open for any signs of aggression.

If he was kind to the man and showed he had no grudge toward Angeal, then Zack would calm down and could help Angeal in his malady rather than hate him for sudden impulsion the burly man had no control over. For the moment, Cloud was certain he would learn later. Except if the degradation touched mostly his brain. Then...

“Oh.”

Angeal soft and sad sound cut Cloud from his thoughts. He glanced at the thing the man was eyeing and saw two others compost's bags slumping in a corner.

“I bought them before I left,” Angeal said. “I didn't remember.”

A shot of electricity ran through Cloud. He exhaled an heavy breath and stared at Angeal. The comment echoed in him almost painfully. Doubting his own brain, his own memories were something he had to deal with on a daily basis.

"Well, we can exchange them for plants, no?" Cloud asked without looking at the man. He mumbled, "The place lack flowers."

“Yes,” Angeal said slowly before clearing his throat. “Yes, I can exchange them. Thank you.”

Cloud nodded at the acknowledgement. He followed after Angeal with the bag. He saw the man glance a few times at him, trying to say something, but stayed silent as they made their way through the Tower.

Eyes wide open, Cloud noted each point of the city Angeal was going through. Planning the area was almost an instinct now. His mental map of the Tower was pretty good now, even with holes in places where he never went. But he could infer.

Though, he really needed to catch Flore so she could find him a map. Cloud doubted Dirk had even thought about getting one, or even went to others place than the kitchen, his bedroom and the SOLDIERs' lounge.

Angeal led them to a building on the outskirt of the plate. Cloud never knew there was an industrial area on the plate, but this place looked like it. The long and low building was open on rows and rows of plants and others gardening tools. Some trees were on the edge of the building, taking a sun bath.

“The place is new,” Angeal said. “It's an idea from Reeve, putting more greens to counteract the pollution in the air.”

Cloud jumped at the name, he glanced at Angeal, confused.
“He's in charge of the Urban Development Department,” Angeal explained, misunderstanding Cloud confusion.

*That never happened in the Mako-fueled-dream,* Cloud thought.

Reeve had tried some things to reduce ShinRa powers without too many results. But Cloud didn't spend a lot of time on the upper plate when he was with AVALANCHE. The industrial part he was at now could be a constant. Cloud doubted this idea.

During his musings, Angeal had approached an employee and asked to change his purchase. The man in front of the SOLDIER shook and stuttered, clearly not accustomed to see SOLDIER. He took the two bags from Angeal and Cloud with speed, then disappeared, surely to catch his breath.

Cloud followed Angeal as the man looked over the rows of plants. There was too much for Cloud comprehension. Some plants looked alike, but weren't named the same. But he could acknowledge that the colourful flowers were pretty.

A cart moving crates with plants balancing their leaves nearly hit him as he didn't pay attention to his surroundings. Angeal's hand on his back pushed him out of the way. The man moved him with a slight pressure on his back so they weren't on the path of the carts moving in the principal path.

Cloud stayed next to a shelf with what was labelled as 'tulip'. The range of colours awed him and he couldn't shake the thought that Aerith would be out of her mind in such a place.

He must have zoned out because the hand reaching for him and pausing mid-gesture startled him. Angeal let his hand fall and took the crate full of flowers he had put on the shelve next to him.

Angeal felt a bit like he had a mentee again as he zigzagged between civilians. Cloud followed on his heels rather than next to him like earlier, certainly using him as a buffer against people.

There was more crowd as midday approached and people left their jobs to go eat. It seemed to put the blond on edge. Although having Cloud in his back put Angeal on edge. He had to force himself to breath and calm down, he wasn't going to attack him again. Zack wouldn't forgive him. Cloud, maybe.

They were passing in front of the gym when Cloud stopped, “I'm going to run.”

Angeal glanced at him, the sudden change of plan from the blond worried him.

"If I did something that made you uncomfortable or anxious I apologise."

Cloud shook his head, "It's not you. It's... the crowd, mostly. I need to..."

Angeal heard what Cloud wasn't saying. He needed to clear his mind, do something else than stand there feeling his anxiety rise. The First would have proposed him to stay at the little garden to cool down, but Cloud had said he was going to run, and Angeal didn't want to make him hesitate. Especially since there was no chance Cloud would calm down in Angeal's presence.

He let the boy go where he wanted to be and headed for his tiny garden where a Third Class was using the calm. Angeal smiled to himself before engaging the other man to help him while he talked about his problem. He savoured this little moment he had with one of his men. In a few weeks, or months, he could stop entirely because of degradation depending on the results with the injection. He
was already more aggressive than normal, his lovers and Zack were at least not the subjects of his angers.

But Cloud was, and Angeal had only one idea for the reason of his lovers and Zack immunity: he cared about them to the point of giving his life to them. Spending more time with Cloud could be helpful.

After his talk with the Third ended, Angeal picked up the lilac coloured tulip, he had taken from the shop. His search for Cloud was quick as the blond was still on the treadmill.

Angeal came to him. He noticed Cloud's confused glance and smiled, holding the tulip a bit higher, "I preferred for you to be a bit more relaxed before offering it to you."

"What?"

At Angeal's horror, Cloud stumbled and fell on the moving treadmill. He moved away from the machine, ending on the ground, his chin scratched and with a nosebleed. Cloud looked up at Angeal as he knelt down. He pinched Cloud's nose as he seemed to be only capable of blinking owlishly at him.

"You're gifting me a flower?" Cloud croaked.

"You seemed to like it and—" Angeal sighed. He let go of Cloud's nose, sliding his thumb under it to get rid of most of the blood and verify it stopped bleeding. "It's not broken at least."

Angeal glanced at the SOLDIER behind Cloud who was hovering uselessly. His attention returned to the tulip. Angeal didn't know how to interpret Cloud's surprise so he reached out, trying to take back the flower. Yet Cloud pulled it to his chest.

"No, that's mine now," Cloud said with a tone that didn't accept any refusal from Angeal. He looked down at the pot, "Thank you. That's kind of you."

Relief overwhelmed him, at least Cloud wasn't being petty by refusing the gift. A part of Angeal was aware Cloud had all the reasons to be petty. But now Angeal just needed to excuse himself for their last encounter and his aggressive behaviour.

Angeal stood, glancing at the SOLDIERs with an involuntary nervousness. Some were observing Cloud and him, but most minded their own business after making sure Cloud's fall had no consequences. He extended a hand to Cloud, worry gnawing at him that he would refuse, and asked, "Would you care for a coffee. I feel bad for making you fall. And I wanted to talk to you."

"Bah, that was my fault, really." Cloud mumbled, putting the plant under his arm and taking Angeal's hand. "No coffee."

The rejection didn't surprise Angeal, but the hurt did. He took a deep breath as to not crunch Cloud's hand between his.

"It's lunchtime," Cloud added.

The comment let Angeal confused before he tentatively asked, "No coffee at lunchtime?"

Cloud nodded and made a gesture toward the door, "Are we going? I'm hungry."

A chuckle escaped Angeal. He moved his hand under his nose. The boy moved instinctively his hand to his nose too, confusion clear on his features. "Maybe you'll want to clean this blood, before
Angeal shook his head, Cloud had some of Zack's traits, like his forgetfulness. It wasn't caused by the same process in Cloud's mind, but Angeal couldn't help be endeared. He put a hand on Cloud's lower back without thinking and guided him out of the gym. With a little hope, by befriending Cloud, he could make Zack forgive him. Or it would help in the action.

Cloud returned to the flower building the moment he was free. The plant he had been admiring made him think of Aerith, and he thought about giving the one Angeal gave him to her, but decided against. So we brought another one and went down to the slums, hoping that Aerith was in her church.

People looked at him strangely with his tiny lavander – he changed his mind about the flower that would suit Aerith – but the more he approached the church, the more people had knowing smiles. Some even addressed him those smiles, like they were content he took a flower to Aerith.

At the entry he stood idly, hit by a wave of hesitation, maybe he should have chosen something else?

"It's a lovely flower," Aerith said, making him jump and turn around. "For whom it is?"

"You!" Cloud answered, pushing the pot into her hands, even if she had her basket on her arm.

She chuckled at his obvious nervousness and beamed at him, "I love it. Thank you, sunshine."

Cloud looked away, glad she was happy with the gift, but still embarassed. At least, Aerith calling him sunshine sounded less idiotic than Reno.

"Are you going to stand here all night, or what?"

He glanced at her, already on the church's steps, and followed her inside.

"So, you need something, isn't it?"

Cloud frowned, "Because I gave you a flower?"

"Because you came here," Aerith corrected. "You're careful, blondie. You try not to come too often for a reason, the same that is standing outside my church."

Cloud titled his head to the side in acknowledgement, "I guess it's more me giving you another gift. Or a tip. And hoping you'll be able to help me with it."

Aerith's eyebrows went up in her hairline, she put down the lavander and her basket, then sat on the pew, patting the place next to her silently.

"My Aerith," Cloud started only to be interrupted by a huff.

"Your Aerith? What I am then?"

Cloud grimaced, then gave her a sheepish smile, "Aerith 2?"

"For all we know, I'm Aerith 1," she huffed, crossing her arm, but her irritation was short lived. She
quickly send him an amused smile.

“Aerith from the world with soulmates?”

“That's too long!”

“Lavender Aerith?”

She opened her mouth, only to be swept by a fit of giggling, “That's cute! You're cute, sunshine.”

Cloud grumbled, he wasn't cute. He was a grown adult with a dark past and darker everyday thoughts. Aerith nudged him gently.

“Come on, what did you want to give me?”

extending his legs and fixing them for a moment, Cloud pondered about the thing to start with. He sighed, “In the other dimension, as you call it, we traveled a lot.”

“Lucky you,” Aerith breathed.

“-you'll do it too, I'm certain.” Cloud shifted his stance and returned to the subject. “We discovered information on the Ancient. But the most important was a book Gast had. Aerith was sure some of the things there had been written by Ifalna.”

Aerith perked up, all her attention focusing on Cloud. She'd lost her habitual joyful expression for a seriousness that made Cloud tense in answer. It wasn't because he was worried, but because anytime he'd seen Aerith – both of the Aerith – became serious, then it was better for him to be too.

“She'd tried some of the spells and magical mixtures in the book. I remember some.”

“And you'll give them to me? Like that?”

She frowned, their shared complicity tainted with suspicion for the first time. Cloud breathed slowly, he forced himself to see this reaction as completely normal, but his feelings were still hurt. He picked up one of the notebooks Genesis had given him. This one never saw other hand, or eyes, except Cloud's.

“I think one or two of your spells could help my friends with degradation. I want to save them, but I can't do it alone.”

Aerith breathed out, her smile returned, if a bit less joyous, “How many are sick?”

“Three,” Cloud mumbled while he observed Aerith smooth the nonexistent fold on the notepad. “Though, Dirk is at risk too.”

“I'll try, Cloud. But I never-”

She didn't finish her sentence. The smile she gave him was small and uncertain. She spent years hiding her powers, even her didn't know the deeps of her own strenght. Cloud patted awkwardly her arm, gave her a loopish smile.

“I know, I believe in you.”

It sounded absolutely corny and impersonal for Cloud. At less Aerith found back her genuine smile. She put the notepad down and jumped on her feet, clapping her hands togehter.
“Either leave, or help me.”

Cloud eyed the patch of flowers, “I have some time. I'll help.”

And so he did. Aerith wasn't touched by the ambiance at the Tower caused by Angeal's last outburst. Her company was a breath of fresh air for the blond. They worked with energy, Aerith filling most of the silence between them with stories. It helped Cloud tune down the problems that plagued his mind.

Time passed and Cloud's PHS recalled him he was to go home if he didn't want to worry Zack. Before that, he asked a last question to Aerith.

“I need to ask, does the guys from Seven Heavens have ties with the Watchers?” Cloud frowned and added, mumbling, “Does Seven Heavens exist here? Anyway, the guys. The guys from-” he murmured, meeting quickly Aerith's amused expression. “-from AVALANCHE?”

“For a little while, yeah,” Aerith said, giving him a sad smile. “But the Watchers were too intent on creating an equivalent for SOLDIERS and talk about finding old gods to help them and WEAPONS. They nearly killed all the guys from Seven Heavens when they decided to back away from them. But they escaped. That's what they told me. Also the supporters that live in the City don't approach us.”

“They escaped...” Cloud repeated.

“Yes, at the end the guys were often parted from each other by the Watchers. They managed to regroup, and then with the power of friendship and freedom, they escaped. Except for Tifa. She'd been alone at this time, but she got help.”

Cloud hummed as the sensation of a forgotten memory hitched his curiosity, then startled out of his thoughts with the screeching from his PHS. He shook his head and waved goodbye at the young woman, his last thought already forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

am cold, am dead
Cloud closed his PHS after having ordered Zack to take a shower. Earlier in the day the man had been sent for a short mission on the plate that had been more to occupy him than anything else. Zack just sends Cloud a selfie of the results. The Third on the photo and him were covered in monsters' blood, thing that Zack found particularly funny at the contrary of Cloud, grossed out. Zack's hair were glued to his head. Even wet, Zack's hair had spikes, so what was in the monster blood to manage to flaten it? Anyway, Cloud told Zack he wouldn't approach him with a ten foot pole like this. The time it would take him to return to the Tower, the blood and other fluids would start drying anyway, then Zack wouldn't find it funny anymore.

"Hey, Bo."

The man didn't turn fully around to see him – only a short glance above his shoulder. He was concentrated on each step he was doing, looking straight ahead at the physician order. The muscles of his arms were tense as he held onto the bars here to help him stand.

“What are you doing here?”

“Seeing you.” Cloud smiled and came closer so Bo could look at him without turning his head in a 360 degree angle. He saluted the woman facing Bo and she returned the politeness.

Bo frowned at him, “You're taking yourself for a nurse?”

Cloud put his forearms on the second parallel bars, unused at the moment. He let his head fall in his hands and stared at Bo making a step.

“No. Visiting hospitalised people is a thing my tutelary goddess loves.” Cloud moved so one of his feet was blocked against his ankle. “It's certainly not for you I'm coming here. Your personality is awful. Not friendly at all.”

Bo snorted, “You're no better. I heard you didn't talk to any other SOLDIER. Well, except for the Holy Trinity, Zack and Kusel. Friendly, uh?”

“I have Dirk and Flore too. I don't need more friends.”

The frown that marred Bo's face didn't fade away, but there was something – an emotion or an idea – in his eyes that slowly came up. Bo looked at Cloud with a prudent consideration.

“So why are you here?”

“Don't stop,” the woman snubbed Bo, making him resume his slow walk with a groan.

“As I said,” Cloud answered. “Also, I don't see a lot of people talking to the 'Holy Trinity' when it's not to talk work or their problems. I don't think they have a lot of friends. Even less than me.”

Bo finished his exercise and fell into the woman's arms. Cloud was impressed by the strength she showed as she helped Bo sit in the wheelchair near them.

“You're right. Even more with Sephroth,” Bo said before a smile split up his face. Cloud shuddered,
the smile was not one of happiness, but sharp and decided, “So you're Sephiroth's friend?”

Cloud scrunched his nose, “Maybe?”

Bo ran a hand through his hair, then made a head move toward the door, “Ma'am, please leave.”

The woman pinched her lips, she adjusted her hairclip holding her curly hair, then pointed Bo with one finger, “I'll wait outside, but we need to talk too.”

With that, she left Bo and Cloud alone. Cloud's eyes lingered on the door a second, his mind giving him half-formed thoughts that didn't help him. He had no idea of why Bo wanted to be alone with him, but it started worrying him. When he looked back at the northerner Bo's smile had vanished, replaced by a resolute expression.

“You know the medication for degradation is a serum extracted from Sephiroth's blood,” Bo started.

Confused, Cloud cut Bo before he said more, “No?”

Bo waved a hand, “Well, it is. Hojo makes the most of those obligatory visit Sephiroth has to extract his blood. Hojo does other things that let him hurt. Not even Kusiel know what it is.” Cloud felt his heart settle in his throat. “As I stayed here I, and Kusiel, noted the times our General came down here for the blood samples.”

“Why are you telling me about this?” Cloud said in a whisper.

There was something unspoken Bo was circling around, like he prepared Cloud for the rest.

“Because I care for the General,” Bo declared. “Do you, Cloud?”

It was a trap, Cloud knew. Either he said the truth, said yes, and Bo obtained an argument to push him to do the thing he was eluding. Or Bo could guilt trip him. There was no good answer.

Cloud shrugged, saying nothing and letting Bo interpret it at his convenience.

“And by now, Kusiel can tell me if one of Sephiroth's trips to the lab was asked with the appropriate forms, or if it's a little fancy from Hojo that isn't jotted down anywhere.”

Cloud took a shuddering breath, his hands were trembling at his side and his heart beat faster as Bo talked, “Why are you telling me this?”

*Why talking about trip to the labs to him? Why talking about Hojo? Why? Why?*

“I saw Sephiroth go to the labs two hours ago,” Bo said. “That's longer than any other of the visit I noticed.”

All the friendliness that Cloud had felt for Bo turned sour. Being in the medical wing had been already anxiety inducing for him, the labs... Cloud shook his head.

“I'm not going to the labs.”

“No.” Bo insisted. “Just go to the reception and ask for him.”

“I'm not going,” Cloud mumbled.

Bo hit his hand hard on his thigh, the movement and sound made Cloud jump. He stared at Bo with wide eyes, “I need you to!”
“Why aren't you doing it if you're so worried!” Cloud shouted, his voice wavering.

Bo rolled over Cloud who backed away until his back it a wall. He loved having his back to walls normally, it mean no one could attack him from behind. But now he felt trapped.

“Look at me, I'm not very threatening now.”

“I'm not either,” Cloud said. “I'm already panicking. Ask someone else.”

“Because Sephiroth wouldn't leave the lab with someone else. Even if Hojo realise he need to let him go. I don't know why, but he doesn't want to be seen like that.”

“Call Angeal or Genesis then.”

“For them to wreck havoc in the labs and get punished?”

“I will do it too.”

“No, you're too anxious,” Bo retorted. He sighed and massaged his temples. “You're our best choice right now, Cloud. You don't want to help him?”

Want, maybe. But could he? He was shaking all over and his mind wavered. It wasn't the only problem, “What if Sephiroth doesn't want to come with me either?”

“Then you will leave quickly,” Bo said in a whisper, his eyes closed.

Cloud bite his lips, he stopped when he needed to exhale. He was ambivalent about the whole thing. On one hand, he knew the pain of past experiences so he wanted to make Sephiroth leave, but on the other hand the terror of those past experiences was gripping him already.

“Go to the reception, say you need him and they'll release him,” Bo explained with a firm voice. “Cloud, please.”

Cloud snarled, feeling all his muscles tenses as he swirled around. He strode away, Bo calling after him, but he ignored the man. A moment of doubt, or even a distraction, would make him change his mind. Cloud was certain of that.

The labs were connected to the medical floor with only few steps separating the two places, at least the emerged part of the lab. Cloud knew there was more of it than just the rooms you could see as a visitor coming to hand papers or such. Cloud walked to the reception desk where a woman looked at him warily.

“I'm here for Sephiroth,” Cloud stated, his tone clipped.

She startled and froze, irritating Cloud who snarled, “Now.”

The woman jumped to her feet and flee from him. His face must have shown all the hatred he felt coming here. At least, Cloud thought so. There was so much anger and fear in him, he was sure people could see it ooze from his skin.

He wasn't even in the heart of the demon called Science Department, he was at a front desk that kept the image of a normal science building. He heard people talking about chemicals and glass test tubes or beakers hitting against each other then, farther into the hell hole there were screams from a voice he knew, but who his mind refused to identify. A full body spasm took him, his mind flashed a memory of strong lights and pain and-
Sephiroth appeared down the hall, waverering on his feet even with a hand on the wall, looking fragile and tired to the bone. Cloud forced the memory back. First, secure the both of them in a safe place, then panic. He stepped inside the hall and grabbed Sephiroth. Confused green eyes peered at him.

“Cloud?”

“Move,” Cloud said. He’d wanted for his voice to be assured, but it was only a murmur. “Move, Sephiroth. I hate it here.”

The other shook away Cloud's hold on his forearm, making the blond's heart stop before Sephiroth draped his arm around Cloud's shoulders and leaned against him. Seeing the benefits of this position, and needing to be out of this place yesterday, Cloud wrapped his arm around Sephiroth's waist, feeling him burning, and guided them out.

His eyes roamed the hall in search of a threat, he noticed Bo at the entrance of his bedroom. The man gave him a weak smile that disappeared as rapidly as Cloud's breath. He said something, but Cloud couldn't focus on words now. He flew the medical yard in a heartbeat.

A strong sense of deja-vu hit Cloud as he waited for the lift with impatience, supporting Sephiroth without too much trouble. Inside, the tiny space only worsened his panic. Moreover, his breath left in shallow gasp and came back the same way, priving him of oxygen. Sephiroth pressed his shoulder.

“Cloud?”

The doors opened on a floor with no one there. Cloud left the lift without hesitation, dragging Sephiroth after him. Sephiroth's head lolled on his shoulders, yet he stood and followed Cloud's lead.

“This isn't my floor,” Sephiroth slurred.

“We're taking the stairs,” Cloud stuttered.

He adjusted his hold on Sephiroth and his hand slipped on a thick fluid. He pressed harder on the man's flank to keep his hold eliciting a pained hiss from Sephiroth. Cloud glanced at his own hand holding Sephiroth like he could see the wound. The fluid could be blood or Mako. Cloud shuddered, but kept moving upward, their feet echoing in the empty staircase.

The General wasn't wearing his uniform, only a long sleeved shirt, black, and normal pants. Distractedly, Cloud recalled it was Sephiroth day off. So much for the relaxation!

The walk helped Cloud clear his mind a bit. At least his breath had a reason to be shallow now. Though Sephiroth was loosing his footing and stumbled a few times before Cloud stopped. He quickly attached Sephiroth's hair, noticing the red and green on his humid hand, then took him in his arms. Sephiroth made a strangled sound, his arms wrapping almost painfully around Cloud's neck, but he didn't ask to be put down. The staircase was empty anyway, Sephiroth didn't risk his reputation.

Maybe he understood that, or he was too tired to struggle against Cloud because he let his head fall on Cloud's shoulder and didn't move an inch. Holding him bridal style wasn't perfect, the man was still taller than Cloud, but it was better than dragging a dead weight on the stairs.

Sephiroth's breath wasn't better than Cloud's. It came slow and hitched a few times, proving he was in pain. Cloud murmured some nonsense, to calm himself and Sephiroth by association. Still, the more he could do was to get Sephiroth to his apartment the quicker possible. Until then, Cloud walked by automatism, the buzz in his head corrupting any reflection and letting only a blank void into Cloud's head.
At the door he had to pause a second to gather his thoughts, then he put Sephiroth on his feet who wobbled and made a face that was a mix of confusion and disgruntlement. Cloud put him against the wall so he wasn’t supporting all his weight.

“I need your key.”

Sephiroth scrunched his nose, one hand uselessly trying to go into his pocket. Cloud was reaching for it when the door opened, startling him.

Angeal stared at them, one hand on the door handle and the other holding two PHS. His eyes finished on Sephiroth, “I tried to call you—” he waved the two PHS, “—but you forgot that.”

Sephiroth, holding still until now, nodded and lost his balance. Cloud caught him with a huff, moving backwards under the dead weight.

“What are you okay?” Angeal asked, his eyes huge with surprise. He pocketed the two phones and put a hand on Sephiroth's back. He grabbed Sephiroth under the arm to help him stand and look at him, “Seph?”

Angeal glanced at Cloud who backed away to give the man enough space for maneuvering the General deadly silent. The other moved Sephiroth's arm around his neck and the silver-haired squeezed automatically without giving a sign of understanding what was going on.


He glanced anew at Cloud. The blond snorted nervously, it wasn't hard to pinpoint what was going in the man's head. Angeal thought he had attacked Sephiroth, but he still fought against this automatic idea if Cloud went by the numerous glance between him and Sephiroth.

Cloud swallowed the lump in his throat to say some words, “I- … Bo asked. I— he.” Cloud closed his eyes, shaking all over. Bo asked him to go in the labs and he did. He did. It was surely a symptom of his panic but he was cold. “Labs.”

Labs. The word echoed in his head without interruption.

Angeal tried to say something to him, but Cloud turned on his heels and fled, the dreaded word in his mind. The lights in the hall hurt his eyes, changed for something more resembling those from medical lamps, the static from the heated filaments burning into his head.

He went into the stairwell again, soothed by the darkness. Here, only one on two lamps worked. Their static was less intense. He went down a few steps before his vision wavered and swam. His foot, hovering in the void, slipped on the edge of the next step, he stumbled and his knees hit the ground. The pain flashed white in his eyes and an image of blood covered tiles superimposed on his vision of the linoleum of the stairwell.

He crawled on the ground to huddle against a corner. Cloud held his knees close to him and cradled his head which pulsed and made his vision blurr. He tried to come back from the memory with the sensations of his body, the pressure of his arms on his head or the slight pain where he had cut his lips when falling. The hum of the Mako reactor, easily ignored normally, seemed to grow louder. Louder than Cloud’s own breathing.

Shaking, he lifted his head, then hit the back against the wall. He lifted his hands to pass them in his hair but stopped. There was dried blood on his hands. His sleeves were still humid.

When he took a deep breath, the odours hit him. Or his brain finally processed them. Blood and
Mako and *medicaments*. He scrubbed his hands on his pants until his fingers tingled. Tingling like the first touch of Mako. Then it burned. Not like the fire of Sephiroth. It burned like ice piercing the skin.

A door opening snapped the last straw of his control. There he was, in the Mako pod, waiting for a scientist to come. Hojo. The one he killed. Doc.

“Cloud.”

Zack's voice pierced his panic only to include him in the terror. Zack was kneeling beside him and standing before his Mako tank too. Cloud closed his eyes, not strong enough to see the rest of the movie his head wanted him to play. He started a litany for Hel, asking her to look over him, to keep him away from her realm for a bit longer.

Cloud didn't know how long he stayed squeezed in the corner doing that, but after a moment he started feeling the hand on his shin, caressing his leg above the fabric of his pants, and the other on his head. It was soothing. As Zack's words. Cloud didn't process them, but the tone calmed him.

“You're coming back, uh?” Zack murmured. He moved to be closer, having kept a distance until now, and slid his hands from Cloud's head to his back. “You're with me, babe?”

“Zack?”

Cloud blinked a few times so the images of the labs faded away, replaced by Zack's tired smile.

“You're coming back? My feet are starting to protest from crouching so long.” A small laugh escaped Zack, his eyes wrinkled by the movement. He peered at Cloud then ran his hand in blond locks, “Cloud?”

He startled and recalled Zack's question. His words didn't want to come for the moment, so he settled for nodding. His vision blurred a moment, but a deep breath resolved the problem. Warm hands helped him stand, Zack bent his knees just enough for him to grab Cloud low around his waist.

Cloud's heart jumped at the sudden movement and he clung to Zack's neck and waist like a drowning cat.

Zack opened the door of the staircase and manoeuvred them around, Cloud heard footsteps coming toward them and buried his head in the other's neck. His arms clutched around Zack, who made a breathy sound, but didn't complain.

“You found him,” Angeal said with a sigh of relief. “I'll let the others know. The SOLDIERs are tearing the Tower apart.”

Zack chuckled, walking to his apartment, “Yeah sorry. I kinda panicked and everyone offered to help. I wasn't going to turn them down.”

“Sorry,” Cloud mumbled, his heart sinking in his stomach. He didn't think of Zack when he hid, just himself.

Zack squeezed back, a hum in his chest, “Hey, can you open - thanks Geal!”

The door of the apartment was closed behind them and Zack paused in the hall.

He nuzzled against Cloud's neck, his hair tickling the sensitive skin there. Cloud huffed and took off just enough to rub his own cheeks where Zack had tickled him, making the brunette chuckle. Their chests away from each other, Cloud noticed the humidity. He glanced at Zack's hair that were
dripping on his neck and shoulders. Tired, Cloud fell back against Zack, not that bothered by the water.

“You're wet Zack.”

“Well, yeah,” Zack said, his smile clear on Cloud's throat. He walked again, edging toward his living room. “You ordered me to shower. I take five minutes to do it and something happens to you. Like, I'm never showering ever again if it means you stay safe.”

Zack sat on the couch and let his head fall on the headrest. Cloud didn't loosen his grip on him, comfortable using Zack as a seat and pillow. The crook of his neck was warm, even with his wet hair.

“That's disgusting Zack, you sweat too much. If you do that, I'm never coming near you ever again.”

Zack poked him on the side, “Then I'm showering only if you're with me.”

The apartment was silent, not music or TV on, which was kind of weird for Zack's apartment, but let Cloud relax. He melted on his human heater, still trembling and freezing.

“And on your missions?”

Zack took a deep breath, but didn't answer. Cloud finally noticed that part of the tremors weren't from him. Zack was shaking slightly too, and his breath was raspy. He wasn't panicking, but he had.

Cloud pulled back only to be stopped by Zack's death grip, “Zack?”

“Sorry, I'm fine.” Came the choked answer from his hair. “I was just worried.”

The sound made Cloud heart stutter with worry, he frowned.

“Zack,” Cloud said with a strength behind that prompted Zack to let him go when he pulled away. Cloud took in Zack's face, the knitted brow and the pout, a sign that Zack tried to restrain his tears. He rasped his knuckles against the brow and said more softly, “Zack.”

Zack scoffed before some tears escaped his eyes, he crushed them under his palm, then answered, looking at a point under Cloud's chin, “It's dumb but… the last time … you said to me to go shower and then you disappeared and today you…”

A shaking breath left him as he bumped his head against Cloud's shoulder a few times.

“It's dumb.”

There was nothing intelligent about triggers for panic attack, Cloud knew. Zack knew, too, he was sure, but when it affected you, all rational thoughts where threw to the four winds.

Cloud held onto Zack as he made them both fall on the side, causing a tired chuckle to come from the other. Both were calmer than a few minutes before, but Cloud still felt bad for the dark-haired, “Sorry for worrying you, Zack.”

Zack's hand traced the contour of his face, “Thank you for helping Seph. That's more important.”

Chapter End Notes
I dunno when I'll update next time, exams are starting to fell on my head
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flipping the page of the diary-slash-everything-else, Zack sang with the radio but kept an ear on the shower. There were pages of Cloud's thoughts and his to-do list for the days, then thrown here and there he wrote some crazy shit that stunned Zack. No soulmate? Genesis deserting? Him, killing Angeal? It was a terrible story Cloud related in his notepad and Zack's heart ached by the fact Cloud considered it the reality for a while.

The shower stopped as Zack was worrying his lips, his eyes looking at the letters without reading them. He looked up when Cloud came, drying his head with a distracted air.

“So, which dimension is better?”

Cloud paused in the middle of the way, glancing at the notepad in Zack's hand and scrunched his nose.

“I thought you'd wait for reading it.”

“Well, you said yes so I made the most of it while you were in the shower,” he answered with an easy smile.

“I hope the Turks will be happy with that,” Cloud mumbled.

Zack startled at the comment then winced. Was he an open book for the blond? Zack nodded to himself, sure he was. Cloud had known the reason behind his ask to read the notepad and still accepted, seeing some deep trust in him. Sheepish, Zack ran a hand through his hair, “I'll tell them only the necessary bits. Which is: you don't have a hidden agenda to kill all of Shinra.”

Cloud snorted and came closer, his wet hair dropping droplets on his shirt. He put his leg on the couch armrest and sat there, fixing Zack.

“I don't know how you'll react, but I made little signs in the margins. A cross for a false memory and a check mark for the good ones,” he glanced at Cloud to see him surprised in a good way and grinned. “I made them in pencil so you can erase it.”

“Thank you,” Cloud's voice was soft, charged with emotion.

It worried Zack a moment, he didn't realise before that Cloud was still so much affected by the two sets of memories he had. And with what Zack read, it was easy to be fooled, the texts on the other reality were full of details that missed in the text from memories of this reality. Which was absurd since the other Mako-whatever-induced reality was devoid of soulmates. With this info, Zack was certain he would have differed the false memory from the true in a heartbeat. Anyone should have. But Mako played with your mind like nothing else.

He smiled, his heart squeezing with sorrow for Cloud still, “Anytime sunshine.”

Cloud chuckled, then crawled on the couch to end up lying on Zack's legs. Zack shrugged, happy with their new position and returned to his task. He had half-an-hour to do part of that, and then see Sephiroth before starting his workday.
“You didn't answer.”

Cloud, his nose in Zack's thigh, mumbled, “About?”

“Which reality, uh, 'dimension' is the best?”

“This one.”

“Because of the soulmates, uh?” he couldn't help himself from asking.

“Because you're alive,” Cloud said, hitting Zack's heart painfully. “Any reality where you are alive is the best one.”

Zack inspired to chase the hurt that Cloud's answer had caused. It wasn't the blond fault, but the life – even if it was only a life he lived in his head – was terrible, knowing Cloud had been so sad and alone hurt Zack more than anything. But he managed to calm himself and then pouted, acting so Cloud wouldn't see his reaction, “But what if in one we're sworn enemies? It is still better?”

“Well, you asked me between this-” Cloud patted Zack thigh, “-reality and the other. I never experienced one where we're sworn enemies.”

Zack hummed, thoughtful, “I guess it would be a really strange dimension.”

A comfortable silence installed between them as Zack dutifully continued to sort the false from the true in Cloud's notepad, one hand in the blond spikes that he rubbed between some fingers or lightly pulled without thinking. He stopped a moment when his eyes caught a name he didn't think Cloud recalled before that.

“Aerith?” Zack lifted a brow, a small grin edging on his face. He returned his eyes to the notepads and started frowning at the wall of text. “Ancient? Connection with nature? Last of her kind etc... Cloud. Love of my life,” Zack gave him a saddened look, “That's fake.”

Before he could make a cross next to it, Cloud lifted himself up on his hands and stopped him with a seriousness that made Zack shudder, “I talked to her. Look the page enumerated there.”

Zack turned the page and read it all. Cloud expanded on the Ancients' history and their powers. He saw Aerith's round and tiny scrawl confirming she had some powers, confirming Cloud's in his assumption and scattering her text with comments about what Cloud was doing while she wrote, naming him with silly names that made Zack chuckle. In the end, he looked questioningly at Cloud.

“There's a lot of... dangerous information here,” Zack murmured. “If this is true. If Aer' is an...”

Zack grimaced, that was some weird shit. Cloud shrugged and flopped back onto his legs eliciting a slight huff of discomfort from Zack.

“She never told you?” Cloud asked, frowning.

“Hum,” Zack skimmed his own memories. He wasn't creating whole worlds in his head, but he sure could forget important information so long as something distracted him at the wrong time. “She was trying to tell me something, sure. But I'm rarely at the Tower and she has her soulmate recently, so we're not spending so much time together.”

He shrugged and glanced at Cloud, his head lying on Zack's stomach, yet supported by his own hand cradling his cheek. The boy looked lost in his thoughts, his eyes turned toward the notepads, but apparently not reading his own writing.
“I guess, if that's true, that's not something to say in passing.”

Cloud nodded, glancing up at Zack from under his bangs, but there was something behind his blank face that made Zack's skin itch. It was easy to understand what it was: suspicion. And not having the full trust from his soulmate was a blow. Never would he have thought Cloud would give so much importance to Aerith, a girl he met once. Once before disappearing, at least.

He fidgeted, uneasy with knowing Cloud wasn't going to trust him entirely if Aerith didn't tell him about her origin. A sigh escaped him, if the full 'ancient' story was real and not something Cloud made up unintentionally then Aerith rolled with it just for the fun. If Cloud went to see her.

Zack groaned and hit his head on the armrest behind him. Cloud doubted him, but he doubted the little blond too. A bit too much to his liking. If he couldn't trust the things written in the notepad Cloud put to remember his days, then he couldn't trust anything. He closed the notepad holding Cloud's memories, thoughts and day to day tasks, then slid it under Cloud's shirt.

“Let's visit Seph. I want to see him before work if that's okay with you.” Zack paused. “Also, we'll steal their breakfast.”

“M'okay.”

Though Cloud didn't move an inch after his answer, Zack stretched his arms, then put his hands under Cloud's arm and pulled him, caught the notepad, stood and flung the confused blond on his shoulder. He slid the notepad under the pant waist, then pinched the ass under his nose. Cloud yelped his name, then hit him hard on the ass.

“Ow, that's hurt. Watch your strength next time, babe,” Zack joked.

Cloud huffed, he was going to protest to be held like that, but Zack jogged to the door, shaking him the more possible.

“Zack,” Cloud whined. He did sound sick, “Don't shake me like that. Put me down.”

He put him down and held his gaze to be sure the blond was okay. Any whine made his protective side jump into action it seemed. He ruffled Cloud's head with one hand, making the blond scowl.

“Sorry, buddy.”

“It's nothing,” Cloud answered, lowering his gaze.

Zack smiled to himself at the memory of a young trooper doing the exact same thing whenever he apologised to Cloud or was honest about his feelings for him like Cloud wasn't familiar with those simple things. He draped an arm around the blond's shoulder and guided him down the hall, toward the trio's apartment.

He opened the trio's apartment door wide and shouted, “We're here! Feed us!”

A chuckled left Cloud at his boisterous call. He leaned against Zack like he was a wall. A comfy wall, little tiny trooper Cloud had said one day.

What Zack didn't expect was the redhead meeting them halfway and engulfing Cloud in a hug that froze the blond on the spot. It was asking for disaster, Zack thought, his heart speeding up at the uncomfortable expression on Cloud. But before he could recall Genesis that Cloud was more than skittish, the blond put his chin on the redhead's shoulder with a sigh. He wasn't reciprocating the hug, but he leaned in, closing his eyes and visibly trusting Genesis. Zack was struck dumb.
Genesis drew away and cradled Cloud's cheeks, “Thank you, dear. Sephiroth never asks for help or warn us of those things. At least with you and Zack, there's always someone to watch over him when we can’t.”

Cloud lowered his head, his eyes cast on his bare feet, “It's Bo who told me.”

“And you could have turned on your heels and left Sephiroth on his own,” Genesis said in a soft and proud voice.

The mention of Bo made Zack hiss. He had received a message from the man telling him he sent Cloud search Sephiroth in the labs and it could upset him. Upset him! What a euphemism. Zack was going to put a little sense into Bo's head, he seemed to have lost every bit with his leg.

Genesis nudged both of them to the kitchen where Sephiroth was almost sleeping on his breakfast and Angeal fretted over him.

“Hello you two, come sit down. Do you want coffee? Tea?” he said, finding a new purpose on fretting over them.

Zack chuckled and pulled a chair for Cloud then pushed him to sit down as the blond stared at Angeal like a second head just sprouted from his head, “That his normal state when he's worried about someone but can't do anything about it.”

“He'll calm down when Seph will wake up and tell him to,” Genesis added, smirking at the gruff sound Sephiroth made.

“I called Bo after I called Zack yesterday,” Angeal continued, putting cereals, then three kinds of juice on the table. “I told him that what he did, even if it helped Sephiroth, wasn't going to happen ever again. You don’t have to follow his words, he isn't your superior officer. Okay, Cloud?”

The face Cloud made was awesome, Zack couldn't stop his laughter. But there was the worry gnawing at him for days now that eased at Angeal's demeanour today. He wasn't purposefully hateful toward Cloud.

“I'm going anyway,” Cloud mumbled.

At that all eyes turned to him, he hunched over himself and Zack put a hand between his shoulder blade to catch his attention, “You're not forced, buddy. Often the three of us are enough to go search Seph. The labs even put cameras to see when Geal and Gen arrive so they don't have to deal with the two harpies right here.”

Zack imitated Cloud's suspicious expression when Genesis made a sad sound, his expression wrinkled in distress.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Genesis answered with faux-honesty.

“I will go down a lot more,” Sephiroth answered.

“What? Why?” Zack exclaimed, his stomach squeezing in worry. “Didn't you manage to reduce the time to your 'maximum' because you're the General and all that?”

“Because more of my blood is necessary. And Hojo will use the time to do more than draw blood.” The answer came flatly.
“But—” Zack glanced at Genesis and Angeal – standing in the middle of the kitchen with his pot of coffee – who didn't object to it. They were the most adamant about keeping Sephiroth away from the labs, never telling Zack all of what happened down there but still putting a deep fear in him. “Why?”

Angeal took a deep breath, put down the pot and met Zack's eyes, “I'm degrading too.”

Zack blinked, not understanding the link, though the man continued.

“The actual serum is made with Sephiroth's blood, perfect SOLDIERs' blood. Hojo couldn't synthesis something artificial, by his own words. He needs someone to give him blood. He just wants Sephiroth down there and with the regs, it's the only way he knows.”

“Or so it's what he told us,” Genesis scowled. “He's not above lying. Far from it.”

All the information slowly clicked together, he knew Sephiroth was still under Hojo's hold but thought the medication for degradation was more complex than some blood. Which means—... Zack shook his head.

“Well, I'm healthy too. Can't I give my blood rather than Sephiroth? So Hojo won't use the time to do other things?”

Cloud jumped to his feet in a blink, then loomed over Zack as he shouted, “No!”

Startled, the ravenette's heart skipped a beat. He looked up at Cloud's face twisted into horror.

“Cloud, they're my friends. If I can help—”

“No!”

The blond stamped around, opening and closing his mouth, certainly trying to find his words, yet Genesis was faster.

“Dear, wouldn't you help Flore by doing the same?”

Cloud froze, his eyes staring in horror at Genesis now. Zack was torn, he saw how it affected Cloud, yet Angeal was his ex-mentor and his friend. He had been an important part of his life since Zack arrived at Shinra. He couldn't just let Angeal die.

“I—... there. Why? She already has a shot of the... serum?” Cloud lifted a hand to his forehead and shifted his stance. He glanced at Sephiroth. “From your blood?”

“Don't listen to them,” Sephiroth said with a sigh. “There's nothing that would stop Hojo from requesting me. Some SOLDIERs start getting degradation too, others are tested to be donors. Hojo wouldn't have given my blood to Flore, it's someone else.”

“I forgot about those tests,” Genesis mumbled. Zack ignored him to observe Cloud, the boy didn't move an inch for a long time now. “You should have a convocation soon, Zack.”

Relief overcoming him, he looked away from Cloud, “So you don't need to go down more!”

“I will.” Zack huffed at Sephiroth's answer. “My blood is still better, I will give it for Angeal.”

There was no place for argumentation in Sephiroth's tone, though Angeal still did it. People though Genesis was the worst during arguments, that he loved to contradict people, but Angeal beat him when the subject mattered to him.
“If we can avoid you going there more, I will take any serum,” Angeal stated.

“No you won't,” Sephiroth huffed. “It's mine or nothing.”

“Nothing, really? You tell me you prefer me dead, only because I care about your wellbeing?”

Genesis took a deep breath and sighed, “There, it's been a while you two didn't fight.”

The both of them addressed him, “Shut up, Genesis.”

The man huffed, crossing his arms and sliding back in his chair like a sulking teenager, “Shut up yourself. It's clear Hojo's claws won't let go of Sephiroth, and our idiot doesn't even want to. Take his serum and get well, then we'll figure something out.”

“Like we did for two years?”

The voices were rising, and from the corner of his eyes, Zack saw Cloud shift uncomfortably, his eyes roaming the place. Maybe staying there to moderate the trio wasn't a so good idea. Also, Zack's moderation never worked, he was caught in the fight and no whining that he had no link to the first problem saved him. When the three fought, retreating was the best idea, then find each one alone and try to dissect the problem and the false from the true that happened during the fight. But Zack loved puzzles and he loved the trio, so he wasn't complaining too much about those rare fights.

With the three focused on each other, Zack jumped on his feet and put his hands on Cloud's back to manoeuvre him away from the kitchen, he murmured the answer at Cloud's silent question when he turned his head around to look at him, “Tactical retreat. We'll be starting our work soon anyway.”

“We didn't eat,” Cloud noted as they opened the door.

“We'll pass by the mess to grab something.” Zack closed the door behind him as shout was heard. He lifted a brow at a loud 'bang' then glanced at Cloud. He had a tiny idea scratching at the back of his head and needed an answer, if possible, “Do you think she can heal degradation?”

Zack didn't need to specify who 'she' was, Cloud's eyes light up and a quick smile crossed his expression, “I asked her. She's trying, but that's not sure.”

Chapter End Notes

happy holidays peeps! I really didn't expect to take one month and more to update. But that's true I had gifts fics planned I needed to edit too -- but it's here for Noël! (yeah fuck the 'christmissqrf' I hate this word bc I took years to know how to write it)
With Zack's absence for a new mission, Cloud tried to find some time with Genesis alone again, feeling the need to be with someone. Though, the man seemed always occupied at this time. This morning, Cloud woke up before any alarm, looking at the clock, he was persuaded Genesis wouldn't be doing anything at this time.

But he would be in his apartment, with Sephiroth. And Angeal.

He stood in front of their door, pressure building against his sternum.

“"Yes, I need to eat now, Genesis. Don't whine, nothing forces you to wake up with me, go back to bed.""

Sephiroth's voice scared Cloud to death and made him dash out of the corridor, toward the lift. He chose to go the farther possible and headed for the cafeteria silent at this hour. Only four SOLDIERs were here, either awake so soon to go on a mission or just returning from one. Cloud didn't stop by their table to ask, he still couldn't talk with the deep pressure against his chest, which pushed him to massage his sternum in hope to calm the pain. The idea that the top hiding his soulmate was the cause crossed his mind, but he quickly disregarded it. Cloud wore the thing for too long, it even lost its elasticity.

The bright light of the cafeteria ended being too much for him, so he moved place, searching somewhere where he could calm down. Without thinking consciously about it, his feet dragged him to Genesis' office, cast in the dark and silent. Technically, Cloud shouldn't have the right to be there, but Genesis had given him another card to get inside. Cloud fell on the couch and curled up there, toying with his phone, incapable to focus on something, not even sending a short text to Zack.

When Cloud heard someone approach in the hall, he sighed but didn't move an inch. If Genesis talked to him directly, maybe he'd focus a bit rather than have his brain stay a blank slate when thoughts trudged but weren't defined enough for Cloud to understand on what his brain was stumbling against.

The door opened in a burst, two people stumbling inside, one laughter stifled by a kiss.

“"Gen-""

Cloud's heart skipped a beat at Sephiroth's husked tone. He glanced up just as the men's shuffled backwards, draped around each other in an intimate embrace.

“"Hum, I want you."

“I'm only leaving for the day- ah!"

Before he could tell them of his presence, Genesis pulled Sephiroth and they fell on the couch. On him. They all startled, Cloud yelping in pain at the elbow hitting him in the stomach and the head encountering his forehead.

“"Wha-? Cloud?"
The men’s crushing on him stood up quickly, gazing back down at Cloud who rubbed his head, huffing in pain. He jerked when he felt a hand brush his forehead.

“Forgive us, Cloud,” Sephiroth said, standing awkwardly behind Genesis, a flush persisting on his features. He cleared his throat but didn’t add anything else.

“Yeah, none of us expected someone to be there,” Genesis added, mirth in his voice.

“Uh, sorry. Yeah.” Cloud redressed himself and stood up, ending up in front of Genesis, really close. He flushed, his eyes falling on his feet not to look at what would be in front of his eyes if he stood straight, which were Genesis’ lips. “I’m – sorry – uh, leaving.”

“Well, you could stay,” Genesis purred just as Cloud sidestepped around him, making Cloud stumbled and stutter. Sephiroth caught him by the arm, calling Genesis’ name sternly while the redhead chuckled, “I’m sorry I couldn’t resist.”

Sephiroth let go of Cloud’s arm, giving Cloud the possibility to escape from the awkward situation in a rush. When he was in the hall, he immediately heard Genesis laugh being cut and then a gasp escape him. The image of Genesis, lips parted and eyes half-lidded made the blond’s cheeks heat up.

[I’m busy for the day so don’t come, Angeal was sent with a group of Third Class on a four days mission and Sephiroth is at Kalm for the day]

Cloud frowned at the message from Genesis. Zack had left three days ago for a week-long mission and Cloud felt out of place in Zack’s apartment, without him. He didn’t eat, didn’t sleep and wouldn’t have said no for a bit of company.

“Why the sour mood?” Dirk asked.

The man leaned against the wall, the food display between them though they were at the far end to let people take their meal. Cloud glanced around.

“Wait, don’t answer,” Dirk continued. “You’re always in a sour mood.”

“Not true,” Cloud huffed.

Maybe. If he was honest. But he had reasons. Today they were accumulating. One, his top hiding his soulmark in case his upper clothes were ripped, fitted badly, constricting him too much, itched even, so he decided to go without it and clean it. Except he felt vulnerable without the light pressure against his ribcage he was habituated to. And then Zack was absent. He had been for three days now, Cloud should just get over it, the time moved toward the day Zack would return.

Dirk made a disbelieving face and straightened when he saw another worker leave the kitchen, looking around, noticing that only one of the people here was making sure the display was full. The man shouted at Dirk to go back to work and help his colleague.

“There’s nothing to do except standing there like an idiot, everything is in order,” Dirk mumbled. Though his superior frowned and Dirk looked away, whistling as he returned next to his colleague.

Cloud shook his head at the guy, he was more prickly than Genesis and didn't like being ordered around. He glanced at his PHS, the vibration of a new message making his heart jump. Yet it was only a convocation to go see the Turks. Another vibration and the name noted on the phone made
him grin, he leaned over his PHS, shielding it from prying eyes. Even if he was back against a wall and nobody was around him.

[except if you just want to sleep, come then dear. Also, care to eat with me tonight? I'll prepare something, now that my hand work]

[but it still hurt? The fact it works is good, but there's no need to push yourself]

[nonsense! Are you coming, yes or no?]

The answer was easy, yet Cloud's fingers were suddenly maladroit as they typed.

[yes]

A last message to acknowledge his answer came. It was such a small thing, and yet he felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. His heart was beating fast, colouring his cheeks with red. He ducked his head low so no one would remark his state, then left the mess altogether, feeling like everyone had their eyes on him, that they knew he wasn't blushing and smiling because of Zack.

The Turk's floor had not been a place he could go before, except when Tseng and Reno 'interviewed' him. The hallways were more crowded with people coming and going in a double flow. Cloud grazed the wall so he wasn't blocking the balanced movement of those Turks. One – a girl with curly auburn hair and playful eyes – came to him, navigating easily between her colleague.

“Thanks for coming, follow me,” she said, relieving Cloud who couldn't pinpoint where he should go.

Her name escaped him a moment before he remembered seeing her at his first 'mission'. It was the closest word he could use, but it still felt false. The Turks had tested him at the time.

Cissnei opened a door – most of them were closed – and ushered Cloud inside the dimly lit room. There a group of three composed of Reno, Rude and Tseng were around a table that showed a few photographs. On two screens behind them were recording of fights that were slowed down.

“Hello, Cloud,” Tseng saluted him as the two others waved and nodded.

Cloud answered the politeness, then came to the table, as Tseng pushed two photographies toward him. Cissnei posted herself on the end of the table, arms crossed, though a coffee mug in her hand that she’d taken from the piece of furniture supporting the screens and one computer.

“It's been exactly four months the Numbers started wearing those collars,” Tseng said, pointing one photo. “You know what it is?”

“Mjölnir, though it's particular from my region. A symbol of protection,” Cloud said, feeling like he was repeating himself.

Tseng nodded, “Bo told us the same. But there's no different meaning to it?”

“No?” Cloud frowned. “I never saw one on a Watcher anyway. We were all wearing the same. Divergences weren't accepted.”

Tseng hummed and it was Rude who put another photography in front of Cloud. The Watcher was in their full outfit, though some modifications were visible. Most Watchers were without materias except if toward the top, this one had two materia slot. Visible. Also, if the mask was put, the head was uncovered, letting the long dark and frizzly hair put in a bun unprotected.
“Do you know this one?”

“Shajar, she's easy to recognise with the slot materia.” he paused, observing the cropped SOLDIER and his sword. Rude and Tseng exchanged a look from their corner, “Also, either crop the whole sword or not at all. Slashy-slash is easy to recognise too.”

Cissnei and Reno snickered at the name, pushing Cloud to think they had a part in naming Zack's sword like that. Cloud's mind focused on the photography, was it recent? If so, he should call Zack, or send him a text the moment he could leave the Turks behind.

“Zack made a report for the day to the signal corp.” Tseng moved another piece with two Watchers, Mjölnir on them. “He's the one that signalled us it's not only the Numbers now, some lower-ranking are putting this pendant too. Only a few, but it is interesting.”

Cloud shook his head, “I still don't know why they wear them. None of them are northerners, except maybe the new fourth, I don't know them.”

“From the recorded fights from those last two months, we assumed the Number four was changed. Either replaced because of degradation or killed by internal conflicts,” Cissnei announced.

“We should change their name, they should be Number five, the lowest on the podium,” Reno interjected.

“This isn't a podium. It's only pseudonyms to differentiate them from the crowd,” Rude said.

Reno only rolled his eyes, “I know, knucklehead. Don't take me for an idiot, yo! It was a funny comment.”

“No,” Rude stated.

Tseng took the stack of photographs and knocked them a few times on the table to align them, though the sound stopped Rude and Reno's banter.

“That's all for the Watchers, though we need you to pick a uniform.”

Tseng looked expectantly at Cloud who simply blinked, his mind slowly catching up on the ask.

“A uniform?”

“You fall out of the SOLDIER-Turk categories, so new uniforms!” Reno exclaimed as a devilish grin took its place on his face. “I have a few models here for you!”

Cloud frowned, that smelled bad for his reputation if he let Reno choose the uniforms for them. Slashy-slash was fun, it was simply a silly name on a good sword, but a stupid uniform was seen in a matter of seconds. Cloud couldn't let Reno dress them, it would be far worse than letting Aerith dress them.

“SOLDIER First class' black pants and Second Class top,” Cloud said in a heartbeat. “It's okay? Dark colours are good to be discreet and it's close to standard uniforms. A new one could make waves in the population, especially if our place isn't known publicly.”

Tseng lifted a brow, glanced at Reno like he silently told him his prank was already dead and nodded at the suggestion, “It's economic and well thought.” Tseng nodded again. “This is set then.”

Cloud sighed in relief under Reno's grumble.
Chapter End Notes

next chap 20 or 21 jan
Free from the Turks, Cloud went to his other duties, like teaching some SOLDIERs about things they already knew from experience or by words. His contract was, in fact, a masquerade to give Turks some needed SOLDIERs' muscles in their rank, without taking a SOLDIER from Lazard with the President authorization. Somehow, Cloud became certain that this wall between the Turks and SOLDIERs the President put was deliberate. The two Departments were dangerous alone, if they worked smoothly together, things could get out of control. Divide and rule. Which meant the President was afraid of his own creations.

Cloud grinned to himself, being afraid of your own people made you a bad leader. Cloud never doubted Shinra was bad, at least after he started to enrich and lost his incredible will to achieve success. The moment he became rich was the first step to the loss of possible advancement.

Again it was his 'students' that recalled him the hour had ended. They seemed happy to have a class with him, one even said it was less boring and stiff than the first classes Third Class SOLDIERs went on. Here they could ask questions without the formality, sometimes had stories of Cloud's own fights with Watchers and the life with them.

After that, he went down to the slums. Though the church was empty from Aerith, Cloud walked aimlessly through the streets. He was tempted to call the Turk trailing after him and ask if there was a place interesting where he could go but didn't act on it.

A bar front window caught his attention as he wandered around. He stopped dead on in tracks in front of Seventh Heaven and stared a moment before he found enough courage to enter.

"Welcome!" the bartender said by habit, her hands occupied with glasses to dry.

Cloud froze at the voice, staring in disbelief at the known face. Tifa stopped her own mechanical work and looked up when she had no answer from her welcome, then she stared back. He had forgotten Aerith mentioned Tifa. At least now he wasn't going to forget again.

"Cloud! Hello, sunshine!"

He glanced a bit to the right of the bar, where Aerith was seated on a stool, a beaming smile on her face.

"Get the fuck out of the entry, punk!"

Cloud startled at Barret's voice, and moved to the side by instinct, not wanting to be pushed around by the man. He stared at Barret passing next to him, who frowned as he met Cloud's gaze.

Barret scowled and maybe tried to murmur to himself, but Cloud heard it loud and clear, "SOLDIER scum."

"Nah, he's good, Barret," Aerith pipped up while patting the stool next to her, "Come, Cloud. Tifa, give him something that works on SOLDIER, he seems to have seen a ghost." She winked at him.

"My treat."

Stunned, Cloud went to Aerith and sat down. He glanced at her behind her bangs and asked, "So,
how many of the people I cited last time are, uh, affiliated with Seventh Heaven?"

“Almost everyone!” Aerith put her cheek in her hand, her eyes bright with amusement. “Except for
Yuffie who left, and we never met the Cat thingy, the big kitty Red XII,” Cloud corrected with
Nanaki's real name, she nodded and finished, “Cid and this Vincent. Maybe they don't exist in this
dimension.”

Cloud made a face, emitting a sound low in his throat. All of them were pretty important for
AVALANCHE in the second dimension – as Aerith decided to call it – and for him. Their absence
worried him.

Tifa put a drink in front of him and he played with the glass without looking at her.

“I thought you were dead, that's what your mother told me,” Tifa said. “Sometimes she would forget
it, but I saw Shinra's letter.”

“Yeah,” Cloud mumbled. “I was kind of out of this world for a bit. Dead is a word that works.”

Tifa made a dumbfounded sound, then nobody talked for a while, clearly distrustful of him. Cloud
was content nursing his drink that he didn't even taste. He only stared at it so he wouldn't see faces
from people that he knew.

“So...” Aerith sing-song voice startled Cloud. She smiled crookedly at him, “Want to met my
soulmate?”

He gave her a tired smile, impressed by her energy and curious about the person that got lucky with
Aerith. Her delighted smile warmed him up. He followed her every movement when she stood and
cleared her throat.

“The love of my life, a superb creature created by the gods, my better half with arms of steel,” Cloud
chuckled at her antics and followed her movement when she lifted her arms to present her soulmate,
“Tifa Lockhart!”

It took a second for Cloud's mind to process the information as he stared at a bet red Tifa who smiled
shyly at Aerith.

“Please stop presenting me like that,” she said only for her nose to be booped by Aerith.

“No way, everyone needs to know how awesome you are.”

“Ooooh,” Cloud managed to say, glancing between the two. “Who do I have to have the Big
Brother Talk with?”

Aerith giggled and sauntered to him, “You're sweet too. But I don't think you need to.”

Cloud took a sip of his drink, grimacing at the awful taste and smiled at her, “I know. You're good
for each other.”

While they chatted, Tifa returned to her cleaning, mumbling in her hair. It was too low for a human
to hear, but not an enhanced guy.

“I can't believe Cloud Strife is here, friend with my Aerith. What else?”

There was a lot of things that came to Cloud's mind that could surprise Tifa. Though it would only
make all of AVALANCHE more suspicious. The atmosphere was already tense. Cloud supposed hs
Mako eyes was the reason. Seventh Heaven sheltered AVALANCHE's members and none trusted SOLDIER. Yet Cloud wasn't worried. Aerith was involved with them. If she wanted she would tell them what they needed to know about him.

As he drank the awful mixture in his glass – throwing something made his skin crawl, even if alcohol was poison – Aerith talked with Tifa and Barret. At least, when the man wasn't trying to pierce a hole in the back of Cloud's head. The flower girl sighed in mock-distress when Tifa announced she needed to return to her job as clients started to arrive. With a frown, Aerith came back to Cloud's side. She took things in her basket at Cloud's feet, then leaned toward him. He mimicked her without thinking, leaning into her space. She handed him three little bottles of clear water.

"Healing water," she said. "I hope. I couldn't make more, it's way harder than I thought. I don't even know if it'll work, but-" she waved her hand around, her head almost on Cloud's shoulder.

"-it's a start," he ended for her.

"Aw," she beamed, smile bright

Cloud smiled and looked down at the precious bottles. They were old, scratched and the metallic cap had stained the glass,

"Thank you."

Aerith shook her head, "No. Thank you. You gave me a great gift for the information on the ways to use my power. I wish I'll find all the places and the informations it hold you talked me about. But someday it'll happen, isn't it?"

Cloud smiled at her joyful face, "I thought using the other dimension as a blueprint for events that could happen here wasn't recommended? That everything will change from the other dimension."

"Yeah but I talk about places and knowledge old as fuck!" Aerith shouted making Cloud chuckle,

"Then I'll show you one day."

It's was Aerith turn to chuckle, "Zack promised to show me the sky. Tifa said she would take me to Nibelheim to met her father and now you... you know what? It smells like road trip for me!" she exclaimed, balancing on her stool while laughing,

A sharp cry of pain she made cut her laugh. She hunched over herself, her hands reaching for her head.

Cloud wasn't better. His whole body tensed as a strong tug on his mind filled his vision with white and made his members feel far away. He blinked a few times, chasing the mist in his eyes and stared straight ahead, his heart racing in his chest. The cry for help that had reached him still echoed in his mind and made the Mako inside him burn.

"Aer?" Tifa called, abandoning her client to hold Aerith's forearm, peering worriedly at her, "Are you okay?"

She waved her off, holding a hand to her forehead, or face, Cloud's couldn't see right, "Just a random pain from... random pain."

There was still the pull of the Lifestream, slowly easing down. It had been a little one. A little one before the stronger Cloud learnt. Now panic flared in him. He didn't know how to deal with a mako pull while in the slums. If it happened there, he wasn't going to go home for a few days, that's for
“What time is it?” he lifted his head blinking again, then found the clock and shook his head, incapable of reading it. He stood from the stool staggering a bit and attracting attention. “I should go.”

“Cloud, wait.” Aerith caught his arm and rather than hold him there like Cloud dreaded, she put the three bottles he’d forgotten in his pockets. “There, return home and stay safe.”

He nodded with curt moves, his vision already returning to normal. Did he tell her what a pull from the Lifestream did to him? And how did she know? If she knew... maybe she’d only reacted to his awful head. Cloud sighed, the walk toward to the Tower was enough for him to clear his mind a bit. The pull had receded, but not his swimming vision, though it didn't blur anymore. He wanted to hit himself, it was a false alarm, and the drink he had only helped him think it was a full pull, not just a tug.

At least he wasn't late to Genesis' apartment even after stopping somewhere else first.

“Hello, dear. You look down, what's the problem?”

Cloud smiled at the first sentence Genesis said as he opened the door to him. The man ushered him inside were a wonderful smell floated in, talking about a warm drink that waited for him. Cloud let Genesis lead him, holding the bottles close to his chest.

“What are they?” Genesis asked, handing him a cup.

Cloud didn't take it, all his body was against letting go of the bottles. He glanced at them terrified to see them leaking their precious liquid. Genesis stood still handing him the drink for a few seconds. When Cloud didn't move, he put it on the nearest furniture in silence except for a sigh.

“What are they?”

“I- maybe, it's,” Cloud stumbled on his words, anxiety rising so fast it cloaked his throat. “It's not sure, me and they – my friend – we're not certain- if it doesn't work, then nothing will happen. Maybe... maybe it's a temporary solution or... or-”

“Cloud,” Genesis cut, his sharp tone made the blond jump. Though, the gentle hand on his face stunned Cloud into immobilism. “Just tell me the short version.”

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and said, “It's maybe a cure for degradation. But nothing is sure.”

When he opened back his eyes, Genesis' expression was slack with shock. He cleared his throat but no words came from him before a few seconds ticked by.

“So, the worst that could happen is: it doesn't work, no ill-effects?” Genesis waited for Cloud's nod to continue. “The medium possibility is: it works, but it's temporary.” Cloud nodded, relieved that Genesis was doing all the talking. “And the best solution...”

“You're cured of degradation,” Cloud said in a barely audible voice.

Silence filled the entryway of the kitchen where Cloud stood, immobile as a furniture. He didn't dare breath or lift his head, his eyes set on the neutral hue of the linoleum. Grey with tiny white bits. He startled when Genesis extended a hand to lift his chin, forcing Cloud to look at him. His eyes still skimmed to the side in an attempt to avoid the contact.
“Are you playing with me? Is this poisoned? What tell me I can believe in you and what you said?”

Cloud liked his lips, what could he say to convince the man? If he was Genesis, he wouldn't trust one word coming from his mouth about degradation.

“Nothing,” Cloud said. He took one bottle away from him and stared at it. “Nothing. But Ae-... they are the best healer you could imagine.”

“And where did you find this healer?” Genesis asked, his words cutting. Cloud lowered his head again, “This is too beautiful to be true. Some water, or a bottle of liquid, is capable of healing me? Ah!”

Genesis swirled around and started pacing in the room. He came back to Cloud, a bit too close, making the blond back away in a reflex. “Nothing,” Genesis said in a strange tone that Cloud didn't identify. “A temporary medication without Sephiroth's blood or...”

A hand extended toward the bottle Cloud wasn't cradling against his chest. He let it go and glanced up at Genesis whose expression was cold, his lips pinched and his brows knitted together. The redhead stared at the clear liquid a moment while he made it swirl in its container. He hummed thoughtfully. Cloud observed him without saying a word, his mind was blank. Though another tug from the Lifestream made him startle. He waited expectantly to see if it would become stronger and sighed, relaxing, when it disappeared. Genesis opened the bottle without prior sings and chugged it down in one long gulp. He put the bottle down and eyed Cloud, who looked back at him, waiting for something to happen.

“Hum,” Genesis emitted with a dissatisfied, but not heartbroken pout. “It's not working then. Well, we can eat, it's ready-”

Genesis hunched over, a terrible pained sound escaping him as he hugged his stomach. Cloud froze in horror. He squeezed without thinking the bottle against him and elicited a screech from the glass. He put it down as Genesis hissed between his teeth, his eyes closed and his features twisted in pain. “Gen-?”

Before Cloud could finish to talk Genesis had heaved, a dark matter gliding on his chin as he put his hand to it, surprise clear on his visage. Genesis heaved again, more liquid coming from his mouth. He put his hand to it, then dragged himself to the sink to let it all go, holding himself on the edge while Cloud hovered around, lost on what to do to help. His heart raced, his hands reached for Genesis before he retracted them, sure the man would swat them away.

It lasted long minutes where Genesis threw up this heavy, almost goo-like matter. At least it had no smell. The sight was already upsetting. “This is disgusting,” Genesis murmured, voice rough.

Cloud lifted a hand to the man's back, but retreated it before that, eyeing the redhead with worry. A thin film of sweat on painted Genesis' face. Trembling, Genesis straightened and made the water flow to drown the dark matter in the pipes. He stared at the sink a long moment in silence, his eyes focused on the water, but his mind lost somewhere else. Sometimes little spasm made him grimace, but it was nothing from the precedents minutes. “My shoulder...” Genesis whispered as he glanced at Cloud. “It hurt less.”
Cloud nodded, shifted his stance, but didn't approach the man staring at him. Genesis moved his strong hand to his wounded shoulder, brushing it, and frowned.

“The wound isn't closed, though.”

Only their heavy breathing was heard again until Genesis swirled around and stormed off the kitchen. During the time Cloud chose to follow and found the bravery to do so, Genesis had stripped his top on the bathroom. He had retired part of his dressing on his shoulder and had his back against a wall like he had trouble standing.

“The materia isn't working,” Genesis said blankly.

Cloud could only stare in horror at the wound. It started above the clavicle. The bone was apparent and tainted black, then the lesion divided to cut across the pectoral muscle and the deltoid. All that with the chair open and a darkened hue. And Cloud saw only the front of it. He didn't know if it had been this profound and long at first, or if it changed, deepened like it had for Lydia. His breath hitched at the sudden thought of her. He had been successful at ignoring her death for a long time now.

“It's better, do you see?”

The hopeful sound of Genesis' voice made Cloud's stomach twist. The redhead lifted his head and grimaced when he crossed Cloud's eyes.

“You can't know, you never saw it before. But I swear it is.” He lowered his gaze to the wound. “There's less blackened chair and skin. I'm not hurting as much though... well I have an open wound.”

Cloud nodded again even if his mind did not work fully. It alternated between a blank sound and a series of all finished thoughts or memories of degrading Watchers.

“You know how to do stitches?” Genesis asked, snapping Cloud out of his thoughts. The man waved at the sink, and continued before Cloud could answer, “There are emergency supplies under the sink.”

Cloud moved and found a box labelled with medical supplies, “But-”

“Materia can't heal long-lasting illness, or wounds. It never worked on degradation. But if you stitch it back first, maybe.”

“But-”

“Or it's the mako in me. I feel it moving. So maybe it a cura could work now,” Genesis talked a mile an hour. “The mako, moving! It's only when I had shots that I felt it like that. What was in this bottle exactly?”

Cloud hummed and emitted sounds when needed. Genesis’ nerve made him talk enough for the both of them, not stopping for Cloud to answer or else. The blond used it to calm down a bit. He focused on putting the thin string on the needle, the meticulous act helping him relax. He had done it a lot of time at Doc's lab, he remembered. When a wound wasn't healing with a full curaga, the first step was to clean and stitch it might it be a sign of degradation. Though exhaustion of the body or the mana often contraried the use of materia. Right then, stitching seemed a good idea.

Genesis sat down on the ground, his back still to the wall and braced himself. It was surely to keep himself from hunching over and hiding the wound from Cloud who crouched down with slow
moves, full of hesitation.

“I- I do it? Really?”

The determination that painted Genesis' features answered him. With a long exhale to calm himself, he pierced the flesh near the disgusting wound. Genesis hissed and instinctively bend over himself to hide his wound from Cloud. The younger reacted by changing the needle from hand. He put his right arm across Genesis' chest, his hand on the wall near the redhead's cheek, to hold him in place.

Unconsciously, Cloud started humming the same way he did for Lydia. It was the oldest nibel song whose lyrics meanings were half-forgotten. He wasn't delusional by thinking it helped Genesis, but it did help him. Instead of focusing on Genesis pained moans and his expressions, the stitches and song transported him to his home back at Nibelheim. He'd spent long winter nights working with his mother on fixing clothes and sheets.

It stopped abruptly when the bathroom door was thrown off his hinge. A gasped 'Genesis' said by no other than Sephiroth echoed through the little room. The man stared at them, dumbfounded and frozen on the spot. Cloud still held Genesis down as he suffered. Though he stood up quickly, disregarding the needle that ended dangling from the stitches already done. He met Sephiroth's narrowed cat-like eyes by accident. Cloud's heart fell in his feet, a ball stopping his throat from breathing or forming words. There was a fury in those eyes directed at him.

Sephiroth, mute, made one step and Cloud backed away by instinct, nearly falling in the tub. Genesis hand on his forearm keep him upward.

“Ca-calm down,” Genesis rasped. “Both of you.”

Cloud blinked, glancing down at the redhead. A mix of blood already drying at certain places and the dark hue of degradation that tainted everything like ink covered the man's chest and his shoulder. He looked awful, pale and weak. His hand trembled around Cloud's forearm.

“Finish those stitches, Cloud,” Genesis ordered.

It was logical, the best thing to do, but Cloud found himself incapable of helping Genesis. He crouched down and fumbled with the needle but was incapable of taking it between his shaking fingers. His breath hitched when Sephiroth made another step, and then a tug on his mind send him spiralling into a panic attack. Sephiroth made the last steps, prompting Cloud to back away in a corner far from him. He put his legs to his chest then hugged himself. Cloud hide his head between his knees as his breathing became uneven.

He cradled his head in his arms. In the back of his mind echoed the call of the Lifestream. There was no apparent reason for Cloud to fell it. He wasn't a Cetra and no other SOLDIER nor enhanced Watcher seemed to have been subjected to pulls.

“Cloud?”

He startled at Sephiroth's call and his closeness. The man's feet were closer than arm's length. Lifting his head, Cloud noticed Genesis was absent and Sephiroth had quitted his weird coat for a warm long sleeved shirt, his hairs attached in a loose ponytail. The man kneeled in front of him with careful movements, then extended a hand that made Cloud's heart jump. He made a panicked whine and Sephiroth slowed down, but still took one of his hand. Cloud stared at him with wide eyes and shallow breathing, waiting for the problems to drop. Yet Sephiroth only took Cloud's hand gently and used a warm washcloth to wipe away the blood and black grim.
“I gave a potion to Genesis, he's sleeping,” Sephiroth said. “His shoulder is clearly better. Years ago he had it stitched, but degradation was too advanced and eat the flesh. Hojo's serum stopped.”

“St-stitches need to be d-done before the... the flesh darkens,” Cloud managed to get out.

Sephiroth nodded as he cleaned up Cloud's hand who stared at their touching skins with a surprising amount of acceptance. He appreciated the warm humid cloth between his fingers and Sephiroth's hold on his hand, enough to support him, but not block him if he wanted to pull back his hand toward him. Now calmer, Cloud was impressed Sephiroth didn't go batshit crazy at seeing him bloodied, holding Genesis against the wall.

“What did you give him?” Sephiroth asked, meeting his eyes, “Because you're the source of that, isn't it?”

“I- it's a-a friend. It's on-only healing water.”

Sephiroth lifted a brow, passing to Cloud's other hand with the same controlled and confident actions, “Healing water? Nothing else?”

Cloud nodded, his words stumbling against each other in his mind, “There, uh, there's another bottle f-for Angeal. I don't know... I don't know where...”

Sephiroth's eyes light up, he stopped his meticulous cleaning a moment, “On the table, the one with a red lid?”

Cloud nodded curtly and lowered his gaze to their hands again, still shocked at Sephiroth's care, as his body worn of the adrenalin, letting him tired to the bone. Then Sephiroth frowned.

“It's cracked near the bottom. The table was humid when I arrived.”

Cloud's heart clenched so hard, tears pooled in his eyes, “I'm sorry.”

Sephiroth frowned again, squeezed Cloud's hand, and didn't stop cleaning it.

“Since when did you have this healing water?”


“But your friend worked on it for longer, isn't it? Why didn't you tell us?”

A cold calm took Cloud. He met Sephiroth's eyes at that, and if he found worry there, he wasn't feeling understandable, “Because ShinRa would've killed them at best, or taken in at worst. I kept them safe.” He sighed. “Also, none of us knew if it would work.”

Sephiroth nodded and extended his hand with the washcloth toward his face, Cloud moved back, startled, and eyed the thing until Sephiroth wiped something on his cheek.

“I have prepared the couch for you and we can reheat Genesis' dinner for us.”

Cloud blinked, but still accepted the proposition. He was sleepy and starving, though he knew he would've just curled on the couch without eating a thing if he returned to Zack's apartment.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Sephiroth stared at him a few seconds before standing, extending a hand to him, “If it works, it's us who will thank you, Cloud.”
Chapter End Notes

i dunno what i'm doing with this story but whatever it is i'm doing it to the end apparently? never expected the thing to be this long or complicated but i'm doing it to the end? which surprise me too so can i get a 'yay'?

next one 3 or 4 feb
Sephiroth heard Cloud move around the apartment the morning after. He rolled around, but Genesis kept him from leaving the bed with a death grip on his waist.

“He's leaving,” Sephiroth commented.

“Yes, give me your PHS,” Genesis mumbled, his weak hand and arm held close to his chest.

On the other side of the apartment, the door closed on Cloud. Sephiroth sighed but did as his lover asked. Eyes half-lidded and with only one hand, Genesis typed a message, then abandoned the phone between them and curled against Sephiroth. He took the PHS too and read the message. While he typed another to Genesis' secretary to say the man wouldn't be able to work, he asked:

“A rendezvous for a spar?”

“You'll let him the day to calm down and he'll come.”

“What if he doesn't?”

“He loves appointment, it gives him structure,” Genesis mumbled, his eyes closed and his face mushed to the pillow.

Sephiroth nodded silently, but still send another message to say Genesis was fine, and that seeing Cloud would please him. He hoped he wouldn't be stood him up even if Cloud ended coming only to refuse the spar.

After that, he managed to stay home a bit longer but ultimately needed to do his paperwork. He had Genesis' part to do too since he wanted the redhead to rest. Lazard often let Genesis have way more sick day than any SOLDIER, but he had to catch up on paperwork, which tired him. It wasn't a good thing just after a spike of illness.

Sephiroth kept close contact with the redhead, even going into a little frenzy when the other didn't answer for more than fifteen minutes only for Genesis to reassure him he'd been sleeping. His day went slowly, and he found himself happy to have a spar programmed with Cloud. He needed to move, focus his mind on something else than his worry for Genesis – and Angeal – which made him restless.

The end of the day was a blessing for him, he had visited Genesis in-between hours when he could get away with it, but he wanted to be alone with him. Sephiroth knew Cloud would spend a little time with the redhead if he came today at all, but he couldn't find a part of himself upset by this prospect. But first, he had a rendezvous that he hoped would happen. Cloud answered the first message written by Genesis, but not Sephiroth's next ones asking if 18:30 was fine with the blond for the spar, with the room's number. Sephiroth waited there for fifteen minutes before sending a new message, then roamed the halls, now upset.

He stopped at the SOLDIERs lounge, sure people could help him there. SOLDIERs weren't Turks, but they did know a lot about their friends' movements.

“Do you know where Cloud is?”
The question and the stare received triggered a deja-vu. He smiled to himself derisively.

“Not with Genesis I guess,” Ama said from the couch.

Sephiroth shook negatively his head, “He doesn’t answer his phone either. For Genesis or me.”

“Where the last place you saw him, boys?” Ama asked the other SOLDIERs present.

“He ran at the gym this morning, like always.”

“Someone saw him after?”

“Bo said he wanted to see him so I send Cloud down.” Flore said, arriving from the hall.

“He left Bo at around 0900,” Sephiroth said. “I asked.”

“You’re searching Cloud?” A newcomer inquired. “I saw him leave Bo’s room. He wasn’t steady on his feet and by trying to hold him I freaked him out. He broke my nose. At least I was at the medical centre!”

The SOLDIER laughed with a few of his colleague. Sephiroth frowned, that didn’t help him at all.

“You only reached for him?” Flore asked, an underneath sense behind her question.

The SOLDIER was surprised but answered, “Well, yes.”

“That’s not normal. He didn’t attack anyone the first weeks we were in the Tower. And you were all in his personal space sometimes. Or menacing him.”

A few SOLDIERs grimaced at that, murmuring between themselves.

“Yeah, but he feels safe here now, isn’t it?” Adam asked, crossing his arms and leaning on the couch armchair to look at Flore and Sephiroth.

“That what I thought,” Ama said. “It explained why he had more breakdown.”

Sephiroth could see the logic behind that, though he never thought about it before. He didn't see Cloud during a panic attack or a break down so never realised if he was in the period of backlash after coming back to a safe place.

He noticed Flore hesitation and her knitted eyebrows.

“What was your idea?”

Her mouth pulled into a smile without a sign of happiness, “When Cloud’s acting strange then its a mako pull.”

Sephiroth frowned, the infamous ‘pulls' Cloud was subject too. There was too little information on them, none of Cloud's chicks had said anything more than 'he’ll walk it off’ and Cloud never talked about it. No durations, no explanations about what it did to Cloud and no signs to look out for one. Sephiroth doubted the blond ever talked to Zack either. They were all ignorant now.

“None of you saw him after 0900?”

Worried expressions were slowly taking places on the few SOLDIERs as they all shook their heads. The two Turks who squatted the communal room leaned toward each other and talked in hushed
whispers. Sephiroth opened his PHS and called Genesis right then.

“Do Cloud answer your messages normally?”

“Well, hello to you too love!” Genesis chirped in a teasing tone rather than angrily.

“Hello,” Sephiroth said flatly. He had left the man hours ago and had already said hi to him in the morning. “Genesis, please.”

“Yes, yes. He always does, obviously. Why the question, love? Still no signs of him?”

Sephiroth shook his head negatively before remembering Gen couldn’t see him, “No. Flore says it could be a Mako pull then...”

He glanced at her for her to finish his sentence.

“If it’s a mako pull, then he found a place to hide the time it’ll calm down.”

Sephiroth didn’t have to repeat with Genesis enhanced hearing, he heard.

“I’ll be down in a few minutes. Start searching.”

The General put an end to the call and ordered the SOLDIERs to start tracking down Cloud. He glanced at Flore, face open and lips pinched she looked bothered but not distraught.

“He’s in the Tower? Is that sure?”

Flore grimaced, “He’ll find a safe place if he can’t leave. But he can exit the Tower now, so... maybe? I don’t know where he could be if he went out...” She paused to think, her thumbnail between her teeth. “Wait! He has a... friend in the slums.”

“We know them. We can look for him around their place.” Elena suggested.

“It’s far?”

Elena shrugged, “So-so.”

Sephiroth frowned at the lack of accuracy. It meant the Turk was hiding something. Before he could ask a question she skipped away.

“We’ll give you a call if we find him.”

The search party kicked in with the normal efficacy of people that had worked often together. With the help of a few Turks, the whole Tower was soon enough buzzing with guys inspecting every part of the place.

Sephiroth was worried, there was still the possibility Cloud went in the slums and there his safety was precarious at best, nonexistent at worst. At least, the eagerness the SOLDIERs showed in their task made him feel better. They wanted to find Cloud too. Though it also made him sorry for Cloud’s life until his rescue.

Sephiroth asked Genesis to stay home and try to contact Cloud, though it looked like a lost cause. Until Sephiroth received a call from Luxiere.

“He’s in a closet’ airway down in the medical ward,” Luxiere said. “I heard the PHS standard ringtone and found him. Though, he doesn’t want to come down. It’s... I don’t know what to do.”
“Stay hidden, the both of you,” Sephiroth said in a white voice, dread filling him. If the Shinra scientists just heard the rumour of Cloud’s pull, then he was in danger.

“Yes, sir! We’ll wait for you.”

Going down made Sephiroth’s skin crawl with the closeness of the labs. He, too, was in danger there, might he cross path with Hojo.

When he passed a hall a door opened on Luxiere. The man ushered Sephiroth inside and pointed to the airway. The metal rate dangling from a side caught the General's attention. He could see Cloud's spikey hair clashing with the grey metal and one of his hand wrapped around his head, grazing the edge of the airway.

Sephiroth pondered about using brute strength to take Cloud but felt uneasy about it. Cloud's slow and deep breathes had changed to shallow ones a few seconds after his arrival. Cloud was scared and Sephiroth couldn't worsen his state voluntarily. Also, from the reports, Cloud’s mind could break through the mako haze a few seconds and kick his ass.

None of them wanted that.

“Cloud?” Sephiroth called softly, his head tilted back to glimpse at the blond who startled at his call. “We need to leave.”

Footsteps on the other side made him froze, he kept silent the time it took for the person to go away. Cloud made a sound, far from something unintelligible, yet the tone made clear he didn’t want to move.

“Cloud,” Sephiroth sighed. “Don’t be stubborn, come.”

Luxiere hovered nervously behind Sephiroth, worsening his mood with his quick movements from one foot to the other.

“Either go out or stop moving, SOLDIER,” Sephiroth snapped.

Luxiere froze on the spot, nodding with energy. Sephiroth sighed and looked up at Cloud again. The blond’s hand tapping slightly on the metal. Sephiroth shifted his stance, hesitating before he reached out to hold Cloud’s hand. The blond jerked but Sephiroth held him. Cloud made a panicked sound, trying to get back his hand with too feeble strength. Sephiroth didn’t use the hold to pull back Cloud, he just stood there, holding his hand until Cloud calmed down.

Worried that the sounds Cloud had made – even so low – had caught someone attention, Sephiroth listened to the outside. After a moment of the normal sound from the medical yard, Sephiroth gave out a relieved sigh and returned his attention to Cloud.

“Cloud,” Sephiroth called back. “You can’t stay here. Let me bring you back to Zack’s apartment.”

Cloud made the same negative sound, he curled on himself. Sephiroth shifted his stance again. The closet was less anxiety-inducing than the white halls whit the smells of medications, but Sephiroth couldn’t ignore only a door protected him from the dreaded hall.

“I’ll leave,” Luxiere said in a murmur. Sephiroth swirled his head around before the man could make a step.

“No!” he said breathily. “You stay here.”
Luxiere froze on the spot. He stared at Sephiroth in incomprehension. The man refused to explain himself, it was shameful since he couldn't pinpoint why he wanted Luxiere to stay. There was different emotions mixing inside him: dread and dizziness and the need to have someone here. It was stupid. Yet Luxiere nodded, no trace of judgment on his expression.

Sephiroth huffed and squeezed Cloud’s hand, “Why don’t you want to leave?”

“Smell... labs.”

A sigh escaped Sephiroth, “Then we fear the same thing: an encounter with a scientist. I want to leave, but I won’t do it without you. Please, Cloud, let me help you.”

Cloud mumbled something intelligible, either in nibel or gibberish, but he crawled with heavy limbs toward the entry of the airway.

“Nhg... unfair.”

Sephiroth couldn’t help chuckle, relieved that Cloud finally came to him. Using his hold on Cloud’s hand, he pulled him, then wrapped Cloud’s arm around his neck the best he could without making him fall. For once his height helped. After that, he put a hand under Cloud other armpit and made him fall. He caught the blond before his feet touched the ground then adjusted his hold.

Sephiroth frowned, Cloud's skin was hot against his, a sign of a heavy fever. Cloud made a strangled sound and his head rolled on Sephiroth’s shoulder. Sephiroth changed his precarious hold on the blond then turned to Luxiere.

“If someone tries to stop us, tell them you need me for something.” Luxiere opened his mouth as he frowned, understanding nothing of this order that was just to reassure Sephiroth. He cut the SOLDIER, “Just do it.”

Luxiere sighed but nodded, then leaned toward the door without opening it. He nodded to himself, “All clear.”

Sephiroth was surprised by Luxiere’s comment, though he acted like he was on a dangerous mission, the SOLDIER might have taken his cues from the General’s demeanour, like on missions. Sephiroth was glad for it and made the most of Luxiere’s presence. He wasn’t going to say it out loud, but he was.

In the lift, Luxiere grimaced at Cloud appearance, “We can see he made a tour in the airways. I'm pretty sure some spiders relocated in his hairs with the spiderwebs.”

A chuckle escaped Sephiroth, his nerves calming down and glanced down at Cloud. He was covered in dust and a dark particle some metals sometimes made. Cloud looked like he needed a shower.

“I warned everyone,” Luxiere said, waving his PHS around before glancing back at Cloud. “So, he really does get up from this mako poisoning?”

“We're not sure it's mako poisoning,” Sephiroth recalled him. “Cloud refused to get down to the labs.”

“Well, it looks a lot like it,” Luxiere grimaced. “One of my friends had been mako poisoned when we made it to SOLDIER, it's-”

“Fatal, normally,” Sephiroth finished. “They die slowly without mako input. It's a horrible death.”
Luxiere made a face while nodding, “But Cloud won't die, isn't it? I can't imagine how Zack would react if.”

“He won't,” Sephiroth cut, the upsetting image of Zack seated on a trooper's bed in his head. “He won't.”

“Won't,” Cloud echoed him, his voice barely audible.

Sephiroth hummed as the lift came to a halt, the door slowly opening on a redhead fury.

“You found him! There is no hate, only joy. For you are beloved by the goddess.” Genesis said before frowning. “He's okay?” He leaned above Cloud. Sephiroth noticed the edge of Genesis' relieved smile, “He's okay, yes, but he looks like he crawled in the slums.”

Luxiere snorted and made a sign signifying he was going, Sephiroth didn't stop him, he preferred for him and Genesis to deal with the rest alone, unsupervised.

“We're taking him home, we can't let him alone like that,” Genesis added, pushing Sephiroth out of the lift. Obviously, Genesis wanted to care for Cloud in their own home, Sephiroth thought. Yet he didn't protest, Genesis put words on an unsaid worry of him, letting Cloud alone in Zack's apartment. A sour taste in his mouth made him feel bad, he was jealous of Genesis' worry for Cloud when he had been feeling the same, “Can you take care of him? I'm not sure I'll be useful with only one hand, sadly.”

“It's still hurting?” Sephiroth frowned at that, even with the pain from degradation, Genesis had managed really good those last years, was it worse now?

“No, it's not,” Genesis opened the apartment door. “But I have stitches I want to keep until materia works. If it works at all.”

Sephiroth nodded curtly, shifting when Cloud's breath hit a sensitive spot on his neck. Being prudent was the best course of action, whatever Cloud had given Genesis, they didn't know what would happen. From Genesis' words, not even the creator of this healing water was sure of its efficacity.

A soft caress on his cheek made Sephiroth look at Genesis, “I'll call Flore and Dirk to learn a bit more about those pulls. They should help, now that they trust me a bit.”

“Only a little bit,” Sephiroth mumbled making the redhead chuckle.

They parted to tend to their own tasks, although Sephiroth couldn't help himself and overheard some of Genesis' discussion. Not that the redhead was hiding his conversation. When enhanced, it was impossible, you'd had to respect someone's privacy when they asked it.

Sephiroth sat down Cloud on the cold tiled floor, he grimaced, but though the blond could sustain it a bit.

“He can get through the mako pull for a bit when threatened, but it doesn't last long.” Genesis yelled from the kitchen, making Sephiroth startle as he put on the shower. “If he's safe, he's catatonic. So we're doing good!”

Sephiroth glanced at the blond, they were doing very good then. Cloud had the eyes glazed with mako, his expression lost to the world with only his deep and slow breathing to indicate he was still alive. His heart was so slow it put Sephiroth on edge.

He checked the water was warm enough, without being scorching hot, and kneeled in front of
Cloud, “I believe you can’t talk, but still understand. I’m going to rinse you off the airway grim. The both of us will be uncomfortable, but it seems your pull last days and Genesis will never let you in our bed or the couch in such a state.” Sephiroth commented. “I know he didn't let Zack do it, at least.”

“He was filthy!” Genesis shouted from the kitchen, his call ended, but the sound of him chopping things came to Sephiroth who chuckled. He had the same day in mind as the redhead, a day when Zack came back from a mission in such a state Angeal took a photography to immortalise it.

Sephiroth pulled Cloud's shirt above his head, he hesitated as he saw none of the cropped top people used to hide the soulmarks. Sephiroth never understood the appeal. With all the problems that went from the omerta Zack and Cloud had maintained by pure idiocy, he'd thought the boy would wear those things every day of his life. That was what Zack did.

He sighed, with Cloud's state it was impossible to ask if the blond accepted him to look at the soulmark or no. Sephiroth bet on prudence, “I won't look at it. Your soulmark, I mean.”

Only a grunt answered him, but he decided it worked as a thank you, then he finished undressing Cloud, noticing the scars littering his body. Some emplacement made Sephiroth's mind reel, he had the same on his own body thanks to Hojo's care. Sephiroth shuddered and blinked a few times, focusing on Cloud so his mind wasn't wandering toward ill times. The blond must be freezing on the ground, so Sephiroth moved quickly and efficiently to put Cloud in the tub, under the warm jet of water.

He managed to block Cloud against one side of the tub. The blond rolled his head around and emitted dissatisfied sounds. Also, Sephiroth's hairs went everywhere. Irritated by the silver strands, Sephiroth stood and assembled them into a ponytail, lowering his head in the process and freezing as his eyes caught a shape on Cloud's back. He lifted his head anew to stare at the wall, his mind jumping between believing what he just saw and debunking it with all sort of theories.

*It was just his eyes playing a trick, his mind said. You're tired and worried, you didn't see right.*

Sephiroth finished his ponytail mechanically, his mind blank, as he crouched down. He took a shaky breath and manoeuvred himself and Cloud so he could see his back. He stared at the soulmark in silence, his blood buzzing in his ears. It was Cloud's shudders, as he was half under the jet, half exposed to air, that brought him back to his senses.

“Genesis,” he called, his voice still barely audible, using the time to take the jet and angle it above Cloud, shielding his eyes, while his thoughts stayed immobile, in shock.

He sat on the bathtub edge, short on breath and waves in the edge of his vision. Was he panicking? For that?

“What? What?” the redhead asked the first thing when he appeared, a stupid apron from Zack on him. “He's okay?” Genesis froze when he met Sephiroth's eyes, “Are you okay?”

“I saw his soulmark,” Sephiroth said in a tight voice.

Genesis sighed, his shoulders fell, relaxed from their earlier tension, “I don't think he'll be mad. He'll understand. At worst, he'll have to do something with his gods again.”

“No,” Sephiroth interrupted, his breath short and his eyes unnaturally dry due to the way he kept them open, without blinking, “I think... you should see it too. Maybe I'm... look at it.”

Genesis frowned at his clear shock and his short sentences. He came close in silence, eyeing
Sephiroth until he could reach for his cheek, “You’re pale as a dead.”

Sephiroth only made a head move toward the blond who's head was now resting against Sephiroth's thigh, one of his hand moved instinctively to card Cloud's hair. Genesis shook his head, his eyes almost rolling and thinking Sephiroth was being silly, surely. Until he loomed above Cloud his hands on his hips, there his pinched smirk faded away. A nervous laugh escaped Genesis and he extended a hand to the soulmark.

“No way.”

Another disbelieving laugh left Genesis who didn't move an inch, his wide eyes focused on Cloud's back. Sephiroth's mind was strolling around, not working on the very obvious problem-discovery in front of him, so he only moved his limbs, assuring himself Cloud wasn't left too long without warm water while wetting his thigh and side without a care.

“What?” Genesis glanced at Sephiroth, mouth slightly agape. “No way.”

Sephiroth nodded, “I-... don't know how to react.”

Genesis spluttered and straightened suddenly, “You know what? Clean this pile of dust, I'll do something to eat because I can't stay immobile and then, then... maybe we'll-”

He trailed off, his eyes diverting to Cloud, then nodded to himself determinedly and strolled off, muttering in banoran about his tutelary deity.

“This is our soulmark,” Sephiroth explained, “We'll show you when you're back. We'll show Zack.”

Cloud didn't answer, his eyes were closed. Either because of the water Sephiroth handled poorly today, or because he was asleep. Sephiroth rinsed Cloud from the grim he amassed in the airway, thought the man's eyes kept searching glimpse of the soulmark.

After a moment, Genesis came back with clothes and made a comment about the time Sephiroth had been in the bathroom, waking him up a bit from his haze. With his help, they put the clothes on the blond, whose eyes were still closed.

“He didn't make a sound for a moment,” Sephiroth commented.

“Flore said his sleep is heavier when he let himself go,” Genesis answered, putting Cloud in Sephiroth's arms, then superficially cleaning the mess in the bathroom. “She said he needs to find a safe place before sleep overcome him.”

Sephiroth glanced at the blond drowning in Genesis' clothe, the closer of Cloud height, though he was a bit bulkier. Cloud's head rested against his chest, the blond's cheek pressed on him and permitting Sephiroth to feel Cloud's light fever.

A sigh from Genesis and a hand on his chin made Sephiroth look at the redhead, “I'll call her later. Put him to bed and we'll eat. And talk. If you're up to it.”

Sephiroth nodded and did as ordered, then headed for the kitchen where he stood, disoriented with the next thing to do until Genesis ordered him to put the table. He exhaled slowly, uneasy by the fact Genesis seemed forced to give him orders for him to act.

“I'm sorry, it seems I'm-” shocked, perturbed, lost and bemused were words that came to his mind, yet weren't describing exactly his state.
“Disturbed,” finished Genesis, before addressing him a smile. “Excited, but also scared and stunned none of us saw Zack's mark earlier?”

Sephiroth lips twitched in a fond smile, relieved Genesis understood.

Genesis sat down on the bed heavily, a deep sigh escaping him. Talking with Zack had been a torture. He didn't tell him anything about the soulmark because he wanted to show it to him face to face, but only talking about Cloud freaked out the other. For a terrifying moment, he'd thought the puppy would abandon his missions – and his men – to come find Cloud. Genesis was glad the rest of the squad managed to put some sense into the puppy's thick skull. Essai had been easier to talk to, taking all the information needed and telling Genesis to go back to Cloud while they took care of Zack.

He glanced at Sephiroth undressing, his eyes lingered on the soulmark he knew by heart since he could stand in the bathroom another mirror in hand. The symbols without meaning resembled the runes from a magic attack and the two pairs of wings. One black, one white. Soulmarks had meanings. People even made huge reading classes about possible interpretations. Some fan of Sephiroth speculated on what was his soulmark. He didn't hide it, but the last time he exposed it in public was during the war.

The meaning of theirs soulmark had always been pretty clear since Sephiroth was added to their couple. The runes for Genesis, and one pair of wings for Angeal and Sephiroth, both changing periodically which colours they preferred and represented. Though, they were wrong. Really wrong.

He fell on his side on the soft mattress, face to face with a blond curled up on himself in a cocoon of covers. Only the higher part of Cloud's face was visible. Except for his slight fever and unresponsive limbs, Cloud looked like he was only sleeping.

Sephiroth sat down on Cloud's other side and Genesis rose on his forearm, “Oh no, not here love.”

The silver-haired blinked and stared at Genesis before asking why in a little voice.

“If Cloud wakes up with his mind all messed up like Flore and Zack warned us. You shouldn't be the first thing he'll see.”

“Person,” Sephiroth corrected automatically, already standing. “Then, where do I sleep?”

Genesis looked at the little pout and knitted eyebrow from the General, with him it was all in slight changes of features, never a clear and full picture. That Sephiroth thought he was ditched from the bed altogether was terrible, but his face was so cute Genesis couldn't help chuckle even more when Sephiroth looked affronted.

“Come here, you big idiot.” Genesis patted the place behind him, getting closer to Cloud. “We have a bed big enough for four people.”

The other man avoided Genesis' eyes, his lips pinched in a bitter expression. It broke Genesis' heart all over again, but Sephiroth took a deep breath and met his eyes this time. Instantly a smile curled Sephiroth's lips. Whatever the other saw on his face, Genesis was glad it was enough to change his mood. He stretched languidly, rolled on his back and patted his own chest this time.

“Come here.”
“Yeah,” Sephiroth murmured as he climbed on the bed then snuggled his face into Genesis' neck, one of his arm sneaking around the redhead's waist. “Zack fits well, and he takes place.”

Genesis chuckled at the memory of the few time Zack had been too drunk and sneaked into their bed and outright asked because he felt alone and wanted to cuddle. He chuckled again, even without knowing Zack was one of their soulmate, they'd been more than close.

“What do we do?” Sephiroth asked in a whisper, his breath tickling Genesis' neck.

“We take care of Cloud, wait for him to wake up and then,” Genesis rolled around. He trailed his fingers on Cloud's warm cheek. “We tell them.”

Chapter End Notes

next time is feb 17 or 18
(to be honest i feel like i'm writing those fics that keep having new infos threw in haphazardly and it becomes a huge mess which keeps going and going until it's some sort of epic story and suddenly you have dragons in world where there were none, and the personification of the zodiacs helping the hero and subtle crossover that ARE NOT SUBTLE... oh, wait, the last one isn't coming in this story)
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The pull ended being way less stressing than Genesis thought at first. Cloud slept a lot, opened his eyes in the morning after Sephiroth found him. Though his eyes were glazed over by mako and he couldn't talk, he managed to move enough to help when Genesis moved him or undressed him, rather than being a dead weight.

Two days after the start of the pull he could sit with the help of a wall and said a few words. He stared a lot at Sephiroth with rapt attention, contrasting with his quick lose of focus on anything else. And he was cuddly. Genesis was delighted until Sephiroth pointed out Cloud was only leeching out his corporal heat. Genesis threw the silver-haired man outside to go on a mission and told the General to let him live his dreams.

And then the day Angeal and Zack returned from their respective mission came around. Genesis was excited and recited loveless so much, with such energy that when he finally went down to do some paperwork, his secretary told him she would bring him back his papers to the apartment, just so she could be alone with her own thoughts. All the better for him.

Sephiroth came to him the moment he stepped inside the apartment. Curious, the other asked about what was Genesis mutterings.

"I'm listing what needs to be cleaned up!" Genesis explained before the man could open his mouth. "The apartment is awful."

"It's not that bad. We cleaned it last week," Sephiroth noted. "And we always do little things to keep it in order."

Genesis hissed and pointed at the ground, "The ground is almost dark with dirt and dust float around. And don't talk about the kitchen! Nobody would want to eat there!"

Sephiroth lifted a brow, following Genesis around as he noted what needed to be thoroughly cleaned.

"It's Zack and Angeal, they've seen worst."

Genesis shushed him. The man liked his cleanliness, he should have been on board with Genesis. Genesis remembered a time where Sephiroth almost obsession for order and cleanliness made him hate going out. Spending time with Zack did good for him. Though, today, it irked Genesis to no end.

"If you're not helping get out of my sight!"

Sephiroth relented to the urge Genesis had to clean everything in this apartment. Yet, the redhead heard Sephiroth mutter about 'stress cleaning' and, with a rag in hand, Genesis told him his thoughts on the very logical reason for this out of season spring cleansing.

"I didn't fell the need to clean that much when we realised we were soulmates," Genesis ended, putting his hands on his hips and giving the silver-haired man a challenging look. There was no fault in his mind.
“We were on a battlefield, Genesis,” Sephiroth said, a small amused smile on his lips. Seeing that made the redhead flush in irritation, fond irritation. Which only irked him more. “I'm not saying you shouldn't be stressed. I am. But I'd like for you to acknowledge it. I'd feel less alone.”

The words struck a chord in Genesis, he opened his mouth only to shriek when he heard the apartment door open. Zack and Angeal's voices reached them. Genesis glared at Sephiroth who hide his snicker behind a curtain of hair.

“Maybe I'm a bit stressed,” Genesis confessed, passing quickly in front of Sephiroth, kissing his cheek, then going into the bathroom. “I need to prepare myself!”

Genesis fumbled in the bathroom, pushed by the time. Voices from the hallway reached him, and he listened as he tried to put his mind straight. He needed to do something, he wouldn't let Sephiroth spoil the surprise for him, thought the man had agreed before that to let him give the news. He only cleaned his face who had a smudge of dirt on it, then ruffled his hairs and took off his shirt. It would be simpler like that.

“Prepare to be amazed!” Genesis shouted as he traipsed toward the duo.

Both of the newcomers smiled at him when he arrived, but Zack's features morphed into surprise as Genesis never went bare chest since his wound on the shoulder. Angeal frowned at his wound. Healing wound. Genesis could pinpoint the moment Angeal saw the changes in the injury. The man's eyes got huge as his mouth fell in a silent 'o' of surprise.

Genesis smiled to himself as Sephiroth shook his head at his antics, a fond smile on his face, then Genesis turned around to present his back to Zack.

“Wow wait, Gen, your back is-” Zack started before choking on his words. Genesis felt the tips of Zack's fingers on his back before he retreated. “That's my soulmark!”

“What?” Angeal blurted.

Turning around, Genesis took delight in the shocked faces in front of him. Angeal glanced at Zack, who stared back in pure astonishment. Zack eyed Sephiroth and tried to say something, but was struck mute. Zack lifted his arms in the air, making moves without meanings as he tried to express himself, only to splutter and say a series of “how, what, why” endlessly.

“We saw the soulmark on Cloud when bathing him,” Sephiroth said, cutting short Genesis fun.

“I thought it was the perfect way to explain,” Genesis added, putting his hands on his hips.

Zack made a disbelieving sound, his eyes so wide, Genesis could see some capillaries with his enhanced vision.

“Oh,” Zack said again before moving his hand up and down.

“And your shoulder?” Angeal asked. He came closer and put a hand on Genesis' arm, under the wound still visible, but clearly healing.

“I'm-” Zack started before motioning wildly toward the bedroom under all three stares. “Uh, Cloud.”

The puppy all but sprinted to the bedroom, a little tremor in his hands. Genesis pinched his lips, was the puppy down with the news, or only troubled?

“Genesis, how?” Angeal couldn't even form a full sentence, though he caught Genesis' attention.
“Cloud, he gave me something that seems to work. Though, none of us knows if it'll last,” Genesis answered, feeling Sephiroth's finger tug on his pant waist while his eyes were on the bedroom.

Zack ran to the bedroom cast in the dark. He closed the door behind him, his hand hovering before he turned around, not locking the door. He took a deep breath to steady himself without any results. His soulmark, on Genesis. So it was on Sephiroth and Angeal too. Zack hide his face in his hands, the fingers dug into his skin, he felt them. He wasn't sleeping. He wasn't dreaming.

“Za-?”

The faint whisper from the bed startled him. Blue eyes thinly veiled of green peered at him from under a cocoon of blankets. Zack couldn't help smile at the adorable sight. Cloud had mussed hair and looked so huggable. Cloud mumbled something, his half-eaten words making it unintelligible. Did he know? Apparently, Cloud woke up since yesterday but did Genesis and Sephiroth told him? Did he believe them then? Most of the time Cloud doubted his reality. He was doing better, but such a change could make more bad than good.

Zack was terrified. And something hateful gnawed at his stomach. Something bitter, because if he had known before he wouldn't have been so destroyed when he was left alone because his soulmate was dead.

He came closer to the bed and fell down on it more than he sat, his eyes stinging with unshed tears. He stared at the wall in front of him until Cloud's hand grasped him. They kept silent for a long moment, sometimes Zack sniffed, holding his tears.

“You 'kay?” Cloud mumbled again.

“I-... don't really know?” Zack glanced down at Cloud, moving so he had a better sight. “Did they... did you know? For er...”

“So...” Cloud said, eyes closed. Zack nodded furiously, before answering orally, then Cloud slowly replied, “Sephiroth said but I didn't see.”

So he didn't trust it. But he knew. Zack sighed, relieved because he had no idea how to explain that. He didn't doubt Genesis would gladly show his back again. Zack let himself fall completely on the bed, then rolled over so he was facing Cloud. Mostly facing since the blonde was huddled on himself like a big baby.

“So many years and none of us saw each others soulmarks,” Zack said. “And neither Genesis nor Angeal was particularly pudic about it. ’guess if I had been less grown up on handling my crush on Angeal, I'd followed him in the communal showers rather than going to a private one and then...”

Zack sighed. “I would have had the biggest hard-on ever, and I'd seen his back.” He frowned. “Except if he wears a top to hide it. I dunno if he does.”

Zack groaned and rolled a bit on Cloud, then rested his head on Cloud's shoulder. He was a bit too warm, but not enough for Zack go into full panic. He had others subjects to make him go there. Like how would their relations change? With Angeal?

He had smothered his crush to a silent longing a long time ago. For a short while, when he had Cloud, the little trooper Cloud, this stupid crush almost evaporated. It came back full force when Angeal took care of him when Cloud 'died' and then there was Genesis. The man thought he was a burden to him, but helping someone else did well on Zack. He liked being his friend, joking and
distracting him from his state. Sephiroth too, they shared a lot of things about their life. Sephiroth told him so much about his problems, would he stop now that Zack was part of those problems too?

Zack's mind jumped on one thought to another, situations and things that could go wrong. That would be different. There was no sign with the way Zack lived, but he liked his habits. Some habits like murmuring a prayer to Shiva before any fights even if he wasn't a believer. There was the full drink of water he gulped before sleeping or the stock of ice cream Sephiroth's loved. Nothing he couldn't do in Sephiroth's apartment.

He jumped to his feet and made a few squat to clear his mind to no avail. Zack sighed deeply and walked like a lion in a cage. He should be taking care of Cloud! Why was he doing... nothing? Zack groaned and pressed his hands to his head, willing himself to come back to Cloud and only think of him. Take care, take care. Move. Or sit. Sit with Cloud and ask him how he was. It wasn't so hard.

"It's not that hard!"

But he was started on his caged lion walk, his heart beating faster and faster since Genesis showed him his back.

"Zack?"

The call coming from behind the bedroom door was like an electric shock. Zack's breath hitched, terrorised*tk to see Sephiroth right now. Everything was a mess. In a part of his brain, he knew he shouldn't panic like that, but that wasn't just any discovery. Genesis wore his soulmark. So did Sephiroth and Angeal. And how could he react to that? Happiness? Sure, he should. He should, and yet... the energy in him made his mind buzz. He needed...

Zack leaned down, nearly toppling over in his move, kissed Cloud's forehead and said he was coming back. Then he burst out of the place. It was just the shock, but Zack needed to steam off before thinking straight.

Sephiroth opened his eyes wide when they almost collided. Zack jumped on the side, stopped, and looked at Seph.

"Just... ah, take care of-" Zack motioned toward the bedroom. "I'm just- going to calm down."

At his relief, Sephiroth stepped on the side, giving him space to go. Sephiroth didn't stop him, and Zack passed the apartment in a flash, remarking Angeal still clutched to Genesis, staring at his shoulder and murmuring about miracles in a way that put Zack more on edge. Genesis knitted brows and his soft answering words only fueled Zack's idea that there was something wrong about this scene.

It only made him leave the place faster.

When he returned to the apartment, calmer and tired to the bone, the place was cast in the dark and in a serene atmosphere only broken by the television sounds. He found Sephiroth watching a movie with Angeal, though the big man was sleeping and leaned on Sephiroth.

"You've been waiting for me, uh?" Zack asked in a sheepish whisper.

The glowing green eyes, half-lidded with tiredness, blinked at him.
"Yes."

Zack moved from one foot to the other and carded a hand through his hair. "Sorry. Didn't want to-- worry you?"

"It's fine, the information startled us too."

Zack flopped down on the couch next to Angeal with a deep sigh. He woke up the man who grumbled and blinked blearily. Sephiroth send a dark look at him and Zack winced and murmured an apology. Angeal's hand tapped comfortably his thigh, forgiving him. The man didn't even move, keeping his eyes shut as he used Sephiroth as a pillow.

Zack rocked one side to the other slightly. He wanted to flop over and don't move for the rest of the night, but if he did he'd touch Angeal and-- and he'd never had been that awkward with touches, but everything seemed different now. He sighed and hunched over himself, his arms on his knees.

"Where's Genesis?"

Sephiroth answered with two of his fingers around Angeal's buckle. It was a little quirk that had some consequences with Zack. He moved so much and didn't always notice Sephiroth doing it, so often time he ended walking – running away – only to be stopped, or slowed down by Sephiroth's unconscious hold. The man always flushed pink at that and excused himself, but he couldn't stop himself. Which was cute for Zack.

"He's eating with Cloud. He woke up and was starving, so Genesis made him a breakfast."

"It's 11:00 in the night," Zack laughed.

"Genesis is happy to cook again, without pain," Sephiroth said. “Whatever the dish is."

"And he wants to spoil Cloud," Angeal mumbled.

"You wanted to, too," Sephiroth the telltale snitched, making Zack chuckle.

"Genesis beat me to the kitchen," Angeal scowled, though he was still leaning heavily on Sephiroth and didn't open his eyes.

Zack chuckled, then flopped on his side, falling on Angeal who groaned at the added weight but didn't push him away. He sighed with contentment, he just showered, with a cold water since he'd realised the number of hours he'd been at the gym, far from the Holy Trinity and Chocobo-head. Angeal was warm and comfortable and Zack melted into the warmth.

They watched silently the end of the movie while some part of Genesis and Cloud conversation reached them. There wasn't so much difference from one of the quiet night in. The trio and he watched a movie and eat fast food. Today, was quiet and comfortable. It was familiar.

Zack was a bit sheepish for his earlier reaction, though now he realised whatever changes would come he had faith it would be good. Also, who could refuse to add sex into such a great relationship? A big smile grew on Zack's face, he was pretty happy about this possibility. He'd be lying if he said he never thought about it before that. A lot.

He was dozing off for a moment when Angeal talked again.

“Do you think Cloud will give me a bottle of the healing water?”
Zack's heart squeezed at the uncertainty in his friend's voice. He heard the creasing of clothes, though Angeal didn't move, so Sephiroth had hugged him more tightly. The second ticked by and Zack was already falling asleep again, tired of the high in emotion – and physical exhaustion – day.

“He's our soulmate,” was Sephiroth answer.

A small smile painted Zack's face, that was a nice thing to hear.


Sephiroth didn't answer for a few seconds, always so careful to weight his words in such situation. If he wasn't panicked too. Zack let him search for his words, not wanting to cut him to answer. Also, his mind was floating toward sleep and why was he still awake?

“Cloud went into a blizzard to help me. He didn't know me except for his mako induced memories forming this other... reality. He knew Zack liked me though. And that was sufficient for him to risk his own life to bring me back,” Sephiroth whispered. “He will help you. For Zack and Genesis.”

“Zack and Genesis, uh?” Angeal repeated, a sharp and bitter laugh in his voice, then he sighed, moving so he was more comfortable in the pile of limbs. “For them.”

Cloud woke up with a face inches from his. He backed away quickly only to hit a wall or a person's sides.

“Wow!” Zack mumbled.

The sleeping – not so much anymore – SOLDIER rolled over, ending on Cloud who huffed at the pressure on his lungs. One of Zack's hand fell heavily on Genesis' shoulder, Cloud being too stunned by the closeness of the redhead – and buried under a body – to stop it. Genesis woke up with a startle and eyed blearily around him just as Cloud moved Zack's hand, only to be clutched against the puppy, his arms blocked against his chest.

“Zack,” Genesis hissed.

The man mumbled something against Cloud's neck, that might be an apology, but was unintelligible. A chuckle, behind Cloud and behind Zack, came to them. A warm and sleepy sound that didn't come from Sephiroth. Cloud wriggled a bit to look over his shoulder and caught Angeal sitting up. Genesis did too, and hit Zack's head, only for the puppy to whine, but start snoring a few seconds after, not without squeezing harder Cloud who groaned.

“We made a good investment with this bed,” Angeal remarked.

“We shouldn't have taken it,” Genesis answered automatically. “Or we shouldn't let the puppy get on it. Aren't dogs forbidden to climb on beds in others houses?” he tried to pull Zack's hand holding one of Cloud's shoulder, only for Zack to clutch harder and sneak his legs around Cloud. Genesis gave a look to Cloud, “You don't seem bothered by being slowly asphyxiated by the puppy.”

Cloud wanted to shrug, but Zack was holding him too close, so he resorted for an indifferent pout. Though, Genesis wasn't giving him his full attention. He looked behind Cloud.

“Go back to sleep, Angeal.”
“It's fine.”

“You look awful.”

“It's not because I'm degrading that I can't wake up after just a few hours of sleep and go on my day.”

Genesis cocked his head to the side, lifting a brow. “Really? That's what Sephiroth and you told me during the first years of my sickness.”

“It is a way to go back at us – me – for our overbearing days?” Angeal asked coldly, and Cloud was glad they seemed to have forgotten him.

“It's true you had been quite, hum, cavalier, but you look like shit, Angeal.” Genesis stopped a second, then smirked. “And it's a way to get back at you.”

“Being coddled don't scare me,” Angeal grumbled, then fell back on the bed, the mattress moving at the weight. He kept silent as Genesis climbed out of the bed, stretching, and Cloud tried to detangle himself from Zack, then Angeal said in a small voice, “Hojo said it would be my mind rather than my body who would take the toll.”

Genesis’ eyes zeroed on Cloud, freezing him on the spot. The redhead had something behind his head, but Cloud, if better from the days of the mako pull, still felt a bit out of it.

“Wha-what?”

“Can you get more healing water?”

“Genesis!” Angeal hissed, only for Genesis to make a face at him.

“I guess? It's A- my friend who does it and-” Cloud faltered before thinking his sentence a bit more, he didn't want to give any information about Aerith to anyone. “My friend gave the bottle they could make. It was an essay they said. I think they'll do more soon. I just need to contact... them.”

Genesis nodded, a happy smile on his lips, “Great! Now, I'm starving.” then he winked at Cloud, and pulled off his shirt to reveal his back and his soulmark.

Cloud stared at it without believing his eyes, he stared and blinked might his vision was playing a trick on him.

But there it was: his name in nibel runes lined by wings. Four wings. He always assumed the two pairs meant one for Zack and him. Sometimes he thought the two pairs were Zack. He was extra enough for it. Right now, he couldn't identify which was which. And it wasn't Zack's back.

Cloud's mind blanked. Seeing his soulmark on another back felt wrong. He gulped and tried to even out his breath. Why was everything changing? Couldn't he have a few month of statics, of plain routine where no news exploded to his face?

He curled on himself, hugging his knees to his chest and cradled his hands in trembling hands.

“Spike?”

Cloud swatted away the hand he felt coming toward him. Zack's whimper broke his heart. The added guilt didn't help him calm down. He rolled over on his back, grabbed the first thing at reach and put it on his head.
“Leave me alone.”

Something poked his back.

“Will be a bit hard, cutie patootie,” someone snorted at the nickname, “You're hiding in a bed that isn't yours, in an apartment that isn't yours,” Zack said.

Cloud's breath caught in his throat at the reminder. He had been vulnerable for days, at Sephiroth's mercy and accepted it. Why? Because he trusted Genesis? But he knew almost nothing about the man.

“You didn't help, Zack,” Angeal said sternly.

“I know!” wailed Zack, moving enough to make the bed bounce behind Cloud. “I'm so sorry, Cloud, babe. Just tell me what you want really.”

He curled on himself at Zack's obvious distress. What couldn't he shrug away the devouring void inside his stomach and the anxiety that battled for the right to destroy him? He was such a clutz.

Cloud sat in a heartbeat eliciting surprised sounds from the men around him. A shot of impulsivity coursed through him.

“I'll go see Ae-...” Cloud choked up on the name. “My friend. I'll-...”

“Take your time Chocobo-head,” Zack said, ruffling his blonde hair. “You didn't see me panicking, but I did.” He nodded to himself and chuckled, “Oh, I did. Send a text when you're back, 'kay?” he yawned loudly and fell back on the bed. “Or sleep more because waking up at nearly 06:00 is a terrible life choice.”

Cloud exhaled a deep breath, relieved. He lowered his head and glanced at Genesis. He hadn't put back his shirt and seemed pretty happy half-nude. The man tapped Cloud's temple and addressed him a smile so sweet it made Cloud's heart leapt. Genesis's hand trailed Cloud's cheek as it fell back to his side. With no one to refrain him from leaving, Cloud walked away, to the slums, in hope that the walk and the time away from all those men – and maybe Aerith's counsel – would help him sort out his mind.

Chapter End Notes

update when i fucking feel like it
In the end, Cloud didn't talk about himself when he went down since Tifa was here and he wanted to ask her pressing questions. Also, the girls had 'something' do to in a few hours. Cloud didn't ask precisely what it was. He suspected a little mako reactor blow up. But Tifa sent heavy looks at Aerith too, so the idea that they scheduled a moment to bang was also an option. In any case: plausible deniability applied.

“How did you end up paired with the Watchers?” Cloud asked his hands on the handle of a rake.

Tifa shifted, then kneeled on the ground rather than crouching. Aerith was painting a huge crack in her cart and half-listened to them. She'd abandoned her attempt for healing water after a very pitiable effort. Though, it was enough to fill one bottle and a little more.

“I met Barret first with his clique, then we wanted to affiliate with AVALANCHE and since they were incorporated in the Watchers—” Tifa shrugged. “We ended up in the Watchers. After a few months, some of us were picked up for becoming enhanced. I was. But Broils and Zira died during the procedure so I refused.” Tifa picked up a rock buried in the ground – by its form it was part of a brick in the past – and threw it on a pile next to them. “They were persistent. They tried to isolate me from Barret and all. Tried to take me. Though I was lucky. Barret kept my back and started thinking of leaving.” she looked up. “He didn't like their methods you know? Stealing people... making them change. Sometimes without their consent...”

Cloud nodded a few times at that, Flore, Dirk and he was part of those people.

“On a mission, they managed to have me alone, after some fights, so I was tired. I fell on number 4, the number 4 of this time, a dual wielder. The one right now isn't the same. I think number 4 changes quite a lot—” she glanced at Aerith who nodded at her. “Anyway, my number 4 saved my ass and told me to leave. So I left. I left Barret and everyone behind until I could go back to them. Though Barret had already a plan and we just ended up finding each other again here at Midgar. And we continued our fight for the Planet without the barbarian.” Tifa put her hands on her knees and sighed, happy to finish her explanation. “I don't know what happened to number 4 after that. Well, after their last fight with Sephiroth.”

“I see,” Cloud whispered, his eyes on the warm soil.

“And then we meet!” Aerith chirped, joining her hands excitedly and ending splashing a bit of red paint on her cheek.

Cloud and Tifa chuckled at Aerith surprised face. She stuck her tongue out at them, smudging her face with paint as she tried to clean it with her hand.

“Anyway, do you want to know how we met?” Aerith asked Cloud, shouting a bright smile at Tifa
who spluttered. Aerith didn't wait for Cloud's answer. “It was at night. Or more exactly: early in the
morning-”

“Aerith!” Tifa moaned in despair.

“-and I'd just ended selling flowers for the drunkards. They're always nice,” Aerith beamed at Tifa
and they shared a knowing look before Tifa hid her face in her hand, making Cloud smile. “I was
passing in front of a club when a girl was thrown out of it! On me!”

“Please stop,” Tifa said. “I'll tell him!”

“No!” Aerith shot back with a big smile. “She stood back and to excuse herself she bought all my
flowers left. Then she told me to stay – and since I’m a curious girl I stayed – Tif’ sat on the ground
just in front of the club and made a flower crown. She gave it to me. She was so cute!” Aerith
giggled, making Tifa goes red. “So I decided to bring her home. Mom was furious until Tif’ started
stripping in the hallway.”

Aerith laughed out loud at Tifa's embarrassed groan. Cloud had a bit of compassion for the brunette,
but he also enjoyed too much Aerith's mirth to stop her.

“We saw the soulmark and – after a few seconds of shock during which Tifa had stripped to her
underwears – we gushed about her back muscles, because hot damn!”

“Oh by Odin, Aer!” Tifa complained her cheeks as red as tomatoes. She glanced at Cloud who
supported a little smile, “Please end me.”

“Wait! It's not the end,” Aerith came closer and draped herself around Tifa's back. “This one,” she
poked Tifa's cheek. “-had a blackout. She didn't remember anything in the morning.”

“I woke up in her bed!” Tifa said. “With her.”

“It's was wonderful! I could tease her as much as I wanted. She really thought he had sex and she
didn't remember a bit. She was all flustered!” Aerith kissed Tifa's cheek. “She was adorable and
asked me things like if I, at least, had enjoyed the night.”

“Elmyra saved me.” Tifa sighed. “You can't imagine how relieved I was.”

“Mom spoiled my fun!” Aerith corrected, then she poked Tifa's cheek anew, “I like poking fun at
prudish backwater people.”

At that, she smiled devilishly at Cloud. Though, a ringtone saved Cloud's ass.

“We'll be going,” Tifa said, standing up and smiling at Cloud. “Take care.”

“And come back soon!” Aerith said as she put the bottle in his hands.

Cloud hadn't talked about his own soulmate – soulmates – but he did feel better when he returned to
the Tower with Tifa and Aerith's happy smiles in mind.

Zack received a text from Cloud telling him he was going to the mess rather than eat at the trio's
apartment. Zack told them he was going to join Cloud for breakfast and, if none of them stopped
him, he saw that Genesis looked sullen and Angeal seemed worried. He sent another text to the
blonde as he made his way to Cloud, asking if he had another bottle. The positive answer made his
heart jump. His next text was for Sephiroth, the apter of the trio to decipher his mind without taking umbrage when he asked all of them to let Cloud alone. They needed to let him come to them.

If Angeal hunted down Cloud, even with the willingness to forgive he'd showed, Zack was pretty worried about the outcome.

“Hello again, sweetum!” Zack exclaimed when he entered the mess. He jogged toward Cloud and leaned down to kiss him but paused just before. “Where the-?”

“At the apartment,” Cloud answered. Zack sat down, pulled Cloud's chair closer and kissed him. Then Cloud asked. “Are we- … are we going home after?”

“Sure, I'll join you when my day is over,” Zack hugged Cloud's side, willingly giving up on his left hand to eat. “You want to do something? Or I rent a movie and we eat take-outs? I don't wanna cook.”

He felt Cloud's tension leave his shoulder and even a smile graze his lips. Cloud pressed to Zack's side.

“Yeah, that's good.”

Warmth spread from the blonde who kept his small smile. Zack breathed out, a wave of love overcoming him.

“You know,” Zack started, leaning on Cloud's so his mouth was on his neck. “Take your time with all that. I spent like five hours – I think – running myself to exertion before calming down. And I'm supposed to be mentally stable.”

“Supposed,” Cloud teased, his smile growing.

Zack snorted, “I'll tell you I aced the psych exams! I answered at random, but still.”

“He cheated!” shouted a SOLDIER a few tables away. “Don't believe what he said. He's the worst of us!”

“Shut it, Essai! I'm a model of mental health and good coping mechanisms!”

A few snorts were heard, one from Cloud. Zack beamed at him, even if talking about his mental health made him uneasy. Without Sephiroth, Genesis and Angeal he wouldn't be here joking about that.

The door opened, without catching Zack's attention, until the odour of cigarette irritated his nose and a booming sound made him startle.

“You!”

All the SOLDIERs present turned toward the man, eyes huge and tension jumping high. Zack calmed, and with him the SOLDIER, when he recognised Cid Highwind. The man liked going to the mess met the squad that would accompany him. The rare times he let one do it. Even with his promotion he was still in his navy blue jacket and cargo pants and hated 'guards' as he said. Cid glared at Zack, which was normal since his squad was assigned to his protection for the next mission.

His men were already standing and heading for Zack and Cloud's table, sure Cid would talk to them as a group.
“What the fucking hell are you doing here you little shit?”

Zack cocked his head to the side, confused, while Cid stomped toward them. His eyebrow always stuck in a frowning state were more knitted together. He stopped at their table and pointed at Cloud. Every eye turned to the blond who shrunk on himself.

“Since when are you here, punk?”

Cloud snorted at the nickname. Why did everyone like naming him as anything else than his name?

“You know Cloud, Cid?” Essai asked while Zack stared at Cid with great confusion.

“Cloud?” Cid said before turning toward the ex-Watcher, “That’s your name? Well fuck, I understand why you didn’t give it to me last time! That’s hard.”

“Cid isn’t better,” Cloud scowled. He met Zack’s eyes and tilted his head to the side in a questioning look. Zack tried to pass his own question, but Cloud ended up looking back at Cid, “Where did we meet before?”

“Ah!” the man exclaimed, taking a drag of his cigarette. “Those fuckers of Watchers attacked the aerospatial complex. Those dumbskulls tried to kidnap Palmer, me and others, except you decided to kill a bunch of idiots.”

SOLDIERs’ gaze fell on Cloud who got wide-eyed and stared at Cid with surprise, “I did?” before Cid could give an answer Cloud nodded to himself, “Oh, yeah I think I remember that. It’s one of the reasons I was isolated at the bam. I think?”

Cloud glanced at Zack who could only shake his head with a smile. Cloud didn't change. Even during his time in the Watchers. He saved random people like that and sometimes ended up in worse situations. Though his presence at the bam saved Zack and the squad. Then Sephiroth.

“But you remembered his face....” Sebastian said. “Yet your report said the one that saved you was masked.”

Cid sniffed and waved his hand, “I lied, you idiot! The poor boy told me those stupid dark-clothed-mask-wearing motherfuckers – sorry for those women – would kill him if they eve, heard Shinra talking about his help. He survived because he killed or maimed a lot. But apparently killing to help me was different so-” Cid waved his cigarette this time and pushed out a cloud of smoke. “-so I kept my damn mouth shut.”

“You know Shinra – more specifically Turks - could get to you for that?” Zack asked, starting to worry. “You lied to them.”

“Bah! I’ll take care of it – talk to those busybodies – I’ve got enough money to grease their palms!” he sniffed, took a long drag on his cigarette and glared at every SOLDIERs, Zack included. “And you won’t talk about it, isn’t it?”

Peter shrugged, “Essai exploded my tympans with his karaoke last night. One I can’t hear anything, two, I'm never accompanying him again.”

Zack and Sebastian chuckled at Essai's affronted face. Zack leaned back in his chair and caught Cid's attention.

“Cloud is working for the Turks, I guess if you can help them fill his info, it'll help. And you could still say trauma made you forgot or something else.”
The man puffed out his air, shaking slightly his head. He looked back at Cloud then dropped his hand on his shoulder.

“You'll have to come visit me one day. I'll make you tea.”

The smile that Cloud developed made Zack cock his head to the side. It looked like Cloud was hearing a shared joke that Cid's wasn't aware of.

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Zack working for the rest of the day let Cloud isolate himself in the First's apartment during the afternoon. He was free from any classes and wanted to brood. He ended up under the cover, shamefully stealing a shirt that smelt like Zack, and reading one of the rare book scattered in the apartment. Somehow, Cloud was certain Genesis was the cause. Either he forgot one here or he gifted them to Zack and the puppy kept them.

Though, he migrated to the couch after a while, needing something that would numb his mind like TV. There he fell asleep and awoke only when Zack opened the door. Cloud snuggled under the cover before he remembered Zack's shirt. He hesitated on the thing to do but ended sitting up and holding the piece of cloth in front of him like it offended him, just as Zack called for him.

Cloud put on the shirt and waved meekly when Zack appeared at the doorway of the living room. Zack opened his mouth, frowning, then shook his head.

“You didn't go see, Angeal?” he asked, eyeing the bottle Cloud left on the table in front of the couch. Cloud's face fell, did Zack wanted him to go immediately to the trio's apartment? Zack hand tapped him on his temple, “Hey, why the frowny face?”

“Sorry, I'll do it,” Cloud mumbled, his fingers fumbling with the hem of his – one of the two shirts. “I'll go.”

Zack warm chuckle made him look up just in time to caught Zack leaning down to kiss him.

“We have the time. They'll understand if you don't go right now. Just don't take too long.” Zack sat on the couch, then flopped down with a groan. On the little couch, they were flushed against each other. “Or if you want I'll be the delivery-boy.”

He smiled a soft smile that made Cloud's heart flutter, as much as his reassuring comment. Zack stretched his hands high above him. Cloud looked up and down at the SOLDIER in uniform. Zack was so handsome like that, even with tired lines on his forehead and a tired smile. Zack caught his wandering eyes and smirked, then wriggled so the last centimetres between them weren't anymore.

Cloud flushed in a heartbeat when he felt Zack's half-hard erection. Zack was pretty excited and Cloud was ashamed.

“I've been thinking about you a lot,” Zack purred.

Cloud's heart skipped a beat. He backed away, stumbling on his words, “I'm sorry, Zack. I just... just thought now. I never-”

“Hey, now,” Zack held Cloud's face so they were looking at each other. “If you don't want it, it's okay. I'll just take care of it myself thinkin' about you. Or ask one of our soulmates-” Zack chuckled, in disbelief, but it felt like a cold shower for Cloud. Obviously, Zack wanted to jump on the other three. Obviously. They were handsome and sexy. They were surely less stupid than him who needed
to be recalled to have sexy times.

“Why don't you do that then?”

He hated how his voice quavered. He didn't sound angry at all. Only hurt and scared. Eyes on Zack's collarbone, he only felt him tense and grit his teeth.

“Because I was fantasising about you,” Zack said with conviction calming most of Cloud stupid outburst. “I had a lot of fantasms on them, sure, but I'm not ready to jump the step without, I dunno, talking? Sorting my own feelings? That shit is crazy and whatever Adam implied I'm not a sex-crazed SOLDIER.” He shrugged. “I just like it.” His flirty smile returned and he came closer, his lips ghosting over Cloud's. “And I like you. So sex with you is a win-win.” he froze and added, “If you want! It's not an obligation, y'know? You have the choice. You can go ate ice-cream while I masturbate. Watch me. Whatever.”

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Zack was going to continue on his word vomit, surely to drown Cloud's shame and anger, but he stopped Zack by pressing his hand to the other's mouth. Cloud thought about Zack doing the same about Sephiroth, Zack having quite the similar expression than the silver-haired man, and smiled.

“I'm just always... in the clouds,” Zack snorted, his smile growing under Cloud's hand. “I-... there always something in my mind and I know you thought about sex. Way more than me. And I'm sorry. I'm... I don't... think about it.” Cloud frowned at his clear explanation. He was such a mess. But he took a deep and quick breath and met Zack's eyes. “I don't think about it, but I'm not against. On the contrary.”

Zack's eyes light up like Cloud announced him he had a gift, and thinking about all the incident with Adam, Zack's libido was pretty high. He liked sex, Cloud's hazy memory recalled that, and he basically lived like a monk since Cloud came back, because Cloud just didn't think.

“I'm sorry for, uh, letting you wallow in your sexual frustration?”

The dark-haired laughed out loud, “Nah! As you said, sex isn't a necessity. I just want to do it with you, because that's enjoyable.” Zack grabbed Cloud behind one knee to pull the leg above his thigh, “So I just need to make you think about it?”

Cloud, already flushed by the position, only got redder, “Yeah.” He cleared his throat at his pathetic sound and met Zack's eyes. “Yeah, I need a reminder.”

Zack smiled devilishly, his knee pressing gently on Cloud's perineum then moving his knees up. He leaned toward Cloud and nipped at his maw, “Do I need to put it on your calendar?”

Cloud couldn't stop himself from laughing at the comment. In retaliation, Zack pressed harder his knee on the sensitive spot between Cloud's legs. A moan escaped him, warmth pooling lower down. Zack's hold on the back of his knee didn't falter. He blocked Cloud against him and the back of the couch, not that Cloud was complaining, and rocked his hips so their erections were rubbing.

The beeping sound from a PHS caught Cloud's attention. Zack nipped at his maw again, harder, his hand sliding up Cloud's thigh to end on his ass.

"Hey, we're not thinking about work or someone else."

Cloud's snort ended in a hiss when Zack pinched his ass, without stopping his delightful grinding.
"W-wait," Cloud gasped, a memory hitting him with a shot of electricity. He held Zack's shoulders to keep himself grounded, "I remember you having wet dreams about Angeal!"

Zack grunted, rolling his eyes, “Well, yes. I'll put some of my dreams in your notebook if you're curious.” He smirked, then played his hand under Cloud on his lower back to press firmly against him. He thrust so their cocks were rubbing, but they were still separated by clothes. Cloud was fuzzy headed, though he heard Zack next words. “I want you to only think about now, about me.”

A moan escaped Cloud. What could he think off that wasn't Zack unbearable warmth and their undulating pelvis? Even his odorat was overwhelmed by Zack's smell. He recognised only the chocolate surely from a dessert Zack gobbled, but the mix was familiar and reassuring. Tension was building up in him and his heart hammered in his chest. Cloud was fuzzy headed, though he heard Zack next words. “I want you to only think about now, about me.”

“I want you to think about my hands on you,” Zack sighed one of his hand moving to wrap around Cloud’s shaft. Cloud bucked into Zack’s grasp, a gasp on his lips.

Calloused fingers made Cloud shudder with pleasure. Clumsily he unclipped the inconvenient stomach protection and all those buckles, whining at the time it took him. Zack chuckled and distracted Cloud by ensnaring him in a bruising kiss. His hand kept a steady but deathly slow rhythm on Cloud’s cock. One of his finger brushing the tip.

“Zack,” Cloud whined, his hips rolling, but their movement stopped by Zack’s hold on his ass, flushing them together so movements were minimal.

Cloud finally released Zack from the stupid uniform. The dark-haired threw his head back when Cloud's hand found his cock.

“Ah! Fuck-“

A smirk ended on Cloud's lips, using both of his hands with a quick rhythm he managed to make Zack lose his pace. The other panted heavily, gasps and moans joining Cloud's. Impossibly hot and trembling even a little, he felt the end coming, and he wanted to make Zack come first.

Intertwining their legs a bit more Cloud drew Zack into a bruising kiss. He cut it and, lips humid brushing Zack's, he said, “Fuck, you're so hot. I want to see you cum. I want to see you cum for me,” Zack's breath hitched, his pupils entirely dark, “and then I want to fuck you.”

Zack's eyes went huge. He gasped, his hand freezing its rhythm and then spilled all over Cloud's hand.

“Cheater,” Zack moaned, closing his eyes with the after bliss.

Cloud smirked and kissed the pouty lips just as Zack twisted his hand around his cock and made him come.

They took a moment to find back their breath. Zack's far away look made Cloud chuckle. It meant he did good. The way Zack smiled back melted Cloud. He hid part of his face in the couch so he wouldn't become red.

“Something dangerous?” Cloud asked, his stomach already knitting in prevision of the answer.

“I guess?” Zack backed away enough to look Cloud in the eyes. “We’re just accompanying him to Rocket Town, the place is in reconstruction and he asked, I mean demanded to return there. The others Head of Department told him yes, but only for a short time. They’re pretty sure the Watchers will attack again if there someone important in the town.”

Cloud hummed thoughtfully. He had absolutely no memory of helping Cid, a vague feeling of rocket Town in explosions, not due to a rocket, but no clear images. Not clearer than the rocket town forms the other side at least.

* 

The dark-haired fished a box of tissues lying around and cleaned up most the traces of their activities superficially. Then Zack settled comfortably to sleep a bit. Cloud couldn't so he settled on braiding Zack's few strands of hair long enough. He looked silly with his sleepy face and his miryad of braids badly done. More when he woke up with a snort when his PHS ringed to tell him it was time to go.

Rather than stay at the apartment without Zack, Cloud walked to the trio's apartment. He took a deep breath in front of the door, careful not to crack the new bottle in his hands, then knocked at the door. At this time, office work was finishing, so there was at least Genesis.

It was Angeal who opened to him. They stared at each other for a few seconds before Cloud started being uneasy under the gaze. He lowered his head and started fidgeting, moving from one foot to the other. He cleared his throat but said nothing.

“I-...” Angeal started, he cleared his throat too and backed away from the door in a stance inviting Cloud to come inside. “I made tea for myself and Genesis baked a cake earlier. I'm pretty sure he will do another one tonight. I wouldn't be against your help to finish eating the first.”

Sephiroth was lucky to have two soulmates that loved cooking. Two soulmates that were also his, Cloud recalled, staring at Angeal with a new light. Though, the man glanced at him like he tried to engage a conversation without finding the right words. He deposed a slice of chocolate cake next to Cloud, still standing in the middle of the kitchen.

“You gave one to Flore, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Cloud mumbled, eyes on his bare feet before handing the bottle to Angeal. He heard him sigh but didn't look up. He preferred to take the cake and eat it in a few mouthful.

Cloud heard Angeal gulp down the bottle then saw him put it down on the table. There, Cloud looked up to meet Angeal's eyes. The other seemed surprised a second before a smile spread on his lips. Cloud's lips quirked up in a faint smile in return.

“Here, take another part,” Angeal said as he pushed the rest of the chocolate cake toward Cloud. “We had enough for us. Maybe take the rest for Zack.”

The warmth of Angeal's voice made Cloud a bit less nervous. Though he kept a distance of security, still not trusting the man's reaction. He was still sick, even if he just took the healing water.

A cough took Angeal. He put a hand on his chest when it calmed and gave Cloud a reassuring smile. Cloud opened his mouth, an idea in head, but closed it. His throat was blocked by his own words and anxiety. Angeal started coughing before Cloud found the courage to talk.

The first sign of the dark matter slid between Angeal's fingers. The man stared at it a long moment.
“What did you give me?” Angeal's eyes were huge with shock. “That's not the healing-”

He was cut by another heaving. Cloud hovered around, as clued on what to do than with Genesis.

“Wha-? Genesis didn't tell you-”

Cloud couldn't finish his sentence with Angeal's hands wrapped around his throat. He choked up, backing away, though the hold was deathly. Automatically his hands wrapped around Angeal's wrists. Blood flooded to his ears that were drowned in a white noise sound.

“What did you do?”

Angeal's spiteful question seemed far away from Cloud who's hip hit the table. He looked up, his hands stopping their movement to break the hold, his eyes caught by the madness in Angeal's eyes. The man held tighter, the time Cloud incidentally gave the other was enough for Cloud to start feeling light headed and dark spots to appear in his vision.

“What-” Angeal said, dark fluid falling from his mouth. “-did you give me?”

Cloud finally moved out of his shock. He turned on his side, freeing his larynx from the brute strength. He lowered his arm on Angeal's, breaking definitely the hold. Air finally made it to his lungs, only for his vision to blackout as second. He leaned hard on the table, a hand to his neck. Angeal was coughing horribly.

He heard a door, he thought, but his ears buzzed too much for him to even hear Angeal right.

Angeal stopped his coughing fit only to charge at Cloud again. Unsteady on his feet, he took away from the table without wanting too. His heart skipped at Angeal's roar. He stumbled, fell on the ground and kicked Angeal hard in the stomach. The man was thrown back. He fell, only for his head to hit the counter with a worrying sound. Then he collapsed on the floor, not to move again.

Cloud stared through a wavy vision that darkened on the edges. Short on breathe, Cloud tried to stand. He slipped on his feet, not feeling them, just as Genesis tumbled in the kitchen, hairs wild. His eyes met Cloud, then fell on Angeal on the floor, blood – it was blood? Cloud had trouble seeing – pooling around his head.

Then Cloud fell unconscious.

The soft and panicked whispers of Genesis to Angeal welcomed home Sephiroth. The man let the door slightly open and ran to his lovers to find another upsetting scene. Genesis was using a cura on Angeal cradled in his arms. Angeal's forehead supported dried blood and a nasty wound that was healing. His half-lidded eyes were focused on Genesis with a scaring intensity. On his lips and chin, he had a trace of the dark fluid Genesis had quickly evoked after healing from degradation.

On the other side of the kitchen Cloud laid unconscious. Sephiroth rushed to him and crouched down, noticing the blue hue developing on his neck. Carefully he moved his head to clear his airway, then turned to Genesis and snatched his materia.

“Seph!” the redhead hissed.

“Cloud isn't breathing.”
He cast the strongest spell possible, Genesis's shocked gasp in his ears. Cloud spasmed, Sephiroth put a hand on his chest to hold him down. The blond didn't open his eyes as a coughing fit took him. He squirmed, his breath leaving in a hissing noise. Sephiroth cast another cura, just as Cloud tried to sat, blinking a few time. Sephiroth hesitated on letting him find a better position, he knew little about strangulation wounds.

Cloud's hands slipped on the floor tiles and Sephiroth grabbed the back of his neck to avoid he hit his head on the floor. It was a mistake. Cloud reacted badly to the touch near his wound. The hard part of Cloud's hand struck Sephiroth square in the jaw. His teeth slammed against each other painfully. Cloud shot on his legs, hit the table, then was grabbed by Genesis in passing. The blond didn't react more calmly to this touch. With quick movement came from habit he put Genesis on the ground. He was going to hit the redhead but froze.

“Cloud?” Sephiroth called.

Except the blonde took off again in a flash. Sephiroth stood again, walked over a stunned Genesis glued to the ground, and followed by Cloud. Other sounds of fight reached his ears, making him grit his teeth.

“Calm down SOLDIER!” someone Sephiroth recognised as First Class Brody said.

Sephiroth opened the door closed by Cloud's passage to the First holding the blond down. There was Brody's friend a few feet away. The Second was pinching his bleeding nose. Cloud struggled against the First, the angle of one of his shoulder made Sephiroth hiss in compassion.

Brody turned around when he arrived, “Sir! We heard the fight.”

“Let him go, Brody,” Sephiroth ordered, noticing Cloud's shortness of breath.

Brody blinked, his friend stared at Sephiroth with huge eyes. None of them moved, except Cloud who forced against Brody's hold.

“Let him go,” Sephiroth repeated, a dark edge in his voice.

The First slowly retracted and Cloud backed away until he was against a wall, the Second's presence surely deceiving him from trying to escape. His hands went to his neck. Cloud's breath was hissing, his eyes were scrunched in pain. Sephiroth crouched down, keeping his hands to him and called the blonde, just as he started another cure.

“Do we call Zack?”

Cloud nodded energetically, his vision unfocusing for a short while. Sephiroth turned to Brody who sat straighter.

“Call Zack and tell him Angeal attacked Cloud,” he said, focusing again on the blonde huddled against the wall. He turned sharply to Brody when he heard the sounds of numbers typed. “None of this need to reach others ears than us, is that understood?”

“Yes, sir!” the two SOLDIER shouted, straightening at the order.

Sephiroth eyed back Cloud, whose hands were cradling his neck and his eyes, huge with terror, looked at nothing. Sephiroth learned – with a lot of trials and errors – how to deal with Genesis, Angeal and then Zack's panic. He didn't want to fail with Cloud right now. In fact, he was certain that any wrong move would deteriorate their relationship.
Yet Cloud was pressing on his own neck for no clear reasons, which worried Sephiroth.

“Cloud,” Sephiroth whispered, without catching the blonde attention. He extended slowly a hand and sneaked his fingers under Cloud's. “You shouldn't-”

Cloud's eyes zeroed on him. After his startle response at the sudden awareness in Cloud's eyes, Sephiroth relaxed. At least the blonde was listening. Cloud didn't fight when Sephiroth carefully drew away his hands from his neck, then Sephiroth stayed there, holding Cloud's hands and waiting. He stared back at Cloud, his eyes drawing to the purple hue played on his neck.

Genesis' arrival cut their silence. They stared at him, seeing the blood on his hands.

“Does he need-?” Genesis trailed off then cleared his throat. “Does he need healing?”

“I cast two times, but he still breath with difficulty.”

Genesis ran a hand through his hair and sighed, then came closer. He took the materia Sephiroth offered him and cast, sitting on the ground with a sullen expression. He didn't meet Cloud's or Sephiroth's eyes, but glanced at the two other SOLDIER, frowning at them and making a move to chase them. What they did, hiding in the Brody's apartment.

“I didn't realise...” Genesis started in a whisper. His hand moved to Cloud's face, but the blonde backed away, taking a sharp breath. Genesis' face fell, as his hand. “I blood on Angeal, so I came to him first. I'm sorry, Cloud.”

Sephiroth sighed, he would be surprised Cloud would even bear being in the same room as Angeal after all that.

“I understand that you are upset against Angeal and me,” Genesis said. “I do hope you know he isn't in his right mind.”

Cloud massaged his neck.

“I know-” a coughing fit cut Cloud words and signed the return of his hissing breath.

Sephiroth exchanged a worried look with Genesis.

“Maybe we should give him potions,” Sephiroth proposed.

The lift opened, and they all turned their head to the arrivals. Zack froze under their gaze, a small amused smile on his lips before his brain caught up with Cloud's isolating position. The raven-haired swallowed the space between them and crouched down, a hand coming to rest on Cloud's knees.

“What happened?”

He asked that to Cloud, who shook his head, refusing to talk. Sephiroth induced that his neck was hurting badly. Since they still could see the purple hue of bruises, it was logical. Zack stared at Cloud, his eyes fleeing on each aspect of the blonde. As his observations pooled, his eyebrows knitted together. Sephiroth was going to answer, after checking that Genesis was mute, guilt marring his face, but Cloud's started tearing up.

Genesis startled at that, his eyes going huge just as Zack cradled Cloud's face and thumbed away the first few tears. Zack turned to Genesis, the easiest to see in his position, then turned to Sephiroth when the redhead stood quickly and left, refugier*tk inside the apartment. The First looked at the General. Sephiroth stared at Zack's stunned expression and sighed.
“From what I gathered, Cloud gave the healing water to Angeal, who had a paranoid and violent reaction I suppose.” Sephiroth's heart clenched when Cloud hugged Zack while protecting his neck from the anxious dark-haired, whose hands wandered Cloud's back and shoulders. “He attacked Cloud since I doubt Cloud was the one to start a fight. Though he defended himself and Angeal ended hurt, on the head. Genesis came home to find them, and went for Angeal, even so, Cloud wasn't breathing.”

“He wasn't breathing,” Zack repeated. “Wh- he...” Zack groaned, staring back at the wall, clutching onto Cloud's head, his hands far from the blond's neck. “He stopped breathing.” Zack leaned on Cloud, who kept his eyes shielded from everything. “Man. Seph. I can't-...” he sighed and glanced over his shoulder at the waiting silver-haired. “Seph, Cloud can't forgive Angeal's for every attack. They barely know each other, that's impossible. I wouldn't do it! I'd felt so betrayed if Angeal attacked me! I-... I dunno how to deal with this, but I don't want Angeal alone with Cloud anymore.”

Sephiroth tilted his head to the side, giving that to Zack. It wasn't just a possibility like Angeal had worried about Cloud and Genesis. It wasn't a hypothesis. They had a few examples that showed Angeal was ready to hurt Cloud.

“I know. I share the same sentiment,” Sephiroth glanced inside the apartment giving on the hallway where Genesis helped Angeal walk to their bedroom. Angeal stared at him, tears in his eyes. “He will take the healing water, while Genesis and I are here and then, I have no doubt he will work for Cloud to trust him, without prompting.”

“That the old Angeal,” Zack mumbled. “But now?”

The question didn't need an answer in Sephiroth's mind. If the degradation had definitely changed Angeal's way of thinking, then they would have to deal with it, not wallow about the lost Angeal.

Until they were fixed, they had other things to do.

Chapter End Notes

i think next one will be 24 or 25. don't freak out if the update is getting late also i need to ask/tell you since your pretty numerous to follow this thing?? how?? anyway, back to the problem, i'm struggling to write the end chapters. for one i hate end, and two, since the middle of this story i lost interest but look i'm a stubborn asshole and kept going. still don't freak out, i still have like eight chapters in advance. the question is: if i don't find back the courage to write fully the end, would you want an outline of the end? or nothing
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cloud didn't purposefully avoid Genesis, nor Sephiroth or Angeal, though he saw them only in passing the following days. Zack confirmed Angeal had taken the rest of the healing water and felt better. Zack wasn't reassured, he doubted the healing water would calm down Angeal even though Genesis was a good example Aerith's creation was working.

As Genesis said to Cloud many times, the SOLDIERs were huge gossipers, more than little grandmas. The third day Genesis showed himself with excitation in the gym room – at odd hours from Cloud's own calendar – they started to talk and theorise. Cloud heard those theories when he came to the gym later.

Cloud focused on Flore though. The third day, after getting the 'new' uniform for the ex-Watchers, who were still named like that even though they had the status of consultants for Turks, he tracked her down. He had given her the healing water but had no return from her. Yet, he found out she did take the healing water. Her sheepish attitude made Cloud frown.

“Bo asked me what was going on because I was so happy,” she said, glancing around in the empty hall and lowering her voice. “Maybe I talked about the water?”

Cloud sighed, then ran a hand through his hair, “I guess it's okay till you didn't talk about who made it.”

She rolled her eyes, “I don't know who made it.” They stood in silence until Flore cleared her throat while glancing at a Turk approaching in the distance, “But I may have evoked you.”

She took a tactical retreat as Cloud groaned. At least it explained why she didn't come see him. She avoided his reaction.

“Flore!” Cloud shouted before a groan took him. “You'll be the worst Turk ever if it continues like that!”

The young woman turned around, stopping dead in her tracks with the poor confused Turk in toe, and stuck her tongue at him, “He's my soulmate! You can't ignore it since you made me met him!”

“Still.” Cloud declared, crossing his arms. His stomach made a grumbling sound and he shifted his stance. He'd searched Flore before eating, but she'd been hard to find. Admittedly he could've called her on her PHS to ask her position. He just didn't think.

“Go eat, I ear your stomach from here.”

“Come after, Mister Strife!” the Turk said. “We organised interviews with SOLDIERs who returned from the battlefields and we need your expertise during them.”

“Aafter!” confirmed Flore like she was worried Cloud would just ignore his hunger and follow them. She wasn't so wrong.

Zack was sent for a short mission near Kalm's reactor, so he left in a flash, barely eating and ruffling Cloud's hair in passing. Cloud didn't find the energy to eat after that, but he knew he needed to find Flore, assure himself she was good, that the healing water didn't work only on Genesis.
The mess was half-full, like always in the morning. For the breakfast, people came at different times. They dripped down slowly as they woke up. The mess was quieter in the morning, SOLDIERs were finishing their night at the table, sometimes even dropping their heads in their arms and waiting for someone of their squad to wake them before the day started.

Cloud found an empty table, put on the side his track and arranged his glass, plat and other sides things in the way he liked. He sat cross-legged on the chair and lost himself in the observation of a chip in the metalised table, wondering what happened, but mostly dissociating.

He jumped out of his skin when a hand dropped on his shoulder. Essai backed away quickly as he swirled around. The SOLDIER smiled, then slowly dropped his hands.

“Sorry,” Essai shrugged. “I just wanted to ask how you were.”

Cloud blinked, “What?”

Essai's smile faltered, but he kept it up, “How are you?”

Even a second time the question was still unexpected. Cloud didn't understand one bit why Essai would ask him that. Though he answered.

“Fine.”

Essai nodded, rocked slowly on his heels, hands in his pockets and made a face, his mouth went to the side with an almost pout.

“Why?” Cloud asked.

“Why what?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

Cloud's position, half-way turned back in his chair, was uncomfortable, but he wanted to notice every impression from the man, hoping to catch a clue on what was going on. Essai shrugged again.

“We spent so much time with Zack, we kind of know everything about you.” Essai had a sheepish smile. “Well, young you at least. And now Zack have new stories, but also worries. One being that he's sure you're hiding him your problems.”

Cloud frowned, obviously he hid things from Zack. He couldn't even deal with his own brain, the time he told Zack about something bothering him, another would replace it. He couldn't put this load of emotional work on Zack. That was torture.

“And?”

Essai smiled hesitantly again, Peter sighed and joined them.

“We're taking care of Zack, and by that, we need you to be okay so he won't worry himself sick.”

“Nah, man. Cloud, we heard everything about you, we like you. You've always been part of our squad without being physically present,” Sebastian interrupted. “We're watching over you because we care for your blonde head and because we like Zack and want him to be a spry puppy.”

They sat at his table at Cloud utmost confusion. The group of men started a conversation while eating, trying to include him in their discussion without any results. Though, they didn’t show any signs of being disappointed or hurt by this.
When they turned toward someone walking on them, Cloud turned around.

“Bo?” Essai said. “You finally left the medical yard! That’s awesome.”

The newcomer made a smile that should have been content but was an half-grimace. A full grimace when Peter stood from his chair, on Cloud’s side, and offered Bo the chair.

Bo’s eyes stared at Cloud.

“Flore,” he started. “She’s healing.”

Cloud frowned, why was it sounding like an accusation? Bo was Flore’s soulmate. He should be overjoyed.

“Yes, I noticed.”

“You sure have,” Bo hissed. He put a hand on the table and loomed over Cloud who was staring confusedly at the man. “Why isn’t Commander Rhapsodos healing?”

More confusion hit Cloud, “But he is.”

“Yeah, he is,” Essai added, arms crossed and leaning on the table. He leaned back and send a questioning look at a surprised Bo. “What’s going on?”

“He is?” Bo glanced down at Cloud again, though he wasn’t looming menacingly anymore.

“That’s what you got for hiding in a medical bedroom for so long,” Peter snickered. “You’re late on the new gossips. Till you have a visit from Kunsel.”

Bo sniffled and looked away flippantly. The other guys laughed at his reaction and started to tease him, not forgetting to include Cloud in the conversation.

Genesis threw open the revolving door and sauntered to them. Cloud couldn’t help smiling when he saw the positively glowing expression of the redhead.

“Good morning dear heart!” Genesis singsonged, arriving with a spring in his steps.

A warm feeling took Cloud at the energy the man was showing.

Genesis cradled Cloud’s face with both hands and kissed him. It was short and pretty unsuspected for Cloud. He was staring at Genesis with the same surprise as the SOLDIERs.

“I have a mission!” Genesis said. He held a hand to his chest and struck a pause, hand on his hip. “There is no hate, only joy. For you are beloved by the goddess. Hero of the dawn, Healer of worlds.”

A lot of congratulations were shouted at him and Genesis paraded, shining under the attention. Though, his eyes, wrinkled by his smile, turned to Cloud again. The redhead who moved the empty chair with a foot and sat down in front of Cloud.

“Do you want to come with me?”

Finding back his scattered thoughts, Cloud shook his head.

“Nah. I’m busy.”
Genesis chuckled and tried to take a bite of his eggs, stealing shamefully Peter's fork. Cloud glanced at the man, standing next to Bo, the both of them a bit behind Genesis. He squashed Genesis' right hand on the table, making the mute SOLDIERS startle, “Don't touch my food.”

The redhead whined and the SOLDIERS grew worried for a second, though Genesis let his chest fall against the table and wiggled his fingers, still holding the fork, “Just a little bit. A little bit?”

The man looked at Cloud from under his lashes, sending him a pleading gaze. Cloud frowned, it was unfair. Why did everyone know he was weak to puppy eyes? The answer was almost certainly Flore. Or Zack. Or both. They talked too much.

Peter and Bo glanced at each other, then found themselves chairs. Cloud noticed the exchange of looks between the other men, but Genesis kept most of his focus.

“You're no better than Zack,” Cloud grumbled, letting go of Genesis' hand.

Genesis beamed at him then took a few bites. At least he wasn't lying like Zack, he stopped after that, without finishing Cloud's meal, then Genesis pointed his fork at Cloud.

“Anyway, don’t lie. You have more free time than the President.” he glanced at the SOLDIER, still eyeing each other.

Cloud pouted, “Not anymore. I’m busy with the Turks.”

“It's boring Cloud!”

“It's my job,” Cloud shrugged.

“No, I mean my mission is boring. It'll be better with you.”

The honest declaration made Cloud's heart jump. He blushed and put a big portion of food in his mouth to occupy himself and not smile like a loon.

“Can't.”

“You're missing out.”

“On a boring mission?” Cloud asked, an amused eyebrow shooting up.

“A mission with me can’t be boring!”

“So you already have good company,” Cloud answered with a full smile. “You don't need me.”

Genesis frowned, but it didn't last, “You're right, obviously. I don't need you for that, but it would have been nice.”

He didn't linger too much, apparently keen on announcing he was sent on a mission – telling it was a boring one each time – and letting Cloud at his breakfast.

Just before leaving the mess he froze, then gave Cloud a glance over his shoulder and shouted, “The uniform is good on you, gorgeous!” and then left. The stares Cloud received after Genesis' departure made him fidget a bit, but he kept his eyes on his meal and eat dutifully.

“So...” Essai started.

“Chocobo-head!”
As the same man they turned to the door, again, where Zack was coming from, as happy as Genesis, though a bit more bouncy. He leaned down and kissed Cloud, then gently head-butted him. One of his hand used the distraction to steal some fruit from Cloud's salad. The blond pinched him without hesitation. Zack yelped and drew his hand back, shaking it a little with a pout.

“You're a meanie.”

“Why are you all trying to eat my food?” Cloud grumbled. “You and Genesis can't eat better things than at the mess?”

“Yeah, but it's on your plat, so it's more appealing,” Zack answered, shouting him a glowing grin. “So, you saw Gen.”

“Yeah, he's pretty happy with his mission.”

“But it's boring!” Zack chuckled, smiling broadly.

Peter cleared his throat and said, “Commander Rhapsodos was so happy he kissed Cloud.”

Cloud heard a hit under the table and Peter grunted, while Essai smiled at a surprised, but not stunned Zack, “I guess it was the excitation, nothing more.”

Zack threw a hand on his chest and made a horrified expression, “You cheated on me with this dramatic buffoon?”

“Buffoon?” the word was so strange in Zacks' mouth that Cloud burst out laughing, the other men at the table snickered and chuckled.

“I can't live with it!”

Zack threw his head back, then stumbled to end up on Cloud's lap, one of his arms around Cloud's neck to stop himself from falling on the ground. He looked up at Cloud, who sighed, and kept eating. Zack tried to steal the doughnut Cloud managed to take before any other SOLDIER. Cloud stabbed his fork in the table just in front of the not so subtle hand. Zack made a scared sound and huddled on himself, closer to Cloud's chest than the fork, his guilty hand held close to his own chest.

“You're kinda dangerous, Chocobo-head.”

Cloud huffed, “Touch my food and I'll eat you.”

For a short second there was blissful silence where Cloud could eat, Zack humming and staring at his food, then Zack beamed at him. Cloud felt something coming up.

“You know what, that does sounds interesting.”

Cloud was confused until Zack finished his sentence with some eyebrow wiggle that made Cloud choke on his food. The other men snickered while Zack jumped from Cloud's legs and ended tapping his back. When Cloud calmed down, Zack stretched out, grinning without shame at Cloud, even if the blond was glaring at him.

“Are you red because he made a lewd comment or because you nearly coughed a lung?”

Cloud glared at Essai, who only smiled broadly at him. They were perfect for Zack if they always reacted like that.

“Hum, Lt. Fair?” Bo called to catch his attention. “Not to be rude, but didn’t your mission departure
was advanced?"

Zack's face fell in horror, before he laughed sheepishly, “Oops?” then he straightened up. “I came for you all, let's move.”

he started walking away, setting the pace, though the lack of goodbyes sent a cold sensation in Cloud. The men grumbled, chairs scraped on the ground, but they followed, not without saying goodbye to Cloud, some going to the point of ruffling his hair. From the corner of his eyes he saw Zack pause, look at nothing a bit above the line of the horizon, then gasped loudly. He pushed his men to get past them and ended up in front of Cloud. Zack hugged Cloud whose face was mashed against the stomach protection, then backed away to peck him on the lips.


Cloud couldn't help chuckle. It was like Zack had hesitated between being sure he was the adulthood adult around or that he would cause the more chaos.

“Also, nice uniform. It's good on you.”

Cloud ducked his head, a faint blush crossing his cheeks. He heard Zack chuckle, meaning his last sentence had been deliberate, then the sounds of boots tapping the floor in a natural rhythm. Playing with the last bits of eggs on his plat, Cloud almost forgot about Bo. The man cleared his throat, making Cloud jump out of his skin and look at Bo.

“Sorry for earlier, I thought-” Bo nodded and lowered his eyes. “Whatever is your implication in this water, I must thank you.”

“I did it for Flore,” Cloud said. He put aside his plats, having finished, and stood. “Not for you, Bo. I did it for the people I care about. For people I trust.”

“Trust and care,” Bo repeated, his eyes on the table and a small smile on his lips. “The Red Commander have you around his little finger.”

Cloud fidgeted under the amused gaze, he wasn't so accustomed to people teasing him. He never understood how people easily differentiated between friendly teasing, armless and fun, from the one bullies made. It looked all the same for him. Except with people he trusted to no end, and yet, there was still a nagging thought if he wasn't in the right mind to make fun of himself too.

“Later, Bo,” Cloud said between his teeth.

He left without more, refusing to meet Bo's eyes and see some glint that would say Bo was judging him, that the teasing had been mean. Cloud sighed, he was sick of being unsure about people's intentions around him. Angeal was the worst of them. Though, Cloud could understand it was mostly the degradation that made him so changing.

He had just stepped outside the mess when he met Sephiroth. The man stood in front of him a moment, both of them staring at each other without uttering a word. From the corner of his eyes, Cloud noticed a few SOLDIERs behind Sephiroth, at the end of the hallway, staring at them.

“Strife,” the man said, making Cloud's startle, then frown. Sephiroth cleared his throat, avoiding his eyes with embarrassment. He shifted his stance and his voice was less cutting this time, “Cloud.”

The change in tone was startling, so Cloud stared. Sephiroth stared back. Cloud rubbed the bridge of his nose, cutting the eye contact and said, “I have to go so...?”
“I only wanted to know if you are amenable to eat dinner with us tonight? Genesis' mission is short enough for him to come back before then.” Sephiroth said, looking uncomfortable. “It would please us.”

Cloud chuckled at the comment. Right now Sephiroth didn't seem very pleased. The man shot a look at the whispering SOLDIERs down the all. He frowned, making all of them go mute, then returned his attention to Cloud. This time Sephiroth looked less uneasy, there was even the glint of expectation behind his green eyes.

Restless fingers went up to touch the collar Cloud kept. Even if its meaning was corrupted by the Numbers, Moljnir was still a symbol of protection to him. Running his fingers around the collar was a nervous gesture, but it calmed him a bit. He breathed out and mentally asked Thor what he would do in this situation. There was obviously no answer to his mental question.

Cloud looked back at Sephiroth. Lips quirked so minimally you had to look closely and brow scrunched, he looked dejected. Cloud liked his lips.

“Sure.”

A pleased smile adorned Sephiroth's lips for a short second. It relieved Cloud from his unease at the sad look Sephiroth had previously. Then the other bowed slightly his head, “Tonight then.”

After that, he left in a swirl of black and silver.

Cloud made a grimace. Eating at the trio's apartment meant he'd have to face Angeal. How would he react? How would Angeal react? He started to regret it already.

“Why so sullen, sunshine?”

Cloud scowled at Elena, who took Reno's petname and used it as much as the redhead. Apparently spending some time with Flore made Turks thinks they could be all chummy with him too. If Cloud was honest, he didn't hate it that much. Only the stupid petname irritated him.

They stood at the entry of the Turks’ floor where the traffic of people was always more important than any other fields of Shinra. SOLDIER's communal spaces were used frequently, but there was not the rush from here.

Elena grabbed his arm, in a very slow manner, that surprised him, without startling him. She moved with the flow, guiding him, and they ended in front of a door. Those doors were all the same, without an indicator of the room's function, or a number. Turks seemed to know by heart which door lead to what. Cloud was a bit impressed.

The interior was an observation's room, plunged in the dark. Rude and an unknow Turk stood there, while Cloud could see Tseng's back on the other side of a two-way mirror. In front of Tseng was a SOLDIER.

Cloud glanced at Elena who pushed him inside and closed the door on him, without getting inside herself. He looked at Rude and waited.

“A bunch of SOLDIER’s returned from long-term assignments, we're conducting interrogation about their missions,” Rude answered his silent question. “You're here to observe.”

“And identify any possibly-a-Watcher?” Cloud ended.

He came closer to the mirror to lean against the side, crossing his arms and observing the SOLDIER
facing Tseng with an irritated scowl.

Rude nodded, “Needless to say, anything that you hear here is confidential.”

“Then why did you say it?” Cloud asked.

A snort was heard, not from Rude, who grumbled, “You will sign a form too.”

“'kay,” Cloud said.

He wasn't intent on letting paper bind him to anything. If there were useful - or interesting - information that came from those interviews, he would choose to whom he'd share it with. Only silence followed his acceptance. For a short moment, Cloud thought the Turks knew he found no legitimacy in their forms and orders. He thought they would kick him out and never ask for him ever again. Maybe they did realise Cloud didn't recognise their authority, but they chose to stay silent, to keep him – Flore and Dirk by association – under their hand.

After that, the interrogation started. Cloud's boredom too. He even dozed off at a moment. He wished he was at the holy trinity's apartment right now.

The dinner was almost done, though Angeal was still working on the dessert. He had time and he wasted everything! He'd complained to Genesis and Sephiroth that his missions were suspended until he had his first injection for the degradation, though, now it seemed unuseful. Today had been a free day then, and he managed to waste it away. He was up in his eyes with problems that none of his lovers, or Zack and Cloud even thought about.

What would Genesis and he say when the highers-up would ask questions about their sudden remission? What would they say to the science department? Saying nothing would flag them, explaining Cloud was the one to help them would put him in danger, and them too.

He focused too much on those questions until he was late to start the dinner he thought of.

Angeal reached for the flour and grabbed nothing. He frowned, then swirled around. He left the mix on the counter, bumped in Sephiroth who moved at this moment and snapped at the General.

“Stop standing like a tree in the middle of the kitchen!”

Angeal froze, let the bag of flour fall back on the table and glanced at Sephiroth. Angeal was terrorised that he exaggerated. After all, there were no reasons for him to snap at Sephiroth who just came in. Sephiroth returned his gaze, blinking slowly, and a bit of snack between his lips. He swallowed it and took Angeal's hand.

“What? No. I'm not stressed, just in a hurry,” Angeal grumbled.

He waved off Sephiroth's comment and took the flour. The cake wasn't going to be finished if he didn't move fast. A thought crossed his mind and he groaned loudly. He shot a look at Sephiroth, still standing in the middle of the kitchen, observing him with a thoughtful expression.

“Do you think Cloud like chocolate?” Angeal asked, his eyes getting back to the cake mix. “I gave him a hot chocolate once, but maybe he doesn't like chocolate that much? What do you think
Sephiroth?

He looked back at the silver-haired man who smiled smugly, “I think you're stress baking.”

Sephiroth left on those words, letting Angeal dumbstruck and grumbling. The food he was making took all his frustration and the curse words he wanted to say to others.

He almost jumped out of his skin when the doorbell rung. Angeal looked around, verifying everything was in order. The table was put, the diner needed only a few minutes to cook and all his kitchen utensils had been removed. Everything was pristine.

A key card bip was heard then, just as Sephiroth poked his head inside the kitchen, staring at him with a mix of curiosity and worry.

Genesis and Cloud stepped inside, the blonde hidden in Genesis' shadow. It was strange that the man who had voluntarily used his reputation as a terrifying temperamental SOLDIER to get ride of rookies was the one Cloud favoured and used as a shield. Though, all SOLDIERs could attest they lost their fear of Commander Rhapsodos when they learnt to know the man. They still dreaded his anger tho. Cloud had only jumped straight to the step of loving the adorable man with a passion for poetry.

Angeal welcomed everyone but saw how Cloud always put Genesis, or even Sephiroth at times, between them. He could understand why. He understood. But it didn't calm the guiltiness to gnaw at his stomach. To keep him from thinking about how he had ruined the relationship between him and Cloud, Angeal put the diner and made sure everyone was eating. He tried to fill the silence with a lot of help from Genesis, but the atmosphere was stilled.

“You're uncomfortable, I can see it,” Genesis said to Cloud when they finished eating.

True to his words, Cloud had been hunched over himself since the beginning of the meal. He didn't relax one bite and frowned at times. Angeal was certain it concerned him since a few times Cloud made this face the moment Angeal said something.

“No, it's not—”

Cloud glanced at Angeal, biting the inside of his cheek, then lowered his eyes. Angeal sighed.

“I can leave.”

With that he stood, some part of him beating himself for his earlier interactions with Cloud.

“No!” Cloud shouted, standing up too and extending a hand. He froze, withdrew his hands toward himself in a defensive manner and rocked side to side, meeting none of their eyes. “It's... I'm so bad at understanding what people expect of me. It's clear with Zack. He talks so much I'll have my answer at a moment,” he rubbed the tip of his thumb on his fork. “I don't know what you all want from me.”

Genesis, his chin in his hand, lifted a brow and made a sarcastic comment, “Do you want a list?”

Cloud hesitated, emitting a sound low in his throat, barely inaudible. Genesis straightened, eyes huge. Angeal sat down and rubbed the base of his nose.

“You did it for me, why not for Cloud?” Sephiroth said to the both of them.

Cloud glanced at him, Sephiroth returned the gaze and they stayed silent for a moment. Until Genesis
sighed loudly more exactly.

“That's totally possible,” Angeal commented, keen on maintaining his voice soft. “Though, my wish can be resumed as that you feel comfortable with me, and not scared.”

Cloud rocked again, looking at a wall, “I'm not scared.” he opened his mouth, said nothing, and put back the fork on the table. “Thank you for the meal. Goodnight.”

He walked out of the kitchen, and the apartment without any other words. The three SOLDIERs sat in silence for a bit, two of them stunned.

“Did he just walk away from us like that?” Genesis asked to no one in particular.

Sephiroth stood, yawning, “He said goodbye. I'll leave for my mission, goodnight.”

Angeal and Genesis stood at the same time and went to shower in affection the silver-haired. He was going to be out for the night and morning while they would be sleeping at home.

When he left, Angeal had time to think about Cloud during his cleaning up of the kitchen. He was making the blonde uncomfortable, even while Genesis was here. Spending time alone with the blonde wasn't advisable then. He sighed, his heart clenching in his chest. What an idiot he had been! Now, it was certain that his relationship with Cloud would never reach the flow between Genesis and Cloud.

Chapter End Notes

well so i'm not set on writing/outlining, still got time to decide but i'll warn you anyway in other news spring is here and with spring came two things i would do better without: pollen and exams. Guess which one will make that i'll only post once in april? if you said both you're right! both make worsen my headaches so i lower my work charge so next chap will be either the week-end of the 14-15 or 21-22
“We're facing a wall again,” Reno sighed loudly.

He fell on the table, his chin resting on it while his arms were taking all the length of the table. Next to him, Elena was tapping her pen on the table, eyes unfocused. Flore looked calm, but Cloud knew she was dozing off.

“If only sunshine could remember!” Reno hissed, rolling his head to glare at Cloud.

A yawn took the blonde, he hummed at Reno's comment, though he already forgot what he said. His eyes were on the enième SOLDIER coming back from a long-standing mission and he half-listened, half-dozed off too.

“Why are we still here?” Flore asked, her voice huskier with her little nap. “We're all sleeping on our feet.”

“Tseng though you'd react better if tired. Something about less control over-” Reno waved around his head. “I dunno man, he said a big word on a thing in the brain and that it would help you react to unconscious cues the spy could give.”

“See how it works,” Cloud grumbled, his eyes drooping.

The Turks knew everything, and more. Cloud certainly didn't expect them to make a chart about his sleeping schedule, notice when he was the more tired, and drag him there. Flore was in the same state, though it was because they kept her awake, with her consent, while he almost had been dragged out of the bed. They knew Zack had come back late, perturbing Cloud's sleep.

Those little pesky things... he'd give them a taste of their own medicine when he could. That they knew so much made him uneasy, but on second thought it was to be expected from the sleuths of Shinra's company.

“Oi!” Reno shouted.

Cloud startled awake, his eyes having shut without him noticing. Cloud send a glare at the redhead who smiled happily, until he was on the floor, his eyes huge with surprise on the ceiling.

“Run, Cloud, run!” Flore said.

Her smile and his sleepiness made him hesitate. But the moment his brain caught up, he stood, send a questioning look at Elena, and exited the room when she waved him off. He hadn't made two steps outside that Flore rejoined him. She yawned and let herself lean on Cloud.

“We're taking a breakfast?”

“Sure,” Cloud mumbled, already checking his messages. “Zack is still sleeping. I don't want to wake him up.”

“Aw,” Flore gushed. “That's true love!”

They met a few SOLDIERs shuffling toward the mess too. They answered to Cloud's grunted hello
with the equivalent grunt, yet made some effort to answer Flore's excited salutation. Her energy was unbelievable. Cloud could only hope she'd calm down like Zack did with some years behind him.

They opened the door of the mess in perfect accordance, sharing smiles. Though the moment Cloud looked back in front of him, he froze at the equally frozen Angeal. Cloud stepped automatically behind Flore. The need to shield himself behind someone made him lower his head in shame. The added guilt of hiding behind Flore, who he was normally protecting, caused him to lose instantly the ravenous hungriness he supported seconds ago.

“I-” started Angeal. He sighed and walked past them, “Good day to you two.”

Both Cloud and Flore watched his retreating back.

“He didn't attack you again since you-” Flore cleared her throat, she nodded with a moue.

“No, he didn't. I'm just-” Cloud trailed off and glanced back at the end of the wall.

A few SOLDIER passed them, since they only blocked one side of the halls, and even gave them a polite nod. Flore nudged him with her entire body and rocked back on her feet while Cloud stumbled with the strength she used. She laughed and skipped to the mess' display.

Cloud caught bits and piece of some SOLDIERs conversation he was eavesdropping on instinctively.

“I heard AVALANCHE returned as a separate group.”

“Yeah, but their leader is different.”

“They still blow up mako reactors.”

“Maybe they left the Watchers because they calmed down on that?”

Cloud hummed to himself, he heard little about Watchers trying to save the Planet. Their initial goal always had been to 'save' Wutaii. The Watchers managed to swallow the former AVALANCHE in them, but their actions against the reactors were dictated only by how they could weaken Shinra.

He was also sure the AVALANCHE that blew up reactors now was the one hiding in Seventh Heaven.

At the table, they were joined by Dirk, who took his pause at the same time just to be with them, even if the two of them were stuffing food in their mouth rather than talking. Dirk seemed to like them silent, listening to him bitching about his coworkers and some SOLDIERs. He had no fear of naming those people. But he always had been an asshole too sure of himself to care for their reactions, to the point he seemed suicidal for other.

After bitching enough to lower his tension, Dirk returned to work. Even with the amount of complains he emitted, Cloud and Flore knew he was content working in the kitchen. They even joked the man would take the chef's hat the moment the old man in power would turn his head around.

In fact, Dirk left the moment Flore started gushing over Bo. Either he was dead jealous, or he was sick of hearing all about Bo's qualities. Cloud started to feel the later, but Flore was so happy he could ignore whatever she said and just focus on that.

“And I'm pretty sure I heard that Genesis would like you in tight leather. Are you fine with it?”
Cloud hummed, his eyes gazing at somewhere above Flore's shoulder and a piece of bread in his hands that he meticulously shredded to tiny bits. He blinked when snickers and snorts echoed around him. He glanced at the men, stopping a second on the one coughing up a lung after swallowing wrong. Cloud frowned and looked at Flore. She had a pinched smile like she tried to hide her mirth without managing it at all.

"Flore."

She beamed at him, "Cloud!"

He shook his head with a slight smile, his eyes naturally fleeing to glance at the SOLDIERs entering the mess. He frowned at the two men accompanying Bo and glared at them. The short redhead looked over and froze, his eyes dropping to the ground. Then he frowned, catching up with Bo and the other. Cloud looked away, only to see Flore's own pinched expression. She met his eyes and they understood each other.

They observed the trio chose their food while talking. The redhead nudged his colleague one time and the burly dark skinned man glanced at them with an expression apparent to fear. There was something off about their behaviour. SOLDIERs were confident almost every second of their life, for the vast majority. They reacted like the ex-Watchers were insects that entered their house, irritated, but not afraid. Yet those two newcomers were afraid. Cloud and Flore's eyes met again, their meals almost forgotten.

Bo left the two to join Flore and Cloud, but he had only eyes for Flore. Cloud was a bit surprised at how shy Bo turned out with Flore. Or maybe he was intimidating him without thinking. After all, he was tense. But it was because of those two SOLDIERs a few tables away. Maybe a bit because Bo had a hand on Flore's thigh. A hand that moved quickly the instant Cloud's eyes zeroed on it.

"What? Afraid I'll stab your hand?" Cloud couldn't help himself ask.

Bo snorted, a smile painting his face, "Not when my hand is on Flore, you could hurt her. But I'm sure you wouldn't shy away from breaking a few fingers."

Cloud chuckled, then a bit more when Flore kicked his chair, a frown on her face.

"Don't threaten my soulmate," she hissed.

The men that Cloud watched from the corner of his eyes shared a look and relaxed minutely, making Cloud confused. He returned his attention to Flore a second.

"I didn't threaten him."

"You gave him the stinky eyes."

"Because he's stinky."

Bo snorted and shot a smile to Cloud. He felt like the man was a bit less irritating now. After all, Bo left his bedroom and tried to get back his life in hand. To be honest, Cloud had disliked Bo only because he reminded Cloud of himself. Sometimes he'd wanted so much to stay somewhere not to move anymore until he died. It was unfair to let his own projection hurt his relationship with Bo, Cloud knew, and he forced himself to think Bo as totally separated from him with varying degree of success.

Looking over the two suspicious SOLDIERs, Cloud's met the redhead's eyes. The guy dropped his gaze instantly before frowning and defiantly looking back at Cloud. The blonde cocked his head to
the side just as illumination hit him. A smile grew on his lips. The redhead lost his defiance and glanced at his friend just as Cloud found Dirk's eyes behind the food display. The man perked up and followed Cloud's quick head movement toward the mess' doors.

Cloud stood, they were maybe thinking Flore and him were spies, like them, but they were still afraid. The two watched him come over to stand in front of them. One cleared his throat and gave Cloud a strained smile. The redhead toyed nervously with his knife. Cloud noticed Ama at the next table giving him a questioning look, Cloud shrugged.

“You're a new guy, yes?” the dark-skinned asked. “What's your division?”

“Tracking Watcher infiltrated in SOLDIER,” Cloud answered.

The smile on the man disappeared a second before he put it back again, “Ahah! What's this nonsense? Watchers in the SOLDIERs?”

“I'm here,” Cloud said. “As you are.” He cocked his head to the side as the men tensed, “Though, here, everyone knows I was a Watcher. What about you?”

The redhead reacted first. The knife he'd played with grazed Cloud's neck as he backed away. The other SOLDIER stood, but was stopped by Flore, standing in front of him with determination. Cloud's attacker pressed forward. Before Cloud could defend himself, Ama knocked against the pale man so hard he fell to the ground. Cloud kicked the knife away, glancing at Ama whose smile gleamed on his darker skin.

“Poison!”

Cloud startled at Flore's word. She was crouched on the ground, next to the other Watcher passing for a SOLDIER. The man convulsed, dying. Ama and Cloud kneeled next to the redhead just as he closed his teeth hard on something in his mouth. Cloud forcefully opened his jaw and put his hand in the man's mouth. The guy bit him hard, drawing blood, yet Cloud attained his goal. The redhead unclenched his jaw, letting Cloud's hand free, and heaved the poison out of his mouth.

Cloud shook his bitten hand with a grimace.

“You're okay?” Ama asked from his place on the redhead's back.

“Sure.”

“It's a poison potent enough to kill an enhanced SOLDIER,” Flore hissed. “You'll have side effects.”

Cloud frowned, “What side effects?”

She shrugged, “I'm not a doc.”

Descending from the jump in adrenaline, Cloud thought about the possible outcome. He didn't ingest the thing, the redhead seemed in bad shape, but could survive with some help, so the poisoned bite wouldn't hurt him. Not too much. He rose, his hand burning, “I'm out for the day.”

“Do you want someone to help you walk to your apartment?” Ama asked when he was already to the doors.

“No, I'll see Genesis.”

“He's at Angeal's garden, not his office,” one SOLDIER shouted from the back of the mess.
Cloud nodded, he was relieved, the pain in his hand ascended to his elbow and he felt nauseous. The garden was a shorter walk than the offices on another floor.

He opened the garden's door while blinking profusely. He wouldn't die from the bite, but it did have some nasty side effects.

“Gen?”

Only Angeal was there. He stood quickly, startling Cloud who stumbled back. Someone grabbed his shoulders from behind and his heart stopped a second. He slipped out of the unknown clutch, toward Angeal, preferring a known danger. Angeal grabbed his forearm, making him shudder, but he didn't struggle against the grip.

“What-?”

Cloud's vision swirled, making him dizzy. He grabbed back Angeal's arm and closed his eyes.

"There was a problem in the mess,” someone said. Bo, it was Bo. “-Flore send me to look after him.”

Cloud blinked as he noticed the lack of details in Bo's reports like he'd forgotten half the story. He gazed back at Bo, who was a very badly shaped SOLDIER with no clear-cut outline, then at Angeal. He barely could saw his eyes.

“We should send him to a doc, no?”

Cloud froze and shook his head, only for his vision to blank. Next thing he knew, he was kneeling on the ground, taking deep breaths.

“I'll just go fetch Gen,” Angeal said, the warmth of a hand on Cloud's back leaving as he did.

Bo's hand found Cloud's back until the blond shrugged it off. Bo sighed but didn't try to touch him again. Cloud moved, so he was clutching his knees to his chest, his head on them. He'd have preferred Angeal with him, both because he really wanted to show Angeal he wanted to know him better, even after the First's attacks, and because the calm of the garden was different without Angeal. Bo seemed off here.

He must have blacked out since he woke up on a couch whose smell he knew by heart.

“Gen?” he mumbled, rolling away from the back of the couch.

The redhead looked down from the potions he was examining, a pinched expression on his face.

“Flore told us you didn't sleep enough, that plus the poison knocked you out.” Genesis put his hands on his hips and leaned above Cloud, handing him a bottle, “I gave you a few potions, but take this. You'll feel better.”

Cloud yawned, rubbing his heavy eyes, slitting one open when he heard someone move from the desk chair. He stared intently at Angeal, whose shoulders were hunched.

“I'll get you a warm drink,” he said in a murmur.

“Don't frown like that,” Genesis said at Cloud, rubbing between his knitted brows. “Or are you in pain? You do have a slight fever, but it's better than when Zack passed.”

“Zack came?” Cloud asked with the bottle of potion near his lips.
Genesis pushed on the bottle's bottom to make Cloud drink it, “Obviously. He only left to hand over his report.”

Angeal left the moment Sephiroth stepped inside. The General shot him a questioning look, but Angeal only smiled sadly - which cleared nothing for Sephiroth he was sure - and hovered beyond the door, without going back to his own office.

Genesis moved into the room and came to look at Angeal too. The redhead frowned and motioned for Sephiroth and him to enter. Sephiroth did, but Angeal shook his head and leaned on the wall adjacent to the door, crossing his arms. There he was hidden from Cloud.

Angeal saw Sephiroth frown when he glanced down at Cloud. It was easy to imagine Cloud sneering at his drink since it had been the expression Angeal saw on the blond the moment he handed him the cup.

"Why is he always like that with me?" Cloud asked to no one in particular.

Genesis glanced at Sephiroth like he would know to whom the question was addressed, or he would know what the question was referring to. Anyway, Sephiroth had no answer for any of those questions, but he glanced at Angeal.

"Angeal?" Genesis asked. "His pampering?"

Cloud said, "Yeah, he does that-" Angeal wondered why Cloud stopped, maybe he made a move to accompany his words, "-and then become all skittish and hide."

Genesis snorted and shot an amused look at Angeal. Sephiroth glanced at him over his shoulder too. Angeal felt under attack but only lifted his shoulders.

"He's only worried he'll hurt you again," Sephiroth said, at Angeal surprise who'd thought Genesis would spill the comment.

"I can defend myself."

Cloud's voice was grouchy, vexed even. Angeal couldn't help a bitter smile to cross his lips. Cloud's comment only made his guilt dig deeper, Cloud shouldn't have to say he could defend himself from one of his soulmates. That was so wrong. Angeal knew he caused this wrongness.

The silence lingered, while Cloud grumbled nonsense and sipped his cup. Sephiroth had started zoning out, apparently bored out of his mind.

"He nearly killed you, give him some time," Genesis finally commented.

Cloud scoffed, “Whatever.”

The comment made Sephiroth startle, he frowned at Cloud. Angeal stopped the man from saying something, feeling an honest, but maybe too blunt, comment coming. The silver-haired man pinched his lips when Angeal pressed gently his arm, understanding what Angeal wanted from him. It was a silent understanding that Sephiroth put quite some time to develop, at first there was one chance on two that Sephiroth missed body language cues.

With his instinctive action, Angeal had revealed himself. He stepped into the office fully and gave a smile that he wanted to be soft at Cloud. Though, it felt like his face didn't answer him exactly how he wanted and he ended up grimacing rather than smiling.
"You do have a startle response anytime I'm near."

"I know! And if we don't spend time together when you're not hurting me, it'll stay too long!"

"Don't force yourself, Cloud"

The young man only frowned more at his words and grumbled in another language, drowning some of his words in his drink. Angeal shot a look to Genesis, he was the more accustomed to Cloud's particularity after Zack. Genesis waved a hand, without a word, which didn't help Angeal at all.

“How was your mission, darling?” Genesis asked Sephiroth, changing completely the subject.

Angeal sighed, he wanted to take care of the problem between him and Cloud now that someone had addressed it first and he hadn't to do it himself. Though the dark look that crossed Sephiroth's face made Angeal forget about his predicament with Cloud for a moment.

“Boring!” Sephiroth said. “No. Worse. They tricked me into going to a gala.”

“Oh, dear,” Genesis whispered with concealed amusement.

Angeal pinched the base of his nose. That explained why Sephiroth came back sooner and was zoning out. Either he had been bored to death and couldn't shake it off alone or someone made him uncomfortable enough for Sephiroth to retreat. Either way, he needed to blow some steam off.

“I want to fight.”

“Obviously,” Genesis snickered. “You're not the kind who want a back rub to feel better.”

“It doesn't work,” Sephiroth scoffed.

Angeal pinched his lips with amusement, Genesis had been teasing, but the silver-haired was on a one-track-mind and didn't pick on the teasing tone. Then the start of excitement took him. He could fight Sephiroth with Genesis. His own degradation had been stopped short before it's lingered for years, but even Genesis and his own wound were better, far better than a week prior.

“Fight me.”

Cloud's comment made Angeal deflate, a sound of surprise escaped Genesis, while Sephiroth only blinked at Cloud. The silver-haired nodded quickly.

“With swords.”

Cloud shrugged, and it was settled.

“Wait,” Angeal said, both irritated that he couldn't fight Sephiroth with Genesis like before and because Cloud was sick. “He just passed out. You're not fighting him.”

“I'm fine,” Cloud interjected, already standing. “I slept and Genesis gave me potions.”

A Genesis who wasn't stopping Cloud, so Angeal nudged him, “Say something.”

“I want to see them fight,” Genesis said.

Sephiroth left the office with Cloud on his heels before Angeal could finish groaning about their stupidity. All of them. He pinched his nose when Genesis trailed after the two, almost skipping happily. Angeal would be glad when the Turks would finally start the investigation for Genesis and
his sudden healing. At least he would return on the battlefield where people listened to him and, strangely, were more rational than the three idiots in front of him. Plus Zack.

A puppy who joined them while Cloud was frowning at many swords in the reserve. He huffed and scoffed and put back anything that he took in hand. Sephiroth was losing patience and Genesis' PHS was ringing, because he said he was ignoring his desk duty and his secretary was pretty mad at him. Angeal couldn't scold him since he was doing the same. But it was infrequent in his books while Genesis loved to get away from work.

"Do you want Slashy-slash?" Zack asked.

Angeal rolled his eyes at the name. Even years after, he couldn't believe Zack kept this stupid name. Cloud chuckled but shook his head.

"I'd prefer lighter swords."

Genesis suddenly left, maybe irritated by the PHS vibrations. Zack chuckled and shared a glance with Angeal, both were sure some raised voices would be heard in a few seconds from Genesis and her secretary, a woman that didn't let herself be walked over by Genesis.

Though, it was a SOLDIER moaning sadly after Genesis that came to them. The redhead came back with two swords from Abe, who was trailing after him with a kicked puppy's face.

"I have a mission in a few hours, sir."

"They won't fight for hours," Genesis answered, handing the twin swords to Cloud.

He weighed up the swords, made a few slashing motions and shrugged. Sephiroth almost dashed out of the room, Cloud on his heels, he was losing patience it seemed. It took only a few minutes for Cloud to chose a weapon, but Angeal was still surprised Sephiroth didn't go hunt for another adversary in the meantime. The silver-haired was curious. Though, Zack and Genesis shared whispers made clear Sephiroth wasn't the only one.

Angeal meet a few SOLDIERs eyes, curious as they were. He hoped Cloud and Sephiroth didn't mind being watched, though they headed for the VHR rooms where they would be isolated from gushing SOLDIERs.

The three of them went to the observation room. It had a window showing the fight without the simulation, and screen with it. The screen was far bigger than in the entry room for the VHR, but the window was the best addition. They could see the fight without the distracting environment falling apart when it happened. And it always happened with Sephiroth since he liked taking an environment resembling the Tower and slash it to bits while fighting someone.

Sephiroth, in a show of great patience for him just before a fight, let Cloud accustom to his borrowed swords. Only a few seconds though.

As it was the middle of the day, Angeal was surprised to see even half a dozen of SOLDIERs join them, crowding the little observation room. He saw one of Cloud's chick, Zack did too since he waved to him and went to engage in a conversation. Dirk send him a dark look, crossed his arms, and gave Zack his back, making the puppy whine.

Angeal put a comforting hand on Zack's shoulder and pressed it. The young man let himself fall against Angeal's chest, crossing his arms too and sulking. The touch wasn't special, Angeal often served as a wall for a young Zack who liked touching people. Yet the knowledge that Zack was his soulmate changed the situation in a heartbeat. Angeal was hyperaware that on Zack's back was the
“Dirk just hates everyone,” Genesis said, observing the man too. “Don’t take it personally, puppy.”

“He’s fine with Cloud and Flore. This tall blonde from the Turks too,” Zack mumbled.

Genesis rubbed away the frown on Zack’s face, changing it for a pout that made the redhead chuckle. This too was a touch that wasn’t rare. Genesis always had his hands on his people’s faces. The thought made Angeal chuckle and he received a questioning look from Genesis.

They were distracted by the start of the fight. Both the fighters tested each other, Sephiroth learnt over the years not to attack with everything he got from the start. Angeal was glad Cloud didn’t have to experience that. The blonde was already struggling to keep up while he was on the defensive. He stumbled and searched his footing, his grip on his swords faltering a few times.

They blocked each other in a stance, even now, Cloud’s arms shook with the effort.

“What’s going on?” Sephiroth asked, a few inches from Cloud before he broke the hold and backed away, sword down. Cloud made a soft sound of surprise. “I can stop any attacks that you didn’t catch. If you’re still afraid of me, you can leave. I’m not forcing you to fight me. Never.”

cloud kept silent a moment, though his mouth was slightly agape. Angeal wished there wasn’t the cask on the blond’s eyes, he wanted to know what expression eh showed.

Dirk, in his spot, fidgeted, perking up, which caught Angeal attention. He seemed pleased with the idea Cloud could leave now.

“Yeah, I was worried but... it's not...” Cloud fumbled with his words and his helmet, adjusting it. He mishandled the swords too, making them rock in his lose hold. He took a deep breath and changed his handle of the sword in a way that made Angeal frown. It was far from standard. “It's okay. He can resume now.”

Sephiroth tilted his head to the side, then drew his sword higher, nodding at Cloud. The blond waited for Sephiroth’s attack again, but his movements changed completely from before. Zack straightened up, at Cloud’s defence, then quick retaliating blow. Sephiroth stumbled back, taken aback by the change, only for a grin to paint his lips.

Cloud ducked the next attack, pressed forward, but his right sword was parried by Sephiroth. He kicked Cloud’s left sword away. Only for it to make a circular motion, then it surged from the bottom to the top. Sephiroth propelled himself back, avoiding a deep cut on his chest.


“Yeah, I know those movements,” Zack said in a breathy voice. “They are numbers 4.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted in a heartbeat. Tension filled everyone as they shot a glance at Dirk, who smirked derisively.

“I dunno. Which number 4 are we talking about? The first?”

“Don’t you think it was something to mention to the Turks?” one said, already typing on his phone.

“Nobody asked. We meet Cloud when he was already isolated from the big part of the Watchers, he might have lied about being the first n°4 anyway. How could Flore and I know the truth?”
“That won't pass for the higher-ups,” the Turk said. “Cloud told us he had been assigned Sephiroth as a primary target only as a suicide mission, but n°4 can injure Sephiroth.”

A coldness had taken Angeal, he glanced at the fight, mesmerized by how Cloud moved, and yet afraid of what the Turks would do to him.

“Dirk Burnham, you are under arrest for an undetermined time.” the Turk turned to them then.
“Please, end the simulation, Cloud Strife is to be detained too. Tseng's orders.”

Zack pressed his forearms hard enough to make him wince. He met the puppy's eyes, Genesis' too with a glance, and knew they needed to do something. But what? Angeal was at lost.

Chapter End Notes

last time I said I'd post the week-end of the 14-15 or 21-22. Well I'm one week late! listen my exams were this week and I finished classes only one week before that... so I wasn't in the mood to edit fics (say the writer who posted other things absolutely not planned >.< i'm sorry)
next update uh... let's say 12 or 13 may.
re-reading this chapter now months old I ask wondering what was the purpose of few things and ended disappointed past-me hadn't written anything about those things that's, I hope, you won't notice are out of place. even if finding something not coherent in such a weird Frankenstein's monster fic is hard
Silence filled the room, only to be broken by Reno's run that ended when he stumbled against a SOLDIER that filled the little room.

“I didn't miss the fight, right?”

“Look at your messages,” the other Turk said. What Reno did while glancing a few time at the fight still in action.

“Well, oh. Shit.” Reno hit his mouth with the PHS distractedly, gazing at the fight. “Someone stop the simulation.”

Zack's hold on his arms only grew stronger. Angeal grabbed his hand, caught the puppy's attention, and smiled at him. His heart was racing, but he had zero ideas. Zack released Angeal's arm and stepped closer to Reno.

“The fu-

Angeal grabbed Zack and put a hand on his mouth, though the young man struggled and gave him a hit in the stomach. The first Turk, Fighter, Angeal remembered, moved around the uneasy SOLDIERs and lifted a hand to put an end to the simulation while Reno grabbed Dirk forearm.

“What do you think you're doing?” Genesis interjected, making Angeal wince. “Cloud is one of us, I won't let you incarcerate him.”

“Yo, calm down spitfire-”

“Touch Cloud and I'll tear this Tower apart!” Zack said, managing to free his mouth from Angeal's clutch.

“Shut up you idiot,” Angeal said between his teeth.

“I'll help,” Genesis added, crossing his arms and leaning against the console for the simulation.

Angeal groaned, squeezing Zack's waist hard enough to hurt, he was sure, then he let go of Zack to hit on the button ending the simulation. Both of them send him a betrayed look, he returned a deep frown that he hoped communicated the fact he would sermon them for not thinking.

“Thanks, dude!” Reno said breathly, apparently worried a fight would have broken out. “Don't freak out, just go see Tseng rather than-”

Zack walked to Reno who backed away, using Dirk as a shield, though he didn't have because Angeal caught the boy before he could do something to the Turk.

In the VHR room, the two fighters had come to a halt, waited a bit like they thought the simulation would work again before Cloud removed his cask. He breathed heavily and was tense as the SOLDIERs in the room assisting to the two sort of exchanges. He sat down slowly, putting the swords on the ground and held his head with trembling hands.

Sephiroth changed his grip on his sword so the tip pointed behind him and he knelt next to the blond,
“Cloud?”

“Hurt,” Cloud mumbled, his head on his knees.

“It wasn’t my fault?” Sephiroth asked with an edge of panic.

Cloud shook his head before hissing and wrapping his arms around his head, “The cask. The images fluctuated.”

Sephiroth frowned and took the disregarded cask, while Zack grabbed Angeal’s forearm without force, but searching for comfort.

“It’s working fine.”

Fighter the Truk shook her head and went to the VHR’s door. She opened it and the shrill sound of metal made Cloud hunch over himself, his obvious pain made Angeal’s gut twist, just as Zack whined and Genesis stomped.

“Please, we need to interrogate Cloud Strife on his time as a Number.”

Sephiroth stood quickly frowning enough for other people to see and made the Turk tense, “What?”

Angeal’s meet a few of the SOLDIERs questioning looks, somehow he was certain those men would obey any of his orders, even if it was to hurt the Turks. He made a grimace and grabbed Genesis who had the same realisation if he believed the dangerous glint in his eyes.

“As you can see he’s not in any capacities to follow you.”

Reno patted Dirk’s head, then held the doorframe and leaned in the VRH room, one foot held up in the air like a ballerina, “Yo sunshine!” Cloud hissed and threw him a dark look. “The interrogation rooms are soundproofed.”

“That’s doesn’t-” Sephiroth started only for Cloud to stand and wave at him silently.

“I’m one of yours, isn’t it?”

Reno straightened, like he was surprised, and glanced at Cloud who came closer willingly, “Tseng said so. Also, the questions we want answers from you are-” he glanced at the SOLDIERs around them, “-not about who you didn't say you were while hinting at it, but we knew, because we're Turk, and Flore-”

“-Flore let too much slip because she isn't entirely a Turk,” Cloud ended, pinching the base of his nose in pain.

“Yet.” Reno added, glancing at the Firsts in the room, one looming behind Cloud with a dark aura. “Tell them not to kill us?”

“And you won’t kill me?”

“We need you!” Reno yelled, throwing his arms in the air.

Cloud startled, his eyes lost focus a second and he stumbled back. Sephiroth’s hand on his back keep him standing. Zack struggled again in Angeal’s hold, Genesis stepped closer, though Angeal held both of them.

“Genesis, you have work,” Angeal said. “We have work. Zack, you have a mission in half-an-hour
in the slums and Sephiroth should go see Lazard for the briefing about your next mission.” he glanced at the others SOLDIERs, “Whatever you have to do, go to it now.”

They shuffled around, murmured between them, but followed his advice.

“What?” Zack yelled, before shushing himself at Cloud's obvious pain from the sound. “Geal! We can't let them have him. I'm not letting you go, Cloud.”

“We're going to work,” Angeal announced before he met the two Turks eyes in turns. “If at the end of the day, the problem isn't resolved, we're going to get Cloud.”

“You make it sound like we're going to do some weird shit,” Reno said, keeping a low voice, proving some level of care for Cloud. He rolled his eyes and threw an arm around Cloud who didn't struggle. “Don't worry, yo. Come get sunshine when you're free, we're not the science department.”

“You still make people disappear,” Sephiroth accused.

Reno waved off the comment, then pulled Cloud with him. Zack grabbed the blond's hand who squeezed back but let go rapidly.

“It's just a headache, Zack.”

“That's not what I'm worried about,” Zack whined as Cloud left the room. “Well, yes I'm worried about it but you're going to the Turks!”

“Why nobody cares for me?” Dirk mumbled, trailing after Fighter, but without enthusiasm.

“Because you're an asshole,” Fighter said. “Yet Spear still like you, at my utmost wonder.”

They left, letting only Abe who went to take back his swords from Sephiroth before fleeing the scene. Angeal sighed at the three pair of eyes who zeroed on him.

“I have an idea, but first I needed you not to anger the Turks.”

Angeal hoped it'll work, or three SOLDIERs would tear him apart.

Cloud was dozing off in the uncomfortable chair. At least there was no sound to hurt his head. During his stay, the pounding in his head calmed down to something bearable. Reno had guided him to the strongest soundproofed room and let him there, not bothering him even a bit. Absentmindedly, Cloud knew the Turks used the time to question Flore and Dirk, though he didn't feel worried. Either he was in too much pain to care, or his gut feeling was right, the Turks weren't surprised by the discovery he was the first number 4.

Sure enough, the first thing Tseng said when he entered confirmed this theory.

“We knew you were Number 4 since M. Highwind told us about his rescue by you. The recordings saved from this day showed Number 4 killing most of his 'comrades'. “ Tseng sat down in front of Cloud. “Your stay here is just to appease our superiors might they hear about your identity. Also, it gives us time to ask about the other Numbers, if you are amenable.”

“Sure,” Cloud mumbled. He pointed toward the door, slightly ajar, and Tseng stood up quickly, understanding his need.
“Let me see him!” Zack moaned loudly.

Before Tseng could close the door, Zack, with three Firsts on his heels, rushed in. He knelt near Cloud and searched something on his face. Cloud let his legs down from his precedent position and smiled at Zack.

“I'm fine.”

“They didn't hurt you, right?”

Cloud couldn't help the fond smile that painted his face, “They need me. It was just for show.”

“Oh.”

The soft sound coming from Sephiroth, who peered into the room made Cloud send him a confused look.

“Why does it sound like a bad oh?” he asked, glancing down at Zack who played with Cloud's pants rather than looks him up in the eyes.

“We may have trashed Lazard's office!” Genesis said, entering the room with a content smile.

It disappeared the moment Angeal gave him a hit on the head. Genesis rubbed his skull, sending a dark look to Angeal while Reno, who hovered behind the men, snickered.

“That's wasn't wise,” Angeal snubbed.

“That played well for us,” Tseng interjected. “People could have been displeased if there wasn't enough trashing and contesting on our three ex-Watchers interrogations.”

“That doesn't make any sense for me,” Zack grumbled.

“I didn't expect you to understand politic that isn't linked to battles, or wars.”

Zack perked up and stared at Tseng with a glare, “Are you saying I'm dumb?”

“Only about the way people in power, that aren't fighters, react.”

There was a tense silence, though Tseng's lips quirked up and Zack huffed, then let his chin fall on Cloud's thigh.

“Your presence is a good thing. I'd like to question you all. But first, Cloud,” Tseng eyed Cloud, crossing his hands on the table, “-on the numbers. I think it's time you start being honest about them.”

He glanced at the others SOLDIERs. “Please, leave.”

Cloud sighed, rubbing the tip of his nose. Zack's hand, holding onto his knee clutched and he rose, apparently to threaten Tseng.

“No, I think we need those pieces of information as much as you,” Sephiroth interjected.

Tseng was going to answer, but Angeal cut him.

“Before that, I want to fill a form to inform the department I found my soulmates.”

“We all know that,” said Tseng, shooting him a look that showed he took him for an idiot, maybe thinking the degradation was acting. Angeal grimaced. He remembered chats with people during
which he talked nonsense while under degradation.

Cloud eyed the three men, plus Zack who looked down at him and smiled sheepishly. He put a hand on Cloud's shoulder and gave him a questioning look like he waited for Cloud approbation. Though there was no problem for Cloud, Angeal, one of his soulmate was freely giving the information about their bond, someone outside the group wasn't exposing it. But it was certain Cloud wasn't following why Angeal thought it was the good moment for that.

“Different from whom you think off.”

Reno, who had joined Tseng's side, frowned, then gave him a look that showed all the stupidity he thought of the demand, “You know where you can find those forms, yo. Move your ass, I'm not your secretary.” Then he blinked, glanced at Genesis and Zack. “Cloud Strife maybe?”

“Exact.”

There was a silence while Tseng closed his eyes in an expression of pain and Reno gaped at Angeal's serious expression. The bouncy redhead glanced at Zack, then Cloud, his stunned expression morphing for a tentative acceptance.

“You realise if you claim him as your soulmate, it'll stand for Sephiroth and Genesis.”

“I do hope so!” Genesis said, closing the door on them – forcing Sephiroth to enter fully the room – then heading for the little table and standing next to Cloud and Zack.

“Arg, you know what? I'll let Tseng handle that!” Reno exclaimed.

He sent a pleading look to Tseng who sighed mournfully before waving Reno, “Go take those forms. I'll question Cloud.”

Before that, Zack made Cloud stand up, took his chair and pulled Cloud on his lap, clearly stating he stayed for the interrogation. Cloud smiled at Tseng obvious annoyance as Sephiroth and Angeal joined them somewhat. Glancing behind him, Cloud saw Sephiroth leaning against the wall. Genesis sat on the table, while Angeal stood perfectly still at their side.

Tseng pinched his lips, but slide his folder to Cloud who obligingly took the pictures.

“I can't say anything for the new Number 4, I only know they change a lot since I've been thrown out of the position,” Cloud started. He took a deep breath and exhaled in a sigh while he took the first picture that Tseng labelled as Number 1. “Shen, wutaian, dark long hair, pale skin with a bit of an anger problem. He likes using a samurai sword. Sometimes I thought he tried to imitate Sephiroth, but he hates him.” Cloud changed the picture that showed a broader Watcher clad in black. “We call him Axe, that's all, he's from the south. I never knew more, it didn't interest me. Light brown skin and striking green eyes if that help. He's an axe wielder as his name, and the picture, show.” Tseng lifted his eyes to the side a second in a more controlled rolling of eyes. “Your Number 3 is Shajar. A materia user, like Genesis, she isn't extraordinary with a sword but can handle herself. She isn't so prone on the 'saving Wutai', but she likes the Boss of the Watcher. Whom I never meet, don't ask me.”

Cloud paused as a doubt overcame him, he frowned and thumbed the corner of the picture he held. Zack put his chin on his shoulder and squeezed his waist.

“Maybe I met him in passing?”

“Let's forget the Boss of the Watcher,” Tseng said, taking the picture of Number 3 to pass to Number
“Kira. She has a knack for memorising numbers, not that it's a useful information for you. She's...”
Cloud tilted his head to the side, recalling his time in the group of Number. It wasn't that hard but there had been more actions, more events that stuck to him through the mako pulls. During his isolated time, every day looked like the precedent and blurred together. “Funny in the sarcastic term. Somehow she was the closest to me. I guess she made me think of Tifa and Aerith combined.”

He froze, Zack hold on him hardening too. Cloud meet Tseng’s eyes, the dark-haired lips quirked up a second before he asked with a collected face, “Friends of yours? From the Watchers?”

“Friends, yeah,” Cloud said breathily. “Not Watchers, though.”

Tseng nodded, “What are her particularities. Also, I would like their weakness rather than a physical description.”

Cloud grimaced and squirmed in Zack's lap, “Sorry. Hum... Kira uses a lance, but close contact isn't her forte. Shajar, as I said, is medium at handling swords, though she has great stamina for casting. Axe use brute strength for everything.”

“But it was months, if not years ago, that Cloud last saw them. They all might have gotten better,” Zack said. Before anyone could tell him he couldn't say, he continued. “I read his notebooks. With permission.”

“Yes, you told us that already,” Tseng added, his eyes shifted behind Cloud, at Sephiroth, then Genesis. “Both of you calm down. Cloud knew Zack was giving us information from those notebooks, and we, the Turks, knew Zack was only giving us pieces to maw on to get us distracted.”

“Turks like to make things complicated,” Angeal sighed. “Why not just ask Cloud to read them yourself.”

“Because they are intimate,” Tseng said.

“Which didn't stop you before,” Genesis added.

“-and because we knew we could get killed for that, and lost Cloud's help for our missions,” Tseng finished, sending a glare at Genesis. “That's why we ask him today. It's easier and safer.”

Reno came back, a pile of papers in one hand and pens in the other. He let everything fall on the table and left while shaking his head and muttering nonsense. He stopped at the entrance and pointed an accusing finger at them.

“Since I like some of your dumb asses, I'll recall you the article seven that basically say no soulmate can participate in a recovery mission involving their other soulmate.” Reno waved. “So jot that down before making your choice.”

Tseng tilted his head to the side, acknowledging Reno's words. Cloud took one form and read the said article while Zack started tapping a rhythm on the ground with his foot.

“I really don't know what Angeal is talking about,” Cloud said staring at Tseng.

“Yeah, stress is making them go nuts!” Zack added with a chuckle. “Me? Four soulmates? That's mad. I only have my sweet Chocobo-head to take care of. Enough for me.”

Silence filled the room as Tseng eyed each of them, daring the Holy Trinity to say a word. Angeal
cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him.

“You know, degradation is making me do strange things.”

A poster perfect smile adorned his lips and Tseng sighed again, but nodded, “Right, I thought so. Then you can go.”

“Didn’t you have questions for us too?”

“Well, Turks noticed a splendid leap in their recovery in Genesis and Angeal, but it seems the degradation is far from cured,” Tseng stood. “So I can only guess Genesis is in a good period, and only Dr. Hojo’s work helped him.”

“Obviously!”

Tseng nodded, “Obviously.”

Tseng slid another picture toward Cloud who tensed. The picture was blurred on the edge and showed a few Watchers clad in black, with Axe, and two people without uniforms. They were blurred too, but not enough for them to be unrecognisable. One was a short and muscular guy with hair as long as Tseng and a clear ascendant from wutaiian descent even with the blue eyes and clear hair, the other an older dark-haired man, gangly, and with a white lab coat in the wutaian style of the left pan of coat over the other.

“Gave us everything you have please.”

Tseng’s comment startled Cloud out of his staring. He licked his lips, glanced down at the picture. He took a deep breath but said nothing.

“Your retention of information wasn’t our concern since we already had them. But those people are unknown from our services and we need to know who they are.”

Cloud squirmed on Zack who held him, emitting a pained grunt at a bad friction.

“Why are you protecting those people?” Tseng asked.

Cloud smiled derisively to himself. Implying he protected those people was as risible than saying Sephiroth would protect Hojo in the same situation. There was no amicable connection between Cloud and those men, far from it.

“Stri-”

“Sh.”

Cloud looked up to see Tseng frown at Sephiroth who just shushed him. He glanced over Zack’s shoulder as the silver-haired left his wall and came closer.

“You’re not protecting them,” Sephiroth asserted.

“That’s what I think too,” Genesis mumbled.

Cloud nodded his head at Sephiroth and Genesis whose eyes pierced Tseng. He inhaled, feeling no relief, only a deeper pressure on his sternum. He tapped the picture with his fingers and opened his mouth, ready to talk, but kept staring at it in silence, the echo of a lab in his ears. He blinked, the remanent image of blue eyes peering at him on his eyes. The only time he saw the other wutaian who isn’t a scientist.
Cloud blinked again when Zack turned around the picture and squeezed his waist, his chin resting on Cloud's shoulder and his chest molding to Cloud's back.

“Hey. You're here?”

“Ngh, kinda.”

He rubbed the palm of his hand more strongly than necessary, hurting himself a little while focusing on the part of the table where the two faces had been. The other men in the room shifted around him but said nothing. Zack pulled away enough to breath on Cloud's neck, tickling him. He tried to bat way the dark-haired man without much results from his position, he'd just hit Zack's temple meekly.

“Zack”, Cloud complained without strength. He turned around to glare at the puppy how sent him a beaming smile. Cloud huffed with amusement, “You're awful.”

He met Genesis' eyes when he turned around to look at Tseng. The redhead gave him a sweet smile that made Cloud's stomach twist with tenderness. It was Tseng clearing his throat that pulled Cloud from his thoughts. Cloud send him an apologetic look and tapped the table again, where the faces had been.

“I met the blue-eyed only once, when-” he swallowed and took a breath. “-I was in a lab.” his eyes shifted, they didn't stop on a point until he closed them and rocked his head side to side, “No name. That I recall at least. And the other is Shi-Shimane. I nearly killed him once.”

Zack's chin rested on his shoulder again, his arms holding onto Cloud. Though the blond was sweating and the hold kept him from breathing deeply. He played with Zack's fingers before forcing him to let go of him, then quietly put back the now tense hands on his thighs. Like that Zack wasn't hindering his breathing and he could still cling to him.

“He is a scientist,” Tseng commented when the silence stretched.

“Yeah,” Cloud croaked out. He cleared his throat, the flash of images stumbling against each other in his mind. “A scientist, yeah.”

Angeal shifted his stance, Cloud automatically looked at him. The man frowned, looking angry with this expression and his arms crossed. Yet he wasn't the thing that made Cloud panic, only his past managed that. The edge of the table caught his attention again. Wood tables broke and acted as substitutes for weapons, metal tables bend and suffered, but didn't help at all an escapee.

“Strife?”

Cloud looked up from the table he'd been zoning out on for to look at Tseng, “Yes?”

Tseng exhaled like he forced himself not to sigh, “I guess I will have no information about those men from Flore or Dirk?”

Cloud shook his head negatively, tapping a rhythm on the table. When they started rusting, they found back their friability. Cloud broke one and used the disgusting metal to defend himself once. Or was it twice?

“Don't push him,” Angeal warned.

It caught Cloud’s attention. He looked up at the man who sent him a soft smile, uncrossing his arms. The comment hadn't been meant to him, he realised.
Tseng didn't move nor talk for a few seconds then he stood up. The sudden movement startled Cloud. Zack hugged him tightly, kissed his neck and Cloud's heart calmed down a bit.

"Then we have finished for today," Tseng declared, nodding at them. "Please, keep a low profile for the next few days. Turks will not mingle with SOLDIERs and they should do the same. If we look like we are divided it will reassure the President."

He departed on those words and Zack snort.

"Are, uh, the Turks and SOLDIERs trying to hide things to the President?" Cloud asked out loud. "I mean, yes, I knew but... is there an alliance?"

"A tentative one," Sephiroth said. He suddenly turned on his heels and headed for the exit, "Let's go. I want ice cream."

Cloud couldn't help smile at that. He followed without second thought.

Angeal left the kitchen to check on Cloud and Sephiroth. He stopped in the corridor when his phone pinged. The text sent by Genesis told him he was still in the city with Zack, destressing who knew how. He sent them away earlier since their tension and constant movement only added to Cloud's hypervigilance. They complained and moaned, begging him to stay, but Sephiroth just had to loom over them threateningly for them to shut up and go. If dragging their feet in the process.

The sound from the TV was low, but Angeal wasn't surprised to see an old movie he'd seen as a kid at Genesis' home – he was the only one with a television – that Sephiroth watched intently. He had a fondness for children's tales he was deprived of as a kid. He was seated on the ground, almost in front of Cloud's head. The blond was curled on the couch, staring at the screen, though Angeal doubted he was really following the movie.

The scene was peaceful, almost cute if a bit bittersweet. The fascination showing in Sephiroth's eyes would never have existed if he had a normal childhood, and Cloud's calm was due to his earlier badly hidden panic attack.

Chapter End Notes

poor reader, spitting blood: why? why did you raise such a monster
me, stroking the head of my demon-fic child: if there's one thing I am, it's stubborn. And if the destiny of my child is to become one of those epic fic losing their plot, adding characters as they go, changing their characterisation, killing them and reincarnating them, having plot holes and deus ex machina, then mote it be. I will raise this fic to its full potential *cue terrible evil laugh*
reader: you-you're the monster!
Chapter 34

Genesis kissed Angeal goodbye, a smile on his lips.

"I know this foxy smile, Gen. You have something in mind," Angeal mumbled as he closed his belt.

It elicited an amused snicker from Genesis whose smile broadened, "I won't do something reprehensible. I'll just give something interesting to Cloud."

Angeal frowned, Genesis could almost hear the gear running in his head as he tried to guess what Genesis was talking about. The redhead chuckled when Angeal shook his head and shrugged, giving up the attempt.

"Don't do something that will freak him out."

"Oh, no, dear. I'm sure he will love it." Genesis grinned. “And we already talked about it.”

Though, to be honest with himself, there was a persistent doubt in Genesis that Cloud would straight up punch him in the chin. That's why he would go with the same approach he used with Sephiroth, being calm and determined, but ready to back away. And maybe run.

"Well, I'll leave before I miss him."

Genesis straightened and rubbed the frown off Angeal's face.

"You know his schedule by heart?"

"Almost. Like I know yours or Zack's."

Sadly, Sephiroth had no clear schedule so it was harder to surprise him.

There was no reason to stay longer, he said goodbye to Angeal and cursed when he noticed he was nearly late. Cloud would be coming back from breakfast in the mess then go run. At first, Genesis had been appalled by the fact the blonde went down there to eat when Zack's apartment was well supplied and the apartment the three of them shared was the same. Dirk and Flore's presences made it more understandable, Cloud went for them and not for the food there.

"Be careful on your mission!" Angeal shouted from the bathroom.

"I'll be, sweetheart!"

Then he headed for the staircase that Cloud used more than the lift. He heard him ascend and grinned, beaming at the blond when they meet each other half-way. Cloud looked away a second before smiling too, meeting Genesis' eyes again.

“Hi.”

“Hello, dearheart,” Genesis swallowed the space between them and cradled the blond's chin in his hand, admiring the blush that immediately spread on Cloud's cheeks. “I wanted to see you before my departure.”
Cloud's eyes shifted to the side, one of his hand rubbing on his thigh like he was nervous. Genesis followed the little movements, gazing fondly at Cloud.

"Oh, yeah. I'll leave too, soon. So-"

Cloud licked his lips, Genesis couldn't stop himself from thumbing at those lips, eliciting a shaky breath from Cloud who looked up. For the same reason, he couldn't help himself from kissing Cloud, though he backed away when the blond tensed. Cloud looked at him with shock painted on his face.

“Well, then. I may have been too eager, isn't it?” Genesis sighed. So much for his other idea, if Cloud wasn't receptive for a kiss, then everything else was out of the line.

“What?” Cloud blurted out.

Before Genesis could quote any part of loveless, or wail interiorly about his sad luck, Cloud clutched his col and pulled him down. Genesis made a choked sound at the sudden pressure on his neck but soon melted into the second kiss, eagerly giving back. He grabbed Cloud's waist, tugging him closer so their bodies were pressed against each other. Cloud moulded against him, moaning when Genesis used their position to press his leg between Cloud's.

Languid, their lips moved against each other. Genesis hummed, appreciating the slow motion. He pulled back enough to breathe, enjoying Cloud's dazed expression and his soft pants, then kissed him again. He nipped at the younger's lower lips, intent on deepening the kiss. Cloud let him do, following his movement when Genesis gently pushed him against the wall so he could put more pressure on Cloud's cock. He swallowed Cloud's gasp, feeling like he could start purring at the sound.

Genesis backed away, Cloud huffed sadly, a frown forming on his face. Genesis licked his lips, grinning when Cloud's eyes followed the movement, then swoop on the blond again, aiming for the throat this time while his knee rubbed at Cloud's groin. He brushed his lips on the sensitive skin, a shot of desire going up his body at Cloud's moan.

“burning deep inside
engulfing our spirits
with pleasures beyond divine “

Cloud's eyes fluttered open. He met Genesis eyes, burning with desire. The redhead said against his lips “let me give you this pleasure” just to be sure the blond knew exactly what he wanted.

Genesis sunk to his knees, holding eye contact with Cloud and enjoying the strangled sound that left him. Cloud's hands fidgeted with Genesis' col as they stared at each other a second, Genesis gauging Cloud's mood. He rested his chin on Cloud's lower abdomen, grinning devilishly at the cute blonde with dishevelled hair and uneven breathing. Genesis wondered if Cloud was panicking, so he asked:

“Will you let me?”

Cloud pressed in the wall taking a sharp breath, yet his eyes were blown wide and he licked his lips, then bit into them with clear lust. Genesis shifted on his knees so his pants were putting less pressure on his groin. He wet his lips, his hands thumbing Cloud's hips before he opened Cloud's fly.

Genesis nipped at Cloud's lower abdomen, grinning at the shuddering breath it elicited from the blond. Cloud's muscles clenched and Genesis felt the younger's shudders echo in his hands. He caressed the warm skin under his fingers, getting the modified uniform out of his way, then pulled slowly Cloud's brief, maintaining eye contact. It was both for his own enjoyment, appreciating
Cloud's flushed face and his half-lidded eyes, and to assure himself the blond wasn't uncomfortable. Though, if he went with the indication given by the hard cock poking at his chin Cloud wasn't going to stop him right now.

Hungry with lust, Genesis swallowed the presenting cock in one go. Cloud shuddered, gasping for air, his hands ending on Genesis' head before leaving, uncertain. The redhead hummed around the shaft, tasting it for the first time.

"Gen," Cloud moaned - music to Genesis' ears. "Oh, Hel!"

Genesis drew back before taking back the warm cock inside his mouth. His tongue wrapped around it eliciting a needy moan from Cloud. The other's hands held onto Genesis' head and his shoulder, trembling and clutching as Genesis set a rhythm answered by Cloud's wanton gasps.

After a while, Genesis used both his tongue and his hands to pleasure Cloud. He caressed Cloud's sides, then lowered his hands to his thigh and his balls.

Cloud whined a litany of his name.

He felt the younger start to tremble and his words choking up. deliberate, Genesis lifted his eyes to met the blond's eyes as he engulfed his cock in his mouth and made clear that he was touching himself too. The filthy sounds of his hand jerking him added to the wet sound of Genesis sucking Cloud.

With a whimper Cloud came at the - Genesis didn't doubt it - debauched sight.

Their panting breath echoed in the otherwise silent staircase. Genesis pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned his hand covered in his own semen while licking his lips. Cloud's gaze didn't stray from him, making him smile smugly when he stood up and Cloud wavered a second, his face bet red.

“Gen! We don't do that!”

“We don't?” Genesis asked, raising an eyebrow, amused by the flustered blond. “Yet, I just did.”

“That's stealing!” Cloud blurted out.

The statement made Genesis blink as he tried to understand it, a laugh bubbling in him still. Cloud was too dazed to think straight apparently. The blond might have realised the lunacy of his statement – Genesis deep laugh helping – because he hid his face in his hands, groaning.

“Well, then. You'll have to get it back when I return home,” Genesis said, his voice low with anticipated pleasure.

Cloud keened, but nodded, his fingers parting enough for Genesis to met his eyes. The redhead chuckled, happiness bubbling in him. He sauntered the last steps to the mid-floor and shot a whining smile at the blonde.

“See you later then, dearheart!”

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Cloud's rest of the morning went normally, except for his sudden thoughts about Genesis' blowjob that made him emit strangled sound in the middle of class. A SOLDIER even enquired about his health when he stayed red for a fairly long time while being completely dazed. Cloud managed to sputter some nonsense which ended in a few snickers from the SOLDIERs in the class that
understood what happened to him, evoking Zack. Which only made him blush more fiercely at the embarrassment that they – partially – saw clear in him.

He was still red as a tomato, his whole face burning when he arrived at Sephiroth's place. Zack almost jumped on him the moment he put a foot in the kitchen and kissed him, pulling away with a big smile. Cloud managed to send a weak smile at Angeal's direction before Zack grabbed his cheeks and caught his attention.

"Wow, you're pretty hot!" Zack remarked. "And pretty red. You're okay? You're hurt? Something happened?"

Cloud spluttered and hide part of his face behind his hand, managing to emit a few words, "This morning, Gen-"

"Gen hurt you?" Zack exclaimed, scandalised. "I can't believe it! He loves you! And he was pretty adamant on – oh hey you're getting redder, didn't think that possible – hu, oh Gen didn't hurt you!"

Angeal warm laugh caught Cloud off guard, he glanced at the man who hid his lower face with one hand, his eyes wrinkled with joy. Zack sighed dreamily before bringing closer his face to Cloud.

"Tell me everything." He shot a look at Angeal and shrugged. "Well us."

The burly First put down the warm plate on the table and observed them as Cloud combusted internally. Cloud tried to say something, but only a squeaky sound escaped him, making Zack laugh and Angeal hide a smile. Cloud cleared his throat and looked away from Zack's curious and intense gaze.

"He-..." Cloud licked his lips.

"C'mon Cloud! You're not that shy normally!" Zack pressed.

"I am here," Angeal commented. "You both are more close than Cloud is to me. Now come eat before it gets cold."

Zack huffed and put a hand on his hip, the other holding Cloud's chin still. He turned a mischievous smile toward Cloud and pressed on his cheeks. Cloud swatted his hand away and frowned when Zack wiggled his eyebrows.

"Did you enjoy it at least?"

"Wha- Zack! I- it-" Cloud groaned, hiding his face in his hands before letting out a weak, "Yes."

Zack barked out a laugh, his eyes glinting with delight. Angeal pulled a chair and nudged Cloud toward it before winking at him.

"If it was a blowjob, then I couldn't believe otherwise."

"Now, that's the kind of information I want to know!" Zack howled, almost jumping on his chair.

After the meal, they stood in the corridor, saying their goodbyes to Angeal.

"I feel like I'm letting my pet alone at home," Zack blurted out.

Angeal burst out laughing and pressed Zack's biceps, a smile tugging at his lips, "You're the puppy, not me."
Zack huffed, "No, you're like a big mastiff, which makes it worse that we're leaving you behind because those big babies have abandonment issues."

It drew a few more chuckles from Angeal and Cloud too.

"That's sweet to worry about me, puppy, but I assure you I'm accustomed to be alone. I go on missions too, you know?"

Zack lifted a shoulder, then rocked on his heels, hesitating to do something. He glanced at Cloud who sent him a questioning look since he didn't understand the sudden change in demeanour. He cocked his head to the side, surprised when Zack's cheeks took a red colouration. The man cleared his throat and didn't meet Angeal's eyes, who seek out Cloud's eyes.

Angeal's hand found Zack's shoulder and he pushed the younger man enough to look him in the eyes.

"Zack?"

The man took Angeal's straps and pulled him down, eliciting a surprised sound from him and making Cloud curious. Until Zack kissed Angeal. There his behaviour was crystal clear. It was short and chaste, then Zack grabbed Cloud by the shoulder, turned him around while Angeal was dumbstruck, and pushed him out of the apartment. Zack's excuse was it was time to go or they'd be late for their respective missions departure.

The shyness Zack was showing was so out of character, Cloud started laughing loudly while Zack whined and pushed him to go faster. Cloud still laughed when they stopped at the absent lift, which permitted Angeal to catch up to them. Zack all but used Cloud as a physical barrier, burying his face in Cloud's shoulder blade. The burly man in front of Cloud took an inspiration with an amused tilt of the lips. He exchanged a look with Cloud and his smile grew soft.

"Sorry, I'll just-" he effectively blocked Zacks hands on Cloud's shoulder and leaned down, above Cloud, to reach Zack who breathed in. Cloud tilted his head to the side to give Angeal's place, smiling even when the hold in his shoulder became painful.

The lift arrival made Angeal pull back, he seemed to hesitate a second, meeting Cloud's eyes, then pressed his arm gently and nodded toward the lift.

"Time to go, or you'll be late."

Zack groaned at Angeal playful tone and the echo of his earlier words to flee from the apartment.

"Be careful on your missions."

Cloud pushed a dazed and slightly red Zack inside the lift. The man smiled goofily and Cloud couldn't stop himself, "Was it good at least?"

Zack snapped out of his daze and pouted, "Oh, shut it, Chocobo-head."

They shared a smile and a laugh before silence showed between them. None of them found necessary to broke it and it let Cloud think.

"What are we doing, Zack?" he asked softly, meeting the man's eyes across from him.

"Uh?" Zack cocked his head to the side, confused.
“Are we-” Cloud started, rubbing the fabric of his top between his fingers. “Are we getting together with them?”

Zack sent him a confused look before a croaked sound left his mouth, "Obviously, I mean, I saw the soulmarks, you too. I mean- I had a crush on er- all of them? For years, kinda." Zack ran a hand through his hair. "It's like I'd just been given the right to act on my feelings, which, admittedly, I could have done sooner. Or you know, at least talk about them to any of the stupid idiots I crush on and – oh, wait," Zack paused. "You aren't comfortable with this? You don't want to be with them? Are you jealous?"

Cloud shrugged, "I could've crushed Angeal's throat when he leaned above me, but I know you and-" he pinched his lips, "-I'm not against. I'm just..." He waved around and sighed. "It's strange. A bit too quick, maybe? I don't even know how I stand with Sephiroth and Angeal if we're even in amicable terms."

Zack came closer and bumped their forehead together gently, "Seph likes you very much, Angeal too, he's just unsure and wrecked with guilt. But it'll pass. We have time, baby, it's not a race."

“Well, tell that to Genesis,” Cloud huffed with amusement.

“You're just at another stage with Gen,” Zack answered before a devilish grin stretched his lips, making Cloud worry. “So, how was it really?"

“Zack!”

The dark-haired man, caught him by the waist to stop him from escaping, though in the little space, it was near impossible. Cloud pushed on his shoulder, then his face, sneaking a leg between them while Zack laughed his head off. The lift opened to their destination, the lack of precedent stops ending there. Two SOLDIERs observed them in their acrobatic position. Zack didn't let go of Cloud, he put a hand under Cloud's leg that separated them, then lifted him like that. Cloud yelped, jumping on his toes on his other foot. He grabbed Zack's neck who caught his left thigh and lifted it too so Cloud ended up carried.

“Asshole,” Cloud grumbled, pulling on Zack's hair.

The man only gave him a beaming smile, then saluted the two amused SOLDIERs that assisted to the scene. He carried Cloud to his point of rendezvous with the Turks without any shame, amusing the men in blacks and annoying Cloud.

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The mission the Turk assigned him to was boring. At least, Cloud ended up taking out a few monsters to relieve his bored mind. The mission in its entirety was still boring. The Turks had discovered a hideout from the Watchers, old or recent, they didn't know. That's why they needed Cloud, they wanted to explore the thing right this instant rather than wait days or weeks to get some SOLDIERs in back-up.

The Turks had been wary of the abandoned place. They all thoughts it was a trap until they realised it was a little lab more than a hideout, and the monsters had munched on most of the scientists. For Cloud, the mission ended as a boring field trip yet still a great change from the confined space of the Tower.

The trek through the wild wasn't harder for Cloud, though he heard the non-enhanced Turks complain to each other. Reno came to him at a moment and bargained for Cloud to carry his
backpack only to get a foot stuck in a pool of mud. Reno lost his shoes and a few gils for Cloud to pull him out.

Yet Cloud was glad when they arrived at the semi-permanent camp, mosquitoes attacked enhanced people too, and nobody told him to bring repellent. Next to him, the Turks smelt it like they bathed in it. He preferred the faint smell of mint floating around. Mint and chocolate.

Scoffing, Cloud clacked his hand on his neck, killing one of those little buggers. He glared at the dead thing in his hand, then eyed the group of SOLDIERs a few meters away warming up. He wondered if drinking his blood – mako infused blood – could kill a mosquito anyway, or if they would have a mako craze. Cloud chuckled at his thoughts, imagining a swarm of mako crazed mosquitoes attacking someone. It was kind of terrifying while still funny.

He turned around at the person coming toward him and blinked, confused, as Sephiroth came closer, “You where send here too?”

Sephiroth stopped in front of him and cocked his head to the side, “Yes, you noted it in your book.”

Cloud was going to refute the statement, but opened his side pocket and took the last tiny notebook Angeal gave him, arguing that the old ones given by Genesis where too big. Too big and now absent since Cloud used them to write everything about the Ancients he remembered and gave them to Aerith.

As he skimmed through the pages, Sephiroth came closer and, hesitantly, showed the page. “I wrote Junon, though,” Cloud mumbled.

“We talked about my last mission, in Junon. You might have mistaken the two.”

Cloud looked up at Sephiroth's face, grumbling, "Do you have an eidetic memory or what?"

“Almost,” Sephiroth answered, turning back his attention to the SOLDIERs who paired themselves for mock-fights.

They shared a quiet company for a few minutes. Cloud didn't feel the need to fill the silence with Sephiroth. Then someone called for the General. Cloud eyed the trooper, who straightened under his gaze. Cloud looked back at the SOLDIERs, grimacing to himself. He'd been glaring without meaning too at the messenger that interrupted their moment.

Cloud was left to the observation of the men, he was free from the Turks and they left only the day after in the early morning.

One of the men come to him, breathless, and shot him a friendly grin. Cloud eyed him warily as the other approached for no clear reason for the blond. He kept his arms crossed when the man extended a hand. Though, to be honest, Cloud realised the man wanted to shake his hand only when he withdrew it. He'd been a bit too much focused on the man's face, searching for a sudden explanation of why he was here. The other chuckled nervously and ran a hand through his hair.

"Timothy Dibs. Guess you don't remember me. But I'm a bad student and never went to your course. Though, you have to admit the videos aren't that good."

“Yeah, they aren't,” Cloud answered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Then, hum, why wouldn't you change that by making the class yourself?”
"I do now. The videos were the basics anyone needed so I was sure everyone knew what I talked about."

The other chuckled nervously again as Cloud shifted his stance for the second time, frowning when the man stayed and another SOLDIER shouted at him to ask the other question. Cloud glared at the group of SOLDIERs who seemed to be resting but was listening intently.

"It's about the General," Cloud looked up at the man talking. "How did you get that close from him?"

"I am?"

The SOLDIER shook his head with an amused smile, "Yeah, he did that-" the man reached for Cloud's waist, though the blond backed away, glaring at the man. The other put up his hands in the air, then looped a finger on his belt and pointed it to Cloud, "Sephiroth always does that to people he's close to. The Lt. Commanders, his soulmates, and Lieutenant Fair. Though, the General do it less with the last one. Zack- er, I mean Lt. Fair often forgot Sephiroth was holding onto him and our General was quite surprised to be pulled along him."

Cloud stared at the man's fingers looped around his own belt, he'd remarked distractedly that Sephiroth had done that before, but it didn't bother him at all.

"Cloud? er- Strife, sir. Wait, we don't know your status-"

"Why do you want to know?"

The man froze and eyed Cloud with an intensity he hadn't before, "We never thoughts Cole was a traitor. His betrayal made us all suspicious around each other in the squad, which is awful during a fight. So we asked the Turks to screen all of us before the rest of the SOLDIERs and now we're doubly watching out for Sephiroth."

"Just say you're worried for him," Cloud said, amused and weirdly fond of this man already.

The man chuckled and ran his hand through his hair again.

"I guess, yeah. We're worried for him," this Timothy said. A gentle smile grew on his lips. "But you're too weird to hide something. I guess- we just want to know more about you, because you're Zack's soulmate and our superior likes you."

Cloud was taken aback by the confession. He was pulled along for a friendly training and even though he felt uncomfortable at being tapped on the shoulder in a friendly way or included in a conversation he couldn't quite follow, the thought of integrating him contented him.

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In the entry of the mess, Sephiroth eyed the men sharing their meal, their conversation punctuated by loud laughs. He liked them but now Cloud's little corner seemed more welcoming, even though a Turk was pestering him.

Sephiroth walked to them and gave a blank stare at Reno who send him a nervous smile, then by pure coincidence, had something to do somewhere else.

Cloud, seated on a chair, his food tray on a box next to him, sighed and send him a relieved smile, "Thanks, I thought he'd never leave."
“Reno is strangely fascinated by you,” Sephiroth stated. He didn’t control the glance he had toward the entry of the mess to be sure Reno had left. “Can I stay with you?”

“Wouldn’t you want to eat at a table like a dignified General?”

The question gave Sephiroth an amused smile, "I'm not always a dignified General. Far from it."

“You could’ve fooled me.”

"Yes, it is very dignified to stuff your face full of mint-chocolate ice cream to deal with betrayal," Sephiroth huffed, tapping a heel on the ground in irritation.

Cloud’s laugh took him by surprise. He glanced down at the blond hiding his face in his shoulder, “Sorry, yeah. Thinking about it you weren't very dignified. Now neither, you're pouting.”

Sephiroth frowned then forced his face to ease from the pout he was supporting, "I'm not pouting."

Cloud tapped the place next to him, “Here sit down.” He glanced at the men on the tables at the end of the mess, “You don’t want to eat with them?”

"I prefer calm," Sephiroth answered, keeping his eyes on the food on his plateau as he sat. "They know it and always tone down their fun when I'm with them."

“So you’re sharing your meal with the brooding and not-so-fun ex-Watcher. That's sad. Kind of you, but sad too.”

Sephiroth played with the goo in his plat, but Cloud’s comment made him frown. He looked up at the blond lost in thoughts.

“It isn’t sad if I prefer your company.”

Cloud sat cross-legged, putting the plateau on his knees and not meeting Sephiroth's eyes, without purposefully avoiding his gaze, "But you don't."

“I do,” Sephiroth stated, a bit irritated by the implication that Cloud thought he knew him better than himself.

Cloud glanced up at that, blinking owlishly, “Because Zack and Genesis like me?”

Sephiroth finished his bite and shook his head, “Do you like me because both of them like me?”

Sephiroth saw the flaw in his question when he felt doubt worm his way through him while Cloud frowned, opening his mouth, but stopping to think too.

"At first, yeah," Cloud said. Sephiroth breathed, focusing on his food to calm down the hand clenching on his heart. "But, I mean, you're like a big proud Chocobo who stuck its leg in a wire and try to make us think he's perfectly fine, and dignified. It's hard not to get attached when you're so ridiculous."

The image was quite the surprise for Sephiroth. He stared at Cloud, his eyebrow high on his forehead, and met honest blue eyes.

“T'm ridiculous?”

Cloud shot him a nervous smile, “When you're not dignified?”
The snickers from the men at the end of the mess drew their attention to the SOLDIERs. Many looked away, holding in their laughs, some staring straight ahead as their face got redder. Sephiroth shook his head fondly at them. After that, they fell into a shared silence, though Sephiroth assured himself Cloud wasn't shutting down because of anxiety or something related.

"Do you have a message from Genesis?" Cloud asked in a murmur when he started his dessert. "I mean, from the afternoon. He didn't answer since then."

“No, but he's on the field, he can't always answer.”

"I know," Cloud fidgeted, a distressed expression marring his face. "I know."

“I doubt he will make you wait too long before answering,” Sephiroth dropped his voice. “Especially after what he did to you before leaving.”

Cloud swallowed wrong, send him a surprised glance before he was taken by a coughing fit. Sephiroth was a bit sorry to have induced that, but it had been too tempting. He tapped Cloud's back gently, enjoying the many attempts to wheeze an answer Cloud made. At the end he was red as a tomato, though, if it was a blush at first, the coughing fit helped in the new colouration.

"Ah- maybe, maybe we shouldn't talk about this here?" Cloud asked, his voice going high at the end.

Sephiroth chuckled softly, staring fondly at the blond finding back his breath and a normal colouration, "A bed has been added to my tent. If you want to talk, then we will."

“No, thanks,” Cloud wheezed out, a clear blush spreading again on his cheeks. “Are you- hum, watching me? So I wouldn't-”

The last comment, plus the hazy motion Cloud made, took a moment for Sephiroth to understand. When he realised Cloud thought he was trying to keep an eye on him, it irked him, but he took a deep breath and answered.

"You saved me two times now, I will be safer with you than without," he met Cloud's eyes, noticed the surprise on his face, and added softly, "I know you can't sleep well with strangers. What are the Turks and my SOLDIERs."

Cloud mouthed a sentence Sephiroth translated to “but not you” and nodded seriously at the comment.

“"You napped on me already, just after you saved me from Cole.”"

"No, I didn't."

“"You tried to steal the remote from me, knocked your head on the armrest and napped.”

Cloud made a gurgling sound, send him a knitted look and shook his head minimally, "I was knocked out and you thought I napped."

“"Wailing often indicate that someone isn't knocked out.”

Cloud sniffled, looking away from him before saying vehemently, “I don't remember, never happened.”

Sephiroth let him the last word, thinking fondly at this night. He thought about knocking Cloud on the ground, but the man had saved him and Sephiroth had lost too much blood, feeling sleepy, so he
let Cloud sleep on him. He only woke up to Zack taking a picture, which didn't surprise him. Though, feeling sad that Cloud was removed from him had surprised a part of him.

Chapter End Notes

bah I won't lie, I had adult stuff to do irl (irk) and I fell into a 'summer fandom' so I was more inspired to do shiny new fics than work on unsteady but I was steady (get it?) and did a few things here and there so you'd finally have a chapter hope it won't disappoint!
Chapter 35

The night was so calm that Sephiroth was dozing off on his paperwork. He'd started tapping on the
desk in annoyance a few times, but recalled at the last minute Cloud was sleeping on the second bed.
In the cramped space, a little sound like that was easily heard. He sighed and put his hand on his
chin.

Cloud moving woke him up. Groggily, he looked around, his eyes stopping on the blond who left
the tent. A few seconds passed, Sephiroth starting to doze off again until he told himself he shouldn't
wait for Cloud to return – from the toilets surely – for himself to go to bed.

“Are you okay, mate?”

Sephiroth, now standing at his desk, frowned at the man's question. Chel's voice was just outside his
tent, then Cloud's grunt. Curiosity pushed him to go check on what was going on.

He opened the pancake on Chel kneeling before Cloud, sat on the ground and head on his knees. Chel
looked up at him and shot him a faint smile.

“I woke you up sir? Sorry, but- .”

He waved at Cloud, and Sephiroth nodded at the silent comment.

“Return to your round. I'll take care of him.”

Sephiroth eyed the SOLDIER as he hesitated, but finally followed his demand. When he left,
Sephiroth crouched down next to Cloud, his fingers brushing hair strands from the blond’s forehead
where it wasn’t glued to his knees.

“Are you sick?”

“Headache,” Cloud mumbled.

“Being outside and cold isn’t going to make you feel better, come inside.”

Cloud grunted and was slow to move, but he took Sephiroth’s offered hand and followed him
blindly, a trembling hand on his eyes.

Sephiroth sat him down on the bunk then handed him a drink of water, knowing that dehydration
could cause such pain. Again, Cloud moved blindly, which told Sephiroth it might be more than a
simple headache.

"Cloud. Cloud, look at me."

The blond lifted minutely an eye, the green colouring of the whole eye surprised Sephiroth. He
cought Cloud’s chin and lifted it.

“Are you a mako pull?”

"No. It's just-.” Cloud slurried like talking was hard. He moved his hand, then let it fall on his thigh,
sighing and letting the weight of his head into Sephiroth's hand. "It's fine. It's not a full thing. Only
her wailing."

Sephiroth blinked, stayed silent so his mind had a few seconds more to process the comment. But it
made no sense. Who was she? After a quick overhearing of the camp, Sephiroth was assured there was no woman wailing.

Absently, he rubbed at Cloud's temple with his hand holding the blond's head, thinking about what he could do. Did he need to call Zack? Or Genesis? He'd assisted to one of Cloud's mako pull, but the blond hadn't liked his presence very much and ended up hiding in a cocoon of sheets whenever Sephiroth checked on him.

He was taken out of his thoughts when Cloud fished his other hand – blindly – and put him on his face. It amused Sephiroth. He kept massaging Cloud's temples, appreciating the truth he put in him.

"Angeal likes that too."

Cloud hummed, but he seemed half-asleep already. Sephiroth himself was getting more and more tired, but he wanted to relieve as much as he could Cloud, and no medication would be given for an enhanced person only for a headache. The doses were too big, too expensive to be used for such trivialities, as per the doctors own sayings.

Though, Sephiroth saw Cloud's face slowly relax with the massage. But his skin was still pretty cold, courtesy of his trip outside. The night was far colder than the day, even Sephiroth felt chilly. His tiredness didn't help him fight the cold.

He eyed the bed he sat on and Cloud's, then pulled the other bunk bed closer. Cloud opened an eye, blinked owlishly when Sephiroth lifted his legs, then let himself fall on his side and didn't move. The blond didn't seem to care one bit what Sephiroth was doing, he slept soundly by the time Sephiroth had joined their beds and retired his boots.

Sephiroth crawled under the cover with a sigh of contentment, then pulled on Cloud's to take it out from under the blond's body and put it on him.

"Roll over, Cloud."

The blond groaned and huffed, but – very slowly – rolled until he was against Sephiroth. It was far easier to pull the cover over the blond now.

Sephiroth expected Cloud to cradle in his bed, at the edge, and huddle on himself. He waited a moment, but ultimately, Sephiroth came to the realisation Cloud wasn't going to spend an ounce of energy to roll back on his own bed. In the dark, Sephiroth blinked at nothing as he thought on his feelings about Cloud tucked under his chin, his breath tickling his collarpole. The answer was that Cloud had feet even colder than his face, so Sephiroth no matter his feelings, couldn't make Cloud move without feeling guilty afterwards.

Sephiroth wasn't against cuddling with people he loved anyway.

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Sephiroth woke up when Cloud shot upright on his arms, he glanced at the blond who stared at a side of the tent, frowning. Cloud started tapping hurriedly on Sephiroth's torso to catch his attention.

"Wake up," Cloud whispered with stress.

"I am."

Though, Sephiroth felt the toll of the lack of sleep after the day of work. His legs ached, his left arm too, and his eyes were dry and hard to keep open.
Cloud removed the covers and shot to his feet, his eyes still strained on a side of the tent. Sephiroth was certain the blond wasn't seeing the material, but something else.

“Clou-?”

"There are twenty-five people in this direction," Cloud pointed before him, where he looked at, then he headed toward the exit without waiting for Sephiroth. The silver-haired man was on his heels in an instant, his boots in one hand and Cloud's in the other. The cold biting air made Sephiroth shudder. He met Timothy's eyes, the one on guard duty at this time, but glanced back at Cloud who met his eyes too, "I'll get the Turks."

Cloud strolled off bare feet toward the Turks.

"Get your boots at least!" Sephiroth whispered though it was a waste of time.

Sephiroth shook his head at the last place Cloud was seen before he put his own boots, using the time wisely as Timoty came closer.

“Sir?”

"Cloud says there are enemies coming at us."

The SOLDIER's brows shot up, before he frowned, opening his mouth on a probable interrogation about the questionable source of Sephiroth's information.

"Remember how Cloud found me in the iced wasteland? How he found the camp? Both with Zack and me?"

Quickly the expression changed on the man's face to serious consideration, “I'll warn everyone else.”

Sephiroth nodded in acknowledgement, satisfied that his explanation was enough to convince the man. Cloud never explained how he did such a prowess, but Sephiroth had pondered enough about it to recognise that it's wasn't mere luck.

Around him, the camp slowly woke up. The low level sounds the men kept doing made the camp look like a ghost one. It looked eerily like camps during the Wutaii war, surprise attacks launched on wutaiian always started like that.

Sephiroth inhaled to chase away the thought. Being eaten by a memory now was out of the question.

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Cloud followed one of the enemies that isolated themselves from the group. Normally, it meant the person was good enough to hold themselves alone without any backups. It meant they were dangerous and to be arrested soon.

He came to a halt near the Watcher in full uniform. He met glowing blue eyes and didn't ask himself if they were enhanced anymore, though he wondered if they were one of the Number.

“Uh oh,” the Watcher whispered.

Cloud noticed the slots materia and huffed now settled on his precedent question. He leapt at the Watcher before she could make a move. A sparkling barrier stopped him from cutting her head.

Cloud noticed the pendant on her neck and snarled.

“Mojlnir isn’t a symbol you can take without knowing the basis of my religion.”
Shajar backed away at his next attack and met his blade the next.

"Your religion? You're a one of the guardians too?"

Cloud pulled back, confused, “A guardian? Me too?”

He shook his head. One part of him was glad he'd fell on Shajar and not Axe. She didn't hate him, she talked till you asked a question and was easy to fight. Cloud was glad for the absence of witnesses too, if there had been someone here they'd wonder why Cloud wasn't giving his most against a Watcher and even talking.

She took away her mask to frown at him.

“Tian gave it to us to, he says it’s a charm to protect us. He isn’t all bad.”

“I don’t know I only met him once while I was cut open.”

She pinched her lips, “He made mistakes.”

“Giving the order to cut open his own soldiers isn’t a mistake.”

“We should be fighting, not talking. You’re with Shinra now. Our enemy. They’re evil.”

She did attack with a firaga that Cloud dodged easily using the big trees as a shield.

"The Watchers are too. I chose the lesser evil."

“You won’t save Wutaii like that.”

“I don’t want to save Wutaii. I want to save the Planet.”

Shajar burst out laughing, an incredulous laugh that shook her shoulders.

"You're stupid, Sky! Shinra is killing the Planet! Saving it is a good consequence of our fight. You should come back."

Cloud snorted at that, he leapt at her, avoided a firaga and used the momentum of his sidestep to launch an attack. His sword clinked on another barrier, sparkes emitting from the friction.

"You're not trying to save the Planet, Shajar, you don't even care about the consequence of your actions. You steal people," Cloud turned around, using his second blade to assail Shajar. This time he caught her thigh, drawing blood, "You torture them and send them to die. You aren't a military force, you don't even have a real strategy to destroy Shinra. You're buying time."

Their weapons met in a fury of sparkles and wailing metal. Cloud grimaced at his two dual blades. They were standards one given to dual wielder, but their balance and resistance were awful.

“For what?”

Shajar's eyes were huge, her pupils dilated by fear. Cloud had put a finger on something. To his surprise, she used an ice materia on him, even while on close contact. Cloud leapt back from her, cursing silently as he felt people came closer.

Cloud avoided the sword coming at his head, met Shen's eyes during his dodge and sighed as Shen's eyes narrowed to crinkled slits. Shajar stayed in retreat for the few next exchanges, casting spells to destabilise Cloud. They seemed to test him, try to see what was his level now. He didn't expect the
next perfect combo, though reacted in time to avoid most of the damage.

They ended in a three-way block. Cloud had halted both of their weapons, though his left arm stung with the burn of yet another firaga. They pushed against him, straining him to the point he started trembling. Sephiroth's arrival was timely. He dispersed the two, though had to dodge another firaga, mumbling about Genesis being more dangerous with those spells.

“I knew those idiots wouldn't hold him,” Shen shouted.

“Shut up and fight!”

Quickly, Sephiroth and Cloud realised the Watchers had the advantage of having fought together against enemies, something the other duo lacked. At least Cloud had fought with such a variety of people, even in the other dimension, his mind had hidden in, that he adapted quickly.

Sephiroth was knocked back by an ice spell, giving a few seconds for Shajar to cast another wind spell at Cloud this time. Cloud shielded himself behind a tree, drawing away from Sephiroth in the process, though he focused on Shen who used the opportunity to surge forward.

Cloud drew his left sword as a guard. The blades connected, then Cloud's fissured and broke. Cloud's blood froze into his veins, his heart came to a halt before going into a frenzy. The other's blade continued its way to his neck. Cloud pushed on the ground to back away and drew his other sword toward Shen's. He tried to minimise the damage, though he wasn't deluding himself, his shoulder would take the brunt of the wound.

He, and Shen didn't expect the barrier that protected him. Cloud glanced at the approaching person he'd ignored earlier and met Timothy's eyes. Cloud came back to Shen and charged with his last sword. The thing broke too, though Shen was on defence. The other took a second to attack, but Cloud had already started backing away.

A yelp left him when someone caught him by his col then took him by the waist and holled him up.

“I'll take him away, sir!” Chel yelled in Cloud's ear.

He glanced at where the man was shouting and met Sephiroth's eyes. The man's relieved expression stopped Cloud from fighting back against Chel's hold. Though he let Chel's carry all his weight in childish retribution from being removed from the fight.

Sephiroth had been reassured by the apparition of his men and how they handled Cloud's defence, though their presence made the two Watchers turn on their heels and flee. The group with Sephiroth accompanied him a quick chase, though the two Watchers separated and lost them. Sephiroth refused to let his men alone face to one of the Number and ordered their retreat to the camp.

The place wasn't too wrecked thanks to Cloud's warning. Talking about him, Sephiroth scanned the camp as he roamed it. Turks were already picking up what needed to and reorganised the troopers to get back to work. A chopper was coming fast in the distance. It was surely to repatriate the wounded. Sephiroth came closer to one Turk, ready to ask about Cloud and received a pointed finger behind the man's back before he could ask something.

The blond sat cross-legged on the ground, looking at nothing and tapping absently on the rest of the blades he still had. He glanced up as Sephiroth came closer, but didn't stop his tapping, which seemed to put Chel's on edge. In consequence, it made the Turk hovering behind Cloud tense.
“I think I need new swords.”

“I think you should stop talking, boy,” Chel snapped.

Sephiroth chuckled at Cloud's affronted face, then at Chel instinctive action to straighten up as he turned around to look at him.

“Sir, I kept him safe,” Chel stated.

“As I see,” Sephiroth nodded at the man and looked back at Cloud who scowled, almost pouted. He met the Turk's eyes, “You will take care of the swords problem I guess?”

The Turk frowned, then nodded quickly when Sephiroth's eyebrows knitted together in irritation. Cloud glanced up at the Turk, then at Sephiroth again, but decided to shrug off whatever had been on his mind.

“Our flight home arrived!” Reno's yell reached them.

Cloud sighed and dragged his feet after the Turk, giving a wan smile at Sephiroth when he fell in step with him. Near the chopper, the Turks amassed. They helped a wounded trooper to get on the vehicle, then went inside themselves.

“Only one chopper?” Cloud mumbled. He moved his head, which caught Sephiroth's attention so he glanced at the blond staring back at him as they headed for the chopper. “Not everyone is leaving?”

Sephiroth walked Cloud to the chopper, nodding at his question.

“I will stay.”

Cloud’s face scrunched in confusion then stayed like that because of irritation.

“I’m not letting your here al-”

Cloud made a sound like a Chocobo wark when Sephiroth picked him up under his armpits and put him in the vehicle. The blond was frozen a short second before his eyes widened.

“Sephi-”

The General closed the door on his nose. He restrained his smile, amused by Cloud’s varying face, but not wanting to push him too far. Especially since the blond could open back the door and physically fight him. A swarm of Turks jumping on Cloud stopped him from that. They couldn’t hinder him with his enhanced strength but they knew Cloud wouldn’t remove them and risk injuring them.

The chopper slowly rose into the sky, Cloud inside, safe and sound.

He rejoined his men only for his attention to be caught by a new message on his PHS. He read with amusement the text from Cloud.

“He didn’t appreciate that?” Timothy asked with a laugh on the tip of his lips.

“Not at all,” Sephiroth answered.

He pocketed his phone, sparing a thought for Genesis before going back to work. The redhead had not sent any messages, even during the night.
Genesis’ office was silent and cast in the dark, that why Angeal startled when he went inside and was greeted by one glowing blue eye staring at him. Hand over his heart, Angeal took a deep breath. He didn't expect Cloud to be here since he returned from his mission in the morning, his day was free.

“By Shiva, Cloud.”

The blond blinked awake, then a warm laugh left the sleepy blond. Angeal shook his head at him and deposited the papers he carried on Genesis' desk.

"I didn't take you for someone easily scared," Cloud mumbled from the couch.

Angeal came closer, shaking his head negatively, though Cloud had returned to his previous position as a human trying to be a cat, huddling on himself to form a sphere.

“I'm not easily scared, startled yes.”

He observed the blond but realised Cloud was just going back to sleep if he'd let him to.

“Don't you feel uncomfortable on this couch?”

“No,” Cloud mumbled.

“Why don't you go see friends, or slept in a real bed?”

“Didn't want to,” Cloud paused and shot a glance at Angeal above his shoulder. “I hoped Genesis was back.”

Disappointment was clearly written on Cloud's face. Angeal reached a hand and ran a hand through his hair to comfort him before he realised what he was doing. A lump in his stomach he withdrew his hand.

“I'm sorry, Cloud-”

“Sunshine!”

The both of them startled at Reno's shout, even if he was coming in the hall and not a few inches from them. Cloud sighed and stood, giving a reassuring smile to Angeal. Relief washed over him, he was too worried he'd overstep boundaries with Cloud.

"Yo! We're going shopping for swords apparently!" Reno waved a wad of gils. "Tseng said yes to us advancing you money for your sword."

"I just wanted the name and address of the place where I could find a good sword," Cloud huffed. "I don't need the money."

Reno lifted a shoulder and send him a smirk, "We'll see, baby."

Both Angeal and Cloud warned Reno not to call Cloud like that. The redhead smirked and sauntered away, Cloud following without much energy behind him.

“Later, big guy.”

Angeal startled at Cloud use of Zack's nickname for him. He smiled to himself, his heart swelling up with fondness.
“See you later, Cloud.”

When he was away, Angeal looked back at Genesis' desk, then he took his phone to check on his messages. As he already knew, there was no new one from his fiery SOLDIER.

Either Cloud was following him around, or Angeal was unlucky because he fell on the blond again. They stood near other in an uncomfortable silence, SOLDIER passing the hall sending them confused and curious look.

“Well, then,” Cloud said. “I was going to eat at the mess.”

“Oh, yes. Me too.” That was a lie, he'd been preparing a meal in Sephiroth's apartment when he received a call to take care of a SOLDIER breaking down. He could refute his last statement and invite Cloud to share his homemade meal with him, but he'd preferred spending time with the blond in a public place, must he lost his mind again. “After you, Cloud.”

Angeal thought the lunchtime would be awkward with Cloud, knowing the boy wasn't so fond of talking about himself, and Angeal's subject of conversations were boring at best. Cloud surprised him when he started complaining about what Sephiroth did. Apparently being picked up like he weighed nothing and closed a door on the nose had managed to annoy Cloud to the point he needed to talk about it. Cloud affronted expression and his almost pout endeared Angeal who couldn't stop chuckling at Cloud's grumbles.

“I wish I had been here,” Angeal commented. “Your face must have been hilarious.”

Cloud sent him an offended look that had a similar edge to Genesis dramatic reactions. The blond rolled his eyes, huffed some more and pretended to ignore him. They finished their meal in companionable silence and exited the mess.

Cloud stopped in the corridor, SOLDIERs passing by while ignoring them.

“I know you cooked. I can smell it.”

Angeal tensed, feeling bad yet not knowing why, “I'm sorry, Cloud.”

"Be at your apartment tonight," Cloud cut him, pointing an imperious finger at him and confusing him to the core. "Be there and I'll forgive you." Cloud walked away, before stopping again. He turned around, but this time addressed a smile at Angeal, "Maybe I'll bring something for dessert. What do you like?"

Taken aback, Angeal answered automatically. He stared at the young man walking away with growing comprehension. He chuckled and shook his head then headed back for his office.
“No, no.” Angeal answered. “We have no news from Genesis, nor his squad.”

“The last thing is the report about troubles, the extra monsters that weren't planned,” Zack added, hovering in the kitchen since Angeal answered the phone and Sephiroth's voice was heard.

A knot of worry irritated Cloud's stomach. He was moving the food in his plat rather than eating it. He changed his mind from Genesis absence by observing Angeal and Zack silent interaction. The way Angeal pressed a few times Zack arm, his hand lingering in a comforting manner. Or how Zack wrapped an arm around Angeal's waist but was filled with too much restless energy to stay put.

A ringing made Cloud’s heart leapt with surprise. He picked up his phone to answer.

“Clou-“

“Sunshine! We got a mission, yo.” Reno didn’t breathe between sentences. “Come down soon. Sooner even. Take your swords. Bye!”

Cloud huffed, eyed his food and abandoned it.

Zack, worried with Genesis, kissed him with a form of desperation and drowned him under his worry. Angeal pushed Zack away relieving Cloud, but he ended doing the same.

Cloud managed to slip away, not without sparing a thought for Sephiroth who would have to deal with the two alone if Cloud came back late.

The Turks were a swarm of busy workers when he arrived in their principal room filled with computers and tables crumpling under papers. Elena and Katana pushed him right back outside and they started walking.

“We’re in a secret mission,” Elena started as they were still in the safe hall of the Turks. “I think you won’t refuse it.”

Cloud frowned, “You can’t know that.”

“A rescue of your non-soulmate,” Rude said, freshly cleaned and neatly folded clothes in his arms. Cloud’s blood froze in his veins. Rude made a head movement to the exit, “We’re going. Either with you or without you.”

Reno came back with a mask that Cloud recognised in a second. He was accepting this mission, and he was going to cut some Watchers if they touched to his Genesis.

Reno met his eyes and smirked.

"You're going to wear a wig too!"

“What?"
Reno had not been kidding. When they were safe from prying eyes, already in route for Genesis' last known location, Cloud changed himself. The Watcher uniform was his, saved by the Turk for a reason Cloud wasn’t going to ask. After that, Elena and – strangely – Rude, put a lot of time taming his hair so they could put him the dark-haired wig.

The thing was uncomfortable, made him sweat and bobby pins scratched his scalp. Cloud complained about them, only to hide the tight knot that drained all colours from his face and made his hands tremble.

“What I am going to find?”

silence fell on the helicopter that had been filled with Reno and Elena's bickering. Cloud, seated on the ground like a savage, let his head fall on his knees. He didn't expect them to hear.

“Genesis Rhapsodos, we hope,” Rude said.

“But if you don't, or if you don't like what you find of the Commander, you can break hell, yo!” Reno yelled in the microphone. Cloud grimaced, then a bit more when Reno continued. “Just kept the computers intact and a few guys to interrogate. And stay alive long enough for the backups to save you.”

“But it is an extraction mission first,” Rude interjected. “From the transmissions we intercepted, they want to discover what healed Genesis-” Cloud whined softly, pinching his eyes shut. He was the one that gave Genesis the possibility to heal. “-we have every reason to believe they kept him alive.”

"But in which conditions?" Cloud asked no one, his heart hurting and despair taking over him.

"Put a little faith in him, yo! You sound like he's already dead and cut to pieces," Reno said. "Now we're arriving at the drop point. You remember the extracting point?"

Cloud stood slowly, feeling nauseous for other reasons than motion sickness, “Yeah.”

He opened the door, closing his eyes at the strength of the wind, then glanced inside. Rude nodded at him somehow transmitting his thoughts without words, nor eye contact. Cloud took a deep breath, then he was falling through the sky, wind rushing around him. He met the ground sooner than expected, rolled on himself to break the fall and caught his swords threw at him from the helicopter.

The vehicle left, so Watchers, if observing it from afar, would think it was just passing. Cloud was let alone in a deep forest.

The silence that followed his fall slowly dissolved as animals found back their tranquillity. Cloud breathed in and out a few times, t calm himself down. He shook his head, gritted his teeth and willed himself to move. He was ashamed to note it didn't happen before a monster passing through Cloud's spot startled him. The beast froze, both eyed the other, then Cloud walked off. He had a Genesis to find.

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“He finally shut up!” grumbled one of the men who had moved away from the cell.

The two guards had moved farther after the third or four recitations of Loveless when shouting at Genesis to stop didn't work at all. They were farther, but still in hearing range. Genesis heard them sigh and ask help from the gods.

He grinned, cleared his throat, grinned a bit more when they moaned in despair, then recited another
poem. The relieved sighs only made his move more fun, with a bit of hope, the second he started Loveless again, they'd open the door to try to kill him.

Genesis was certainly not going back to the lab. He'd broken enough things and maimed enough people for any really invasive experiences to be done the first time, but the second... he shook his head. The second wasn't happening, it was simple enough.

The hall wasn't used so Genesis tensed when he heard another set of steps coming toward them.

"Where is your partner for the relief?" one of the guards asked.

"I'm not the relief."

Genesis' heart leapt at the recognisable voice, then dread filled him. Cloud seemed to be alone and Genesis wasn't at his best, leaving the place would be hell even in the best of their conditions.

There was silence, then one of the guards was hit and huffed more with annoyance than pain. One of the guards whispered about 'collar' just as Cloud continued.

"I've been asked to see him."

"Yeah, right. Take care of him for the scientists," the second guard snorted with a tone of amused sadism.

"I heard he killed three people even with enhanced guys present to stop him."

"Mn."

Cloud came closer, abandoning the two snorting Watchers who talked excitedly about the beating Genesis would have.

The heavy door of the cell opened on a dark-haired Watcher. One second Genesis thought the man had just a semblable voice as Cloud's, but the guy's baby face and relieved expression sold Genesis. Cloud met his eyes a short instant before closing them, taking a shaky breath. He had three sheets for swords. One was almost entirely hidden though the handle was easily recognisable. Cloud had found Rapier before coming to him. Genesis was torn between being happy they wouldn't have to go take it – or abandon it – or being slightly vexed Cloud thought about the sword first.

For a short second Genesis saw Cloud waver. He lifted his shackled hands to him and Cloud swallowed the space between them. Cloud crouched down, holding his hands and breathing heavily, though not heavy enough to be heard by the men. Genesis started rubbing his thumb on Cloud's hand, respecting the silence the blond was keeping. A fleeting thought made him realise he should play the cocky and snarky Commander he was, rather than being silent so they wouldn't make the guards curious.

Cloud fished something on his wig, taking out a bobby-pin and picked up the locks of the heavy shackles that went up Genesis' forearms. He still didn't meet his eyes since the initial contact and, before he picked up the lock of Genesis' feet, the man lifted Cloud chin.

"What is he doing? Probing him telepathically?"

The second guard snorted at his comrade humour. Cloud looked away, his hands shaking more and more. It made Genesis worry and feel guilty. If Cloud had refused to look at him it was for something, apparently not fall apart when they were still inside the den of monsters. Cloud groaned against the shackles at Genesis' feet then rose, an angry set to his face. He walked to the door, made
a sign for Genesis not to move and reopened the door.

“Come here!” Cloud barked.

Silence answered the blond until the two guards came to him obediently.

“Why? Is there a problem?”

The first Watcher – not wearing his mask – arrived near Cloud, his comrade on his heels. Cloud took
a knife, grabbed the man and killed him without hesitation. The other man tensed, moved his hand to
his sword, but was dead before he could do anything. A cold shudder ran down Genesis' back. He
knew Cloud killed before that, consciously at least. But assisting to a cold murder was different, it
wasn't a fair fight, it was deception and elimination. It was necessary for their escape, Genesis knew
that, but a part of him drilled by Angeal's words about honour made him uneasy.

Cloud dragged the two bodies inside and started stripping one.

“What are you doing?”

Cloud glanced up at him, "You'll change so we won't be discovered."

"I'm not putting another man's clothes!" Genesis hissed, horrified by the idea. Even at Wutai, they
didn't do such things.

Slowly, Cloud stood up. Even after he'd spilled the tea about Zack and Cloud's soul-bond, the blond
hadn't been so stony-faced.

"Then what do you propose to leave the place without any of us getting killed?"

"A Materia and some explosions."

Cloud grabbed him by his col and dragged him down so they were nose to nose. Genesis' breath
hitched at the sudden movement. Cloud's eyes were sharp and cold.

"You put those clothes on. Now."

Genesis struggled to make the blond pull away, but Cloud's hold was firm. Genesis was hungry and
tired to the bone, only adrenaline kept him up and his bravado dissolved into nothingness. He sighed
and his own hold on Cloud's wrist loosened up. He was just trying to get something under control,
only to feel better about the last days. That what his little poem recitation had been all about, he had
quite some time to think about it.

"Fine, dearheart, lead the way."

"Change before that," Cloud grumbled, however, there was none of the sharpness he'd used earlier.

Genesis huffed, but swallowed his disgust for wearing a dead man's clothes. With quick moves,
Genesis finished stripping the man, grimacing all along. He removed his own clothes, then put the
other's, pinching his lips as a shudder of disgust ran down his spine. At least he'd lost his cloak a lot
sooner and hadn't to let it behind now.

Genesis took the mask on his borrowed belt and put it on his face. Cloud send him a confused look.

“What are you doing?”

“Putting the mask so nobody will see me grimace like that,” Genesis said in an amused tone. “And it
means I can make faces at you.”

Cloud’s lips quirked up at Genesis’ childish comment, then any trace of joy left him. He took back the mask and hanged it at Genesis’ hip.

"No one wears the mask inside," he said in a hushed tone. "You'll catch others' attention more than with your natural hair colour." Cloud made him lift his chin. "Look straight ahead. And keep your scowl."

Genesis lifted an eyebrow and looked down, only for Cloud to force him to lift his chin back. He took Rapier and handed him.

“Follow my pace. Don't talk.”

Genesis nodded and followed the blond as he walked away from the cell with a firm rhythm. Around them, the echo of their boots filled the previous silence. Genesis’ heart was beating fast and strong. He felt like the artery in his neck was going to burst open under the pressure.

At the angle of the corridor was an intersection, they met one person that looked at their faces, then immediately at their feet and scuttled away down the hall. The reaction took Genesis by surprise, though he was happy the man didn't change the route to go down the hall Cloud and he left. Two dead bodies would have caught the attention of the nervous stranger.

Zack had talked about the escape from the bam, Genesis and the rest of his lovers had read the reports too, but assisting to one of Cloud's escape was quite different. Genesis took part on rescues missions during the Wutaiian war. It was always explosive and loud. Genesis could release his tension on enemies and bask in the satisfying fights that helped lower his adrenaline. Now, he walked, keep his body loose, just tense enough to react to an attack, but not on the defensive.

It was a silent escape and all the more stressing.

A few times under even fewer seconds, Genesis found himself reaching for Cloud. He wanted to grab him, assure himself of his presence, and maybe make him change the cold, blank expression he supported. Genesis wanted to see the nervous wreck, the blond with hesitant smiles and cute confused blinks. He also wanted to leave the place alive so he could see those things in Cloud a lot more than if he did now and they were both killed. So, he kept his hands to himself and thought about taking even breathes so he wouldn't fall unconscious in the middle of their escape.

In the meantime, he looked around. The halls were bare, both from people and art or windows. Genesis hoped Cloud already came here once because there was no visual cue to orient oneself. It only made the SOLDIER wonder about the emplacement of all the Watchers. Or the scientists.

Then they ascended stairs and Genesis found his answers. People sat like haphazardly thrown books in the corridor, often time by someone's side, or back to back. Here a lot of the rooms were used, though most of them were shut to any prying eyes.

None of them stopped Cloud and Genesis. Even when one frowned and pinched his nose at Cloud. He quickly lost his curiosity and returned to his contemplation of a bit of space.

Genesis scowled, they looked no better than parked animals ready for slaughter. Some were moving in the same nervous movements, others were already dead inside. It was pitiable, a place no one could keep its sanity. The redhead wondered why they didn't go lower, near the cells, or dispersed themselves.

A metal gate at the end of the corridor gave Genesis his explanation. Cloud didn't slow down, he
barked at the guard to open. The unenhanced guy startled, hesitated and asked what was Cloud's mission.

“What's the mission?”

Cloud didn't say anything for a long moment before saying in a monotonous voice, “I really want to die today.”

The guy snorted, “Like us all buddy. So?”

“Wait!”

Genesis startled, his heart coming to a halt. He caught sight of the same reaction in Cloud when they both turned around. A young Watcher with dried blood on a temple, Mako blue eyes wrinkled with a sheepish smile, stared back at them. It wasn't the reaction of someone coming to snitch.

“Sorry for being late, you won't really leave me behind for that, isn't it?”

The question was genuine, though it caught off guard Genesis. Had the boy-girl-whatever been hit too hard, or were they understanding the both of them were escaping?

“That's the last time, Camila,” Cloud said his hand flying to pinch at the girl's back of the neck. “Don't be late again.”

“Never. I promise.”

Cloud looked back at the guard, ready to argue, but the man cut him by opening, “Whatever. If you escape we'll send the hounds. Or the Numbers. They're here.”

Camila emitted a low sound in the back of her throat, but Cloud pressed on her neck and she was on his heels in an instant, Genesis brought up the rear.

In the following corridors and rooms, there was more crowd, but they were mostly scientists or non-enhanced with unknown attributions. None looked at them, nor stopped them, so they reached the entry quickly.

Genesis hitched with the need to find a fine fire materia and burn everything to the ground. He needed to find a way to get out the excess of restless energy in him. Another mean he used - when fighting wasn’t allowed - was to recite some poems. Though, right now it was out of the question.

They exited the compound and found themselves face to a tropical forest. Apparently, they didn’t take Genesis too far away from his mission’s location.

From Genesis' squad, Salmar had taken a hit on the head from one of those snipers with matrias. The man didn't stand up again. The fate of Smith was more uncertain for Genesis, either he survived his great injuries with a lot of luck, or he died waiting for help.

Cloud walked still. He wasn't hurrying, wasn't grabbing his swords.

The girl looked behind herself and murmured, “The snipers, we need-“

Cloud nodded and met Genesis’ eyes, “The snipers will attack soon. You go in front of me the moment I tell you.”

“I am the most versed in materia, love. You’ll have to rectify your plan.”
Cloud’s nose and eyes spasmed like he’d stopped himself from snarling, “I’m the only one who escaped the Watchers alive. And who slept and eat in two days.”

Genesis huffed and reported his attention to the edge of the forest, their safe haven. A few hundred meters and more. He wasn’t going to say it out loud but every part of him ached, his eyes were dry and hurt.

He was going to nod when Cloud told them to run. The girl froze at the first sound of fire. Genesis caught her and ran. Somehow, he was certain the blond would kill him if he’d let the little one behind.

The warmth of a firaga announced its arrival. Genesis handled Rapier with one hand, stopped dead on his tracks and put the girl behind him. His sword took the most of the damage. Genesis groaned at the effort his arm had to give at the impact, but the cast wasn’t strong enough to maim him. He shook his left hand, partially burnt, but had no other injuries.

Cloud followed after them. He blocked the other casts with his barrier. The trio reached the edge of the forest without more troubles. It was like the snipers hadn't had the heart to give their all. They let them go.

“If all the Watchers have the same will to keep their comrades at home, I understand why there isn’t that much escape,” Genesis commented, his sarcasm clear.

“Yeah, no.” Cloud paused, eyeing both the girl and Genesis who couldn't help himself and lifted his chin and send a flirty look at the blond. “It's different for all. And today there's Numbers here. So, we're running.”

That was the only warning before Cloud took off. The young girl – Genesis gave her sixteen at most – whined, but dragged herself after Cloud. Genesis contemplated the idea to whine too – he was in pain – though a glance above his shoulder from the blond made him reconsider. Quite logically he recalled himself he could wallow in his pain later. If he survived. Since there were some Numbers around here, it wasn't a certain outcome.

As they swallowed kilometres, Genesis lost his composure. He was pained to find he was as fit as the young Camila. They both panted heavily, stumbling a few times, which only made Cloud more and more worried. He ushered them, went ahead then returned on his trail to encourage them with a few whispers. He eyed the forest with the kind of manic glances a prey had. Genesis was too feeble to worry about their evident hunters.

Cloud came back to them, a few words on his lips, when he froze and drew his swords. Genesis grabbed Camila by her neck and pulled her away from Cloud. The blond changed behaviour on the second, changing from defence to flight. He pulled Genesis – and Camila – into a bush covering a dent in the ground. He arranged the bush they just moved, then flattened himself on the ground. Genesis did the same and put a hand in front of his mouth to divert the sound of his heavy breathing.

Two Numbers and a few men passed a few hundred meters away, silent and too numerous for Cloud alone. Genesis couldn't fool himself, he wasn't at his best and Cloud would do the most of the work must a fight start. There was no doubt either that Cloud would stay behind for Genesis and the young girl to flee away from any danger. Cloud already did it. Fortunately, Zack hadn't let him alone.

They waited for the group to pass, Genesis was floored by their lack of methodical search. They just walked, eyeing a few recesses, and walked away. Again, Genesis concluded the Watchers group lasted only because they used people like disposable trash. More than Shinra, which was a hard level to surpass.
The trio stood up just as another late person arrived, sauntering and not really looking for a fight. Though, she couldn't miss them. Genesis met the woman's eyes who grimaced.

“I don't want to be in pain.”

The comment took aback Genesis, though he had no breath to say something. A barely hold panic was filling him, not because of the woman, but because his shoulder started causing him a throbbing pain again.

“Why would you be in pain?”

"Because you hit hard, Sky." the woman flicked her hair behind her back, her hand on one hip, the other loose around her spear. "You look pretty lively for a dead person."

Genesis snorted, Cloud was far from lively right now. His automatic response was a wrong one since it triggered a coughing fit. He hid it the more possible, certain the woman was chatting Cloud only to give time for backups, and giving their position faster wasn't in his plan.

“Lively?” Cloud said, lifting a brow.

“For a dead,” she repeated before glancing at Genesis. “When you were destituted from our little elitist group, I was told you were dead.”

Silence fell between them, Genesis heard Camila's breath, hissing. She was ready to fall unconscious but kept standing. What a great trio. They could conquer mountains, especially in their state.

"Well, I'll let you to your little ballad in the woods. Be careful, there are monsters."

Cloud called her back before she could go, “You don't want to come?”

She paused and eyed him, “Later maybe.”

“There's no later.”

“Only if I'm dead.” she breathed, observing them. “You have a safe number I can reach for?”

Genesis hissed as Cloud straight up threw her his phone, “What are you doing? We should leave.”

“Fishing for information. And you're right.” Cloud pushed him to start walking again, giving his back to the lancer without any hesitation. The woman stared at them, leaning on her weapon. “Let's mosey.”

She snorted but made no move to stop them. Genesis had thought Cloud’s relationship with his chicks strange, but the one with this Number was incomprehensible.

Obviously, their luck couldn't last forever. Just as they reached a clearing, one Number, hostile this time, found them. Cloud immediately entered a fight with the man, cursing under his breath about late backups. Genesis had a second to admire Cloud but put his head back in the game quickly the moment he felt a presence behind them.

“Camila!”

He grabbed the little one by the fabric of her shoulder but it was too late to avoid entirely the full force of the sword from the Number 3, the little materia user: Shajar. Genesis snarled, mentally punching himself for having being distracted. At least the Number had the idiocy to be in the range of his Rapier. Had she used her materias, in his state Genesis would have been overwhelmed.
He did a series of quick assaults, touching the woman a few time and stopping her from jumping back out of the close ranged fight. The glow of her fire materia made Genesis’ heart leap in his throat. Was she really going to use it at such close range?

The direct hit from a thundaga used combined with a sniper rifle touched the Number’s shoulder. Eyes huge with shock, she scrambled away for cover. Cloud was soon enough freed from the other Number with a second sniper from a second chopper.

The blond took Camila’s from Genesis’ hold. He huffed, ready to complain that he wasn’t weak, but a tinge of pain his shoulder made him close his mouth. He gritted his teeth at the shooting pain as he took the ladder. Inside, Cloud was trying to stop the girl’s wound from bleeding. Blood poured out of the wound, tainting Cloud’s hands red. Genesis cursed, he was helpless without the materias that were stripped from him.

“Hey!” Flore shouted from the other vehicle. “Catch that!”

Cloud caught the green orb flying at his face. Genesis took it from him.

"I'm better," was his only answer when Cloud opened his mouth to stop him.

Cloud huffed but didn't take back the materia considering Genesis was already casting. The green glow of the healing put the little cockpit of the chopper in green hues.

Camila’s wound stopped bleeding and the girl fell silent, still conscious, but focused on breathing. Genesis cast a second time for good measure. After that he let himself fall against the seat of the chopper, lacking too much energy to sit on them. Cloud did the same, though he ended on Genesis.

“I could do that every day,” Genesis commented, breathless.

Rude lifted a brow, Camila groaned and Cloud didn’t answer except for grabbing one of Genesis’ hand and squeeze it hard enough for Genesis to hiss at the pressure.

The First sighed, he forced Cloud to let his hand go then draped his arm around Cloud’s waist and pulled him to his chest.

“I’m definitely keeping you.” He kissed the back of Cloud’s neck just as the blond took back the hands around his middle. “You’re my greatest investment as of late.”

Cloud huffed with amusement and pressed his back to Genesis, drawing his knees to his chest and trapping Genesis’ hands by the position.

“You could just say thanks.”

“Well thank you dearheart for your chivalrous rescue. Would you like a kiss as a reward?”

Chapter End Notes

did you think I forgot you, pals? guessed right. I also forgot everything about this chapter so... well idk, nothing seems right now but let's trust past-me since she wasn't in the muddle-mind I'm in right now.
I know it was a long wait, sorry pals, gals, dudes
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