## Conflict Predisposition

**by** pas_daccord

### Summary

Spanning the entire duration of Crisis Core to fill in the canon script from Cloud's POV. In-game emails and ridiculous Digital Mind Wave plot included. My premise for writing this was that I thought working for Shinra must have been awful and ended up making it worse in every way.
His Unwavering Smile

Chapter Summary

If Cloud had a DMW Zack would have been added early on.
You won't convince me that Cloud hadn't already noticed the new SOLDIER star far
before Modeoheim.
So here's hoping you enjoy my version of things.
Fair Warning: It's terrible.

Cloud fixated on the bottom of the bunk above his. Another night of not being able to sleep
surrounded by a dozen others in rows of bunks. It wasn't what he'd expected. Then again, what had
he expected? Working in the infantry was just one of the ways he could afford to stay in Midgar
and keep trying to get in to SOLDIER.

He felt like he hadn't gotten to know anyone since he'd arrived. They all talked, mostly to exchange
company news, or incidents, but he felt like he hadn't gotten to know anyone. He had never
considered what being homesick could feel like before leaving. He'd thought he'd had it all planned
out.

Instead he read the same signatures and bad quotes over and over again lying awake in his bunk.
He especially couldn't sleep recently because in three days the next exam to get in to SOLDIER
would be held. He was planning on taking it again, despite his certainty of failing it a second time.

Everything had been going by so fast since he arrived at Shinra. He had been hired on the spot,
among other young men and women, handed a uniform, and promptly put to work in whichever
department would take them first. People were hired like that at the company every single day.

Many quit without a word as well, making it hard to get to know anyone at all. But Midgar was the
largest city in the world and it was where SOLDIER and the Shinra Electrical Company had
started off, so it was where he had to be.

An impressive 50ft above-ground technological fortress of a city divided in 8 sectors each with it's
own Mako reactor. It was in part thanks to the Mako reactor that had recently been built in the
mountains of his hometown that he had heard about every Shinra exploit to date since he was a
child.

The company was the largest in the world, they controlled all known sources of concentrated
Mako. They also owned and operated the only wide-scale military force and were virtually
unopposed.

Virtually, since they were still currently at war with the last standing nation that refused to let them
access their territory, the Wutai nation. The young blond didn't know much about Wutai, but he
had heard nothing but praise for Shinra, and for SOLDIER in their plight against the solitary
nation.

Long tales of honor and bravery were shared in every village about SOLDIER. Namely for one
SOLDIER operative in particular, the great Sephiroth. The strongest man in the world. A man with
very distinct features; tall, muscular, with a slender face, and a complexion that made you believe
he'd stared through the face of death itself.

The famed 1st Class SOLDIER that Cloud had idolized for so long was a man with astoundingly long silver hair, captivating silver eyes, and dressed exclusively in black leather. Cloud on the other hand wasn't particularly remarkable in any aspect.

He was below average height for his age, had regular blue eyes, his blond hair was messy and spiky at all times despite his best efforts to tame it in a ponytail and up under his helmet. Not to mention that on top of everything else, he couldn't seem to gain muscle mass.

He had wanted nothing more than to be like Sephiroth. He would do anything to be as remarkable as him. But that man was also the reason he was currently staring at the bottom of the steel bunk above his own in dread and he wondered if it was such a good thing after all to want to be like him.

Since his arrival at Shinra he had only stood in the presence of Sephiroth once; in a room filled with other infantrymen all attempting to pass the SOLDIER exam. The Hero was there to wish them luck. His presence had been brief, but he couldn't get the 1st class SOLDIER's voice out of his head.

Cloud wanted nothing but to hear him speak again. He couldn't quite grasp how serene and tantalizing his presence had been, as if he really wanted more people to join SOLDIER. If he made it in to SOLDIER then he may someday get the chance to work with the 1st. Which was why even though he knew he wasn't anywhere near the scores required to pass the exam, he needed to try again.

As the weeks went by, the young blond became increasingly anxious about his constant sub-par performance. People either passed or they didn't pass, only those who passed ever admitted their scores. Those who didn't avoided the topic with the other people re-applying for the exam entirely. Some thought taking the exam was stupid anyways, that they'd have more chances joining the suits instead. Others hated the competition and if they found out you'd been applying again they'd make your life hell. After a point he had stopped caring that everyone ignored him just because he was quiet. Or bullied him, just because he wasn't good enough at anything. He'd never cared about that stuff back home either.

He never cared about the people he grew up with, and he didn't care about any of the other infantrymen he had met here either. He missed his mother. He hoped Tifa was well. He regretted every word he'd said to her about wanting to be like Sephiroth. He would stay awake at night thinking about how it was possible to have had the highest of hopes and so much spite push him to such a naive dream. He had wanted to make a name for himself. But more and more, he lingered on the thought that he didn't even know what being cared for felt like anymore anyways.

He started to think that he would never be able to go back home at this rate. Sighing, rolling over for the umpteenth time that night, still unable to sleep. He stared through pitch darkness at his squad mates who had long dozed off. They were all exhausted from the demanding training regiment the company had them on.

Working in the infantry in itself wasn't just any feat, but so far he was doing terribly. Only a handful of people from the group he had enlisted with had already made it on to SOLDIER, those who hadn't then quit. New people came in all the time and he felt just as anxious as his first day surrounded by strangers. The SOLDIER exams were held every two months. on the last day of the month. Every moment that passed made him feel worse, because every moment only brought him closer to the next exam. A mix of excitement from the prospect of possibly being in the vicinity of his idol for a few moments again, and the absolute dread of painfully failing each part of the exam again, kept tugging at him to the extent that he felt physically nauseous. The exam was comprised
of technical short answer questions, an essay on a developmental topic, as well as a physical
strength test, a stamina test, and a combat simulation test. Cloud had received horrible results on
each part of the exam during his first attempt.

He hadn't been able to answer barely any of the questions they had selected, he had no clue what
gentrification meant and hadn't been able to write three pages on the topic, nor did he meet the
basic standards of physical strength or stamina. In addition to messing up the entire combat
simulation within the first minute of it.

He knew it had just been a virtual simulation, but for some reason he thought he could still feel the
bullets that had ripped through his throat concluding his abject failure even now.

Put very frankly, Cloud wasn't anywhere close to entering SOLDIER. If anything he spent most
days just trying not to get fired from the infantry. As a result, he spent a lot of his spare time doing
tasks for other employees just to make up for all his screw ups.

He was routinely taken advantage of because of this, but at least most of the errands he had to do
for the ones threatening or blackmailing him sometimes gave him an excuse to talk to strangers in
the city. He was too apprehensive to strike up conversations otherwise, even if being displaced in
such a big city got lonely.

Cloud had no idea what time it was, but he finally lost his patience and got out from his bunk to
leave their quarters. He couldn't stand laying awake thinking about how he was never going to get
in to SOLDIER all night again. He felt as if he shouldn't of made a promise he couldn't keep,
especially not to someone like Tifa.

Cloud sighed to himself as soon as he'd slipped out of their quarters undetected. He walked
aimlessly. The silence of the empty hallways at night creeped him out even if he knew most of the
building well enough by now. He wasn't supposed to be wandering after the company's curfew, but
he was screwing everything else up, so he may as well screw that up too.

“Oh boy! Angeal! That mission was RADICAL! The most fun I've had in years, by far!”

Cloud froze as soon as he heard a loud voice echo through the lobby of the headquarters he'd
managed to wander down to. Had he wanted to leave HQ? This was a bad idea.

“shit..”

He ducked behind the first beam he saw in hopes that he wouldn't be seen. Peering around the
corner he watched two tall dark haired SOLDIER reporting back to HQ. He could only imagine the
world of shit he was about to receive for not only breaking curfew but for being caught by
SOLDIER members.

Why he had thought he could make it outside so easily in the dead of the night had long escaped
him. Instead he stressed about how unnatural it felt to suddenly want to walk right up to them, just
to meet them, despite the amount of trouble he'd get in to.

Cloud held his breath, trying to remain as small as he could behind the beam. He had to try to get
away with it. As he saw them approach he considered that it probably wasn't normal either, to think
about how beautiful the younger of the two men was, or about how jarring his smile was.

“Try to keep your head clear. That was an amateur's case. You still have a lot to learn, Zack.”

He recognized the other man now. Angeal, 1st class SOLDIER, and fan-appointed leader of
SOLDIER. He was scolding a 3rd named Zack, but the 3rd didn't seem intimidated in the least. He
continued to watch Zack's unwavering smile and he forgot about getting caught or even failing.

“My head's never been clearer, Sir!”

Zack responded just as enthusiastically as before, but Cloud was surprised that anyone would talk back to a 1st like that. It was as if he was openly gushing at the older man. The entire time he'd watched them walking down the hallway towards him the 3rd's eyes never left the 1st's. His bright blue eyes were just as insistent as his smile in indicating that he was filled with unwavering joy from their successful mission and the presence of the 1st at his side. They were almost about to pass where he was hiding when Cloud turned his back to the beam in fear leaning back motionless against it.

“Alright, Zack.”

The two SOLDIER walked past him without breaking stride. Neither turned. Cloud watched as they moved past him chatting, like most people did any other time of the day.

“I'm serious Angeal. It was the funnest thing I've ever done. This SOLDIER business is going to suit me just fine! You'll see.”

“Why are you so set on becoming a 1st?”

Cloud almost gasped audibly. Angeal was personally training a 3rd to become a 1st? Cloud didn't think anyone got picked out that early. That sort of thing never happened. Just how strong of a rookie was he for the leader of SOLDIER to take an interest in him?

“I want to be a hero.”

“A hero?”

“Yeah.”

“From what I saw today, you might do just that.”

Cloud continued to watch in silence. He wondered if he'd ever see that 3rd again. He watched as the pair were about to enter the elevator at the end of the hallway when Angeal glanced over his shoulder and looked directly at him. He thought he'd been caught after all, but he only held his gaze until the elevator doors shut and they were gone.

Cloud wasn't sure if Angeal would end up penalizing him later on or not. He had known that a 1st class SOLDIER should have noticed someone hiding just a few feet away. But then why would he just pretend not to notice him? Did he do it to test Zack? Or because he just didn't care about some nobody who was out past curfew?

It was with a lot of additional stress that Cloud then made it past the only guard patrolling the entire Lobby and slipped out of the front doors of the Shinra building. The cold night air washed over him and he felt like he could breathe again. He wandered the streets until sunrise, mostly for the relief, but also because he was too afraid to return before curfew ended at this rate.

He kept thinking back to Angeal's neutral gaze. He'd wished he'd grabbed his helmet before leaving his quarters but he hadn't been thinking straight. Not only was he cold, but he was so worried that Angeal would recognize him later. He usually always wore his helmet, but he hadn't been thinking.

It was so rare to be in the presence of a 1st anyways. Other than at ceremonies or during training.
And during training they wore all their equipment. The blond infantryman was barely recognizable with his hair tied up under his helmet, and he liked to keep it that way.

He'd enjoyed the anonymity at first, but he was even more envious that SOLDIER were strong enough not to need headgear at all. But it wasn't just shame that motivated Cloud to remain hidden. It was also fear. He really didn't want to get a bullet through the head, and so he gladly kept his helmet on as much as he could usually.

Cloud watched the sun rise up between the reactor and adjacent facilities in the distance. He knew it was time to head back inside, but he hadn't been able to shake off the dread that kept reminding him why he was here.

Just 74 hours until the next SOLDIER exam.

Morning training was always the same; push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, squats, and running, a lot of running. Cloud may not run as far, or as fast, or beat anyone's records but his own, but he liked how exhilarating pushing your limits was. He didn't mind the working-out part of it all, it was better than the studying or dealing with people parts. He didn't mind pushing himself physically, except the days where his body failed him.

He hated waking up in Medical, yet here he was again. He was trying to remember how it happened this time. Except, all he could remember was blacking out sometime in between the 2nd and 3rd mile of their run that morning. He cringed when he finally felt just how much his head hurt.

The blond gently inspected a large bandage across the side of his face. Looks like he'd really bitten it this time. He groaned at himself and turned over to try to see what time it was. Looks like he'd been out cold for at least two hours if he was telling time right. He wasn't sure that he was.

A nurse noticed that he was awake and got up to come check on him. Cloud thought he recognized the man but he was having trouble focusing. He probably knew all of the staff in Medical by now, it was no use trying to remember every one of them if he kept this up. Besides, he felt he wasn't even in a state to look them in the eye in the first place.

“How are you feeling?”

“...”

The nurse sat down on a chair besides the young blond when he received no response. He sighed before trying another question.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“I'm fine now.”

“That's not what your chart says.”

“...”

Cloud didn't want to hear about how maybe he wasn't cut out for it again, how bad his digital mind waves looked again, or about how he wasn't taking enough care of himself to stay in the Infantry division. Let alone make it in to SOLDIER. He just wanted to get back to his unit before he got fired for missing too many hours of service that week.

“Listen. I know we've been over this before. You already know what I'm going to say don't you?”
Cloud maintained his silence but the nurse grew impatient.

“Right, so I'll just cut to the chase. The department is suggesting that we increase your infusion levels, adjust your anabolic booster dosage, as well as your Methylphenidate dosage.”

When Cloud still said nothing the nurse went to get the supplies he needed. In a moment he was back and set the tray down on the table beside the infantryman, pulled up his sleeve and swabbed the area for a shot.

“Hold still.”

He warned. He was used to the blond being squeamish when it came to needles but something about the way he lay with his eyes fixed on the ground away from them made him uneasy. It was something so routine, he held his arm firmly as he injected him with yet another anabolic drug. The company manufactured everything they were licensed to use on their employees.

The mixed results in patients he'd witnessed since his time with Shinra administering their technology and drugs worried him. The nurse Cloud couldn't remember the name of made it a point to document as much data as he could. Most of the employee's refused to talk to him or any of the other staff. They all heard rumors about how filling false reports of misconduct could get you fired. He knew Cloud was one of those people, who were too scared to leave the company.

“That's the last shot for today. And we're putting you on 50mg instead of 30mg so please follow the instructions carefully and report any irregularities to us. Okay?”

The nurse had handed the blond a glass of water and a Methylphenidate pill and waited. He sat up and took it without question. Then he handed a few packets to Cloud, who'd also taken it without response. The nurse didn't let go until Cloud looked up at him.

“I mean it, report any irregularities.”

“Okay.”

“You're free to go.”

The nurse let go and with a nod, got up, and walked away while writing down notes on his chart. Cloud watched him go as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and let his feet feel the ground. He wanted to stay. He felt woozy from the shot, or was it from the head injury? He rubbed his arm and pulled his sleeve back down. He looked around at the other patients, worrying about what could of happened to them to end up in here too.

He started to feel sick from worrying about what he'd look like the next time he ended back up in this place if things kept on like this. He willed himself to stand up and made sure he had his footing before heading out of the Med bay without another word. He needed to get back to his quarters and keep studying, there was only an hour until they had to go eat lunch, and even though he wasn't hungry at all, at least studying could distract him until then.

Cloud made his way back in to his division's living quarters, fetched a pile of books from the storage unit besides his bed and hurried back out before too many people could ask him questions about why he disappeared again during training. He ignored the other infantrymen who were trying to talk to him or who were laughing at him, eyeing only the ones who were trying to study in their bunks. He recognized a few who had failed the SOLDIER exam last time too. The one's trying to harass him for fucking up were new members.
He made his way up to the archives, no one used those rooms except a handful of employees but they usually left him alone. There where good tables and good lighting for reviewing documents. It was where he usually went to study when he was especially stressed. When he needed silence.

The next time the blond checked the time he realized he'd ended up studying for hours on end without noticing. He'd forgotten to report in for his first patrol shift, not to mention missed lunch entirely. He was so surprised he'd read for so long, he got up suddenly and reached to pick up his books accidentally knocking half of them to the ground.

A woman shouted when the books clattered to the ground. She turned around expecting to see a row of archives vandalized, but it was just Shinra Military-issued manuals, so she sighed from relief and apologized. Cloud apologized back, he felt terrible he'd startled her like that. He hadn't know what else to say, besides, he had to go. He was just glad she'd returned to her inventory count.

Cloud hurried back down to the Infantry floor and dropped off all his books haphazardly on to his bunk before turning right around and heading back out again. Only those who weren't studying for the SOLDIER exam bothered to look at him come and go.

He started running down the empty hallway back towards the elevator. It was unusually quiet this last week, he knew more troops had just been deployed to Wutai, but something felt off. Maybe it was just the guilt of being late for duty again. He tried to focus on that instead.

When he got out on the SOLDIER floor, the other infantryman who had been waiting to be relieved from his post practically hissed at him.

“You do this to me again Strife, and it won't just be Security who will teach you a lesson on protocol.”

“I understand. I'm sorry.”

“Save it! Just fucking show up on time tomorrow.”

“It won't happen again.”

Cloud almost fell back in to the elevator when the other infantryman checked him while leaving. There was nothing he hated more than a sudden push or shove. Even the punches that didn't land provoked him just as much now he felt like his heart would stop either way. Threats of violence felt just as bad as being hit, knowing the other person somehow hated you that much. He managed to stay standing and avoided the elevator doors closing in on him, moving back just a few steps before they slammed shut in his face.

He glanced back over his shoulder to assess the current occupancy of the space. He saw no one. It was really too quiet around here. He'd only started patrolling on the SOLDIER floor a little over a week ago. Ever since the Security unit declared that joint training practices where the only way to dispel the myth that SOLDIER was better than the Security Infantry. That meant more of them needed time off work for these special joint training sessions.

Since the rest of the Security unit were set on "Defeating SOLDIER!" none of them wanted to patrol the SOLDIER floor anymore. But they weren't allowed to break their Security contract, and so that meant that the infantrymen that the Captain or prominent members hated most were assigned to those shifts instead. Cloud was at the top of that list somehow.

The fact he got to spend time up here meant he was happy he was hated for once. Even though the
SOLDIER floor had a reputation for being dangerous. Fights between Shinra employees could break out at any moment, for any reason, but especially on this floor. Cloud wanted to have a better reason to be there, but at least he was there, and he was glad he had a chance to see more of the 1sts for a change.

Except, since he'd gotten access he hadn't seen any 1sts, or Zack for that matter. Which made him wonder where they all were. He knew Genesis was in Wutai, but he'd never seen so few SOLDIER in HQ before. He nervously brought a hand up to tuck in his hair underneath his helmet. Although, after getting seen sneaking around, he definitely did not want to run in to Angeal. He kept telling himself he wouldn't be recognized with his helmet on, but what if Angeal still did somehow? He just needed to stay focused on avoiding people.

He listened a lot while he patrolled, you could hear people talking about almost anything in this company. The blond had learned how to eavesdrop early on when he joined Shinra. He did a lot of walking, a lot of listening, and definitely not a lot of talking. He found that Shinra never gave them the whole story in their Shinra Newsletters and it caused a lot of gossip to travel.

It was quiet on the SOLDIER floor that night again. Only a 3rd or a 2nd was ever heading in or out and generally avoided him. Most of the SOLDIER had been harassed by the Security unit in one way or another prior to him being assigned there as they grew their rivalry. Thankfully SOLDIER ignored him most of the time, but when they tried to start a fight he'd learned to deflect consistently and loudly.

“I'll never be against SOLDIER.”

The longer he walked down the halls without seeing anyone the stranger he felt until someone interrupted the monotony. He thought that whatever it was that had him on edge about the prolonged silences must of been exaggerated. He should be appreciating how whatever it was, it was making his job easier.

Maybe it meant things were going well on the Wutai mission. He felt like there should of been more gossip from recent events, but it was almost like radio silence. He wondered if that meant that they would resort to dispatching the great Sephiroth overseas soon.
Cloud's time spent patrolling was agonizingly slow. He'd walk up and down the same hallways for hours on end. When no one was around it was that much harder. He hadn't realized how used he'd gotten to focusing on other people instead of himself. He'd hated how noisy this place usually was. He had stayed awake entire nights just wishing that, even just for one day, that there wouldn't be so much yelling, or construction, or traffic.

When he'd been hoping for a less abrasive city, this isn't what he'd pictured. The outside felt the same, the gut wrenching sounds of metal being drilled or pounded in to place, or of alarms going off constantly, or the sound of a car screeching to a halt. It felt like it was only the company that had gone silent. He walked up to the large glass windows that lined the common area on the SOLDIER floor and looked out at the city briefly.

He heard that the construction had only just ended inside of the headquarters, and that the exterior would wake another 2 years to finish. Not to mention another 5 years, minimum, for the rest of the city. And that was only if everything stayed on schedule. He wondered if he'd even still be around when everything was done being built. If he'd get to see it with his own eyes. The city was more than all the steel and lights mangled together, but that's how it felt to him in this deafening silence. He tried to think of being somewhere else, but it was no good, all that came to mind was the sheer amount of steel that was used to build the city.

He wished he could just go back to studying. He wondered if that was the first time he'd ever thought that since he'd arrived here. He hated studying. He always had. He hadn't expected how extensive the company's testing would be. He had thought being a SOLDIER was mainly about strength, but he hadn't even come near passing those requirements either.

It was too hard for him to try to recite chapters back to himself from memory. He needed to make so many notes to try to memorize anything. He didn't understand how everyone else was able to recall so much information about grenades and how they were even manufactured. He was too afraid to handle them, how was he supposed to know every detail about how they even came in to existence besides to terrify him?

Cloud sighed as he patrolled the halls. He did this a lot. According to the rest of the troops, this was one of the reasons everyone hated him, because he was always sighing. He hadn't noticed how much he did it until he'd managed to aggravate so many people. He tried to hold them back when people where in earshot, but the short infantryman's sighs only got deeper and angrier each time one managed to escape him. When something really bothered him, it was involuntary.

He wished he could just attempt to memorize the last SOLDIER exam to make it through, except that they changed the content of the exams regularly. By now he felt like he should have shown at least some signs of improvement, but in all likelihood he would fail the exam again. He wondered if he should even take it at all with what happened today. He felt exhausted enough to collapse from just patrolling, how was he supposed to try to complete another SOLDIER exam?
Again, he wished he could just go back to studying. Anything to stop the repetitive task of walking in circles. He still had to wait for the next infantryman to come relieve him from his post. He wanted to be doing something useful, anything that could help him get in to SOLDIER.

Instead he felt useless, every other thought he had was about someone distracting him instead. Usually it was the faces of his superiors, upset with him, or of his hero. He'd come to the point where he felt that Sephiroth was so removed from his own existence within Shinra and that everything he did to try to get closer wasn't worth the effort anymore.

He used to think of the unrivaled man a lot, probably too much, when he first arrived at the company. Daydreaming? He hated the term. As if it only happened during the day, and as if his thoughts were anything near dream-like. Even when he pictured Sephiroth, he never could manage to imagine the man being happy to see him. He had trouble picturing anyone who didn't hate him lately, except for Zack.

Cloud stopped walking. He needed to catch his breath suddenly. He really wanted to sit down, but there were cameras everywhere and he'd been caught “slacking off” too many times already to risk getting fired. He stood in the middle of the hallway and closed his eyes. The floor seemed deserted for the moment anyways, so it wouldn't really matter if he stopped patrolling for a minute, would it?

He wasn't certain he'd been right about his realization, but he needed to at least try. Cloud attempted to reconstruct the image of the tall dark haired SOLDIER walking towards him in his mind. Remembering the smile he'd seen on the man's face alone made him feel like he'd lost his sense of time all together. He couldn't bare to continue imagining the other man smiling at him like that. He felt wrong. After all, he was convinced that the SOLDIER's opinion of him would end up being just like everyone else's should they ever meet.

He resumed his walk as if he'd never paused in his tracks at all. He felt his eyes burn despite himself, but no tears came. He was just too tired, he shouldn't be doing stupid things like that while he was on duty. He was lucky he was even allowed on to the SOLDIER floor in the first place. He just needed to get through this shift so that he could get back to studying. And eat something. He was feeling increasingly weak, and he regretted not getting something on his way up here.

Cloud stared out at the city while he rounded the common area for the 21st time that night and sighed. By the time the next infantryman showed up he had forgotten what time his shift was even supposed to end. His phone had died, so he couldn't check online, and he couldn't remember his schedule for the life of him. When an infantryman finally did exit the elevators Cloud went up to him.

“Strife.”

“Leblanc.”

The other infantryman looked around the empty floor and sighed when he didn't see anyone, rubbing the back of his head before asking.

“Do you think the rumours are true?”

“Which rumours?”

“About Genesis. I heard he and his entire unit deserted in Wutai.”

“Are you serious?”
Cloud swayed, he felt like he was going to pass out again and took a few steps past the other man, reaching out to the nearest wall for support from the shocking news. Leblanc hesitated for a moment, wondering if he was alright before elaborating.

“Yeah. I heard Genesis convinced a ton of 2nds and 3rds to betray Shinra with him. I heard they've been emailing others internally to desert too. Everyone's talking about it. They aren't even sure how many have deserted yet.”

“Why did Genesis betray Shinra?” Cloud asked quietly. He couldn't believe it. He looked back at Leblanc who had simply continued to gossip openly.

“It sucks. I don't want the likes of them coming after us. It makes me want to quit too. But I'm no deserter! Uh, well you know how Genesis went on and on about becoming a hero? I don't get it either. Shinra must have done something he didn't like in Wutai. That's my guess anyways. I heard the emails from the other ex-SOLDIERs have just been about how corrupt Shinra is and about how all they're accomplishing is poisoning the world, and on and on about how evil the company is and that it's up to them to end the suffering of the world.”

“T-That can't be.”

“I know! I don't know man, it sounds like maybe he's just lost it. Why wouldn't he just tell us what Shinra supposedly did in the first place? What the hell do they mean by all the suffering? Shinra helps people.”

When Cloud went silent the other infantryman adjusted the rifle on his back and turned to go.

“Well, no time to slack off. I heard the company is firing anyone they suspect is involved, so don't tell anyone what I said to you, okay?”

Cloud nodded solemnly and Leblanc left to patrol the floor. It took some time for Cloud to make it to the elevator. He was so shocked that the popular 1st Class SOLDIER Genesis betrayed the company. Maybe the recent break-ins they were experiencing were related to the desertions? He needed to find out more about this. But he couldn't risk the distraction right now, it would have to wait until after the next SOLDIER exam.

He went down to the cafeteria and grabbed some basics before returning to his quarters. He ate on his way back. He was too starved to wait any longer, except that the smell of all the food had made him more nauseous than usual. He had picked very bland items and gotten in and out as fast as he could yet still had trouble eating any of it.

He had to think of where to go to study. They would be locking off non-essential floors soon when curfew came up, which meant he had really limited options. He got back to his bunk, stuffed the books he'd discarded there earlier in to a bag and collapsed on to his bed for a second.

At least that's how he justified it to himself. He needed just a second to stop and figure out where he could hold out for a few more hours to finish his notes on that latest study Shinra had released. It must have been hours since that last thought, because the next thing he knew he was sitting in the back of a convertible. Since that was highly improbable, he definitely knew that he was dreaming.

Cloud rarely dreamed, or more accurately, scarcely remembered his dreams. He'd never questioned why really, but he reasoned that it was because his dreams were typically lucid, reoccurring, and
uninteresting to him and that's why he never remembered them. Except he'd never had a dream like this one before. He felt wind all around him as the car sped down the highway, he looked over at the driver and saw a tall man with short black disheveled hair and blue eyes. Cloud looked around them, but it was pitch black out and they were speeding incredibly fast everything looked like a blur around them.

“Zack?”

The driver turned to look at him in response as he sat confused in the back seat. Zack's hands remained steady on the wheel and looked at him for what seemed like much too long. His blue eyes shone in the dark. He could barely make out his features but he knew it was him.

“Cloud.”

He'd felt as if the car had suddenly hit a wall in the moment he heard the other man say his name. He rolled over in bed, the shock of the sudden crash had him breathing heavily, trying to calm down. He felt his heart racing from the dream ending so suddenly. How did he allow himself to fall asleep in the first place? He tried to check the time on his phone but he had forgotten to plug it in. He squinted in the darkness looking for a digital clock anywhere.

It was 4 A.M. And he still had to wait another hour before curfew was lifted. Only a little less than 51 hours until the next SOLDIER exam. He plugged his phone in quietly and looked around at all the bunks. It looked like he was the only one awake. He didn't necessarily need his phone until his next work shift so he decided to just leave it. He only grabbed his bag of books and his helmet on the way out.

He'd rather forget all about the dream. It made no sense. Why would he leave the city with Zack like that? No one in SOLDIER even owned convertibles. What kind of idiot dreamed about getting driven around as if he was the president or some shit. He was so frustrated at himself. Especially for how much he had enjoyed the brief escape.

He had a hard time studying that morning. And an even harder time at training. He'd thought about quitting too many times, which led to him legitimately questioning his own sanity. Everyone by now was gossiping about Genesis and his deserters. A lot of pressure was coming down from management across the board because of it too.

Cloud still couldn't bring himself to give up. He had been the first to report in for training that morning. The Infantry captain on duty was the same as yesterday's and he asked him what Medical had said, but Cloud only answered that they had cleared him for duty. He captain called him as useless as a piece of furniture and walked away to check on the rest of the unit in the locker room.

The next two days had felt like hell. He managed to stay in line and hadn't caused himself too much additional grief before the exam, but despite all his studying he couldn't shake the regret of not being more prepared for it. He started to feel like he was never prepared for anything.

When he walked in to the exam room at the designated time that dreaded morning, he managed to make a fool of himself before the ordeal even began. He'd stopped upon seeing Sephiroth standing at the front of the room. The tall silver-haired man was leaning against the podium, waiting for everyone to sit down. Two people had run in to him in the process of stopping in the middle of the entrance. They threw a few insults directed his way as they shoved past and he'd managed to get out of the way and sit down in the nearest seat to the door.

The blond didn't dare look up again until a 3rd and a 2nd who were actually there to supervise the exam had finished passing them out to everyone who'd shown up. He tried to avoid looking at the
1st, he was too ashamed from gawking at him when he'd entered. He had thought that Sephiroth being present during the last exam had been a special occurrence. He couldn't believe it was happening again.

1sts rarely attended entrance exams. They usually had to handle too many other things, and so he was worried why Sephiroth would be there again like this. Last time he had simply wished them well, but he wondered if he was here because of the desertion. Maybe this was the company trying to tighten the ranks.

“I'm not here to lie to you.” Sephiroth started bluntly. “You've probably all already heard the rumours. And they're true. Genesis has deserted Shinra.”

The entire room gasped audibly at Sephiroth's cold announcement. The SOLDIER brushed his bangs back as if he was exasperated waiting for everyone to stop whispering so that he could continue.

“Shinra needs SOLDIER more than ever. That's why I came to tell you all, you who will attempt to join SOLDIER today, that there is a lot of work ahead of you should you succeed.”

With that the silver-haired man walked out of the room leaving the other two SOLDIERs to quiet down the men that had erupted in to frantic gossiping. Cloud had sat by the door out of desperation to get out of the way as fast as he could, not because he had expected to be so close to his hero as he left the room unceremoniously. He regretted his choice of seating.

He'd watched him walk all the way to the door, he hadn't wanted to, but he felt paralyzed by the sight of him. The hero had sounded detached, almost angry, during his address. But he could clearly see something else as he walked away from all of them. He looked sad. Had he and Genesis been close?

Cloud flinched when the man's silver eyes met his gaze briefly before he walked out through the electronic doors. It looked like he'd disapproved of being read so easily. He couldn't understand why the great Sephiroth had even looked at him at all. He was conflicted with the notion that he shouldn't have been staring at the man that way in the first place.

The exam had been just as difficult, and the rest of that day had felt like torture just waiting for the inevitable. The following day after the results of the exams had been posted online had felt even worse somehow. He couldn't believe that his scores had barely improved. He was still nowhere near passing. An entire month went by in a blur of pain and disappointment.

Ever since Sephiroth had openly stated what no one else in the company would tell them the chatter had been ceaseless. He almost missed the deafening silence they'd all dredged through. At least it was better than everyone fighting and turning on each other. No one seemed to be able to explain why any of the desertion had happened in the first place.

Cloud had asked around as much as he could to try to figure things out, but most of his efforts had just gotten him in to more problems. People thought he was trying to either protect Genesis or idolize Sephiroth and he didn't want to be seen as doing anything except wanting the truth.

He was on another long patrol shift on the SOLDIER floor one night, exhausted from training and studying as ever, when he noticed Zack again. It was the first time he'd seen him again since running in to him and Angeal that one night. His uniform was different, it had only been a little over a month and he had already been promoted from 3rd to 2nd? Who was this guy?

Cloud watched from behind the bend of the hallway as the blue eyed SOLDIER did squats in the
common area. He had been at it for what seemed like forever now. Cloud had been too nervous to continue his patrol when he'd noticed the dark haired man complaining to himself in public between squats to blow off steam.

The blond was starting to feel awful about watching him for so long. His form was perfect, swinging his arms in a fluid motion, grunting as his entire body bobbed up and down. His legs were massive, and he showed no signs of slowing down. He looked upset about something, and despite his distracting activity, Cloud tried his best to hear what he was moaning about.

The sudden elevator ding behind him almost made him jump out of his skin. Cloud had awkwardly spun around to see who had come out of the elevators when he saw it was another SOLDIER. The man looked right at him, practically caught red-handed spying, except that when he saw it was Zack in the distance, all the SOLDIER did was give the eavesdropping infantryman a smug look before walking right over to Zack with defiant confidence.

Cloud had been too afraid of being called out by the other SOLDIER to move, but his jaw dropped when he saw that he'd just ignored him to go sit down on the steps nearest to Zack. The man leaned back on one arm almost too casually. Something about the tone of voice he used to address Zack made Cloud really uncomfortable.

“Hey Zack, you seem a little on edge.”

Cloud knew he should have moved on long before he'd even gotten caught, but since the SOLDIER hadn't explicitly ordered him to mind his own business, he couldn't help but keep listening.

“Can you blame me? All this training. And no assignments. Like they're hanging me out to dry. You must be pretty busy with everyone off base.”

“Huh? Off-base? Wait, haven't you heard?”

Kunsel had stopped overtly staring at the other man's ass while he did squats and stood back up in surprise when he realized Zack was out of the loop. Cloud was surprised Zack didn't know too, but the scene had made him realize he didn't feel so bad anymore that he'd been distracted by Zack's body with the way that other SOLDIER had just sat down to admire the view in spite of the way he'd been watching from afar.

“There's been a mass desertion at SOLDIER. It appears one of the 1sts deserted. He took a bunch of 2nds and 3rds with him, too.”

Zack had stopped his squats abruptly when he heard the word desertion. Cloud wondered why the SOLDIER hadn't just told Zack it was Genesis. How could Zack not have heard what had happened already?

“Nobody knows why he left, or what he's up to. This mass desertion's the reason your training's on hold.”

Kunsel had continued, earnestly filling in Zack as best he could. The elevator dinged again and Cloud thought he'd died again for the second time that night from surprise. Angeal was next to walk straight past him in to the common area, completely ignoring him.

“Heads up, a 1st!”

Kunsel announced. It was protocol for the next highest ranking SOLDIER to announce such things.
“Zack, new assignment.”

“Woo! Finally! Some real action!”

Cloud was surprised by the SOLDIER’s enthusiasm. He was rising so fast, and there he was being handed another high-profile assignment. It looked as if he wasn’t bothered by the desertion at all as he ran up to Angeal, and the 1st class SOLDIER proceeded to promised him;

“This will be your show.”

“Yes!”

Zack exclaimed in turn.

“Report to Director Lazard. We'll give you the details.”

Angeal walked off to the briefing room and Zack stayed behind just a moment longer to gloat to the other 2nd class SOLDIER.

“Watch me make 1st with this assignment, Kusel.”

“I'm rooting for you, Zack.”

Cloud watched Zack disappear in to the briefing room and he finally resumed his patrolling. His shift was almost over and he wished there had been a way to find out where Zack was going to be sent. The company kept a lot of information about missions to a need-to-know basis, which was meant to prevent security leaks. Despite the company's best efforts to maintain covert operations, there were just too many employees with huge mouths who managed to work for them. Rumors circulated through gossip and emails faster than an electrical fire spread through cheap housing.

He couldn't help but wonder what kind of show Angeal had in store for the young SOLDIER? Cloud certainly admired Zack's strength and ambition, but he was left feeling unreasonably worried about where he would be dispatched by Lazard with Angeal. What if they made him go after Genesis in Wutai? What if he never came back either?
The War Is Over

Cloud hadn’t slept that night knowing Zack was being deployed overseas. He checked the news, message boards, blogs, any source he could find for updates on the Wutai war.

He couldn’t shake the sense of dread he felt since the man had suddenly been sent to Wutai. He couldn’t explain it. He'd never even talked to him. He knew exactly nothing about him.

They received the official email about the mobilization many had witnessed just before morning training;

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Subject: Situation with Wutai
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From: Shinra News

We have received reports from the Security and SOLDIER departments on the state of war with Wutai.

We have been in negotiations with Wutai for years in order to peacefully resolve the long dispute regarding mako extraction in the region. However, Wutai's steadfast refusal has resulted in aggravated tensions.
In order to break through this impasse, we have decided to resume military action. A special attack force of the smallest size has been mobilized to keep the scale of operations to a minimum.

--

He'd read the email over several times while attempting to search for real updates and coming up empty handed. They didn't even say who they had sent. But a ton of employees clearly saw Lazard, Angeal, Sephiroth, and Zack along with a handful of men, leave HQ. That's all anyone knew and everyone had immediately moved on from that fact. He wished he knew where to look, but the company was highly secretive when it came to ongoing missions.

He tried the only thing he knew how to do, he hung around after training to listen to gossip. The longer he listened to people talking about anything unrelated to the war, the lower Cloud sank. He knew he couldn't outright ask anyone for updates, anything not released directly from Shinra was considered leaking classified information. Emails and calls on company lines were monitored, sounded reasonable, if you didn't know all lines where Shinra owned.

On the second day without any news he'd been so desperate to find an inside source that he even asked the Soldier fans who gathered in front of HQ if they had heard anything new. He thought maybe one of them knew someone who was “close” to one of the SOLDIER deployed. They hadn't. He regretted even asking. They had then tried to make him pick between Angeal, Sephiroth, and Genesis. The infantryman walked away to their dismay.

He was exhausted from lack of sleep. Well, that wasn't exactly new, but the additional stress was making him feel far worse than usual. He'd never been so scared in his life. He thought he had seen the worse of it already. How much more was there to possibly feel? He'd already feared for his
own life on several occasions. He'd been convinced that he'd felt all of the loneliness, and all the pain a person could withstand, but he'd never imagined something like this.

He needed to know if Zack was alright. He remembered the guilt he'd endured when Tifa got hurt when they fell in the mountains all those years ago. He remembered worrying back then too. Somehow he had known she would be alright. He knew she was a million times tougher than him. She probably still was. But what had hurt most back then was the guilt of being blamed for it when he'd only wanted to help.

Cloud checked his phone excessively for notifications or updates from the tags he was tracking. He felt sick to his stomach, he couldn't eat, and he felt as if he'd completely lost touch with everything he'd been working towards. Things were getting out of hand. He was supposed to be joining SOLDIER, not stalking one.

He told himself that Zack would be fine. He was a million times stronger than him too. So then what was making him feel like he'd never see him again? Never get to even meet him. Not that he'd ever have a reason to.

Cloud sighed and put his phone away again before anyone got angry. The day had been agonizingly long and he wasn't done his shift patrolling yet. The only other piece of information they got later that day was that Rufus had been promoted to VP.

Subject: Personnel Announcement 0012

From: Shinra News

Official Personnel Announcement

Effective today, Rufus Shinra has been appointed to Vice President and Corporate Officer.

Additionally, Rufus Shinra has departed on a long-term business trip, the details of which cannot be disclosed for security reasons.

--

He was so sick of reading those only two emails since Zack had left. No one knew anything and staring at the screen on his phone was starting to give him a migraine. The rest of the 2nds and 3rds were off running scavenger missions in the meantime. The company's usual tactic when anything was going on was to keep everyone busy.

Cloud hadn't remembered falling asleep that night. All he knew was that he was staring down a highway again. This time he was in the passenger seat, and the radio was on. He glanced over and studied Zack again, wondering why his dreams where always so simplistic.

They listened to the music while he drove them out of the city. Or was it in to the city? He couldn't tell. The song had a rhythm, but when he tried to listen too closely it only sounded like static. He willed himself to reach over and touch the other man's face. He'd often had lucidity to his dreams. Even though most of the time he had no idea what was going on, like most dreams. Sometimes they were reoccurring dreams, so he'd learned that remembering how they unfolded let him to try to change their outcome.
He looked the SOLDIER over once he'd caressed his face. He looked the same as in his last dream. The tall man's eyes were bright in the darkness as he steered the convertible at top speed. Streetlights whipped by, briefly illuminating them as he inched towards the immobile chauffeur.

Cloud thought that if they were just going to crash anyways, he may as well be the cause of it. He slid his hand from the man's cheek down his jaw then behind his head to run his fingers through his hair as he moved closer. He wanted nothing more than to feel his lips before it was too late but it wasn't right. Zack wasn't smiling at him as he had in his first dream. Wait? Had he been smiling at him last time at all.

Zack was staring ahead down the road past him, but before Cloud could turn to see why, he felt the car reach it's unfortunate destination and their bodies were suddenly flung forward from inertia. Both unbuckled, they went crashing through the windshield. He woke up screaming.

“What the fuck!?"

Someone shouted back. Cloud groaned through a sob in response when he stopped screaming. Several Infantrymen were either yelling as well, or throwing something in his general direction.

“God damn shut up and go back to sleep!”

“It's 3 fucking AM!”

“Fuck what the fuck who was that?”

“Fucking Strife.”

“Go back to sleep!”

Cloud wanted to get out. He was choking back sobs quietly while half his unit begrudgingly tried to get back to sleep by yelling at those who were still talking or cursing at him. He rolled over and picked up the cellphone he'd fallen asleep on early, pulled the covers over his head, and tried to hold on to the metal frame to stop feeling like he was falling.

It felt more like being thrown. Like being pushed down stairs. It took a while before he could breathe right again. It always took a while to calm down whenever he started crying like that. It wasn't so much the exhaustion from it that bothered him, but the searing pain in his chest and throat when he couldn't contain himself.

Once he'd worked up the courage he flipped open his phone under the covers. He'd get reprimanded for this on top of waking everyone up if anyone saw. But he didn't care, no one could see the light this way, and he needed to know if there was any news. He had no notifications.

Cloud closed his phone and rolled over again. Morning couldn't come fast enough. He couldn't bare to be in there another second. As soon as the automatic alarm went off he was already walking towards the exit.

“Strife.”

His superior called him almost immediately. He looked back and saw he was still putting his boots on, so he walked faster towards the door. He grabbed his gear while the rest groaned about having to get up more so than usual.

“Where do you think you're going?”
When Cloud didn't respond the other man proceeded to shout, and a few others hesitated as to if they should attempt to restrain the blond or not.

“That's another mark-down, Strife!”

He kept walking. He hated being reprimanded for shit he had no control over. What was the difference between one mark-down or two mark downs the same morning at this rate. He hated that no one was talking about the war. How many people had been sacrificed over the years? It had been almost 10 years since the Wutai nation and Shinra had been facing off. The only two remaining world powers.

His town had welcomed the Shinra long ago. The first Mako Reactor ever even was built in Mt. Nibel. He didn't know what life was like without the Shinra. He wished he could have seen what Wutai was like before they had decided they needed another reactor and started the war at all.

What where they fighting for exactly? Just more Mako? He looked at his phone again. Still no notifications. No one knew anything. Everyone was more interested in getting through their day than wondering about what the company was really doing overseas.

Cloud sighed and realized he was just as guilty. He'd never worried about the war before. It had been going since he was a kid and he never questioned it. Why were they only dispatching 1st class SOLDIERs now that one of them was missing? Shouldn't they have sent them all together instead from the start?

The news reports had long claimed that the SOLDIER initiative would bring an end to the war. Did Wutai have a secret weapon too? Had Genesis and his entire unit been killed off? Why did they think that he deserted willingly? What if they were just all dead? What if all the SOLDIER ended up K.I.A. and then the Wutai came after HQ next?

Why hadn't they sent Sephiroth instead of Genesis in the first place?

Cloud stopped walking. He swayed for an instant. That feeling of falling, of being weightless for just an instant. It made him panic, feeling as if he was about to faint, so he reached out to the nearest wall to brace himself. What was he going on about? He needed to keep his head low. If he got fired he'd never find out if Zack was alright.

He tried to dredge through another day. He hated routine. By the time morning training was over he was too tired to even look at his phone anymore. He knew he couldn't rely on the intranet, it was just inane filtered chatter. He needed to find a source. He was considering skipping lunch. He couldn't remember the last prescription he'd taken. He wasn't in any shape to keep this up.

He returned to their quarters while everyone else was out and decided to try and at least sleep before his patrol shift. Well he tried. He hadn't known if he'd slept at all before sudden shouting and cheering interrupted his train of thought. It was coming from the door as several infantrymen returned from lunch in some sort of frenzy, singing the Shinra anthem at that.

He groaned and sat up in confusion, watching the guys cheering and singing. He got up and opened his phone. He'd missed an email notification;

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Subject: President's declaration
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From: Shinra News
We hereby declare the end of the war with Wutai. Worthy of note is Sephiroth, SOLDIER 1st Class, whose contributions were instrumental in bringing about a peaceful resolution with a minimum of casualties. The end of this war marks the beginning of distribution and further development of mako throughout all regions. The Shinra Company is dedicated to these goals and will continue to achieve them by any means possible.

- President Shinra

The war was over? Cloud dropped his phone. The other infantrymen looked at him and they all burst in to cheering when they saw the shock on his face.

“It's over! It's really over, we won!”

They kept shouting. They were dropping their gear off and practically flailing about the room with excitement.

“They're giving us the rest of the day off! They're throwing a party tonight for the returning hero, Sephiroth! We won!!”

Cloud picked up his phone from the floor and inspected it for damage nervously before putting it back in to his pocket without a word. He couldn't believe what he had just read, or heard. What did any means possible mean? What had Sephiroth done? Who were the casualties?

“Come on! Let's go! We'll miss all the champagne!”

Cloud shook his head. The others didn't bother to stay to convince him to consume free alcohol as they were already marching off to partake. When the doors slid open again he could hear the sound of even more people cheering from the hallways before the door slammed shut again.

“What casualties?”

Cloud questioned out loud. If only to feel just how much his throat hurt in that instant. He couldn't just break down. He needed to go see. He needed to know if he was back or not.

The entire HQ was buzzing with celebration like he'd never seen it before. He got out on the 3rd floor and he could see every surface was lined with white tablecloth and drinks and food were being pilled on in preparation. A podium was being installed for the president's address and the lobby was filling with people. Only authorized guests and employees were being let up to the 2nd and 3rd floors but they would probably be broadcasting the whole thing across the city.

Cloud anxiously looked around and tried to ask people when they were due back in Midgar but they only answered hurriedly before moving on.

"Any moment now!"

He begrudgingly took a drink, if only to get people to stop shoving trays in his face. Everyone was so happy. The president sure let it show that the only one he cared about was Sephiroth. He wondered why that was. Angeal and Genesis (and Zack) were probably all amazing SOLDIER too weren't they? Didn't anyone care about the casualties? His heart sunk when he thought that Zack might not to be walking in any second now.
It felt like hours had gone by. He had lost track of how many drinks he'd had. By now he was angry no one could tell him who else was making it back alive except the great Hero. Everyone who worked at Shinra was celebrating by this point, even the catering staff. There was music playing and everyone chatted about how amazing Sephiroth was.

For the first time Cloud was sick of hearing about Sephiroth. He moved down to the 2nd floor to try to get away from all of the chatter. People were dancing in this area and really letting lose while some of the staff kept prepping cameras and equipment on the 3rd floor for the grand arrival.

He’d been staring out at the crowd for an eternity when an audible gasp from the crowd down bellow alerted him. The security infantry had asked civilians to move aside and clear a path through the lobby. The entire HQ erupted in to cheers and applause and Cloud had to hold on to the banister not to fall in to the lobby from being pushed to see by everyone behind him.

There was Sephiroth. Not bothering to look at anyone, simply making his way fluidly through to the staircase while the infantrymen held the manic crowd back from storming their hero. Lazard followed, looking proud, smiling and waiving at everyone who was cheering.

He almost leaned too far over the banister when he hadn't seen Angeal next, nor Zack, a few more men followed the pair in to the building before Zack did, lagging behind. He wasn't looking at anyone either.

Where was Angeal?

The infantrymen moved back and blocked off the staircase again once the men had made it through to the second floor. Lazard was shaking hands and making his way up to the 3rd floor with Sephiroth. The rest of the men readily joined the celebrations. All but Zack, who walked straight up past everyone and left through the elevators.

Well that wasn't going to be good for PR. Cloud could already see several people gossiping about the 2nd class SOLDIER just leaving without a word. He wanted to follow Zack, but he didn't know what he could even do for him. Cloud watched Sephiroth from across the room and despite the fact he seemed to be acknowledging the public as he usually did, Cloud couldn't help but feel that he seemed incredibly sad.
Cloud only snapped out of his daze when someone almost knocked him over trying to get by him. He'd been staring at Sephiroth for so long he felt numb, or maybe it was all the alcohol. He scanned the crowd but no one seemed to care that their hero wasn't showing any signs of partaking in his victory.

Everyone was so ecstatic to see Sephiroth up close and for the president to speak that nothing else seemed to matter to them. He watched as the crowd swelled and ushered the two revered men up to the podium and cameras. He couldn't bare to keep watching anymore. He knew something went wrong with Angeal and that he wouldn't find out more by staying for the speech.

Cloud turned to leave. Somehow he'd underestimated how difficult it was to leave a crowded party. He was trying to get to the elevators and hadn't realized how drunk he was until he'd stumbled a couple times trying to avoid people with little success.

He still couldn't believe how happy they all seemed. He wondered if he would be acting just like them had he not been filled with so much grief for a SOLDIER he didn't even know. Would he have been just like all the others trying to get closer to Sephiroth instead of chasing after a stranger?

The infantryman had no idea what he was doing but he couldn't help needing to try. Finding Zack would he hard enough. What would he look like if he got caught sneaking around where he shouldn't be while the President gives his speech. He knew he shouldn't be going up there, but the look on Zack's face upon entering HQ was plaguing him. What was it like to lose a mentor? He wouldn't know, but he thought he'd felt part of it somehow.

Other employees crowded in to the elevator as they progressively ascended. It seemed as though he wasn't the only one uninterested in the party bellow, or the one above. He overheard a few who were carrying as many bottles as they could in their arms talk about how the real party was on floor 61 tonight.

Cloud got off on floor 49. He followed his gut and somehow his gut was right. Except, he wasn't the only one who had worried about the man's sombre return. That other SOLDIER he'd seen with Zack before, Kunsel, was already talking to Zack in front of the training room.

Cloud moved back from the nearest corner to hide when he'd seen the pair. He wasn't wearing his helmet, and he instantly regretted his decision to find the man. While he seemed compelled by bad ideas, he peered around the corner to watch the pair arguing.

“You can't get caught up in all this desertion mess, Zack.”

Kunsel pleaded, his voice sounded minuscule compared to the anger Zack projected back.

“I'm not! He's not!”

Kunsel took a step back, raising his hands defensively.

“I just meant that no matter what's going on, we still need you, Zack.”

Zack sighed sharply before going back on the defensive.

“He's not a traitor.”
“I didn't say that!”

Kunsel tried to defend himself, but Zack just shouted back.

“He's not a traitor! He's coming back!”

Zack turned away and went in to the training room before Kunsel could say anything else. The other man was left standing there shocked.

Cloud was just as shocked. His chest felt heavy and he couldn't breathe. He knew he needed to get out of there. He shouldn't have seen any of that. There was nothing he could do. He reasoned that it was safer for everyone to let the SOLDIER blow off steam in the VR system for now.

The blond headed towards the stairs. He couldn't risk getting stuck waiting for a crowded elevator again, not while he was on the verge of whatever it was that was preventing him from breathing.

The pain in Zack's voice had filled him with agony. He tried to hurry, quietly, but he barely saw where he was going. His throat burned, his eyes stung, he wanted to cry, but nothing was coming out. He had to stop walking and brace himself against a wall to collect himself.

“Hey you.”

Cloud looked over his shoulder. It was Kunsel. He couldn't move.

“Yes, you. What are you doing here?”

Cloud wanted to give an excuse, but he was too afraid. His heart was racing and he just wanted to make a break for it, he was so close to the stairs, why had he stopped?

“Hey! I asked you a question!”

Kunsel was coming closer and Cloud moved from the wall to step away from him almost stumbling backwards in the process.

“Nothing.”

Cloud mumbled, he couldn't look the SOLDIER in the eye. The other man sighed when he saw the state he was in.

“Shit. Are you drunk? The party's downstairs. What are you doing here?”

“Uh... I.”

“Look, just get out of here.”

Kunsel shook his head at him as he dismissed him and Cloud turned to head down the stairs. He had to hold on to the banister with all of his strength. Every step down he took felt as if the ground would open up beneath him.

The blond had never felt so disoriented before. He wanted to blame it on the alcohol, but he knew that it wasn't normal to care so much about someone he didn't even know. He just hoped Angeal would return, for Zack's sake.

The next day everyone was hungover. Training that morning had been a joke. Some were doing worse than him for a change. He almost enjoyed it, but all the talk about how lit the party had been was too demoralizing.
All he'd thought about that morning was his patrol shift later that day. He wanted to see if Zack was
doing any better. As soon as training was over and they were dismissed he was pulled aside by his
superior and the 18th division captain.

They told him his work duty had been changed following several mark-downs in addition to a
complaint from a SOLDIER that morning with regards to suspicious behavior. Cloud didn't see the
point of making any excuses, he could only nod while they told him they were assigning him to the
slums instead.

No one wanted to patrol the slums. He'd heard all about how terrible it was down there, and how
more and more monsters were spawning by the minute. He didn't have a choice but to go.

He was more concerned about how he was ever going to get a chance to talk to Zack at this rate
instead of his own safety. He'd never actually been to the slums before. When he enlisted he was
driven in with a group of young men who were also applying to work for Shinra right in to the city.

That day had been his first time taking a train as well. He'd boarded with his employee pass and
walked down the crowded cars, watching as they passed steel beam after steel beam descending
from the plate above. He held the strap to the rifle slung over his shoulder tightly.

He had no idea so many people traveled to and from the slums each day. Once they'd disembarked
he followed the commuters out in to the adjacent marketplace and he looked around in amazement.

It wasn't what he had expected at all. It actually seemed nice, but the rumors weren't all wrong.
Once he'd made his rounds he'd seen that there were definitely a lot of monsters. Not to mention a
lot of people who didn't like Shinra. Thankfully, they hated monsters more than the Shinra and he
was able to shoot down a few of them to get people off his back.

He gained more experience down there in a month than he had since he'd joined Shinra. It was
strange being somewhere else than Midgar at first. He wasn't sure if he liked it, or if he just
couldn't tell how bad he felt anymore.

It had been so long since he'd last seen Zack, he wished he could of spoken to him about the war,
but he hadn't seen him since the night he'd returned. Even if he had, he knew he would never have
the courage to do so. There was still no sign of Angeal, so he expected things weren't great for
either of them.

No one had any idea what really happened in Wutai. The company hadn't released any details.
They hadn't even outright said if Rufus' overseas business was in Wutai or not. No one in
SOLDIER had said a word either since. He would have heard if they had but everyone seemed
worried SOLDIER was falling apart.

Cloud was sick of people talking about nothing. And now he was tried of them asking him about
the slums. He'd preferred it when people had just ignored him. He didn't want to talk about all the
monsters. There actually seemed to be more and more every week. His first few confrontations had
been nerve-wracking but he'd managed to survive so far.

The slums were like nothing anyone knew outside of Midgar, and because of that it was a prime
area for contraband and other services. He hated being accosted with requests for illicit purchases.
He especially hated being accosted by people IN the slums. They didn't want anything from him
except for him to leave because they hated the Shinra and he couldn't do that.

If he left he'd get reported. There were cameras in their helmets. There were cameras in the
marketplace too. Well, a few, or the ones the residents couldn't get to at least. He thought he'd
gotten used to the monitoring when he'd first joined the company but somehow it still got under his
skin sometimes.

He hated that he still wanted to join SOLDIER. He wanted to quit even more now that he was
constantly getting ambushed by monsters on his patrol duty. He'd accumulated a impressive
collection of scrapes and bruises from all his encounters. Getting knocked down and trampled by
monsters became part of his routine. He preferred it to being beat up by men, because at least the
monsters couldn't tell him all the reasons why they were doing it in the first place.

There was only one other detail besides being far away beneath Midgar that managed to reassured
him. It was someone he couldn't describe to anyone. He refused to speak of her, or mention her
name to anyone, for her sake. But her name was Aerith.

He'd seen the green-eyed girl walk though the marketplace many times. Everyone greeted her so
warmly. That's how he'd learned her name. She smiled at everyone except for him, but he couldn't
blame her. He was a faceless armed man whom she probably hated just like everyone else down
here. He hadn't blamed any of them from the start either.

If anything he was starting to hate Shinra too. He hated that they let two of their 1sts go on some
traitorous desertion without explanation. He hated that they'd systematically murdered anyone who
stood in the way of mako exploitation. He hated that Zack had probably killed many people in
Wutai along with his hero Sephiroth.

Cloud wished he could think of something other than the war that had supposedly just ended. He
wished everyone down in the slums wouldn't hate him as much, but it only made him work harder.

Even Aerith had looked at him once with so much apprehension that she'd looked away as if more
disgusted at herself for even looking than how disgusted she was with him. He hated that he had to
be the person that made her feel that way.

Cloud felt as if something was different about her. It wasn't just her beauty, or her ceaseless
kindness. Something felt different about her. Every time he saw her, he was left wondering about
the lingering presence she had. Like warmth radiating through your skin. As if she was the sun and
they all orbited her presence.

He had spent a lot of time wondering if it was the same feeling he'd had when he'd first seen Zack.
It felt so familiar in a way, but completely different in others. Zack had made his heart race. Lifted
him through an instant of wonder and admiration for a person so beautiful and so strong he couldn't
of expected to exist.

But Aerith felt miraculous in a different way. Just her presence made him feel serene in ways he
couldn't explain. All he knew for sure was that he wished he could talk to her too, somehow.

It had been a month so far and she never had, and he refused to cause her any grief by addressing
her himself. All he could do was try to keep her safe through the simple act of expending as many
Shinra issued bullets in to monsters as he could between the church and the marketplace.

The constant adrenaline that came with clearing out monsters left him feeling more on edge than
ever. He felt like he hadn't been able to focus on anything else for all that time since he'd been
assigned to the slums. Between training, studying, and his patrol shifts he didn't do anything else.
The next exam was coming up and as long as Shinra didn't fire him, he would still try to make it in
to SOLDIER.

He'd been sleeping more than usual somehow. He hadn't dreamed about Zack in a while, but he
was still more than thankful for the sleep. Though the night before he hadn't been able to sleep before because the other infantrymen were all talking about Banora before curfew. Apparently Banora was where Genesis and Angeal were from, and where “The brightest up and comer, Zack” had just been deployed.

He hadn't been as terrified as when Zack was sent to war. He had no idea what Banora was like or why he was sent out there alone if only to confirm that neither deserter had returned home. But what if they had?

He'd tossed and turned all night. He had wanted to go walk to clear his head, but since the desertions and the war ending Shinra had ramped up security in HQ with what troops they had left. There were always new people joining the company but it took time before they could be trained.

The very next day Zack had already returned from Banora. There had been no press releases about the mission. It felt like the entire file had been covered up, as if the mission had never happened.

Then out of the blue, about a week later, the company closed the case on the deserters. He sighed when he read it, as if they'd believe it when no one else confirmed it.

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Subject: Personnel Announcement 0103
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From: Shinra News

This is an official notification of the change in status for the following personnel.

Angeal Hewley - SOLDIER 1st Class:
Killed in action

Genesis Rhapsodos - SOLDIER 1st Class:
Killed in action

--

Cloud had almost jumped out of his own skin when his phone's alarm went off shortly after he'd read the email. He knew it was odd, because he knew he hadn't set one for himself. He'd been so caught up in thinking about why the K.I.A. announcements and why they came in so late. He had been wondering if it had anything to do with Banora being covered up, but when he saw his phone was going off because of a city-wide alert he almost dropped it.

Several people were looking at him with concern, most just wanted him to hurry up and turn the alarm off, but once he had he felt paralyzed by the silence that ensued. What should he do? If the city was under attack, should he return to help?

The infantryman waited for orders, or for something to happen. He'd walked around the marketplace for good measure, if only to confirm that Aerith wasn't around before heading outside the wall. If the city was under attack, they might try to come through the slums too.

He'd stood guard and nothing but monsters came. It felt like something was calling them from all directions, like a beacon. Whatever was going on above the plate was serious.

He unloaded clip after clip in to mutated beasts trying to get in to the market. He told anyone who crossed his path to get indoors somewhere, that there were
“More monsters out than usual.”

He didn't tell them what the alert had been for, he didn't want anyone to panic. Most of the people who lived in the slums were so used to monsters they didn't bat an eye anymore, just did their best to out-run the things and let someone else take care of them.

All day that someone had been him. He was almost out of ammo and he sat leaning against the cold steel wall of the marketplace in exhaustion when he got another email. He practically gasped reading it.

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Subject: Personnel Announcement 0104
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From: Shinra News

Official Personnel Announcement

Effective today, Zack Fair has been promoted to SOLDIER 1st Class

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Cloud shoved his phone back in to his pocket and sighed out of happiness for a change. At least Zack was being recognized for his hard work. He's made 1sts so quickly. Banora must have been something.

He stared out in to the distance, smiling and leaning against his rifle as he imagined Zack in an all-black uniform. Nothing as extravagant as Sephiroth. He just imagined him walking through the shadows, his dark hair failing to mask his Mako infused eyes.

Tall, and handsome, how was it possible to look so cute in a turtleneck. Wow. Black really did suit him. He looked troubled still, even though he was walking with Aerith.

He was really. Really walking towards the marketplace with Aerith leading the way. 1st Class SOLDIER Zack Fair was in the slums? Had the attacks on Midgar ended? Why was he with her?
Cloud watched motionless as the pair approach the marketplace. He barely even reacted when some monsters targeted them. He was exhausted, yes, but more than anything he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

He watched as the newly appointed 1st cut down the foes with a few quick slices, then proceed to turn back around to the young woman for praise. She didn't seem convinced he merited any.

Cloud realized he hadn't even tried to get up and back to his post in the presence of a 1st and his surprise was just as quickly replaced with panic.

He needed to move. He'd been too astounded by his beauty. Their beauty. Why where they together of all people? He hated himself for wanting to know more. He had no right, but there they were, and here he was, too afraid to walk away.

The infantryman pushed himself up with the help of his rifle, moving out of sight behind the nearest pile of rubble nearest to the entrance. There was a lot of trash from whatever people discarded from the plate above that fell down on the outskirts of unfinished sectors, which tended to accumulate near the marketplace.

He watched as Zack and Aerith made their way over but lingered at the entrance in silence. Zack looked around at the houses and some people making it past them for a moment before speaking up.

“It's kinda stuffy down here.”

Zack pointed out, hands on his hips, as if trying to get a feel for the place.

“Really?”

Aerith questioned back immediately.

“It's always like this, though.”

Cloud figured it really was Zack's first time down here, and that meant they must have just met today of all days. He couldn't understand why a 1st would be down here when there had just been an attack on the city. Didn't they need his help? Or were there deserters hiding out in the slums?

“I know what it is!”

Zack finally exclaimed, hitting his fist in to his palm and announcing.

“You can't see the sky.”

Cloud seriously starts doubting the man's attention to detail.

“Who wants to see the sky? I don't, that's for sure.”

She looked down while she responded. He could barely see her expression but her tone had changed. He had never imagined people could be afraid of the sky. He thought people wanted to leave the slums as often as they could to see it.

“Wouldn't you normally miss seeing the sky if you lived under a plate all year round?”
Zack asked the obvious question, almost too insistently. The dark haired man held his hands out besides himself, at a loss of how ridiculous it was not to miss the sky

“I guess I'm not normal.”

Aerith retorted in the same tone as before. Zack walked closer to her, as if he was concerned, but she didn't look up at him so he stopped and crossed his arms.

“You want to talk about it?”

Aerith looked up at the SOLDIER again and answered as simply as she could.

“The sky frightens me. I feel like it's sucking me in…”

Zack stared at her with his arms crossed, just as perplexed as before. She looked down again when she got no response back and added,

“Weird, huh?”

Zack seemed to be coming to terms with something before he raised a hand to rub the back of his head in defeat and admit,

“Normal is overrated.”

Aerith continued to stare at the ground.

“Think so?”

Zack hit the palm of his hand again in a far too sudden gesture of clarity and Cloud wished he'd stop doing that.

“I have an idea!”

Aerith didn't react, but he proceeded to explain,

“One day, I'll take you to see a beautiful sky, the real sky.”

She looked at him for just an instant before looking back down to the ground just as dejected as before.

“It's not frightening at all. I know you're gonna love it.”

Zack insisted and Aerith finally looked at him once again, holding his gaze for a few moments before nodding once firmly. Without another word they proceeded to enter the marketplace together.

Cloud stepped out from behind the discarded rubble as soon as the gates had closed behind the pair. He wished he could just leave already, but his shift wasn't over yet.

He felt awful he'd listened in on the pair. He still didn't know what Zack was doing down here. He wished he could help himself from eavesdropping any more than he already had. But he was stationed down here, he had to return to his post.

Zack hadn't really been sent down here by Shinra, had he? Perhaps he'd already taken care of the problem. That or he was just passing through, but then how did he just happen to run in to someone as special as her out of the blue?
Cloud sighed and looked up at the plate. They hadn't even met yet and he felt as though this was the end of the possibility entirely. How could he compete? But more importantly, how long had he been thinking about Zack that way.

He sighed again and decided not to think that through. He straightened his helmet and slung his rifle back over his shoulder before entering the market to make his rounds. It would still be a while until the next infantryman showed up to relieve him of his post and it was quiet enough outside the walls to go back in now.

He started walking around and kept an eye on the pair. They seemed to be running about frantically searching for something. Or someone? He overheard something about a pickpocket. Cloud watched the scene unravel before him in disbelief. How could a SOLDIER 1st class get pick pocketed? He rubbed the back of his sore neck as he watched them go, questioning everyone around the marketplace as to the whereabouts of the culprit.

He had no idea where the kid in question had gone, or which kid it was in the first place. Even though the slums were dangerous, there were still quite a lot of families who lived out their lives down here.

He wondered what Aerith's family was like. Or Zack's. He was exhausted from the influx of monsters he'd had to deal with all day his thoughts roamed ceaselessly. He thought it would be best to avoid the two, besides he knew he needed to go back out and make sure more fiends hadn't made it in to the populated areas.

He was about to leave when Zack came right up to him. He was so surprised he forgot about the wallet. He just froze and practically shouted,

“Ah!? You're--”

Cloud took a step back from the SOLDIER who just stood there confused, and before he could respond anything the younger man muttered an excuse.

“Oh nothing, Sir. Just an Infantryman on patrol.”

Zack turned away without another word but Cloud could feel his heart pounding against his chest. Zack hadn't even gotten a word out and he'd panicked? What the hell was wrong with him? He got out of there as quickly as he could and headed down the path opposite from the church. He didn't want to run in to either of them again and feel whatever it was they were able to inflict on him.

He wished he understood how two beings so entirely different could cause him so much pain by meeting. He didn't know who he was jealous of more, her or him. All he knew was that he had no right to be jealous. He began to hate himself for it.

As he approached the deserted playground he saw monsters roaming about. He aimed his rifle and took them out. It had almost become a reflex. He hadn't even waited for his helmet's tracking system to lock on to the target.

Point and fire. Cloud sighed at the thought that he was getting used to this. He'd never felt worse in his life. How was it that he could be so happy for someone one instant and feel so incredibly sad the next, just because they're with someone unexpected.

She wasn't just any person though. There was something profoundly different about Aerith. He wondered if Zack's smile was just as powerful as her's, and if that's why they'd been fated to meet.
Cloud reasoned that he was exactly what either of them shouldn't be exposed to. Someone who smiled only when necessary, and most rarely for himself. It dawned on him then that when he'd read the email about Zack's promotion to 1st, that he hadn't really smiled in months.

He felt as if his face was actually sore from it now that he thought about it. He rubbed his jaw lazily, he couldn't tell what hurt exactly. He'd been in so much pain for so long, from the fighting, and training, and frankly he was starting to lose track.

He took out another enemy or two, clearing out the playground and moving on. He'd kept patrolling for so long he'd almost reached halfway through next sector before realizing that he needed to turn around.

By the time he'd circled back it looked like the rate of roaming monsters had decreased significantly. Even kids were running around again. He had to get back to his post before the next infantryman arrived.

Except Zack and Aerith where standing in the playground. He couldn't get past them without being seen, but more importantly he didn't want to interrupt whatever was going on.

It looked like something was wrong and he couldn't help but stare. Zack stood with his arms crossed, looking away, and Aerith looked upset again as well. His helmet allowed him to see easily from a distance, but it took some time for it to enhance sound on targets.

“I'm sorry.”

Aerith apologized for some reason and he watched as the pair stood in silence for a long time. Zack wasn't sure how to respond and she simply waited for a sign he'd accept her apology.

The SOLDIER lowered his arms at first to consolidate her apology before scratching the back of his head. It looked like he was struggling with what had just happened but he was quick to respond when she changed the subject.

“So pretty...”

Cloud sighed to himself (Girl, I know.) But Zack gleefully pointed to himself in response.

“The face?”

She laughed, but kindly corrected,

“The eyes.”

Zack walked over to her, happy to indulge.

“You like them? Then take a closer look.”

He stood a few feet away from her and leaned in so she could take a good look at his eyes. Cloud really wished he hadn't stopped to watch the pair again. Was that guy really this full of himself?

“Eyes infused with Mako energy. A SOLDIER trademark.”

Aerith took the opportunity to examine them. The closer she leaned the wider Zack smiled and she eventually pulled back, giving him a slight shove.

“Oh, you!”
Cloud was confused. Zack was amused, laughing innocently at her reaction to finding out something so pretty could be SOLDIER-made. Even his laugh was beautiful.

“Color of the sky, right?”

She looked up at him again and nodded with a smile.

“Mm-hmm. But not scary at all.”

“I'll admit it, things haven't been normal at all lately.”

Zack turned as he spoke before pausing and looking back at her.

“What about you Aerith, how's your life going?”

She mimicked him, turning her back to him as she spoke.

“I was thinking it would be a normal day, but then suddenly... Some guy fell out of the sky.”

Zack shrugged, joking about it.

“That's not all that bad.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Cloud watched as Aerith agreed and smiled at the SOLDIER. He just. Fell? From the plate above? How? He survived a 50ft drop? He'd actually fallen down all the way from Midgar in the unlikeliest event of meeting her. He thought that this was how things were supposed to be after all. Zack was supposed to meet someone like her, not him. And she was supposed to meet someone like Zack, not him either. He was still some mixed up kid obsessed with heroes from his childhood.

When the SOLDIER's phone rang, the volume on his audio augmentation spiked and he cringed at the pain, kneeling down to try to collect himself. His heart was racing from the shock of being reminded of what he was doing in the first place. Eavesdropping again.

“I'm on my way.”

With that Zack ended the call as suddenly as it had started, turning to Aerith to explain.

“I'm sorry, but duty calls.”

“I hope you're friend's okay, Zack.”

“Huh?”

“You talk in your sleep.”

Aerith explained her sudden statement, but the look on Zack's face seemed so conflicted. Cloud couldn't be certain what was going on, he only assume she meant Angeal. He'd seen the same look on Zack's face when he'd first returned from the war.

“Yeah, it'll be fine. I know that now.”

The SOLDIER put on a brave face for her, but Cloud wasn't so sure he really believed what he'd just said. He watched as the young woman departed and Zack seemed disoriented for a moment, looking around as if he wasn't sure which direction to go in before heading back towards the
Cloud waited a long time before heading back. He assumed Zack would be heading back to Midgar and he couldn't even think about boarding the same train as him. He still couldn't believe the man was alive after falling from so high. He wondered to what extent Shinra really experimented on SOLIDER operatives.

He couldn't help but feel as though he was lucky that despite whatever the company had done to the other man, it had allowed him to survive the drop down to the slums. Except, he wondered why he felt lucky at all when it was painfully obvious that fate had no intention of bringing them together. Fate had chose to send Zack to Aerith instead.
When Cloud returned to the marketplace there was no one waiting to relieve him of his post. He hadn't been able to help himself from wandering over to the train station just to see that Zack had already departed either.

He stood on the empty platform and felt more alone than he had since he'd first arrived in Midgar. Hadn't he wanted to avoid seeing the SOLDIER again? He didn't understand why he had come to check that the train had left without him.

Cloud returned to the marketplace and attempted to purchase more ammo. The vendor initially refused to sell to him, but after he'd explained he was almost out of ammo and showed the man his two remaining bullets the vendor agreed to the transaction.

He was trying to shake off the sinking feeling of dying down here that the vendor's initial refusal had offered him. He was so shaken that he'd felt obligated to go on one last patrol instead of just waiting.

It had gotten dark out. Well, darker. Most of the slums were always lit up by bright lights or neon signs except remote paths that residents didn't cross after nightfall.

Cloud strayed from his route. He couldn't understand why he had just purchased more ammo using his personal funds when the company probably wouldn't reimburse him. Or why he was still down here when there was obviously something serious happening up above.

He would periodically receive alerts through his helmet's advanced combat sensory system when a threat was detected. He aimed with more care before firing. He had a limited number of expensive bullets after all.

He was trying to take the monsters down as efficiently as possible with what he had left through some remote desire to keep the Slums safe. He was getting too sluggish to respond to so many threats that seemed to be making their way further into the core of the slums in the darkness.

He'd steadily been pushed back down the path he'd strayed on. He could see the gate of the Marketplace again and tried to hurry back to it.

He fell from exhaustion. Hitting the ground only to try to push himself back up from fear of being caught up to. Fiends approached but he felt the weight of a large boot on his back pining him down.

He started to panic. There was no one else out there, he was sure of it, he was sure it was only more fiends. He took out the knife in his holster and tried to get whoever had been holding him down with one decisive swipe.

He swung hard and in the process of turning around and realizing he'd been right about being alone he questioned if the hoard of fiends approaching were real or if he just felt them too somehow.

He'd never seen so many in his life and he couldn't expect to fight them all. Something had definitely made them all come to Midgar and he didn't want to find out what.

He realized that whatever was going on up top had him too afraid to return to the city. It hadn't just been protocol, or the fact that seeing Zack unexpectedly had been terribly distracting. He hadn't wanted to return since he'd gotten the alert in the first place.
He concluded the fastest way to find out if he was really hallucinating would be to let the fiends reach him, but by the time he'd rationalized that that was an awful idea a large mutated wolf-like creature attempted to bite his neck and he hardly dodged in time.

Teeth collided with his shoulder plate and managed to snag him from underneath. The impact knocked him to the ground and the next thing he knew he felt the fiend slashed at his head with it's oversized claws.

Much like the initial attack, Cloud didn't see the claws coming as he tried to push himself off the ground. The shock to his head sent his helmet flying and slammed him right back down.

He'd cried out from the deep gashes the claws had sliced up his back in the attempt to decapitate him. His shoulder had giant teeth marks carved in and the cuts on his back reached up the base of his neck and he couldn't help but cry. He couldn't feel anything else but the blood escaping him. He'd lost his knife in the attack and he struggled to get a hold of his rifle tightly enough to reorient himself.

He shot. He could barely tell how many bullets over the sound of the gate opening up behind him. He looked at how many fiends there were approaching before looking back at the gate to see who had opened it. He only prayed it wasn't Aerith.

“Shit!”

The man who'd opened the gate exclaimed, he was terrified. Maybe he hadn't imagined all those fiends after all. Shit. The fiends.

“Get in!”

The man urged Cloud to move but soon realized he was bleeding heavily and barely able to move. He ran out and pulled Cloud's right arm over his shoulder, hurrying him inside just in time for someone else to shut the gate behind them.

The sound of several monsters attempting to take down the gate in pursuit refrained conversation. The man dropped him against a shack where there was light and said something about a medical kit before vanishing.

Cloud was bleeding out and no one else dared approach him. He closed his eyes and tried to keep breathing, he didn't know what to do, he could barely tell what his own injuries were.

It was hours until another infantryman arrived in the slums to replace him. The man who had saved him had patched up the deep wounds on his back and left shoulder even though Cloud couldn't recall it happening.

Once the bandages had stopped the bleeding and he'd been able to drink a few potions he could stand again. The news that the other infantryman delivered of the city's current state only made him want to collapse again.

He hesitantly boarded the empty train back to Midgar after warning the other infantryman not to go outside the gate until sunrise. He worried for the entire trip back up to the plate that the slums might get overrun with fiends at that rate. He hoped whatever had been attracting them was gone.

He was told to report to the Med Bay as soon as he arrived in HQ but it took everything he had not to black out on the train. He was in so much pain from his wounds he barely felt his motion sickness. So much so that it made him feel like he'd cease to exist any second as if his tolerance was tied to his life.
The sight of the city is what really outdid him. He'd never seen Midgar sustain that kind of damage before. They were still carrying bodies away through the streets when he dredged himself back to HQ. He couldn't pass out. He refused to be another burden on an already suffering city.

By the time he got to the Med Bay he was too shocked from his own injuries and the sight of all the people unjustly attacked lining every cot they had. The staff processed him but he couldn't say a thing.

They were overburdened and barely registered that he was bleeding until they tried to take his pressure and noticed his uniform was soaked in blood. They changed his bandages in a rush and ran a few test simultaneously before clearing him for duty.

Cloud didn't think he'd make it back to his unit's quarters. He barely registered what he was doing until the relief of reaching the threshold was hollowed when he saw no one around.

He sat in silence for a long time. His exhaustion managed to replace itself with grief even though he didn't believe that his entire unit had been compromised. He reasoned that even if it was after curfew that at least a few of them were working or back in medical getting patched up. He couldn't be the only one to have survived.

He didn't remember falling asleep but the next thing he knew he was being shaken violently.

“Hey! I said wake up!”

The pain from his injuries kindly alerted him of the infantryman insisting on waking him.

“Where were you?”

“What?”

Cloud managed his question steadily despite how tightly his jaw was clenched from the pain. It felt like all the gashes scattered across his body had been reopened, so much that the pain traveled through his skin as if it were wildfire.

“Where were you during the attack?”

“On patrol. The Slums.”

The other man looked like it took him a while to remember at what time the first attack began and to understand that the blond had been on patrol that entire time before baking away.

“Lucky.”

“Huh?”

Cloud winced, holding back a groan from trying to sit up too quickly before he managed to look up at the other man. Cloud couldn't remember ever having an actual conversation with him, but he'd been around one of the longest. His name was Evan Greene.

Greene seemed just as displeased with him as when he'd abruptly woken him up in the first place. It was apparent that the man hadn't slept and had probably spent all night helping the wounded or cleaning up HQ.

“You should of come back. Didn't you get the alert down there?”

“I'm sorry.”
“Are you?”

Cloud couldn't find an answer. He felt he should have returned as soon as he'd gotten the alert. He couldn't remember why he hadn't. All he could think of was Zack and he felt even worse for not having returned from picturing his smile.

The other infantryman looked at him with disgust and anger, he looked like he had more to say but Cloud couldn't meet his eyes and so the other man sighed and walked out without another word.

It was past morning training and Cloud was confused, but at least Greene had proven that at least someone from his unit had made it besides him. Assuming that the lack of assembly meant training was cancelled he decided to head down to the training facilities anyways to use the showers.

Peeling off his bandages to inspect his wounds had been excruciating. He'd never been cut or stabbed that deep before by anything and it felt like the bloody gauges were tearing their way deeper past his muscles to his organs to shred him apart from the inside.

He could barely look at anyone. He didn't want to engage. Several men were talking about Genesis and the deserters and their attack on HQ. He overheard that the entire Security system had been hacked and that all the bots around the city had killed hundreds of civilians in only a few hours before the system was reset.

Everything about showering that morning had been excruciating. All he could do was listen to the devastating details of what had happened in Midgar and be reminded how close he had come to dying himself. Never mind that traitor Genesis, he could get himself killed all on his own by second-rate fiends.

He hated showering in the first place. More accurately, he hated the process of doing it in front of others. He never had before being hired here and he'd gotten into the habit of picking odd hours to do so. The rest of the time he avoided looking at anyone else too closely.

He'd never been compelled to look at anyone the way he'd fixated on Zack before. He felt his heart in his throat and he had to force the image of the man showering from his mind urgently.

Men here didn't have any reservations showering together. Nibelheim may have been far more conservative in that regard. Or maybe it had just been his impression of things.

Cloud grit his teeth from the pain as the water washed away the dried blood that had crusted over the gashes in his skin. The contact of the hot water and his fresh wounds was too much and he could barely stand.

He leaned his sore head against the shower wall and watched until the blood dissipated. He was in too much pain to wash his hair and so he gave up on the entire ordeal, simply rinsing the blood from it before turning the water off and wondering if the potions he'd been drinking were starting to lose their effect on him.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and made his way back to his locker with considerable difficulty. The water dripping from his long blond hair down his shoulders and back made his wounds sting and he desperately wanted to patch them back up.

He'd managed to fish out disinfectant and bandages from his locker and sat down on the nearest bench to attempt to steady his breathing. Any movement he made was difficult, pulling at his wounds that had already started to bleed again.

Cloud put the supplies down and slowly started pulling his hair over his right shoulder before it
could get coated in blood again. He shivered as blood slowly started to drip down his skin as he tried to steady himself.

“I didn't know they let women in to the infantry now. Is that why we got wrecked by those deserters?”

One of the men changing back in to his uniform nearby had stopped what he was doing and was looking down at him with great disgust. Cloud let go of his hair almost immediately from the remark and wondered when the last time he’d been called a girl had been.

“Why are you even still here? You can't do anything for Shinra. You must be used to the slums by now. With a face like that why don't you ask the Don for a job instead?”

Cloud cringed the more the man kept talking to him. He thought he should be concerned as to why the man knew who he was, he didn't recognize the other man, but all he felt in response was anger.

Anyone who knew about the slums knew about Don Corneo and he hated to think of what the other infantryman had just been suggesting he do instead of serving the company.

He didn't understand why the man hated women so much. Women weren't hired in the infantry, but they worked in every other department, including with the Turks. He didn't care if his long hair made him look feminine. He'd always had long hair as far as he could remember.

Several top ranking SOLDIER, including the great Sephiroth, had hair more than twice as long as his and yet something was wrong with him because he was too feminine and they weren't?

He still hadn't thought of anything to say to end this quagmire. Meanwhile, several other infantrymen were now agreeing that from the side he did look too much like a woman.

“I asked you a question you stupid faggot.”

Cloud had been staring at the ground since the mention of the Don. It was easier than looking at the faces of everyone inspecting him as if he didn't belong. He had always been made out to feel different.

He felt a hang brush past his cheek and across his neck before he felt his hair suddenly get pulled up in to a fist that raised him from the bench to face the other man. He didn't know his name, but he looked more pleased with himself than angry at him anymore at how easily he could manipulate his body.

Cloud grit his teeth and tried not to cry out at how much it hurt being held up by his hair on top of how much his wounds stung from being jerked up. The sudden motion had managed to tear several of the gashes along his shoulder and neck open again.

He knew it wouldn't make much of a difference at this point even if he did lament, yet he grit his teeth harder and remained silent. He expected to get hit next, this is how things usually went when someone singled him out for no reason.

Nothing he said ever helped when things went this far. He learned that unless he mitigated the assault before anyone made contact with him, the rest was impossible to avoid.

Cloud looked back up at the man who was gripping his hair and he couldn't tell what was happening anymore. He was increasingly disoriented from the pain and could barely stand.

“How did you get those?”
The other infantryman's tone had changed as soon as he'd seen the extent of his wounds up close. They were used to gunshot wounds or the occasional stabbing. But only those that worked in the slums saw what kind of damage fiends could inflict.

“Fiends.”

Cloud answered coldly. He saw the other men come closer just to see the depth of his wounds for themselves. He flinched when he saw them advance, he hated getting surrounded.

The only reason anyone ever surrounded him that way was to beat him. He tried to get the man to let go of his hair but his grip was too tight and he easily twisted him around so that the other men could see his body.

“Are you that creep they sentenced to the Slums for harassing SOLDIER?”

“What?”

“He is.”

“The stalker?”

A few were confused, but others chimed in to confirm the first man's suspicions. They were right. He was “that” creep that had been reported eavesdropping on the SOLDIER floor. He was “that” creep who had been eavesdropping on Zack again just last night.

“No wonder they sent him to the slums.”

The other men seemed more than willing to go in to detail about how the company should of dealt with him in the first place and how they wanted to deal with him right now.

“Is that why you're growing your hair out, because you want to be like your idol? You just couldn't help stalking him either?”

The man pulled on his hair harder, practically lifting him up from the ground. Could cried out. He couldn't help but struggle from the pain, trying to pry the man's hand from his hair but lacked the strength to.

“Are you really trying to be like him? You just look like a little bitch.”

“Sephiroth isn't some faggot like you, you sick fuck.”

“Actually, I don't know. I heard that no one's been able to fuck Sephiroth. Man or woman. Even the hottest bitches in accounting tried. It's like he doesn't care at all.”

“What??”

“Yeah like all these people have been competing over him and none of them have proof they've gotten any and keep fighting about it.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Wait, which guys?”

“Someone hand me a knife.”

Cloud stiffened at the order the man who held him up had given the rest of the gossiping men
who'd fallen silent from the demand. He felt his knees give out and slid down only enough for the man to pull him back up harder. He hated the idea of his career at Shinra ending in such a pitiful way.

Why the man requesting the knife was so offended by his appearance escaped him. He reasoned that maybe getting his throat slit in the showers would be better than suffering through whatever any of them had left to say to him, and especially anything they had left to say about Sephiroth.

“You’ll need to buy a wig if you still want to work for the Don.”

The man placed the cold knife against the nape of his neck as soon as it had been handed to him. The cold metal against his skin had only reminded him how much his body burned. He looked at the ground and saw small drops fall at random as his wounds continued to ooze blood down his shivering body.

Cloud felt the hand holding him up loosen for only a moment before it twisted all his hair around once and then tightly in to a fist. He felt the blade pull up sharply, slicing his hair off in one fluid motion.

As soon as his hair had been forcibly removed the sudden absence of restraint permitted him to fall to the ground. He braced his fall poorly and continued to stare at the ground, watching as his blood mixed with his discarded hair.

Cloud cried out when the same strong hand grabbed the top of his head, threatening to pull him back up, gripping what was left of his hair.

“Now that you don't look like a such a bitch anymore you should stop acting like one.”

Cloud struggled against him again, he was getting desperate. The man was trying to pull him back up but he didn't have the strength to stand anymore, he was shaking from the sight of the knife he still held in his other hand.

He'd thought he'd wanted to get it over with. He couldn't explain the amount of panic that he felt when the man tried to take control of him again.

“Attention all Security personnel. All those not currently on duty report in for new assignments immediately.”

The men had gone silent as soon as the voice through company-wide speakers had blared out the order. It had sounded rushed, and unfamiliar, but he hadn't more time to register the interruption before the man who was still gripping his hair shoved him to the ground in response.

“Clean yourself up. You're lucky some of us have real work to do. Quit while you're ahead, Strife.”

The infantryman practically sneered at him before handing the knife back to the man who'd volunteered it. He listened to their footsteps as they got their gear and left. To try to remain conscious he forced himself to bandage his wounds.

He reached for the scattered medical supplies and painstakingly disinfected his wounds, leaning against the bench for support. He thought he'd pass out several more times before the pain subsided enough for him to stand again.

After several more potions Cloud was convinced that their effects were practically null. He forced himself to clean up the hair and blood coating the ground next. He was thankful no one else had wandered in since the orders had come down and he managed to clean up most of the mess. The
last thing he wanted were people finding out about what happened that morning.

He knew it was inevitable that people would find out. Just like it was inevitable that those men had heard about why he'd gotten re-assigned to the slums. He just didn't want anyone to see how much he'd suffered.

The sudden mounting pressure at the back of his head and lack of equilibrium reminded him that he was getting better at feeling himself fainting coming and forcing himself to stay conscious. He felt so dizzy he'd had to kneel down again but he managed to steady himself.

He ran both his hands through his hair, holding his head as if to stop the room from spinning forcefully. He thought it might before feeling just how short his hair had been cut. The sensation of jagged edges of uneven blond strands at his fingertips made him feel sick.

He didn't understand how he could be more upset by this than the physical injuries he'd received on multiple occasions in the past. It would grow back.

Either way, he wasn't going to do anything about it. He didn't care what his hair looked like, and he wasn't about to pay someone to fix it. What would he tell them in the first place? He'd rather let it fix itself.

He wanted to get out of there. He'd suffered enough in these facilities. He never seemed to be able to avoid conflict. It didn't matter if it was on the field, or in here, or anywhere. People found reasons to resent him.

He pulled himself up and begrudgingly put a fresh uniform on. He touched the back of his head again, having his hair so short was unnerving and he still didn't understand why.

He pulled his hand away and tried to ignore it. Focusing on getting out so he took his prescriptions instead. He put his helmet on and reported in late for reassignment.

Cloud nervously tucked one of the longer strands of blond hair he had left over his ear under his helmet over and over again. He wished he could leave it alone but it kept coming loose every time he looked at the ground now that he couldn't just tie it back.

The Security division seemed overburdened and anxious about the recent attacks. They explained to him with little tact how they wished they could respect his former, now deceased, captain's orders and keep him in the slums but that they needed him up top. At least until the next hiring campaign.

He was to begin a new rotation back in HQ under a new unit. He was instructed which and that his things would be moved by the end of the day. He didn't contest.
Inhuman Obsession

Days dragged on painfully as Midgar recovered. All the employees were putting in overtime to get operations back on track and the mood around HQ was worse than ever.

Cloud's wounds weren't healing as fast as they should have even though he tended to them regularly. He convinced himself he was imagining things if only to avoid returning to the Med Bay.

He still felt so guilty about not being there during the attack despite the certainty that he'd of only been another casualties. He'd been thinking about the damages to the city, and to HQ since that night. He couldn't get the sight of the city on fire out of his mind.

He wished there could of been something he could do to help. He could have returned or he could of at least reminded Zack about the city-wide alert in hopes that he'd of returned sooner.

Many employees and citizens died in the attacks. Those that had been on duty in HQ mostly, but some in the city who where at the wrong place at the wrong time as well. Shinra wasn't releasing any numbers.

Cloud had been avoiding everyone he could. He didn't know anyone in his new unit and kept any interactions to a minimum. He still couldn't sleep much and managed to hate his new bunk more than the last.

He was down in the data room after morning training again. He continued to fill all of his spare time with studying in between figuring out which prescription he'd taken last.

He heard that the science department had taken the most damage in HQ. He didn't want to know what was going on in there or why they'd been targeted. Then again, he was starting to worry more about what was going on in Medical.

He didn't want to hear another civilian beg him or anyone else working for Shinra to release reports of the deceased. They just wanted to know if their family was still alive and the company was outright ignoring them.

He'd found out that the company had ordered that the debris be carried off only as soon as everyone, alive or dead, had been sent through Medical for clearance first.

He thought he'd been told to go through because of his injuries, but it seemed to have been a quarantine. He was too afraid to wonder how many had really died and how many were still being held in the Med Bay.

The next thing he knew, heavy boots had entered the data room and ordered plainly.

“Everyone get out.”

Cloud stopped breathing. Only one other employee had been in the room with him storing files on a shelf. She spoke up only after great hesitation at the sight of the 1st Class SOLDIER Sephiroth.

“I haven't finished returning these files to-”

Sephiroth dismissed her just as plainly as his initial order.
“It isn't important. Get out.”

“My apologies.”

The woman had finally summoned the will to excuse herself. Abandoning the cart of unsorted materials she walked past the towering silver-haired man and practically ran out of the room.

Cloud had piled all his books and his helmet in to his arms and hesitantly followed. He watched Sephiroth standing in the middle of the data room eyeing the rows of sorted files as if they were his greatest enemy as he waited for the space to be vacated.

He slowly stepped backwards towards the door, watching the 1st closely as he tried to leave without a sound. Sephiroth never turned to look at him.

Cloud felt a body collide with him as soon as he'd backed out of the doorway blindly. He'd lost his balance and knocked whoever had intended to enter down with him in the process.

His books and helmet were scattered across the hallway and he could only look up at the sound of the data room's locking mechanism being engaged. The security bolts slammed into the frame and the light above the door changed color when an alarming notification went off.

Cloud immediately looked back to see who he'd knocked over in the first place and was terrified to see that it was another SOLDIER member.

“Did Sephiroth just lock himself in there?”

“Uh...”

Cloud looked back at the door, then back at the man. He still couldn't move or answer. The SOLDIER sighed and stood up, looking around them at the mess of books.

He saw the man was trying to figure out what all the books were for, but Cloud started collecting his scattered possessions as quickly as he could.

He noticed a cellphone on the ground that wasn't his. It displayed a floorplan of their current location and two blinking icons. It looked like a tracking system.

Cloud pretended not to see it and reached for another one of his books instead. The SOLDIER retrieved his phone and shut it off before offering him a hand up.

“You should watch where you're going next time.”

He was so surprised by the SOLDIER's gentle tone he hesitated when taking his hand. The other man simply pulled him up to his feet in response.

“Then again, I know how hard it is not to stare at him. I used to too, you know.”

Cloud felt his face redden, giving the man a look of complete disbelief. He wanted to call the man out on his bullshit; That the only reason he knew it was Sephiroth in there was because he'd tracked him here.

He couldn't believe that he'd just knocked a SOLDIER to the ground and that his response was to joke about having had some sort of fixation on the great Sephiroth in the past himself?

“Oh.. Don't take it that way. Hell, half the company still looks at him like that too.”
The man laughed lightly but Cloud still didn't know how to react. He was offended that he was being compared to all the great hero's obsessive fans. He couldn't believe a SOLDIER could be this unprofessional in the first place.

The blond glanced away as if checking which way was the shortest distance to leave before noticing his helmet was still on the ground. The man watched his incredible apprehension and picked up the stray helmet from the ground before he could with his arms full of books.

“So anyways, why -were- you in the data room with a 1st?”

The SOLDIER had stopped smiling after that question and Cloud felt a mix of fear and embarrassment that threatened to spill the contents of his stomach out instead of a valid answer.

He lowered his head and averted his eyes. He had no way of getting his helmet back to hide his face now and he couldn't bear to let the other man see right through him like this.

“I wasn't -with- him. Sephiroth just-”

Cloud was surprised by how angry his response had been before being unable to continue his train of thought after speaking the hero's name. The SOLDIER sighed impatiently at him before attempting to check the video log on the stray helmet instead.

He knew there was nothing the man could see except the obvious. The shaky view from the helmet he'd stacked on his books as he'd attempted to leave the room quietly and failed when they'd collided outside the doorway.

Cloud didn't understand why it was so hard for him to answer the SOLDIER's question. He blamed the man's tone but he knew it was what he was insinuating. He spoke up with great effort.

“I was studying. Sephiroth told everyone to get out. He said it was important.”

The SOLDIER smiled again, turning off the video feed of exactly what the infantryman had just affirmed, and approached him.

“See. Was that so hard?”

The SOLDIER's tone became increasingly juvenile. Cloud held his books tighter in response and only managed to back up a step before realizing the door to the data room was right behind him.

“Are you studying to get in to SOLDIER because of him?”

“No.”

Cloud wasn't certain he'd lied. Either way, he knew he certainly looked like he was lying with the way he felt his face continue to burn up.

He stared away, anywhere but at the man who was standing too close for comfort. He knew he was still here because of a SOLDIER, just not that one anymore.

“I mean, it's as good a reason as any. But just a word of advice; No one knows what that man's in to. And besides, I have my eye on someone else these days. I'm sure you've noticed our newest 1st too, haven't you?”

Cloud flinched and looked at the man out of sheer surprise before forcing himself to look away again. He could only be talking about Zack. After another long silence the SOLDIER finally gave
up on gossiping and took a step back.

“Aanyways, I was just down here because I had to get Sephiroth to sign off on something. Unfortunately, it looks like he'll be in there a while.”

The SOLDIER sighed when Cloud remained silent and shook his head dejectedly before handing the blond his helmet back.

“I'm Luxiere by the way. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone that I saw the two of you together.”

“We weren't.”

Cloud answered bitterly. He accepted his helmet and walked away without another word. He could hear the other man mumble something back at him out of frustration before giving up and banging on the data room door instead.

He didn't care if he got reported again. There were cameras all over. He wasn't afraid of that, he was only afraid of what the man had been trying to discuss from the start.

He was so angry for no other reason than that he'd subjected him to the irony that it was safe to be gay and out as long as you were strong and successful.

He knew the man hadn't actually suggested anything of the sort. He didn't even know anything about him except that he was a 2nd, and that he was obviously yet another person better suited for Zack than he was.

He couldn't stop thinking about his run-in with Sephiroth and Luxiere all day. It was another endless patrol shift through the lower levels of HQ that night and he couldn't get them off his mind.

People were angrier than ever that anyone would still defy Shinra. And even angrier about how long the repairs around the city were taking. Shinra had always given priority to some sectors over others, but it was more obvious than ever during the aftermath.

There was an aggressive hiring campaign in motion across all departments to fill the positions of all the missing and deceased. They wanted more people to join SOLDIER especially.

They had even moved up the date to the next entrance exam exceptionally for the campaign. Despite studying every day and keeping up with training he knew he still had no hope of passing the exam.

He couldn't sleep that night either. He only returned to his new unit's quarters moments before curfew in an attempt to avoid any small talk. It was something he'd gotten good at doing.

He stared at the bottom of the bunk above him for hours on end. He went over what he would do if he ever quit the company for the hundredth time, even though he knew he'd never have the courage to go through with it.

He hated that he always ended up thinking about the same things. He couldn't focus clearly on anything, it felt as though his mind simply replayed the same problems back to him until he could finally keep his eyes shut long enough to fall asleep.

Unfortunately, his subconscious wasn't any better. Here he was looking out at the city, sitting in the passenger seat of the same convertible he'd been subjected to for weeks now.

He sighed in his own dream and turned to look at Zack lazily. He was exhausted by the certainly
that they would crash again. He didn't understand the point of the ordeal and why he hadn't managed to change it.

When he looked ahead again he noticed momentary flashes of writing on the pavement disappear beneath them as they sped down the endless highway.

Cloud leaned forward in surprise and tried to read what had been painted on the road. Despite their speed he could clearly see that they were large words in all capitals: CAUTION / TURN BACK / DANGER / YOU WILL DIE

He held on to the edge of the windshield to brace himself for the impending crash. His heart was racing from the warnings Zack was blissfully ignoring.

He stared out ahead for a solution but all he could see in the distance was Sephiroth walking straight towards them. He didn't have his sword, nor was he wearing any armor.

The tall man was stripped from the waist up and seemed to look right past them despite their inevitable encounter. Zack continued to stare straight ahead as well, ever accelerating towards the other SOLDIER.

Cloud reached out with both hands to pull the steering-wheel sharply in an attempt to spare the man from their ill fate but he wasn't able to budge it from Zack's grip.

As soon as he'd realized he wasn't able to dissuade Zack the heard the sound of boots landing on the hood of the car and he looked up in shock.

The great hero towered over them and he couldn't believe that the dream had actually changed course. He let go of the steering-wheel and watched as Sephiroth knelt down and leaned over the windshield towards them.

“Do you wish to revolutionize the world?”

Cloud watched the man's long silver hair flow through the air above them, his pale eyes fixed on his and he couldn't answer. He'd leaned all the way back in his seat in a futile attempt to get as far away as possible. When he failed to answer, Zack did.

“I do.”

Sephiroth offered the other SOLDIER his hand and Zack took it without hesitation. As soon as they made contact Sephiroth pulled him up and Zack gave up control of the car just as easily.

As soon as the two men had embraced on the hood of the convertible they crashed and Cloud bolted awake. Cold sweat dripped down his face and his heart raced. He tried to sit up to breathe properly but his wounds stung when he tried to move too quickly, only managing to turn on his side.

He didn't understand why he kept having that dream, or what had just happened at all. He was terrified, but even more so he was aroused.

He didn't want to know what a typical wet dream was supposed to be like, but he was convinced that they didn't end in car crashes. He groaned from exasperation when he saw the time. Morning training was going to be hell.

The sight of Sephiroth crawling over the hood of that convertible shirtless had plagued him for days. Every day after training he went back up to the data room only to find it still sealed.
He thought it had been strange the first morning, but every day that followed made him feel worse. Was he alright? He had to be, there were cameras. They would override the lock if something was wrong, he was sure of it.

So then how was it humanly possible for him to stay in there for so long? He must have emerged at some point, but by the 5th day rumors circulated that he hadn't, nor had he consumed anything during the entire period, and he feared they were true.

It had been over a week and he didn't care if it was true and the man wasn't human, he just wanted to know if he was okay. Rumors continued to circulate wildly that he was reading through every experiment the science department had ever recorded.

No one could piece together why. But people just as soon stopped talking about it all after finding out that the security personnel who had been screening the camera feeds and leaking information had been fired for talking about the man's sudden isolation.

The silence that followed on the matter made Cloud more anxious than ever. It was late one night after his patrol shift and he was on his way back to his quarters when he got a text.

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Subject: Analysis of the Midgar Attacks
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From: Shinra News

The recent attacks came in two stages. The first stage was the attack on headquarters and the entire Midgar region. Our forces were dispersed to respond to these initial attacks. The second stage consisted of additional attacks on headquarters as we attempted to recover. Although the damage dealt was costly, its overall impact on company operations is minimal.

- Heidegger, Director of Security.

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He raised an eyebrow. He wondered why the report had been issued so late, if at all, when they hadn't released any actual information. It was typical of Heidegger to talk only about money.

Of course he didn't care about all the lives lost in the attacks. Minimal. That's what he thought of all those people. Out of all the disgusting people that worked at Shinra, that man was the most hated unanimously.

His phone started ringing while it was still in his hand and he jumped. He'd almost dropped it before he could steady his hands enough to read the display. It was a blocked number.

“Hello?”

“Cloud Strife of Infantry Unit 36?”

“Yes.”

“Report to the rooftop immediately. You've been assigned to a mission with 1st class SOLDIER Zack Fair.”

“...”
Cloud hadn't know what to say. He hadn't had a chance to say anything, the other man had hung up as soon as he'd given him his orders.

He tried to remember protocol. He'd never been assigned personally to anything like this. He'd never even worked with SOLDIER before.

His first real mission and it had to be with Zack of all people? His heart was racing, he felt faint. He started panicking. Did he need to go get his gear? No. He was already in gear from his shift.

He couldn't do this. But if he didn't get up there soon they would depart without him. He ran to the elevator and hit the up button as hard as he could.

He got in and swiped his card for the top floor. Clearance had been authorized and he ascended in complete terror. When he got out to the rooftop he saw only one infantryman waiting.

"Strife?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Smith. Unit 15. I've been assigned to pilot us to Modeoheim."

"Modeoheim?"

"Look, we have to hurry up. I just got the call and we need to go pick up that new SOLDIER."

Cloud was baffled. He followed the other man to the lone helicopter. He didn't understand why Zack hadn't reported in for the mission directly, or where everyone else was. How could they be the only two assisting a 1st?
Cloud held on to whatever he could when they descended beneath the plate and headed for Sector 5. He could feel his stomach start to turn and tried to focus on his breathing.

He could hardly focus on anything but the pain pooling in his chest that only seemed to increase by the minute. He stared out the window at all the shocked people that were gawking up at the machine.

He thought he'd of been happier that he was about to meet Shinra's newest 1st. Instead he felt as though his lungs would seize at any moment or that he would throw up. He was going to make a fool of himself in front of Zack.

It was too late to turn back now. The helicopter landed in front of the old church where Zack and a man in a black suit were standing. Flying under the plate had been nerve-wracking on its own, but watching the man order Zack in to the Helicopter suddenly seemed worse.

Cloud looked on silently. He couldn’t hear anything over the helicopter. He had the impression that the entire mission had been rushed. Zack hadn’t reported in for it just so he could see Aerith again?

He was usually afraid to go on any missions at all, but the thought that Zack might have wanted to warn her he might not come back terrified him further.

Zack didn’t seem thrilled at all. He watched the 1st begrudgingly follow the mysterious man back to the helicopter. As soon as they set foot inside the pilot took off and Zack was still groaning in discontent as he buckled in.

“Whaaatever.”

The other man has already strapped in to his seat and neatly ignored the SOLDIER's complaints. Cloud glanced back at Zack tensely, watching him mumble to himself out of frustration looking out the window as they left Midgar.

It wasn't any of his business and he had no place saying anything about it. He especially didn't want to talk about the mission. The more he knew the more he'd have to fear, but he ended up looking over at the man in the black suit anyways.

“Tseng of the Turks. We're en route to Modeoheim. I'll explain more when we get there.”

He recognized the man's voice from the phone call and nodded once in response to the brief introduction. He felt himself start to panic again. He'd been assigned to a mission with a 1st and a Turk? This couldn't be real.

He looked at the floor of the helicopter to try to calm down. He knew he couldn't be hallucinating all of this. He'd felt he'd only looked away from the two men for an instant, but when his eyes strayed back over to Zack he'd already fallen asleep.

Cloud's fears were immediately interrupted. He could barely believe that the rumours were true. He did sleep on the way to every mission? He looked at Tseng in an instant of disbelief, but Tseng hadn't acknowledged it at all. He assumed they'd worked together before.

He bit his lip when he caught himself staring at Zack leaning back in his seat and head lulled to the
side fast asleep. He'd forced himself to stare outside at actual clouds for hours and he wished he
could stop thinking about how peaceful the other man looked.

It looked like Zack talked in his sleep at some points, but it was impossible to hear over the sound
of the helicopter. His eyes kept straying to his lips as he mumbled and he felt trapped by the sight
of him.

He was grateful that the infantry's helmet's visors were tinted and neither of the men in front of him
could tell where he was looking. It didn't make him feel any better about it because he knew
everything was recorded and they could review his actions at any time and so he stared back out as
they crossed the ocean.

It was protocol to keep their helmets on, but he couldn't help himself from staring with a false
sense of accountability. He tried to read Zack's lips while he mumbled in his sleep, or when his
read rolled lazily from side to side between snores.

The flight was taking forever. They'd been flying over mountains for hours and he started to worry
that they should have reached their destination by now.

Tseng didn't seem worried, but Cloud kept trying to see down bellow for a sign of where they were
besides ice and snow. Suddenly there was an explosion and the helicopter started spinning out.

There was screaming. Cloud couldn't tell if it was just him, or if the others had been as well. All he
could tell was that Zack was definitely shouting, or swearing, or both as he unbuckled himself. He
swung the door open to see where they were about to meet their demise.

Cloud had never jumped from a helicopter before, this was crazy, was Zack going to? He watched
bewildered as Zack motioned for all of them to get up and proceded to unbuckle himself too.

He knew he had no choice, whether he jumped or stayed, he was still falling. He pulled himself
over to the other three as the Helicopter continued to spin out. Zack kept them from the open door
long enough for him to see where they were and with a sturdy push they were thrown from the
helicopter.

Cloud lay on his back in the thick snow. He stared up at the endless sky and only knew that he was
still alive because there were snowflakes covering up his visor. In the distance he could hear Zack.

“Ugh... well, that's a fine how-do-you-do!”

He can hear him start walking down the mountain shouting for them and he's reminded that he
should probably move to show some sign of life.

“Tseng! Hey guys!”

Cloud sits up slowly, expecting one of his limbs to be detached from the amount of pain he was in
but he seemed intact. Tseng and the pilot seemed whole as well, if not sorer than he was.

Tseng got up and immediately checked his phone, slapping it shut after just an instant and stating
with surprising neutrality.

“No signal out here.”

“Well, at least we're all in one piece. We'll be all right.”

Zack tried to reassure the group as the helicopter burned behind them.
“Thankfully, we have someone used to this kind of terrain.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm a country boy...”

Zack tried to brush Tseng off as if he was more annoyed by his thanks than his attempt to reassure the others.

“All right, then. We would have reached Modeoheim by now if we hadn't crashed. So we're going to need to make up for lost time.”

“Alright! Follow me then.”

Zack moves past Tseng to lead the way as soon as he'd suggested they speed things up. Cloud felt that maybe whatever was going on between the two of them was better off avoided.

Cloud followed suit and was thankful to see that Zack could really handle all the snow. He marched with nothing but the knowledge that if he didn't he might freeze to death on some uncharted road that hopefully lead to Modeoheim, and worse yet, he'd lose his only chance to spend time with the man.

He steadied himself through the thick snow, grateful for the cold air that made him feel more alert than he had felt in months. He told himself that as long as he was on this mission he'd do everything he could to help Zack and the only way to do that was to keep up with him.

The taller man had glanced back a few times at him and at the others trailing behind them. Cloud hadn't know if he should say anything at all, but then Zack suddenly turned and yelled back at Tseng and the pilot who were lagging back.

“Yo! Don't fall too far behind!”

Cloud had practically flinched from the sudden show of concern. He kept his pace up, having grown up in the mountains he didn't mind hiking at all. Despite his lack of any real talent, he had a lot of endurance when it came to the basics.

“At least someone's keeping up!”

Zack exclaimed cheerily. Cloud couldn't believe he'd said something to him at all. He didn't understand that why of all people, someone so kind could make him feel so nervous. It wasn't what he had said that overwhelmed him, it was how glad the other man had sounded.

“Well, I'm a country boy too.”

Cloud hadn't known what else to say. His voice was timid and he looked away when Zack genuinely smiled from his admission.

“From where?”

Zack's voice seemed softer in that instant, as if he was attempting to match Cloud's tone. It had made the conversation all too intimate all of a sudden and he hesitated to answer.

Zack rounded in front of him with his arms crossed, a stern look, and half of a smile. His lips pursed in amusement as to why he wasn't just telling him where he was from.

“Nibelheim.”

Zack burst out laughing when he got his answer so easily, surprised that he hadn't had to put much
pressure at all to get his answer. He wondered why Cloud had omitted to answer right away at all.

“How about you?”

Cloud asked in return, albeit defensively from of the man's amusement.

“Me? Gongaga.”

Zack answered proudly, but when Cloud chuckled involuntarily at the name of his hometown, Zack suddenly didn't enjoy the situation anymore.

Cloud had raised his hand to hide his mouth in a poor attempt of covering up his reaction. He couldn't believe a place called Gongaga existed, and that Zack grew up there.

“Hey, what's so funny about that! You know Gongaga?”

“No, but it's such a backwater name.”

Cloud regretted what he'd said as soon as he'd said it. He had no right to judge Gongaga, he didn't even know where it was. He just had some faint memory of reading about a big accident there long ago.

“Ditto Nibelheim!”

Zack looked conflicted, he had just been laughing at his hometown too even though he realized neither of them knew the other's. The 1st had turned to go but Cloud stepped forward abruptly.

“Like you've been there.”

Cloud retorted at his back, but cringed at his own sarcastic remark. Was he really trying to start a fight with the only man he wished more than anything he could get to know? This is how he was going to do it?

“I haven't, but there's a reactor there, right?”

Cloud nodded and seemed amazed by the change in the other man's tone yet again.

“A mako reactor outside Midgar usually means...”

Cloud answered sarcastically despite himself again, but to his surprise Zack chimed in at exactly the same,

“...nothing else out there.”

They stared at each other in surprise when they'd realized they'd said it together and laughed. They laughed sincerely and Cloud realized he hadn't laughed in months. It felt surreal.

Zack couldn't take his eyes off him. He contemplated how gentle his laugh was and how it had felt just as harmless when he'd laughed at the name Gongaga in the first place.

“Good news, Tseng! Me and...”

Zack had turned back to the others before realizing he hadn't asked him his name yet. Cloud hesitated for a second before he took off his helmet to introduce himself properly. He'd forgotten all about how bad his hair looked.
“Cloud.”

Zack smiled at him before turning back to Tseng and the pilot with the smuggest look on his face, waving at them.

“Me and Cloud here are both backwater experts. Oh yeah!”

“Good. Carry on then.”

Tseng sounded beyond done from Zack's inexhaustible enthusiasm. They carried on ahead gladly. Cloud somehow felt as though Zack seemed different after that moment.

There had been a handful of run ins with fiends, and Zack had dealt with them easily, but it was nothing compared to his strength now. He wiped out fiends as if he'd somehow doubled his strength for no apparent reason.

Cloud still kept pace with him. He couldn't help but admire Zack and how he could take down anything that came their way without breaking a sweat.

They'd exchanged smiles as they pressed on. He was so caught up in the thrill that when a particularly large fiend blocked their path and Zack simply obliterated it with a terrifying show of dark magic. He was completely besides himself.

“That was amazing,”

“Really?”

Zack turned and questioned the compliment as soon as he'd received it, but his glee was far too apparent and Cloud simply nodded furiously before marching on and he followed.

They had kept up the pace and Cloud was actually starting to feel the cold sting. He looked up at Zack and noted that he didn't seem like he was cold at all despite showing more skin.

He'd put his helmet back on in between battles and they pressed on. As they approached a turn in the path several fiends appeared and Zack took them out methodically. He spun his sword above his head as he always did before holstering it again.

“Way too easy.”

Zack stated cockily when Cloud saw another large fiend swoop in from behind and he immediately aimed his rifle at it and shouted.

“Zack, get down!”

Once Zack had ducked as instructed he fired at the fiend, knocking it out after unloading an entire clip in to it's head. Zack made his way back over to Cloud and smiled cheekily at him despite his evident sense of gratitude.

“Wow, looks can be deceiving. Thanks, I owe you one.”

Cloud took his helmet off again and couldn't help but smile back despite the remark about his stature. He didn't care, Zack was smiling at him.

“Glad to be of help.”

They smiled at each other and he wondered if time had stopped because his eyes weren't averting
from his. It felt as if the moment had lasted too long before Zack rubbed the back of his head and motioned for them to keep up their hike. Eventually they could see a factory in the distance below the cliff.

“Phew... Let's wait a bit.”

Zack said while they looked back to see just how far away the other two were.

“Hey, Zack, uh...”

Cloud saw an opening to get to know the man he'd been wishing to talk to for so long now. Here they were, seemingly assigned to the same mission just because they were both from the middle of nowhere. There they were, in the middle of nowhere together.

“Hm?”

“Um... What’s it like to be in SOLDIER?”

“I don't quite get the question.”

Zack folded his arms, he seemed a little defensive.

“Um...”

Cloud hesitated, he could barely look the man in the eyes anymore. He didn't know what he had meant either. He wanted to know more about him but he didn't feel like he had the right to ask him anything.

“Well, once you join, you'll know what it's like.”

Zack lowered his arms when he answered, trying to sound encouraging. Cloud sighed heavily and his shoulders heaved forward. He couldn't very well admit he'd already failed the entrance exam more than once.

“If I can join, that is...”

“Don't sweat it! If I can do it, you can, too.”

Zack sounded so sure of himself, giving Cloud one of his award-winning smiles again.

“Cloud, look.”

Zack motioned towards the guards who were patrolling the facility. They crouched forward together to observe their route.

“That's a mako excavation test site.”

Tseng finally caught up to them and filled them in on the mission.

“I'll go check it out!”

Zack announced readily, standing back up.

“Our primary objective is to investigate Modeoheim. We can't afford to lose people here. At the same time, we can't ignore the activities of the Genesis Army. Therefore...”
Tseng elaborated, hoping Zack would clue in. He had a hand on his hip and looked frustrated by the entire ordeal. Cloud couldn't help but feel he was upset with them, so he focused on Zack instead.

“Infiltrate while avoiding combat, right?”

Zack conceded, impatient to get down to business. Despite being visibly exhausted, Tseng didn't falter in his orders.

“Exactly. There's an entrance at the back of that warehouse. Once you're inside the facility, you can do as you like.”

“You got it. I'll prove that SOLDIER isn't all about muscle and brawn.”

Zack made a fist, he was clearly pumped for some action. Cloud couldn't even imagine taking on a warehouse full of troops and not show any sign of fear. How strong was he exactly? What did -do as you like- mean?

“You watch carefully too, Cloud.”

“Uh-huh.”

He'd responded immediately. He didn't his eyes off the man and watched as he made his way down to the facility. When he looked back over his shoulder Tseng gave him a disappointed look.

Cloud felt like he shouldn't of taken Zack's suggestion so literally. It looked like Tseng had wanted to say something but abstained when he crouched down to observe Zack's infiltration himself.
“Okay. Strife, Smith, this way.”

Tseng took the lead and they easily infiltrated the facility. They'd taken a far simpler route than the one Zack had just improvised. They proceeded towards a path underground and soon discovered how large the area inside was. Tseng ordered them to split up.

Cloud continued on straight through while they checked the lower levels. He broke in to a jog when he heard voices up ahead and saw Zack taking an elevator up to the next level where it looked like Genesis and Hollander were arguing. He knew he needed to get up there fast and so he ran to the next elevator and took it up. By the time he arrived on the scene it looked like Zack had his hands full with Genesis and Hollander was about to escape.

“Stop!”

Cloud ran right up behind the scientist and grabbed on, clumsily attempting to restrain him.

“Cloud! Good work!”

Zack praised, but he'd just as quickly lost control. Hollander elbowed him clean in the face to get free and he fell to the ground.

“But nobody knows where the Jenova cells are being kept! Not even Hojo knows. You'll never find it!”

Hollander seemed desperate to reason with Genesis. Cloud had no clue what they were talking about, all he could feel was how much his face hurt as he tried to get back up. Zack kept trying to keep the scientist away from Genesis who still very much looked intent on murder.

“Then, I shall willingly accept my fate! But, I'll take the world with me!”

Genesis raised his sword dramatically and attempted to strike Zack who countered immediately, holding him off only long enough to look over his shoulder and see Hollander escaping. Zack struggled against Genesis but looked at Cloud next who had been hesitating to go after the scientist. He could see that the blond wanted to help him instead but he was focused on their mission.

“Cloud, go!”

Zack shouted, but Cloud stared back in fear for a moment longer before nodding and running after Hollander. He was mortified at the idea of Zack being forced to fight a 1st and all he could hear was the sound of swords clashing and Genesis shouting in the distance

“Howl in terror, Shinra lapdog!”

Cloud ran after Hollander as fast as he could. Unfortunately, the old man was relentless. By the time the scientist made it out of the facility Tseng and Smith were also on his heels. They all chased Hollander through a tunnel and past the abandoned barracks of Modeoheim. The further they ran the more Cloud felt himself falter.

He'd left Zack to fight Genesis alone and weighed turning back. The greying SOLDIER hadn't looked in good shape, plus if his copies were any indication of his strength he knew Zack would be
fine. Yet he couldn't help but worry. He knew Zack and Angeal had been close, but he had no idea where Genesis fit in besides being Angeal's friend.

He felt like something terrible was about to happen. He was breathing so heavily when they reached the next facility he could only nod when Tseng ordered them to split up to search again. Tseng went up the nearest staircase, Smith went up the farthest staircase, and that only left the main hall for him.

He tried to slow his breathing back down and held his hands over his ears for a moment. They were freezing and all he could feel was the sting as he tried to warm them. He'd circled the area and found nothing but lab equipment and headed back to the entrance. When he heard yelling from above he ran up the stairs only to find Hollander pleading for his life on his knees before Tseng.

“There are no orders to bring you back at all if not alive.”

Cloud froze as soon as he'd reached the second floor. Tseng steadily held his gun aimed directly at the scientist's head.

“Please! I'll-”

“Just shut up.”

Tseng hit the old man across the face with his gun before steadily aiming it at his head again. He watched Tseng watch the old man struggled in pain on the ground. Cloud was convinced he'd pull the trigger next. Instead, a gust of wind suddenly announced the arrival of the one and only;

“Angeal!”

Hollander announced in fervent hopefulness. Cloud pulled his own rifle out in abject terror at the sight of the rogue 1st who'd flown down to them. He watched as Tseng surveyed him from the corner of his eye with unbreakable patience before Angeal finally raised his sword at him and shots were fired.

Angeal easily deflected the bullets and Hollander took the opportunity to escape. Tseng unloaded his clip at the much larger man in vain while he attempted to gain some distance from the SOLDIER only to be easily overpowered the next instant.

Cloud watched on in shock as the Turk got his gun knocked clean out of his hand before another fist knocked him to the ground. Cloud's hands were shaking. He was pointing his rifle straight at the SOLDIER but he couldn't fire. If Zack still cared for that man at all he couldn't fire on him.

Angeal looked back at Cloud over his shoulder and chuckled for an instant before returning his attention to Tseng who was trying to get back up. He swung the blunt side of his sword at the man his body was flung back against the far wall. As soon as he'd over-powered the Turk he'd turned his attention back to Cloud and walked up to him.

Cloud was paralyzed by the sight of how conflicted the man approaching him was. He couldn't control the shaking. He could only watch as the man's towering wing stretched out above them. He felt his rifle slip out of his numb hands as soon as the man had torn it away from him and cast it aside.

“Zack is here.”

Cloud hadn't known what else to say. The look of surprise in the 1st's eyes told him that he still cared, and he could only hope it meant that Zack would be alright even if this was it for them.
Angeal glared down at him the next instant and punched him clean in the stomach. Cloud crumbled to his knees in unbelievable pain and unable to breathe. He fell face first to the ground and blacked out.

“Hey!”

The beautiful sound of Zack's voice echoed in his head and he couldn't tell what was going on. Everything felt so bright, even though everything was actually pitch black.

“Ngh!”

Cloud grunted as he opened his eyes and realized how much pain he was in, trying to push himself up woozily.

“Cloud! Talk to me!”

Zack rushed to his side and knelt down, placing a hand on his arm to attempt to help him up. Cloud pulled away from his touch, alarmed by the man's pained tone and proximity he pushed himself up too fast and fell back down. He hadn't expected to lose his balance and had reached out for Zack suddenly, only to see him reach out at the same time.

They'd both frozen before their hands could touch and he pulled away again. Zack's entire focus was on him, searching for any sign that he was going to be alright. He couldn't stand to be showed concern, it made him feel as if he'd failed. He glanced over at Tseng who was conscious and leaning against the back wall. He judged the path of least resistance was to shift the focus away from himself.

“We're alright...”

Zack looked up and saw Tseng propped up against a wall and practically screamed,

“Tseng!?”

Zack rushed over to Tseng's side with surprising haste, but Tseng didn't even look at him.

“Tseng!”

When Tseng finally looked at Zack, it seemed like he was surprised to receive as much concern from the man. He then pointed down the path besides him.

“Down that way.. You have to catch Hollander.”

Tseng struggled to speak, clutching his stomach weakly.

“Angeal... is waiting for you..”

Cloud stood up and strained to find his balance. He wanted to follow Zack, but he'd already disappeared through to the next room. He didn't want to let him fight alone again. He'd only made it a few steps forward when Smith came up the stairs and shouted at them.

“Hey guys! I found another helicopter. Can we get out of here yet?”

Cloud looked at the pilot before looking back over at Tseng. He waited for orders, although Tseng seemed impartial to the news. Smith jogged over to the Turk and knelt down when he'd received no response.
“Hey, are you alright? What happened?”

He looked Tseng over and looked back at Cloud as well before trying to pull Tseng's arm over his shoulder. Tseng looked extremely displeased that he had to rely on the other man to walk. Cloud picked up his stray rifle and accompanied them to the helicopter. If Tseng chose not to explain what had just happened, he didn't feel like he had a right to.

“Are you alright?”

Smith asked him next, once he'd made sure Tseng had found the helicopter's medkit.

“Yeah.”

Cloud answered plainly, looking back anxiously at the facility. He boarded the helicopter to get more ammo and stepped out with a sigh.

“I'll be right back.”

“Ohkay.”

Smith nodded. Tseng said nothing. He couldn't stand not knowing if Zack was alright. He headed back down in to the facility only to see Hollander trying to escape again. He ran down the stairs to cut him off before he could make it out, shouting and aiming his rifle at the man.

“Don't move!”

Hollander hesitated, backing up towards the exit.

“You again...”

“I said don't move!”

Cloud fired a warning burst above the man's head, stopping him in his tracks.

“Fine! Fine!”

Cloud circled the scientist who continued to protest. He aimed his rifle at the man's back and pointed him towards the far staircase.

“I don't want to hear it.”

He ordered the man to shut up and to his surprised he had. He was so angry that he'd had to chose between Shinra's objective and Zack's safety that he'd wished he'd of let the old man go instead. By the time they'd made it back outside It looked like it had just finished raining. Tseng and Smith's surprised stares were evident the entire way up to the helicopter.

“Get in.”

Cloud insisted when the old man stopped to say something to Tseng, pushing him in to the helicopter instead. He made sure the scientist was cuffed to his seat before stepping out again.

“Well, at least we didn't come all this way for nothing.”

Smith offered Cloud a weak smile that went unacknowledged.

“Good work.”
Tseng added, but Cloud was still staring back at the facility, tormented by Zack's absence. He wanted to go back for him again but something felt wrong. Smith got in to the helicopter to make sure Hollander was secured and to ensure everything was in order for their departure.

Cloud paced in circles and Tseng remained motionless, leaning against the helicopter. He felt so stupid for not just going right back in. He couldn't figure out why he continued to hesitate. Angeal had evidently turned his back on all of them, what would keep him from doing the same to Zack? Was all of this because of Genesis? He felt helpless to understand what Zack was going through.

Tseng didn't look worried. He was unsettled by how neutral the man was able to remain as they waited. The sun was starting to set and the loss of daylight made him feel worse by the second. He agonized that Zack might be injured. He worried that maybe he should have done more earlier. He was about to give in when he saw Zack walk out of the facility solemnly. Tseng moved forward as if anxious to greet him suddenly, and Zack seemed grateful to see a way out of Modeoheim.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Zack hung his head after his apology. His face was stained with tears, streaking eyeliner, and blood. His heart sank the longer he watched him stare down wearily before he stepped past them.

"Let's go home."

He offered just before climbing in to the helicopter. Cloud felt completely destabilized by the excessive amount of pain the other man suddenly carried. He felt choked by the silence that followed and assumed the worst had happened. They departed as soon as they'd all climbed in to the helicopter and he'd slammed the door shut behind them.

Zack looked like he was in agony. None of them said anything, not even Hollander. It was as if there was no sentiment that could be felt that wasn't erased by despair in their limited space. Cloud watched the man fight back tears and wished he knew what to do. Besides the awful gash across his cheek he appeared to be unscathed.

Cloud watched him hesitantly. Zack continued to stare down out the window in an effort not to acknowledge his own grief. Tears persisted in rolling down his face despite his steady gaze in to the darkness bellow. He saw Tseng glance over at Zack several times with worried looks as well, even though neither of them said anything. Cloud could only assume that they'd lost two 1sts that day.

He'd always known that email about their K.I.A. status had been a lie. He just hadn't expected to be present when it really did happen. He didn't understand what Shinra had done to them, why they'd sprouted wings, or what their intentions had been throughout the desertion. All he could see was that Zack was deeply grieving the loss of his mentor.

He wanted more than anything to comfort him, but he had no idea what to do, or what to say. He felt it wasn't his place to even try with how hard Zack was trying to hold it together. After several hours of fighting back tears the SOLDIER finally fell asleep. Tseng had resorted to glaring at Hollander to pass the time, but Cloud continued to watch as Zack cried even in his sleep.

He was astounded that witnessing his pain was more horrific than any pain, physical or otherwise, that he'd previously known. He couldn't ever have imagined anything gouging through him to this extent. A helplessness to ease someone so unjustly rid of someone that they cherished.

He'd tried to stop watching the man with so much concern, but the weight of Zack's pain tormented him. He only hoped that he'd know what to do by the time they got back to HQ. He hadn't, and
when they'd finally landed back in Midgar he got up and undid Hollander's restraints, leading him out of the Helicopter.

He then stood by and watched as Tseng gently shook Zack's shoulder to wake him. He could tell that Tseng was still in a lot of pain as well despite the potions, and he wondered if it was partly because he could feel Zack's pain as clearly as he did too. There was something unnatural about the space that surrounded them in his presence and he wondered if it was all in his head.

“We're back.”

Tseng said softly once he'd managed to wake him before stepping out of the helicopter, followed by Smith. Zack seemed disoriented for a moment before he rubbed his eyes sorely and got out as well. Cloud wanted desperately to say something to Zack, but he still didn't know what.

What could he say, when he didn't know what had happened to either men from Banora? He wanted to tell Zack everything would be alright, yet he felt it wasn't true. Before he could find the courage to speak up, Tseng ordered him and Smith to jail the scientist.

“Bring Hollander down bellow.”

“Yes sir.”

They answered simultaneously. He hated doing that, but it had been made a reflex. Smith moved forward to escort the old man along with him and Cloud regretted not at least saying goodbye. He glanced back over his shoulder as they left the landing platform and watched Tseng try to reassure Zack.

“You did what was necessary.”

When Zack didn't respond, Tseng reached out in an attempt to comfort him. Zack jerked away sharply.

"I'm fine."

He justified coldly, but he saw that Tseng looked frustrated that his gesture had been rejected.

"You're on stand by until further notice. Don't go too far."

He heard Tseng order just before he and Smith lead Hollander into HQ and had to endure the extensive process of incarceration paperwork and multiple debriefings.
Chapter Summary

Rude and Sephiroth make unplanned appearances! Because who follows their own drafts, right?

Cloud pulled at the short strands of hair at the back of his head while he finished filling out what he hoped would be the last of the paperwork. The later it got the harder he pulled. It didn't make him feel any better, but at least it wasn't as bad as biting his nails. Smith had already left some time ago when Tseng had verified their statements. He on the other hand, was required for further debriefing.

“Do you know why I'm here?”

Someone new again sat down in front of him and slid a cup of what looked like tea towards him. He was staring off at no space in particular.

“I've said everything I know already.”

Cloud started wearily, he was exhausted from the mission and wanted to at least try to sleep.

“Once more.”

Cloud stared back at the bald man, surprised by the sight of his sunglasses and so many piercings. The unknown man gestured at the cup in front of him.

He looked at the tea and back at the man and wondered why he'd never questioned Shinra before. The sudden apprehension he had towards the drink in front of him made him sick.

“It'll help your memory. Drink and start from the beginning.”

Cloud thought of all the Shinra products he consumed on a daily basis and pulled at his hair again. All the medication, potions, food, everything that was provided by the company he'd taken without question before.

The man before him looked at the clock on the wall in dismay and leaned back, giving Cloud another expectant look in hopes that they could continue.

He reached out and picked up the cup, leaning away from the man and rolling his eyes involuntarily. He figured nothing they could give him would matter at this point and so he drank.

The hot liquid had been a relief, even though the taste was awful. It hadn't tasted like any tea he'd ever had before. That was the only thing he'd been certain of by the time he'd set the empty cup back down.

“How did the helicopter crash?”

“There was an explosion. I don't know if it was just the engine, or if something, or someone attacked us.”
The man in the black suit leaned back, taking notes lazily before staring blankly ahead, waiting for Cloud to continue.

“We hiked the rest of the way and infiltrated the first facility south of Modeoheim. That's where Hollander and Genesis were.”

“We received no footage of this.”

“Smith was searching elsewhere, and I'd l-”

“Lost your helmet?”

“Right.”

“When?”

“On the hike there.”

“Why?”

“It was in the way.”

“...”

“I mean, I was in the way. It got knocked out of the way. We encountered a lot of copies.”

Cloud corrected himself with increasing frustration. He'd answered so plainly instead of sticking to his story. He couldn't afford to slip up like this, but he was convinced everything suddenly felt off.

“Right, the monsters. But, why would you call yourself it?.. Who does that?..”

The man asked incredulously, leaning back in his chair as if he was wasting his time. Cloud tried not to glare with little success.

“Really.. Has anyone compared you to furniture before? Because I don't see why else you'd say that..”

Cloud opted for glaring at the clock instead. He was getting too angry to keep his thoughts clear. He hadn't realized that they'd wanted complete surveillance this badly.

“So it just fell off the cliff?..”

“Right.”

Cloud confirmed bluntly, with more thought than his previous answer.

“And Zack can verify this?”

Cloud hesitated. He was too tired to hide his surprise. He couldn't remember if Zack had actually noticed it happen or not, or why he'd only asked about him. He expected they'd asked Tseng already, but he couldn't worry about that now.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“We were almost at the first facility by then.”
“That's where Hollander and Genesis were hiding?”

“Right”

“Zack was going to intervene when I saw them and I went to help.”

“…”

“It looked like Genesis and Hollander had been fighting about something. Zack got there just in time.”

“Fighting?”

“Hollander told Genesis he'd never find the Jenova cells.”

“The what?”

“I don't know. Hollander said no one knows where they are.”

“Right..”

Cloud was skeptical about the man's tone. Hell, he was skeptical about his own tone. Something about how surreal the conversation felt assured him he wasn't sober anymore. He wondered if the man really knew about Jenova or not.

“Hollander tried to escape so I went after him and left Zack to fight Genesis on his own.”

He could hear the guilt in his own voice and he was surprised he'd sounded so vulnerable. The bald man across from him had raised an eyebrow but listened on.

“…”

“I don't know what happened to Genesis. I chased Hollander and regrouped with Tseng and Smith along the way. By the time we caught up to Hollander, Angeal intervened.”

“Who attacked first?”

“…”

Cloud was surprised by the question. Where they cross-referencing Tseng's statement as well? He looked away to try to picture the scene he'd witnessed, but reliving the moment made him sick. His gut still hurt, he could only imagine how much pain Tseng was still in.

“Angeal did.”

He could have sworn he'd seen a glimpse of relief on the man's serious features. It was then that he realized that the bald man in front of him must be a Turk as well.

“Did he say anything?”

“No. He knocked Tseng out first, and then me. I only came to when Zack found us.”

“…”

“Tseng told him Angeal was waiting for him. I wanted to assist him, but Smith found us next and he'd found a helicopter. He couldn't fight while carrying Tseng, so I escorted them out.”
“...”

“I went back, that's when I saw Hollander escaping again and apprehended him. Then Zack returned, and we left. He didn't say what happened with Genesis or Angeal.”

“Nothing?”

“No. He's really shaken up.”

“...”

The expressionless man stood up and walked to the door. Cloud watched him with surprise.

“Report to Medical...”

The bald man ordered then left the room. Cloud stood up too quickly and had to hold on to the table. His head felt light and everything still seemed uncanny. He sighed and took a moment before he could steady himself to walk out of the room and head down the deserted hall to the elevator.

He arrived in Medical and was routinely submitted to a series of tests. While the staff gathered their results and moved on to other tasks he was left with unsettling deja vu from the process.

By the time they'd hooked him up to a DMW reader he'd forced himself to focus on anything but his surroundings. He hated seeing the nurses' reactions to the data his mind transmitted. They whispered among themselves, let their dismay and disbelief twist their faces, frequently followed by condescending questions. They seemed incapable of grasping that this is how he always felt.

He only looked up at the nurse running the test that night when he'd realized that no one had said anything this time. He looked at the back of the monitor that she'd been staring in to before giving her a questioning look.

She looked back at the monitor nervously when she'd noticed his look before going over his chart once more in an effort to stall what she was about to say.

“It appears we must suspend you.”

“What?”

Cloud asked dryly. He'd been expecting this moment to come since they'd first started complaining about his results, but he hadn't expected to feel so angry about it.

“Your readings are at a record low. It appears-”

“They're fine.”

Cloud cut her off. He didn't know what else to say. He felt awful attempting to contradict her decision. It was useless to attempt to validate his lack of strength to them. He'd been prepared to work himself to death, but it appeared he couldn't even do that for them.

She looked between him and the monitor and seemed increasingly concerned by whatever she was seeing. He couldn't believe that this could be it. The look on her face told him that he had no way out of this.

He'd hoped he'd have figured out why he'd stayed at all by the time they fired him, but he still
didn't know. He had only wanted the chance to meet Zack, and now that he had, he assumed his subsequent suspension and inevitable discharge were his price to pay.

The nurse gasped and Cloud flinched. He watched her surprised face light in awe at whatever she'd just witnessed on the monitor, looking down at his chart again and back at the monitor. She appeared to be humming from excitement.

“Unbelievable.”

Cloud cringed at the smug look on the woman's face that now replaced her initial excitement. She just as soon looked back at the monitor in dismay when he assumed his readings had returned to their baseline.

“Despite your record lows, it seems as though you might still be useful to the company.”

“...”

Cloud couldn't understand why she'd changed her mind so quickly. He wondered what she'd seen, but their readings were for authorized personnel only, even if they were HIS readings.

As far as SOLDIER had claimed, the devices that were surgically implanted would record, track, and heighten existing emotional bonds and could channel them in crucial combat situations.

If he'd somehow formed a bond with Zack, he could only imagine that it was what had just been showcased. He didn't understand how the technology worked, but he felt terrible that the woman had been so impressed. He couldn't look at her anymore. He wondered if harnessing something so involuntary could actually be valuable to Shinra.

“Uh, well. That'll be all for now, you're cleared to go.”

The nurse hesitantly offered, but when Cloud didn't respond she simply stood up to remove the sensors from his head and returned to her work. He stood up and took a good look around as he exited the Med Bay. He'd been too worried on the way in to pay attention.

He could see that there were barely any men still being treated since the attacks. That meant that all those who were still missing were either dead, or being held elsewhere. He started to walk faster on the way down the deserted hallway towards the elevator.

Things had felt off for a long time in HQ but he'd never felt this scared before wandering the halls at night. He kept looking over his shoulder. He could swear he heard someone, or something creeping up on him but there was never anything.

He rode the elevator up in silence and made his way to his unit's quarters. He made a great effort not to make any sound as he walked over to his bunk, although the door sliding open had inevitably stirred a few.

He hadn't bothered getting changed, or even pulling the blanket back. Once he'd set his gear down and slid off his boots he'd laid down face first in to his pillow, and before he could go back to his repetitive over-evaluations, he'd drifted off to sleep.

He practically yelled from shock when the morning alarm went off and he could hear all the divisions on their level waking up simultaneously. The infantrymen's quarters weren't as well built as most of the other levels. They were part of the original levels in HQ before the last expansion,
and renovations were not a priority when they were still building parts of some Sectors.

“Rough mission?”

Someone asked him and a few chuckled. He winced from the light that suddenly flooded their quarters as he tried to pin-point who had asked in the first place. He groaned holding his stomach as he sat up. He could still recall the force of impact of Angeal's fist and wished he hadn't thought about it again.

“Hey, are you alright?”

The same voice came again and he finally located the man, his name was Silva and he was one of the recent recruits.

“Yeah.”

Cloud tried to brush off his concern and stood up, giving the room a tired glance and seeing their captain walk up to him.

“Take the morning off, Strife. I can't have you miss your shift later and your reports don't look good.”

He watched him scroll through the reports that had been emailed to him overnight while he gave his orders.

“I'm fine.”

Cloud protested, glaring at the ground to avoid seeing anyone staring at them. The captain scratched their head before repeating themselves with a mixture of confusion and concern.

“Why are you arguing? It says here your helicopter crashed and that you encountered heavy resistance forces. So take the morning off. It's an order.”

The entire unit went silent. They'd all been eavesdropping because that's what anyone did when anyone was being told off by a superior. They hadn't expected to hear about anything of interest relating to him,

“You crashed!?”

“What mission?”

“What happened to the helicopter?”

“What resistance?”

“Was Genesis there?!”

“Genesis is already dead, you idiot.”

“Wow! Did it explode?!”

“Hey! What mission?”

“No he's not.”

The captain looked around in dismay when most had stopped getting ready for morning training
and crowded over them instead.

“There's no time for this. If you can't chat while training, you'll just have to find another time, but everyone except for Strife is marching out of here NOW.”

The men groaned and cussed in response, some even still tried to ask him questions while they got their gear on to head out. He was completely overwhelmed. All he'd been able to do was sit back down on his bunk and wait for them to file out.

He laid back and wished he could override the room's settings to turn the lights back off. He pulled his pillow over his face instead and tried to fall back asleep.

It was only when he remembered his prescriptions that he'd forced himself to sit back up. He downed them with a potion and laid back down again staring up at the top bunk.

Cloud gave up on falling back asleep when he found himself worrying about what he'd do next again. He figured he might as well take advantage of his free time while he had it and fished out his bag of books from underneath his bed.

He didn't particularly want to go study, but it had become such a habit that he couldn't think of anything else to do instead of lying awake. He knew that with the state he was in, and the exam coming up so soon, that he'd have no chance of making it that he considered not taking it at all.

He was halfway through changing in to fresh clothes when he heard the door slide open and heavy footsteps entered the room. He turned around out of surprise, his shirt stuck above his head, and saw the infamous silver haired 1st walking towards him.

“Oh, God.”

“Not quite.”

Sephiroth replied indifferently before stopping to face him. He stood there inexplicably, watching his every breath with what could only be described as indignation.

Cloud struggled to get his shirt on over his head, but he'd gotten one of the sleeves twisted inside out and he'd been so embarrassed that he'd frozen before the man.

“Need some help?”

He struggled against the fabric when the question alarmed him and he managed to pull the shirt down. He couldn't believe he'd actually seen some shade of amusement across the man's features. He'd never seen Sephiroth like that before, he just didn't believe it.

Cloud took a step back and reached out to hold on to one of the posts of his bunk to try to steady himself. He felt the cool metal beneath his skin and he watched the very real man resume his neutral stare.

He didn't look any thinner than what he remembered. Had the man really spent over a week locked away in the data room? He wondered if that's why they'd sent Zack to Modeoheim instead of him.

“I have some questions for you.”

Cloud could only conclude that this was about the mission. Had he known that Genesis and Angeal had really been alive would Sephiroth have come on the mission? Had he known that the original reports were fake?
His head spun and he held on tighter to the bunk. He couldn't explain the overwhelming sensation of the other man's power before him. He'd always felt it to some extent, but he had no idea his scrutiny could amplify it to this extent.

It wasn't simply overwhelming, it felt completely foreign. Nothing he'd experienced from anyone came close to this. He'd understood what pure willpower felt like from Zack, but this wasn't it. It was also different from the warmth and strength that Aerith had carried with her.

Sephiroth's power felt senseless. He felt his own strength fade from his body as he struggled to stand. He couldn't pull his eyes away from him and he started to fear why he'd been put in to such a position at all.

“You should ask Zack.”

“I tried.”

Cloud stared back at the taller man blankly when he'd received such a simple response to his deflection. He couldn't picture the two men getting along but it was painfully evident that he must be wrong. He looked at the ground and tried to rationalize the statement.

“He's gone?”

Sephiroth sighed at the question before clarifying, he seemed to grow impatient to get to the point.

“He left this morning. I attempted to question him last night. However, he was unable to stop crying.”

Cloud felt weaker, he had to sit down despite breaching protocol. He felt like he was going to faint as he tried to steady his breathing. He desperately wanted to try to talk to Zack about the mission. He could only hope that Sephiroth had at least attempted to console his fellow 1st.

The leather-clad man seemed confused by the sudden disrespect of sitting down in his presence. He stepped forward and leaned in to see his face, as if attempting to understand what had possessed him to disregard him so.

“He'll be back. He only went to the slums.”

Sephiroth added, concluding the information he was willing to share with regards to Zack. Cloud pulled back to look up when the man approached him, soon regretting his poor choice to sit down.

The fact that he'd gone to the slums was of some relief, not because he hadn't wanted to search for him, but because at least he was certain that Aerith would be able to help in a far greater capacity than he felt he could.

“What did Hollander say about Jenova?”

Cloud's jaw dropped at the question before tensing under the man's gaze. His tone had changed entirely and he was shocked by the idea that he'd never seen the 1st look so desperate before.

“I don't know.”

He answered out of fear, but it easily frustrated the silver haired man who placed a hand on the top bunk above his head and leaned down further.

“Don't waste my time. I read the reports.”
“Genesis said he needed them.”

“For what?”

“To stop the degradation?”

Cloud was trying his best to remember, wondering how it was possible to give the 1st what he wanted when he truly believed he knew nothing.

“What is Jenova?”

Cloud watched the man's gaze harden further at the mention of the unknown entity. He wanted to get away but his presence confined him.

“I don't know. Genesis was ready to get rid of Hollander by the time we got to them, and Hollander just kept saying they would never find the Jenova cells.”

“That not even Hojo knows where they are?”

“Right.”

He confirmed immediately, almost too eagerly. He felt outside of himself, as if he had no conception of all his fears or anxieties that had previously restrained his thoughts.

He couldn't feel anything but the man towering over him and his overbearing power. He gazed up at him, completely captivated by his grey eyes shining with Mako.

“They didn't say anything else?”

“No sir.”

“Did you find any of Hollander's data?”

“No sir.”

“What about Angeal?”

“He didn't say anything to me.”

Sephiroth frowned, accepting that the infantryman had no valuable information.

“Zack fought both of them alone.”

Cloud spoke up unprompted, compelled to voice his concern despite himself.

“No one knows what happened to them but him.”

Sephiroth stepped back at that. He seemed critical of the suggestion that he cared what had happened to his colleagues before turning away to mask his reaction.

“Very well.”

The 1st strained to sound neutral. Cloud attempted to stand when the man turned to leave but he couldn't find the strength. He felt numb from the unsettling lack of doubt in his actions.

Sephiroth looked the blond over with far more contempt than when he'd first approached him, turning away without another word and leaving with heavy steps.
Cloud watched him go and was enthralled by the sensation of his own stifled awareness slowly coming back to him as the 1st vanished. He urged himself to remember that he hadn't just imagined it all.

He raised the back of his hand to wipe sweat from his forehead, but when he looked down and saw how hard he was his heart stopped. He was terrified that Sephiroth had noticed.

He had no idea when he'd gotten so turned on, but he imagined that was why the 1st had looked so frustrated with him. He laid back in exhaustion from the realization that the 1st probably hated him.

Cloud couldn't shake the feeling that had overwhelmed him since the man had set eyes on him. The senseless desire to adhere to anything that came out of his gorgeous mouth had felt like second nature.

He pictured his perfect lips moving and his hair cascading over his shoulder as it had when he'd bent down towards him. He slid a hand down his pants if only to prove to himself how hard his idol had made him.

He shouldn't have, but it had been impossible to resist staring at the SOLDIER's bare chest, or expansive thighs when he'd towered over him. He couldn't explain why but the man's voice had the same effect as his presence, in so far as it was impossible to focus on anything else.

He tried to focus on his breathing, but imagining the sound of the 1st's deep voice still monopolized his focus. He squeezed himself harder and groaned, moving against his own touch.

He couldn't be doing this here. If anyone came in that would be the end of his infantry days. Even so, he continued to stroke his hard cock while picturing his hero ordering him to his knees before him.

The thought alone of Sephiroth getting hard while he waited obediently before him sent him over the edge and he came in his pants. With a heavy sigh he stared up at the bunk above his.

“I'm fucked up.”
It wasn't like he hadn't already needed to do laundry. He'd been putting it off for a while now because they had started locking the facilities off at night and he hated going when there were other people. He cleaned himself up and got changed again, bringing his books along with his laundry.

He hoped that there wouldn't be anyone. He was still shaken by the sudden encounter he'd so poorly handled. Thankfully there were very few people who were exempt from morning training and the facilities were empty that morning.

He sat down on the ground opposite of the machine he'd loaded and went over the company's employee handbook again. He'd picked it because it was the simplest to memorize and he wanted to avoid thinking.

A dozen pages in to the manual and he hadn't managed to stop thinking about his childhood hero. Washing away the problem proved to be harder than he'd planned. He always covered things up to avoid questions, and he needed to stop believing it didn't affect him.

He was afraid of conflict, but he finally saw that he'd been closed off for so long to allow it, that it had prevented him from feeling so much more. Even as a child, he'd rarely ever brought problems to his mother. She'd already had too many already.

Cloud sighed and scratched his head out of frustration. He felt nauseous at the thought that he was acting this way because he'd avoided people for too long. He was scared cutting himself off was causing him to develop grandiose obsessions that would clearly do him no good.

Despite having read about Sephiroth in the news over so many years, he knew next to nothing about him. They never talked about the man, only his exploits. He might not even be human, yet he looked more human than anyone else.

It wasn't like the mutations he'd witnessed with the Genesis copies. They had appeared distorted, but Sephiroth felt entirely different.

He tried to think back to the first time he'd seen the man in person to try to understand if his perception had changed then but he couldn't remember clearly feeling any different about him.

He found himself wishing Shinra had never come to Nibelheim at all. If they hadn't he hoped there would have been the possibility he'd never heard of the great hero to begin with.

He wondered how much of his attraction to the 1st was genuine, how much was purely aesthetic, and how much was because of his inhuman aura. He wondered if it was something proper to SOLDIER, and if that was the only reason he'd noticed Zack as well. Because of whatever Shinra was doing to enhance their mind waves.

He hadn't considered that it might be unnatural to feel so many varying forces from people at large. Their every mood, all their emotions, their intentions, their apprehensions, and most of all, their aura or presence. He wondered if that's why people seemed impulsive and simplistic to him, because they lacked perspectives.
He hated always feeling overwhelmed with other people's experiences. He hated the way his heart jumped every time he'd see those two men in particular. He hated that he knew almost nothing about them and was too afraid to find out more.

Cloud never expected to get the chance to speak to either of them personally. But at this rate, he almost felt sorry he had. Why had he?

He thought back to the last days before he'd left Nibelheim. His mother had encouraged him since he'd told her he wanted to join SOLDIER. In fact, she hadn't seemed surprised at all. She wondered aloud more and more to him about how great Midgar would be for him. She'd told him to write to her often, especially if he met any girl he liked.

He hadn't wanted to write to her about anyone, and any less about himself. He was too afraid she'd find out he was having a hard time. That the company isn't what he thought it would be. He hadn't been able to send any of the letters he'd started.

He wondered if he should have written to her when he'd seen Aerith for the first time. He wondered if that's what his mother had meant. He'd admired her kindness towards others, and she was beautiful, but he had never even spoken to her. How could he know?

Had he felt as much as when he first saw Zack? Why only talk to her about women. Now that he'd spent time with Zack could he even still deny that he liked him anymore? He reasoned that it wasn't appropriate to write to her about someone he'd never have a future with.

He wondered if his mother knew that he had liked Sephiroth all those years, and if that had been why hadn't been able to stop talking about the hero. He refused to talk about his peers because he was always off on his own either way, he had nothing to say about them.

He'd thought back to the times his mother had ever tried asking him if he liked anyone. He remembered how defensive he'd been when she'd asked about Tifa once out of the blue. He hadn't even talked to his mom about Tifa in years, so she had no business bringing her up.

He couldn't remember why he'd been offended. Tifa was the only other person in his town he respected. He wondered if she still expected him to become famous. The washing machine finished spinning and the silence in the room felt like a time bomb. Like a gas leak threatening to spark. He felt like something was inevitably wrong but he could barely bring himself to stand.

Cloud looked around, as if he'd been certain he'd heard someone enter, but the room was still empty. He transferred everything to a dryer and picked another book. The handbook hadn't helped at all, but no matter which book he swapped to he couldn't stop thinking about what Sephiroth had wanted to learn earlier that morning.

He hadn't seemed concerned about the ex-1sts at all, if barely even concerned for Zack. Couldn't he find out what he wanted from Hollander? He'd gone through the trouble of bringing him in. He couldn't rationalize why the man had wanted to ask him about any of it at all.

When the chore was complete he was relieved that he could stop attempting to understand what was going on at Shinra and move on to something else, anything else. He dropped his things off back in his storage unit before heading out to Sector 8 to clear his head.

He didn't want to think about SOLDIER, or Modeoheim, or the dread of being confronted by members of his own unit over any of it. He hadn't planned on telling anyone about the mission and didn't know how he'd avoid it now that their captain had kindly informed everyone it had been a mess.
He still had hours to kill before his shift and he wished he hadn't gone outside. He hated spending what little gil he had so he never visited any of the shops in town. Since he could buy the basics in HQ he hadn't realized how little he'd actually ever left the building other than for assignments.

He didn't care for the daytime. The city was crowded, and loud, and bright, and everyone was always in a rush. He preferred walking through the empty streets undisturbed until he reached the edge of a Sector. Even the few the other people wandering at those hours wouldn't look twice at you.

Unfortunately since the attacks on HQ it was much more challenging to get out at night with the added security. He had to take the time to walk through the city when he could now and he wondered if he ever even enjoyed it at all.

It was only when he'd returned to HQ to get geared up for his shift that he'd finally understood just how fast word-of-mouth traveled at Shinra. As soon as he'd entered his unit's quarters everyone turned towards him. He had only made it a few steps in when several confronted him.

“Sephiroth was here?!”

“Who cares about him. What happened to the helicopter?”

“Hey, is it true?”

“Was Sephiroth here?”

Cloud avoided looking at any of them. He couldn't process their excitement. It was all there, but it left him feeling as though they were just fishing for something to use against him. He opted for lying.

“What? When?”

Their reactions varied widely and he certainly didn't want to address whatever was happening. He moved around them to get to his gear while they looked amongst themselves for proof.

“I heard someone saw him come in to our unit.”

“Yeah they said he was in here a while!”

A few troops offered their stories, but he held up his side.

“I wasn't here.”

“What?”

“I did laundry when you all left.”

“Huh?”

Cloud didn't want to know what they'd heard. He didn't want to be involved in any of the company's drama. Especially not anything to do with Sephiroth. His fans were crazy.

He'd finished gearing up and grabbed his helmet, trying to get away from the confused cluster of men.

“I'm late for my shift.”
He justified, but they weren't dissuaded. After several promises to clarify more later, which he had no intention of upholding, and a lot of persistence, he was able to escape their quarters.

He'd taken for granted that the halls were usually deserted during training. Anyone could have been out there when Sephiroth had graced their halls, but he was certain he hadn't seen anyone when he'd left that morning.

That meant that his lie would only hold up if the person really saw Sephiroth on their floor. If it was someone who worked in surveillance and it came back to him he was convinced he'd get fired anyways.

He felt a headache coming on. He was conflicted with the idea of leaving Shinra over what could transpire. He couldn't tell if he was still afraid, or simply excited by the prospect.

He felt as if he needed a new plan entirely. Any alternative felt like a dull glimmer reminding him that he still had a choice in everything.

He'd only ever wanted to be famous. For what? For unconditional admiration? Surely that wasn't it. If that's what he felt for Sephiroth then he didn't want any part of it anymore.

He wanted to quit. He wanted to leave without a word, sell whatever he could carry and just leave. When he'd gotten to the elevator and had to decide whether he was going down to his shift, or down to leave midgar, a third option opened up to him.

He considered a faster way to leave Midgar. The motivation he felt at the idea of somehow managing to get past security and through to the roof scared him. He hadn't felt so ready to do anything in months and he'd clearly contemplated jumping off of HQ.

He convinced himself he needed to think it over. He knew he'd get out of there, out of it all, yet he began his patrol route without a sign of objection. Pacing through the same hallways with just as much complacency as he always had.

He started avoiding his unit entirely. The more he did the more it made morning training difficult. He could feel that they started to resent him more than they did before.

There were rumors about people getting fired again, because anything concerning Sephiroth always got people fired. Everyone was too afraid to talk to the 1st, and without proof they could only speculate on the nature of the would be visit.

Cloud hated being asked questions because any mention of the mission only made him worry about Zack. It had been months now and he still hadn't seen him anywhere.

He hadn't gone as far as to stake out the SOLDIER floor for him, but he had been hoping for any chance to at least see how he was doing. He wondered if he would still want to talk to him at all.

The worst rumour circulating had been that Sephiroth had personally threatened him to keep quiet about the deserters, his dear exe friends. However, the wildest rumor that still made it's way back to him was that he was working for said deserters and had relayed information to Sephiroth and that soon all of SOLDIER would turn against the company because of his help.

The infantry obviously still had issues with SOLDIER, but things were getting out of hand. He was so tired of saying he was loyal to a company he didn't believe in anymore.

Things continued to escalate the more he denied any of their claims. He'd tried avoiding the subject by saying the Modeoheim mission was classified by the Turks and that he couldn't go against them.
It was never enough, and the more people's speculations didn't pan out the angrier they got.

He hated being referred to as the disgusting puppet in their conspiracy scenarios. He hated being observed, and more than anything he hated people's assumptions about his intentions. One day he took a knife to what was left of his hair and proceeded to cut it as short as he could.

He'd been unsure if he wanted to grow it back after he'd been assaulted. He hadn't been certain why he'd grown it out at all anymore. He hated it. He hated looking at himself anymore, and if all it would do was make him recognizable he didn't want to keep it.

He sliced off strand after strand. Starting from the back and worked his way up, he lost sight of what he was doing halfway through. It was shorter, spikier than ever, and far more uneven now.

The more he cut in to it the more he wondered how his hair managed to do that. He wondered if that's why he'd preferred it long after all. He got a hat instead and started wearing it anytime he wasn't in uniform. Tucking what was left of his hair underneath he spent the majority of his time unseen.

He hadn't attended the last two SOLDIER exams. Not because of all the accusations he'd received with regards to wanting to serve SOLDIER's mass-desertion objectives, but because he was too afraid he'd end up seeing Zack again. He looked for him everywhere and it scared him. He told himself he just wanted to make sure he was alright, but he felt that it was much more than that.

He wandered HQ's hallways and Midgar's streets so much trying to come up with another plan, but he still failed to justify leaving the company in any reasonable capacity. He'd wanted to leave for so long now he really didn't know what he was doing anymore.

He still harboured the terrible idea that he'd make it in to SOLDIER and somehow things would be different. Weeks kept passing him by and he wondered why he kept on working, or why he kept on hoping for another chance.

He couldn't go up to the SOLDIER floor. He didn't want anyone thinking he wanted to talk to Sephiroth after people finally dropped the topic. The proof seemed to have disappeared, most likely fired, and since no one dared ask Sephiroth to verify the rumors everyone eventually moved on.

He'd stopped studying entirely. If he wasn't going to take the exam, he didn't need to care about anything but his basic infantry duties. He started walking the city streets more often and wondering if he was still paranoid or if the mood at Shinra had gotten worse, and not just for him again.

Cloud consistently avoided answering anyone's questions until troop rotations virtually replaced his entire unit again. Because as troops died, were fired, or quit, the fragmented units got reassigned to larger ones so that senior personnel could focus on training new recruits.

He still had trouble sleeping most nights. He wondered how long it had been since Modeoheim and if he should of at least tried texting or calling him. They hadn't had reception on the mission so there had been no use in exchanging numbers. But he wasn't about to ask Tseng for it either.

It was another night spent staring at poorly engraved messages from the infantrymen who had laid here before him and observing how they varied poorly no matter which bunk or stall he occupied. He got up, slid his boots on, and set out to wander the hallways for another night in a row.

He didn't go far anymore most nights. He often used the 'I was going to the bathroom' excuse when reported, but most of the time he got by because he knew which floors were patrolled regularly and which weren't.
When he really didn't want to bother with anyone he sometimes even just paced up and down the empty flights of stairs from the 1st to the 59th until he was too tired to stand.

That night he'd headed towards the elevator to leave the infantry levels entirely. He stood looking around absentmindedly until the elevator pinged and the doors unveiled an equally surprised man.

“Oh? Is that you, Cloud?”

Cloud was startled by the fact that he'd run in to anyone so soon. He knew the patrol routes after all and no one was supposed to be changing floors at this hour. Except it wasn't a patrolman at all, it was Zack.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter is entirely with Zack
why I wanted a 33k lead up no one knows
The 1st class SOLDIER he'd thought had vanished stood in the elevator before him, looking him over with mesmerizing eyes before smiling.

He realized he must have looked terrified, wide-eyed and frozen by his presence. Zack, on the other hand, looked better than ever. His hair was longer and he wore it slicked back now. He looked much older, but even the deep scar on his face couldn't detract from his perfect features.

He couldn't stand the deafening silence he'd subjected them to by not answering his question. Emphasized by the irritating sound of the elevator's mechanism threatening to close at any second, he regretted not taking the stairs.

“Zack.”

Cloud finally articulated. He couldn't bring himself to say anything. He'd rehearsed so many questions in his mind for when this chance might arrive, yet his name is all he'd been able to answer.

“That's me.”

Zack affirmed, still smiling, and Cloud expected the elevator doors to shut the next instant. Leaving him without further explanation or concern.

“Get in.”

He ordered and Cloud was too exhausted to think of an adequate refusal. His own impulse to step forward so quickly surprised him, as if he'd betrayed his own sensibilities.

He'd silently stepped in to the elevator besides Zack who wrapped an arm around his shoulders warmly in response. He hadn't expected the gesture and was left bracing himself.

Zack looked tired, and the touch seemed sympathetic, yet he couldn't understand how it could feel so familiar. He'd only ever touched his arm once before, if only for a moment.

Cloud felt pathetic that such a simple gesture could affect him to this extent. He tried not to look up at him. It was difficult enough attempting not to lean in to him despite the weight of his arm coaxing him to give in.

They stood in silence as they rode the elevator up to the 1st's quarters. As soon as the elevator doors opened the weight of his touch vanished and Zack moved past him.

Cloud followed, just as methodically as in the past. He was thrilled that he could still feel Zack's arm across his shoulders. The contact had been brief, but he started to worry that it shouldn't be possible to feel so much over so little.

In the dead of the night no one else happened to be wandering the hallways, allowing them to make it to their destination uninterrupted.

He had no idea what was happening. Then again, he must have already known where they were
headed, but when Zack suddenly stopped in front of a door his heart sank.

He felt terrified despite his wish for a chance to talk to the man again. He couldn't tell what it was, only that he felt that he shouldn't be there. That he shouldn't go in.

The next thing he knew, the taller man had swiped his keycard on the lockpad and had invited him in. He hesitated, but a firm hand on his back had already carried him in.

Zack let out a long loud yawn as soon as the automated door locked behind them, as if he had been holding it in the entire way. Cloud yawned in turn. Of course, yawns were contagious.

He watched the taller man kick off his boots as he smiled at him yawning in turn. He hated how beautiful his smile was and looked anywhere but at it while he took his own boots off.

“So you couldn't sleep either?”

Zack laughed after his question. Cloud couldn't help but feel like he didn't want to discuss why either. He watched him fetch two cans from the small cooling unit by his bed and he felt obligated to answer.

“I don't most nights.”

He felt he hadn't answered something honestly in months. The relief only reminded him of how much he'd been lying about these days.

He felt out of place, and regretted sharing. But more than any of that, he couldn't understand what it was about his perfect smile that made him feel like he'd forgotten how to be defensive entirely.

He felt guilty that it was the other man smiling at him to cheer him up instead of the other way around. It had been so long now and he'd never had the courage to talk to him about Modeoheim.

Zack returned to him and handed him a can. He hadn't strayed far past the entrance. He was still surprised by how large a 1st's living quarters were.

“Here. This should help.”

“Thanks.”

Cloud looked at the cold one. It was a brand of elixir he didn't recognize. He accepted it despite his reservations about it's contents simply because he was afraid it would offend Zack otherwise. Or at least he assumed it would be rude not to drink what he was drinking.

He hadn't attempted to see if it would help with his insomnia, but with all the hangovers he'd witnessed since joining Shinra, he'd been convinced not to try.

One drink wouldn't be that bad, and either way he didn't plan on wasting that much of the man's time. Surely he'd ruin whatever this was soon enough.

Zack had been the only person to ever make him feel this conflicted. He needed to try to not ruin this. He told himself again it was just having one drink together.

He cracked open the can and forced down a gulp as he took in the sights of Zack's room. Unlike the rest of the military's personnel, the 1sts had private living-quarters with all the amenities.

They were paid far more for their services and they had more liberties when it came to their general freedom. Like not having to wear helmets with built-in cameras all the time on duty.
Then again, he knew that every room in HQ was inevitably bugged. And at this rate he knew that even 1sts weren't exempt from surveillance.

He glanced around some more, admiring what little decor there was, inevitably scanning walls for invisible cameras. He felt ridiculous for even looking. How could he recognize signs of technology he'd never seen before.

The technology department was just as secretive as the science department. He wondered what the real death tolls in those departments were compared to the infantry and SOLDIER. He felt terrible at the thought, taking another drink.

He wondered if Zack was even aware of the company's mass surveillance at all. He felt nauseated by his own persistence to worry. There had been a long standing rumor that once you became SOLDIER, you never left the company other than in a body bag.

Another popular alternative did seem to be turning in to monsters and vanishing, but he didn't like those odds either. He was increasingly concerned by Zack's chances of coming back from his next mission in one piece.

"Is everything alright Cloud?"

"..Uh, yeah."

Cloud hadn't noticed Zack had sat down on his bed while he had stood there looking around at all his things. The bed was larger than any he'd ever seen and occupied most of the space, along with a large storage unit, a desk, chair, several side tables, lamps, and that cooling unit.

He didn't know what to do with himself. He wanted to know how Zack really was, except he didn't know where to start. He couldn't bring himself to ask about Angeal, but he needed to say something.

It was now or never, he needed to at least try. While fidgeting with his drink he looked over at Zack and tried to sound as calm as possible.

"About Modeoheim.."

"I'm fine now."

Zack answered quickly, defensively, before motioning for him to come sit besides him. As he approached he watched him move to lean against the headboard to face him.

He complied so easily, and Zack smiled again. He timidly sat at the opposite end of the bed, but he couldn't even look at him anymore because he didn't know what to say.

He took another drink to avoid prying the subject without choosing his words properly. He just wanted him to know he'd listen if he needed him to.

"How long have you had trouble sleeping?"

"Since I first got here."

Zack's sudden question had surprised him, but he'd answered honestly. He leaned back on an arm, almost relieved by the precision of his own answer. The relief was momentary however, as he realized he'd just exposed the extent of his pitiful exhaustion. He took another drink in hopes that the unappealing taste would distract him from the look of concern he could see building steadily on
the other man's face.

“That was months ago wasn't it? Why can't you sleep?”

“I'm not sure.”

Cloud answered plainly. But Zack's obvious dissatisfaction pressured him to elaborate.

“I've never been around so many people, for one.”

Zack smiled at that part, but it looked less like he was amused and more of a knowing look. Except when Cloud didn't elaborate further he tried to pinpoint the problem instead.

“So you don't like assemblies? Or you mean your squad mates? Or..”

Zack sounded like he was on a roll and Cloud couldn't bear to have the details of his anxieties enumerated to him so he answered bitterly.

“Everyone.”

“Oh.”

Zack's concerned gaze was finally diverted to the ground. Cloud couldn't bear to see the unintended sadness he'd caused the other man and lowered his eyes as well. They both took another drink in silence.

Cloud felt guilty of having bluntly lumped Zack in to “everyone”, but it was true in a way. Even Zack made him nervous. He couldn't tell if he honestly enjoyed spending time with him or if it was just as painful as with anyone else.

He felt so unsure of himself around him, yet he'd never felt anything to the extent that he made him feel anything. It felt completely surreal that he'd somehow raised the bar on every single thing.

He knew he'd do anything to spend more time with him and it scared him. He was the only person he'd met here who had shown any interest in him. Well, positive interest.

“You don't like being around me either?”

Zack asked softly, and the tinge of sorrow muting his voice was agonizing to hear. The SOLDIER across from him focused on his drink instead of him, patiently waiting for an answer. But Cloud only starred, perplexed as to how to correct himself.

The brave face that was always usually so bright, so confident, so full of emotion, appeared torn down by a feeling that never should have twisted his features. He felt guilty for having caused the other man to experience anything of what he was feeling at all.

“No. Sorry. I mean, it's just how everyone's always makes me feel. Around you I..”

Zack hesitantly raised his eyes and Cloud paused, staring down at his drink in an effort to press on.

“I don't even really know? I wanted to see you again. It doesn't matter how I feel otherwise. It's not that you're like everyone else at all. I, uhm.”

Zack seemed instantly reassured despite the uneasiness with which Cloud had trailed off. He regretted admitting he'd been thinking of him since the mission.
But that was normal right? Who wouldn't want to spend time with a 1st again? His apology had gotten his heart racing again and he took another drink, trying to focus on anything but Zack's smile.

“I knew you didn't mean it.”

“Right.”

Cloud affirmed as decisively as possible, but he couldn't believe what was happening. If such an astounding person wanted him around, then why did everyone else always treat him like such shit?

At least Zack's overly casual smile made him sigh from relief that maybe they could change topics now. He ran a hand through his hair pushing his uneven bangs aside and found himself smiling back at him.

“What usually helps? There has to be something that can knock you out. What used to get you to sleep, totally without fail, back home?”

“Uh..”

Cloud took another drink to stall while he thought of an answer. Well, of another answer. He was too embarrassed to say the first thing that came to mind. He could tell that Zack wouldn't drop the question, and since the drink tasted awful, he decided to explain instead.

“It was just me and my mom growing up. She used to read for me a lot. I've heard the beginning of some stories so many times and still don't know their endings..”

Zack, satisfied with such a straight forward answer, and adorable mental image, gingerly put his drink down on the cooling unit at the edge of the bed and got up.

He went to collect the few books he had that weren’t Shinra issued and dropped them on the bed between them. He settled back down, leaning on one arm and gesturing with the other to showcase the selection.

“Pick one. I can read to ya, if you like. But fair warning though, I'm sorta tired too, so I might not do the best job.”

Zack stopped elaborating when he noticed how red the blond's face had gone. He couldn't make out any of the text, and so he picked one of the books based on the cover.

He wondered what Zack's native language was like, but he was too embarrassed to ask him about it. He couldn't even bring himself to ask what any the books were about. He couldn't let him to do something like this for him.

He'd wanted to decline, but instead he wondered how many languages Zack knew. Most international employees, including himself, only knew their mother tongue and learned English to work for Shinra.

Zack seemed wildly amused by the fact that he was poorly concealing his face with his bangs while pretending to read the cover. He then leaned in across the bed to snatch the book away from him.

“This one then?”

“Zack..”
“Yes?”

“You really don't have to.”

“I want to.”

He wanted to plead the man not to. He was so embarrassed by the prospect of him somehow coming to his aid when he'd thought about nothing but consoling him first.

Cloud looked up after a long silence. He struggled with the fact that Zack actually wanted to do this for him, but the sight of his bright mako-blue eyes staring back at him sent his heart racing again.

Zack stared for a moment longer, only releasing him from his gaze when he opened the book to start reading. The few books he owned looked as if they'd been read many times.

Cloud could feel his heart pounding steadily faster while waiting for his voice to fill the silence. He felt his face get even warmer from the suspense and resorted to downing the rest of his drink to try to calm down.

Under any circumstances, all he knew to do when he started panicking was to get up and walk away. Except that this was the first time in his life that he could feel this much fear and still not want to leave.

Instead of running he wanted to move closer. Lay up besides him, and listen to him for as long as he could relish the experience. He'd leaned forward after setting his empty can down but caught himself before he could make a fool out of himself.

He felt childish, and even naive at the thought that he wanted to get closer. He felt that somehow Zack wouldn't be upset even if he did try, but that feeling soon made him sick.

He leaned back on an arm, attempting to steady himself from the sudden unease. He had to remind himself that listening to a bed-time story from a superior was probably not really normal.

He was too tired to keep caring so much at this point and wished his nausea would go away. He stared at the cover to avoid looking at him until he finally spoke up again.

“It's called The Sacred Balance. It's about rediscovering our place in nature and stuff. It's really cool actually, it talks about all the elements you'll see. I think you'll like the chapter on fire.”

The book began with myths of how human beings came to exist on Gaia before delving in to our evolutionary background. He'd picked the cover because it had had diagrams of earth in orbit on the cover, but he hadn't expected the book to be so insightful.

As much as he was enjoying the story, he was even more curious as to what the SOLDIER really intended to accomplish by reading to him. He didn't think something so simple would even work, but how could he disrespect him by refusing to let him try?

Zack continued reading, rarely glancing up at him between paragraphs. He understood by his hesitant pacing that translating as he read might be a new challenge for him. One that he appeared to be taking very seriously.

Zack didn't read in the tone that he'd expected with regards to how serious the content was, but for some reason it didn't feel wrong either. After several more pages he'd sunk further down, despite trying not to actually doze off.
He accepted a pillow that Zack tossed him and he use it to lean down more comfortably. Trying to keep his eyes open until the older man got bored of reading to him.

Cloud ended up focusing on the sound of the SOLDIER's voice instead of the story. He still wondered what language the people of Gongaga spoke. He'd ask him when he'd get tired of reading to him. Surely this wouldn't go on for much longer.

Despite the few mistakes in pronunciation, or hesitant translations, his soft voice had effectively knocked him out. He wondered how it was possible to put so much passion or tenderness in to what seemed like such an old fashioned story.

Chapter End Notes

The book I'm referencing is The Sacred Balance by David Suzuki. I'm reading it right now and it's amazingly grounding. I highly recommended it for anyone who wants to read about climate change or just our place in nature. It's surprisingly romantic too so I'm going to be using it as a plot point in future chapters. You can all thank Suzuki that this fic somehow got much fluffier than intended.
Sleeping on a Cloud

Chapter Summary

wow 40k why aren't we at Junon yet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next thing Cloud knew, it definitely was no longer nighttime, and no dreams had followed him back to reality that morning. It had been the high pitched sound of an incoming text message that had woken him up.

He scanned the unfamiliar room in search of the disturbance, unsure if it had been his phone or not, only to come to the realization that he'd fallen asleep in Zack's bed.

Zack Fair, 1st class SOLDIER. The man that was everything he wasn't. Everything he'd wanted to be. He was so much more than all the glory of his rise to fame.

Last night Cloud hadn't believed for an instant that their experiment would work. He'd expected to go back to his quarters after an hour or so. He hadn't really expected Zack to let him stay.

Yet there he was, safe, snug, warm, and more rested than he'd felt in years. It was only when he realized that the weight and warmth surrounding him was actually from Zack's body that he started to panic.

It appeared that Zack had joined him at the other end of the bed before falling asleep himself. He could hear him breathing steadily behind him and he froze, hoping he wouldn't wake him up.

As the instinct to run away rushed back to the forefront of his mind, he jerked forward to leave before Zack could realize how close they'd been, and promptly failed.

He hadn't been able to move because a very strong arm was wrapped around his shoulder and down his chest. It looked like Zack hadn't bothered moving him off the covers and just threw a spare blanket over them instead.

He struggled to calm down, working through why he wanted to run when he didn't even know where he should be instead of here. He had no idea what time it was, but judging by how well rested he felt and by the amount of sunlight pouring in to the room, it had to be way later than he could even fear to estimate.

Cloud couldn't get his heart to stop racing, squirming in an attempt to get away. The full weight of Zack's body leaning against his terrified him. It wasn't that he feared being crushed, or that he thought he might intend to restrain him further, it was simply the sensation of his body pressed up against his that felt obscene.

He wanted none of him and all of him at the same time. He abstained from moving his body further. He was rendered helpless by the fear of waking him, yet couldn't help himself from tilting his face down to the arm that trapped him.
He pressed his cheek against his arm cautiously at first, but as soon as he'd brushed against him he moved in to the touch and his lips caressed his soft skin softly. He felt he'd gone too far and pulled away.

He prayed that he hadn't just felt that and that he wouldn't wake up just yet. He could feel his face burning up and let out a sigh, although it sounded more like a moan since he'd been holding his breath.

Cloud felt the urgency to flee again, quickly trying to think back over how he even got in to this position in the first place. He was compelled that he must be misreading the situation. He'd never considered that Zack might feel the same way towards him.

Surely he'd only rolled over by mistake. Or maybe sleeping this close was just something friends did sometimes. And friends shouldn't enjoy being trapped beneath their friends, right?

Cloud's heart started racing again. What if it was the other way around and he'd misread that Zack's intentions weren't platonic at all? That couldn't be. He couldn't handle this. He needed to get out.

He tried to move out from underneath his arm again but trying to lift it only shifted his weight further against him. He almost groaned out of frustration but kept quiet. He felt weaker by the second, trying to push his arm down instead had proven just as useless.

Struggling against him had only made him alarmingly aware of the massive hard-on pressed against the back of his thigh. He stopped struggling, but it was too late, he'd managed to wake him up and Zack only pulled him in closer in response.

“Mmm.. Mornin’.”

Zack's greeting was muffled by the pillow he had buried his face in to. He leaned away, yawning lazily for a moment before rolling back in to a more comfortable position. He tilted his head down to rest against the back of Cloud's neck and remained otherwise motionless.

Cloud was frozen as the taller man's body moved against his. The sensation of hot breath down his neck was torturous. He'd already started to feel too warm, but now it felt like he'd pass out from the contact and heat if he didn't get out of bed.

Zack seemed content with going right back to sleep after such a plain greeting. He couldn't stand this for much longer and asked his next question while trying to lean away to get out of his grasp.

“What time is it?”

“..Hm?”

Zack hesitated at first, as if he hadn't understood the question, when really he was trying to remember where he put his cellphone. He pushed himself up on an elbow and reached over Cloud for the device on the end table besides them.

“..like 8:00.”

Once Zack had accomplished the task he'd just as soon dropped the phone and laid back down with a yawn. Despite his momentary freedom, Cloud hadn't had a chance to react from the shock of Zack's bare chest hovering above him.

Zack tugged at the blanket that appeared to be sliding off the bed before bringing his arm lazily
back down across Cloud's chest, leaning in to him to promptly go back to sleep.

“How did you get all those scars?”

Zack asked a few moments later and Cloud flinched at the question. He hadn't expected him to ask about them since he usually kept them covered.

He must have gotten a good look at them down the back of his shirt and he wasn't sure how to respond. He didn't want to bring up the slums, because he didn't want him to know that he already knew about Aerith.

“You don't have to answer.”

Zack tried to reassure him when he'd received no response, but all he could do was try to lean away from him. He tried forcing himself to think of anything else, but he had no clue how to react to what was happening.

The sight of his perfectly defined chest that had suddenly hovered above him when he'd asked the time had left him dizzy and wanting another look. He felt himself start to get hard and resumed panicking instead.

He was thankful to feel that he was still fully clothed, which meant that all he needed was his boots that he'd left by the door to get out of this mess. His heart pounded steadily. It was way past morning training, so far past that he was going to be late for his early shift if he didn't go get geared up soon.

“I have to go.”

Cloud spoke up, even if his voice was barely a whisper. He tried to move out from beneath his hold again, but it was clear that Zack was far stronger when he wasn't sleeping, making no effort to release him.

“Hmm.. What is it?”

“I'm late.”

Cloud tried to clarify, but he couldn't contain the second wave of terror that urged him to get out of his bed. He didn't want to explain. He felt as if he'd lose it if he had to.

Zack easily restrained him by simply not moving his arm away. The SOLDIER's bright eyes were still hazy with sleep and he turned to yawn in to his pillow before mumbling in to the back of his neck again.

“Can't you take a day off, or something? This is nice.”

“A what?”

Cloud tried to turn around to look at him incredulously even though he couldn't turn far enough. Everyone worked 7 days a week, 12 hours a day on average with over-time measures. There was no such thing as a day off if you weren't 1st Class.

He wanted to look at him to see if he was serious, but he couldn't with the way Zack held him. Instead he felt Zack nuzzle in to his back softly before tailing the tip of his nose up the length of his neck. He'd never known he was ticklish until he felt his lips brush up behind his ear.
“I’ve never met someone like you before.”

Zack’s voice and breath felt warmer than before, sending another shiver down his spine. He’d almost let out a gasp, mulling over how painful the contrast between his tone and his words had felt instead.

He hated being different. He felt so small constrained by him like this. Even so, he wasn’t about to keep struggling against one of the strongest men in the company. He didn’t want to seem even weaker than he probably already did to him.

“Like me?”

He finally managed to respond, unable to mask his uneasiness in his tone. He could only lean away hoping he wouldn’t honestly answer his question. He didn’t want to know what it was that had brought them together.

“I don’t know.”

Zack started, with more confidence than his first admission.

“Things feel different with you. Like I can tell you anything.”

Zack explained before nuzzling in to his back again. He remained frozen, unsure of how to respond as always. He wanted to agree with him, but he also wanted to get away before he could agree with anything else.

“It's nice, right?”

The words that were mumbled in to his back confused him. He wanted to find a way to get away without offending the older man’s sudden affections, except he still had no idea how to.

“huh?”

He had lost his train of thought, he couldn't focus anymore. Zack lulled his head back up lazily to clarify, holding him tighter to emphasize what he'd meant. His hot lips touched his skin again and he swore he must have felt his entire body shiver against his.

“This.”

Zack clarified and Cloud didn’t have the will to protest the fact. He still hadn't accepted that Zack was even really spooning him intentionally. Yet he had just admitted to enjoying it.

“You looked like you really needed to catch up on some sleep. You slept all right, right?”

Zack continued talking sleepily behind his ear before trailing his lips back down the length of his neck all the way to his shoulder. He felt him smile against his skin and remained paralyzed by his embrace.

He felt that his question had sounded so incredibly smug just then, evidently taking full credit for getting him to sleep. There was no doubt left, he was thoroughly enjoying whatever this was.

He couldn’t go through with it. Not like this. And especially not while they were certainly being monitored. He couldn’t let this drag out any longer. Everyone was working overtime and he’d just vanished in the night and skipped out on training.

He needed to answer, but he was still too anxious to give in. His lips against his skin had left an
exposed path that felt like it had been set on fire. He wondered why he still wanted to run while he tried his best to give a neutral response.

“Yeah. Did you?”

He managed an even tone, despite his terror at how much he wanted to twist around in any capacity to embrace him. He couldn't understand how Zack could be so careless, whereas he felt like he'd been caught in some sort of trap.

“Next to you, who wouldn't?”

Zack had responded just as smugly as before and felt Cloud tense up at his response. He couldn't help but chuckle lightly in to his shoulder. He was only starting to see just how flustered Cloud was and he loved how red his face had become.

He hadn't thought twice about spooning the night before. Although, he hadn't expected waking up enjoying it quite to that extent. Now all he wanted was for Cloud to stay. He wasn't sure he'd convinced him yet, but the sight of the younger man blushing and squirming from every touch had him in high spirits.

“Why don't you take the whole morning instead of rushing off?”

“I'm going to be in so much shit.”

“Worse than you already are?”

Zack sighed happily when his question received no further opposition from the blond. Moving over only to turn him towards him.

He smiled and Cloud couldn't help but smile back despite his surprise from being rolled on to his back. Thankfully, it was inexplicable how many anxieties that kind smile managed to take away from him every time he saw it.

There was something about how sincerely he looked at him that made him feel like things could be alright, even though none of what they were doing felt right.

Cloud couldn't believe that a SOLDIER he'd practically just met had successfully lead him to and held him in his bed so effortlessly. He wondered how often he did this sort of thing.

He'd never been this close to anyone before, but the way Zack held him made it seem as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He wished he would make him feel weightless too someday.

He felt progressively more confused as to what to do next. Hadn't he wanted something like this to happen all along? How had he gotten here so fast. Was Zack even trying to read him at all? He felt afraid, and excited, and everything in between.

He couldn't breathe while he watched Zack's hand lazily stray down his chest. He felt him caress him hesitantly and trail fingertips down his stomach until he was certain it was only a matter of seconds before it would be too late to turn back.

He'd closed his eyes, but instead he felt him trace his way back up across his stomach and move past his chest to his collarbone. He tried to focus on his breathing, too afraid to say anything, even though he'd just been given yet another opportunity to stop all of this.

Cloud was certain that Zack must feel his heart pounding back in his chest in response to his touch.
He felt terrible, not only by his current state of arousal, but of his own lack of volition to get away from him.

Did he want to go work? No. Did he dislike Zack? No. He was trying to think of the appropriate excuse as to decline staying in bed with him all morning when he felt hot lips brush up against his ear again and his eyes shot open.

“You still haven't thanked me for my exceptional skills as an orator, by the way.”

Cloud felt like his heart was going to leave his body at this point. Zack's warm face so close to his own made him flinch away and respond far too quickly in an attempt to placate his own reaction.

“Thank you.”

This was too much. He needed to end this. For some reason the urgency of getting away from the SOLDIER seemed just as unreal as the urgency of wanting the SOLDIER to touch him in the first place.

“All in a day's work.”

Zack chimed back, but Cloud wasn't looking at him anymore. He let out another soft yawn before he leaned in again, pressing his lips against his exposed neck.

He had hoped a few light kisses would bring his attention back to him. But when they didn't, Zack leaned further up and peered at him. He couldn't believe how cute the flustered look on his face was.

He brought his other hand up from his chest and turned Cloud's chin slowly to face him again. He leaned in and placed his lips on Cloud's just as gently as the kisses he'd left against his neck.

Zack had never kissed anyone before, but he'd wanted nothing more than to try in that instant. Cloud's lips were insatiably soft beneath his. When he didn't feel any push back from the younger man he moved on top of him to deepen the kiss, pulling half the blanket down in the process.

Their blue eyes finally met again after a long kiss. Cloud couldn't focus on anything except how bare his lips felt from the sudden absence of contact and how much the rest of his body felt compromised beneath him.

Everything became a blur of blinding heat and lack of control. Zack's beautiful face, his bare chest, and his exponentially large boner rubbing up against his own where all making him question why Zack was doing any of this to him of all people.

He'd never felt this good before. He wanted to pull his full weight down on top of him. Despite the overwhelming sensation of being trapped, he started to wish to be crushed instead.

He didn't know what to do with himself. He felt sick for wanting to be hurt by him. The only reason people usually got anywhere near him was to harm him. He couldn't settle the mixed emotions of fear and excitement in his gut and he couldn't keep looking up at those bright blue eyes that made him seem so sure of himself.

He felt as though his own pale blue eyes, that were persistently sad, dull, and downcast, were a mockery compared to his. Why was Zack doing any of this to him. There was nothing appealing about him.

Cloud kept his eyes averted and kept wondering if he was really alright with that sudden kiss. His
first kiss. He hadn't given any serious thought to kissing before, but even so, he felt guilty that he'd enjoyed it so much.

He had no idea how to respond to it, especially since Zack seemed so pleased with himself. He told himself he should just be flattered a SOLDIER was even interested in him in the first place.

He couldn't quite understand how that should feel like. Despite his efforts to rationalize what was happening, his conflicting thoughts about his first kiss were soon interrupted by a second kiss.

Zack had caressed his cheek before he cupped his face and turned it back to meet his once more. Kissing him just as slowly as the first time.

He felt heavier on top of him in that instant, as if both the kiss and his body were threatening to suffocate him. Struggling against him only made him moan in to the kiss.

He hated any form of involuntary action and the sound of his own voice felt aberrant to him. Zack thankfully smiled in to the kiss and he had a moment to gasp for air.

Zack couldn't help but laugh softly at how breathless he'd rendered Cloud beneath him before trailing kisses down the side of his face in an effort to comfort him.

Cloud was embarrassed, he didn't even know how to kiss properly, but that didn't seem to bother Zack, whom only waited a moment longer for Cloud to catch his breath before leaning back in.

Cloud let Zack's lips claim his again and tried to stop struggling under his weight. He could feel Zack was just as aroused as he was and the more their bodies continued to grind against each other the more he felt he was going to lose it.

He didn't want to think of what would happen if they went any further. He tried to interrupt the kiss, but as soon as he had opened his mouth he felt Zack's tongue run against his parted lips before sliding in.

The strong tongue that slid in against his was delectable to the extent of intoxication. Even though he still felt all the stress that had built up that morning urging him to run away, he couldn't stop kissing back.

He let soft moans continue to escape as the kiss deepened and he knew he wasn't thinking. Pulling one instant, pushing the next, he needed to stop and managed to slide his hands up to separate them.

He felt like he would suffocate if he kept getting overwhelmed by him. He tried to push him off again, but the hands that he had urgently managed to wedge between them were still far too weak to displace him.

His slid his hands up over the curves of the firm chest that he'd been certain he'd wanted to escape from only a moment ago. He slid them all the way around his shoulders and neck, holding on to him instead.

As their kiss continued Cloud wrestled with keeping quiet. Every motion of their hips grinding together and their tongues intertwining had him holding on tighter.

The overwhelming sensation of pleasure and complicity had him ready to cum any moment now and he didn't care in the slightest how it had all started anymore.

Cloud felt a strong hand trail down his side and his body flinched in response before they could
trail back up beneath his shirt. Zack leaned back to let Cloud arch further running his fingers over the length of his spine.

Zack finally pulled away from their kiss and watched Cloud pant to catch his breath. He slid another hand up his shirt and pulled it gently over his head, discarding it on the floor.

Cloud barely registered what had just happened since he had to let go of Zack's neck in the process and before he knew it he was bracing himself on his elbows while Zack trailed kisses down his chest.

“Zack...”

“Yes, Cloud?”

Zack stopped to answer, pulling back to sit upright on top of him. Cloud stared back up at him in shock at just how large his erection was. He felt flattered by his reaction and reached down to undo his pants, wanting nothing more than to show him exactly how hard he'd made him when his cellphone went off.

Chapter End Notes

welcome to the Tseng is a cockblock trope
Cloud practically yelled from surprise at the sound of the incoming call. Inching away beneath Zack unsuccessfully, seeing as he was already at the edge of the bed.

Zack groaned loudly at the interruption before reaching over to grab his phone from the end table, not bothering to move off the younger man to answer.

“Yes?”

“You're needed in the science department.”

“I'm busy right now.”

Cloud wanted to die. He could overhear the voice on the other end of the call, and he knew it was Tseng, and he did not sound happy at Zack's dismissal.

“I can see that.”

“Huh? What do you mean, you can see that?”

Zack asked incredulously. He really was clueless. He'd even glanced around the room as if Tseng had somehow snuck in at one point or another.

“I meant, listen, it doesn't matter, report to the lab immediately.”

“Huh?”

Zack seemed more confused than frustrated that Tseng had hung up on him. He'd wanted to press him on whether or not they could just use someone else for the tests but he was left hanging. Literally, by the time the call ended he'd gone soft and begrudgingly got off of Cloud and out of bed.

“Sorry. It's uh, important, apparently..”

Cloud was left shocked, and embarrassed, siting up in bed, watching him apologize. He wanted to tell him the truth about the company, but he just as soon couldn't bare to be the one to break it to him him that Tseng hadn't misspoke.

Besides, he needed to talk to him outside of HQ if he was going to say anything at all. He watched as Zack put a new shirt on and fastened his belt and armor over top. He then fetched the shirt that he'd removed and discarded earlier and handed it back to him with a smile.

He took it, averting his eyes from embarrassment, then watching him disappear the next moment in
to what he could only assume was his own bathroom. He'd put his shirt back on and sat on the edge of the bed in defeat. How could he realistically tell him anything when the entire building was bugged?

He couldn't help but be angry at Tseng for ordering him away, even if he wasn't certain of the purpose of the order. He wanted to expose all of them. For thinking that they could orchestrate other people's lives as they saw fit.

He had no idea what to do with his anger. He couldn't possibly go against Shinra and make it out alive. More importantly, he couldn't risk compromising Zack. In other words, he was too afraid to tell him.

Zack returned and knelt down in front of him when he hadn't looked up, offering a smile. Cloud admired his lazily touched-up eyeliner, distracted for an instant by his beauty before the familiar contact of his hands made him wish he wasn't still being touched in front of them.

His strong hands stroked his thighs before resting on his knees in an effort to comfort him. Instead he felt sick, looking down at his hands instead of at him in an effort to steady himself.

“I really am sorry. You can stay as long as you like even though I have to dash, all right?”

Zack offered but he didn't know what to do next. When Zack leaned in slowly, just as he had earlier that morning, he moved a hand up to cover his mouth with his fist before he'd even closed his eyes.

The gesture had seemed so sudden to Zack, who blinked and moved back. Cloud felt guilty for distancing himself despite his overwhelming unease. He watched the other man simply raise his arm up to his and tapped their forearms together gently.

“Like this then?”

He asked, hopeful, in some sort of effort to meet him half way. Cloud couldn't help but smile again when he realized he'd somehow matched his defensive gesture and turned it in to something entirely new.

Zack stood back up, satisfied with the smile he'd received and made his way over to the entrance to put his boots back on. By the time he'd turned back to him, Cloud had already gotten up to do the same.

“I had to get going too anyways. I'll just leave with you.”

“Oh. Right. Okay.”

Zack rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, he hadn't realized he'd been keeping the younger man from anything important. He worried that it meant he'd wanted to leave the entire time.

Once Cloud had slipped his boots on they'd stepped out in to the hallway. Several SOLDIER who happened to be passing through looked at them with a mix of confusion, surprise, disdain, and amusement.

Zack smiled at them as if he didn't notice their reactions at all. In his defense, over half of them were wearing helmets, but Cloud could tell he'd be hearing about this later.

“Cloud.”
Zack spoke up and he almost jumped, glancing up at him as they walked towards the elevator.

"Huh?"

“I hope I didn't.. uh.”

He looked for his next words shyly, looking back over his shoulder at the other men they'd passed by, making sure that they couldn't hear.

“I have to tell you something.”

Cloud said instead, taking Zack by surprise who'd hesitated once they'd reached the elevator for a moment. He pressed the the down button before turning back to him to finish what he'd wanted to say.

“I have to tell you something first. I've never done something like that before and I-”

“Me neither.”

Zack's eyes were full of surprise and relief, whereas Cloud looked away, embarrassed by their admissions. This isn't what he'd wanted to talk about. He hadn't even noticed the doors to the elevator had opened when Zack pushed him in.

Cloud selected the button for his unit's floor and leaned against the wall, trying to form any semblance of a plan that wouldn't make him sound crazy. Zack hit one of the buttons as well before turning to face him.

“I want to see you again.”

Zack smiled at Cloud's request, moving in closer. He placed his hands on the wall on either side of him, if only to prevent himself from touching him again.

“I'd like that too.”

Zack responded gleefully. He looked so happy, but he couldn't help glancing as the numbers dialed down on the monitor behind him. Every second he knew he risked never getting a chance like this again.

He raised both of his hands weakly at first up to the man's suspenders and pulled him closer, leaning up to his ear to clarify himself.

“I need to see you outside of HQ. I'll wait for you tonight in sector 8.”

“Hm? Where do you want to go?”

Zack asked curiously, not realizing that they'd already reached floor 49 and the doors had sung open behind him. Cloud nervously tried to explain when he could see that there were people waiting by the science lab down the hall.

“It's not safe to talk in HQ.”

Zack chuckled at the sudden alarming statement the younger man had whispered in to his ear and pulled back gently to look at him when he'd let go. He didn't understand why he looked so worried, so he gave him his best smile.

“Don't worry. I'll keep you safe. Promise.”
Cloud felt like he was going to faint. He felt light-headed, even though he knew full well it wasn't possible to keep promises like that. He could only watch the man as he walked away before the elevator doors slammed shut.

He'd been so out of sorts he hadn't even come up with an alibi yet by the time he'd reached his unit. Everyone's attention was on him again when he entered and he heard his captain shout.

“Strife!”

He froze, and the man walked up to him with heavy steps.

“Absent all night. Again?”

“...”

“Are you trying to tell me you think you can do this job without adequate rest?”

“No, sir.”

“Then where were you all night?”

He glanced away again, he hated being questioned.

“Well? Did you leave HQ again?”

“No, sir.”

“You better not be lying.”

The older man groaned in frustration when he didn't get a response.

“Look. I don't know how your other captains let so much shit slide. If you're absent from any more contracted hours you will be fired.”

“It won't happen again, sir.”

His captain then brushed past him and walked out, discouraged from the sight of him. The few men who had witnessed the scene then felt obligated to comment.

“Wow Strife. It was nice knowing you.

One laughed.

“Where the fuck were you again?”

Another pressed, but he walked past them to get changed. He needed to get to his shift or like his captain had just threatened, he'd really get fired.

“Hey man. Come on. Why do you have to be like that.”

One complained.

“Yeah. You know we're just going to find out anyways.”

Cloud finished getting his gear and put his helmet on before turning back to them.

“I was with Zack Fair.”
He walked out of their quarters before the other men could finish shouting incoherently to question him further. He hurried back to the elevator, trying to reassure himself that they'd of found out by the end of the day either way, and that there wasn't anything worse they could do to him at this rate.

His shift had been uneventful. He agonized about what to do next. He wasn't sure Zack had even taken his request seriously. And even if he did meet him, would he believe him?

By the time he'd dropped his gear and got out to Sector 8, there were only a few hours left before curfew and the situation left him panicking again. He found a bench to sit down and attempted to sort himself out. It didn't matter if Zack showed up or not, all that mattered was that he waited.

He knew he'd keep waiting, even if he didn't show up tonight. He'd wait every night, but he couldn't come to grips with why it felt like it was already too late. They knew he knew. They knew he'd try to tell him.

Cloud was holding his head in an attempt to ride out the wave of sudden nausea that gripped him. He couldn't manage to shake the fear and sitting still wasn't helping. He started walking through the streets instead.

It hadn't been so much that he'd preferred motion, it was safer to say that he was only finding it increasingly challenging to stay in any spot for too long when he was spiraling out and the urge to run couldn't be contained.

He waded through the busy streets of the city, returning periodically to the entrance to scout for him. Even though his panic subsided he still didn't know how to prove anything to Zack.

There was still no sight of him in the main square and he started to despair. What if he didn't believe him and reported him for slander instead? He'd be fired, or worse.

He felt that at least if he was fired trying to keep him safe, it would be worth it. Even if it ruined anything they might of had, and even if he ended up murdered, he felt it was ultimately the right decision.

He'd walked for hours, worrying, and agonizing over the incredible man who'd effortlessly changed his life. He didn't know how else to describe it anymore. He could still feel him all over his body, as if they'd parted only moments ago.

Every time he returned to the square and there was still no sign of him his resolve sank lower. He rounded the area once again, just to be sure Zack hadn't hid anywhere if he'd actually taken what he'd said seriously.

He was certain there was no sign of the SOLDIER, but it was then that he noticed a suspicious man in a black suit who appeared to be tailing him. He had no idea how long he'd been following him, but he was sure he'd seen him somewhere before.

He hurried through unused streets, and down a staircase as a test to try to lose the man, but when he heard footsteps following him down the steps he stopped before the next set and turned to face him.

He looked suspicious, and not only because of his fire-red hair and face tattoos, but because his shirt was sloppily undone in addition to lacking a tie. He hadn't wanted to be right, but it looked like the man had to be a Turk.

The man walked down the stairs towards him slowly when he'd turned to face him. He seemed
entirely too amused about the confrontation. The closer he got the further Cloud backed away despite his resolve to stand his ground.

The man only stopped once his back hit the brick wall behind him. He looked him over, but stopped smiling once he met his gaze. He saw fear and an unsustainable anger that was starting to build.

“Just lookin' at you is makin' me sick yo.”

Cloud looked away after the remark. He felt he hated the man's voice more than he hated the sight of him.

“Name's Reno, of the Turks.”

The man looked proud, but he responded crudely.

“What do you want?”

“Oh. What's this?”

Reno scoffed, taking a step away, as if he was going to keel over and laugh before looking back at him dramatically.

“They said you didn't talk back.”

Cloud grit his teeth and looked away again. He regretted not having at least tried to get back to HQ before the Turk could catch up to him. He clearly had no idea what he was doing.

“Yo. Stop that. You're fuckin' makin' me sick again.”

The man lamented, and he sighed in response. Glaring steadily back at him, impatient to get whatever this was over with.

“What do you want.”

Cloud repeated. He felt his voice shake and he couldn't tell if it was out of rage or fear. All he knew is that the man had heard him waiver and took another step closer, leaning in with a crooked smile.

“I have a message to deliver from the boss.”

Reno laughed at the surprised look he received. Resting his forearm against the wall he leaned in further to explain.

“You know we heard your little plan in the elevator right?”

Cloud felt faint. His lungs appeared to have given out again, and he couldn't feel himself anymore.

“He's not coming. We erased your warning.”

He felt his knees about to give out as tears burned his eyes. How could they erase it? The next thing he knew he couldn't condone the proximity of the Turk or the reality he'd just cemented for him. The thought of Zack's memory being toyed with enraged him.

He lashed out and shoved as hard as he could. The other man was caught off balance for an instant. He could have run, but instead the mounting adrenaline urged him to shove again, to hit back, to do SOMETHING. If not in retaliation for whatever bullshit this was, then for all the times he'd
wanted to punch back like he used to.

He'd only stopped fighting back when he'd gotten hired by Shinra because he feared disciplinary measures. In the past he'd never let anyone talk down to him and it had often resulted in fist fights over inane details he wished had never come up.

He swung, but the other man was faster, and hit him back hard enough to send him stumbling back. Before he could reorient himself he felt his arm get twisted up behind his back, then the sudden impact of a brick wall. He screamed. His arm felt like it was going to break and he couldn't hold in the pain.

“Not the smartest tool in the shed are you? You know I could just have you fired for that, right?”

Reno lightened his grip only enough to get him to stop yelling and groaning in pain when his threat hadn't done the trick. He still had work to do and couldn't risk attracting a crowd. He leaned in to get a better look at his pained face and returned to his amused tone.

“But, orders are orders. I'm just here to tell you to stay away from our latest 1st Class hero-wannabe.”

The Turk laughed, loosening his grip slightly, he ran his other hand through the blond's hair, pushing his face up against the wall harder.

“You can imagine what kind of an asset he is to the company. You shouldn't complicate the position you've put yourself in.”

He chuckled again.

“Besides, he's certainly not going to keep you safe. Look at yourself now. What a stupid promise to make to someone.”

He let go of his hair and looked like he was reaching for something.

“So don't pull any shit like that again, or I'll see to it that you never work another day in your life.”

The Turk struck a metal rod down against the brick next to his face and he flinched from the sudden impact. He couldn't feel anything except his heart racing and the pain from his arm being twisted.

“I don't understand what he sees in you. But if thicc SOLDIER cock is all you're after, I'm willing to improvise, for the sake of the company.”

He scraped the rod down against the brick before sliding it up between his legs, pressing the base of the rod up against him to make a point. Except when he received no response, he twisted his arm a little further just to get him to at least groan in pain.

Reno leaned in and licked his neck next, watching the horrified and disgusted looks on the blond's tear-streaked face as he bit in to his neck, moaning at each groan or cry he extracted from him.

“Not interested, huh? Too bad. Just keep quiet.”

Cloud was in so much pain that the bites only made him feel sick. He felt the rod grind in to him, threatening to enter him despite his slacks. It took everything he had not to start sobbing when suddenly the other man kissed him.
He'd tried to move away, but hadn't been able to before he sloppily forced his lips on to his, pushing his tongue in to his mouth. He tasted like ash and rye. He whimpered in to the kiss before panicking and biting down on his tongue.

The taste of blood filled his mouth as the Turk groaned in pain. When he pulled away from him he managed to kick one of his knees out to gain some leverage back on his arm, breaking free.

He hadn't made it far, when in the next instant he felt something hard strike his side and electricity coursed through his body. He could only watch the Turk laugh as he collapsed to his knees before falling to the ground. The rod he'd assaulted him with sparked with electricity besides him.

His entire body had seized and he felt like he'd been broken in to pieces from the inside-out. He thought he'd hallucinated the music that suddenly muffled the man’s horrible laughter. But it was really a phone and Reno concealed his weapon before answering.

“Ya?”

Cloud had forgotten to even attempt to move again. The overwhelming pain had left him paralyzed until the reflex to run returned. He watched as the redhead spat blood to the ground.

“Almost.”

Reno sounded impatient. He needed to get away from him, but struggled to even push himself back to his knees. He'd wanted to give up when he saw how much blood was still dripping down his face, unaware that his nose had started bleeding.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve got it covered.”

Reno hung up suddenly and turned back to him. He came and stood over him, grabbing a fist full of hair to twist his head back, forcing him to look up at him.

“Listen up..”

The Turk started, but was interrupted by the sound of footsteps approaching. He looked back over his shoulder the next instant to shout at whoever it was.

“OI. Move along!”

Cloud couldn’t see. He couldn’t turn with how far the other man had been pulling his head back. When their eyes met again he could only see contempt and he wished he could do something, but he couldn't even feel the tears rolling down his face anymore.

“I need a god damn drink." He spat out blood again. "You’re lucky you’re still useful to the company. For now.”

He couldn’t be sure of what was happening anymore. He felt an incredible wave of vertigo that urged him to pass out.

“As long as you listen to the boss, we’ll leave you alone.”

He let go of his hair after his warning. Cloud then collapsed at his feet.

“Besides, you don’t have to worry about Zack. The boss takes very, very good care of him, then erases it all afterwards. Says it wouldn’t be professional otherwise.”

Reno laughed at the horrified look he received.
“I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

Reno sneered at him.

"Just stay out of sight."

He watched the Turk leave and couldn't move for a long time. It felt futile, but returning to HQ that night had been the hardest decision he’d ever made.

Chapter End Notes

the turks are assholes,

a story by me
Cloud returned to headquarters without anyone picking up on him or his bloodied state. He swiped his clearance card, keeping his head low, and hurried.

He still had time left before curfew, but he needed to clean himself up first. He couldn't control the rising urge to vomit and thought he wouldn't make it several times before finally reaching his destination.

He locked himself in to the nearest lavatory and dropped to his knees and hurled. Cloud was soon rendered to dry heaving. He felt completely off since his run in with Reno.

He told himself it had to be from the electrocution. He'd never felt that sick after getting beaten before. He hadn't done anything worse than he'd already received before, right?

He thought of the way he'd kissed him, and although he couldn't taste the blood in his mouth anymore, he gagged violently. His stomach had nothing left to give, and so all he could do was force himself back up.

Once he'd managed to wash up he made his way to a spare storage unit he kept stocked with medical supplies. He changed his bloodied shirt and took anti-nausea medication before using some of the items to disinfect the cuts on his face.

He didn't care about the pain anymore. He could barely feel the stinging as he bandaged himself up. He only wished he wasn't there at all.

Once he'd finished he looked at the time and calculated how long it'd take him to get back to his unit. There was still plenty of time.

He took some painkillers for the swelling and pressed his forehead against the cool metal casing of the storage unit. He closed his eyes, wishing he hadn't ever gotten involved with Shinra at all.

After throwing out any evidence of the altercation, he walked back to his unit only moments before the lights would go out. His captain sighed at the sight of him before returning to whatever he was doing.

"Wow. What the fuck happened to you?"

One squad mate's question had prompted everyone else to try to get a look at him but he just kept his head low and any discourse was soon cut short when the room went pitch black.

He laid on his back in his bunk, wondering how he'd made it so far in to this hellhole as to actually
appreciate the mandatory curfew. Even so, there would be no escaping the next morning and the questions it always brought.

At least for once he didn't let his apprehension keep him up all night. The medication and exhaustion did him in quickly.

He'd barely registered the alarm the next morning. Everything hurt, and yet again he had to pretend that it didn't.

Just getting his gear on had been arduous. His left arm hurt so much from being twisted up behind his back for so long that he could barely handle his equipment properly.

Training was a nightmare yet he pushed through it. He had convinced himself somehow that he needed to try again to make it at Shinra. He ignored questions and hung back.

It had become a habit of his to always be the last to enter the showers after training. Most rushed in and out to be able to go eat. The habit had started when he'd usually be the one they decided to chew out the longest after training.

When he realised that most rushed in and out out of the facilities, and that they were practically empty afterwards, he made it a habit to always hang back.

By now he didn't care who else was around, he just preferred when it wasn't crowded. Except after beatings, when he knew his body was covered in evidence, then he hated being seen.

Hanging back didn't make him any less of a target. Those that intended to plague him simply hung back as well, but at least there were less witnesses this way.

He'd managed to ignore everyone up until he had to change the bandage on his face, to which one of the men who'd gotten a good look at him took a few steps closer.

"Did that SOLDIER do that to you?"

Cloud had already turned away and was thankful, he couldn't have hid the panic he felt from the question. He tried to go on about his business, but a few more insisted in knowing what had happened.

"That 1st class guy thinks he can push you around?"

"Let me see too."

"The fuck did SOLDIER do?"

Cloud wanted to slam his head against the door of the next storage unit. He didn't want to encourage their paranoia about SOLDIER. Everyone was still on edge, ever since the war ended.

"It wasn't SOLDIER."

He answered, covering his severely scraped cheek with a fresh bandage before looking at them over his shoulder for an instant. He grabbed his gear next to leave while they .

"But yesterday you said that-"

"It wasn't Zack."

Cloud slammed the door to the unit shut and pushed past his squadmates. To his surprise, they let
him go without much hesitation as they opted to continue railing on SOLDIER anyways.

He walked back to their quarters anxiously. He felt his heart racing as if he was still in danger. He hated to think that the same people who routinely chastised him would be just as willing to gang up against anyone else they had a problem with on his behalf.

He might have insisted too strongly, but he couldn't let them think Zack had anything to do with it. He hadn't hurt him at all. Or at least he hadn't intended to.

He was still so angry at Reno that he hadn't any resentment left for anyone else. He couldn't let him corner him like that again. He had to try and stay out of things, like he'd been told to do.

He felt pathetic. All he ever did was follow orders. He hoped that he'd figure it all out sooner than later if he stayed. It was a vague sentiment that he couldn't get rid of. It was as if being able to help Zack was all it ever came down to.

If he was being controlled in any way. If his memory was being manipulated in any way. If Tseng was using him in any way. Zack deserved better.

He was so angry he didn't know what to do with himself. He avoided people as best he could, and over the next couple nights he still waited out in Sector 8 until curfew. Even though Zack never came.

All things considered, things weren't as bad as when people had found out about his last encounter with a 1st. He tried to relativize things, but he couldn't shake the feeling that things could only get worse.

He was frankly relieved that Zack's popularity didn't seem that high. He wasn't sure if he even had a fanclub yet. He'd only received a handful of spiteful looks and managed to avoid any more threats and life went on.

It was only on the third night that he was stopped by a 2nd Class SOLDIER during his patrol. The end of his shift had been nearing and he thought it was odd that he'd come to one of 5 floors he'd been cycling through on his route.

"Strife?"

"uh."

Cloud hesitated out of fear. He felt that something was off, but he straightened up to answer him and kept wondering why he looked so familiar underneath his helmet.

"Yes, sir."

The pain that came next sent him crashing to the ground and his helmet flying across the hall. He hadn't even registered that he'd just been punched clean across the face until he tried to talk and couldn't from the pain.

"You fucking creep!"

He stared up at the man that stood towering over him. His voice sounded so familiar, it had to be that SOLDIER he'd seen around Zack often.

"I know what you're doing!"
Kunsel continued to shout, but Cloud had no idea what was happening. He could only stare up at the SOLDIER in some pitiful attempt to avoid more harm.

“I know who you are. You went on what? One mission with him? And then you two just what? Just like that?”

“Holy shit..”

Cloud managed to whisper at the incomprehensible rage before him. He rubbed his sore jaw, if only to make sure nothing was broken.

Somehow thankful to find that at least he’d managed to hit the side that was already bruised, he tried to think of how to calm him down.

“What do you want from him? Just because he’s already made 1st, doesn’t mean I’m not still looking out for him. I know you’ve been watching him like some fucking stalker.”

When Kunsel received no response except for a shocked stare he took another step forward, bringing his boot down hard next to the blond.

“Answer me! I want to hear you say it. What are you after?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?!”

Kunsel spat his inadequate response back at him. He couldn't help but flinch at every sharp gesture as he struggled to steady himself enough to stand back up. He then sighed, rolling his eyes, turning to sarcasm when he couldn't get him to keep talking. He looked down at him with disgust.

"Right... Like he’s the one who asked you back to his quarters.”

Cloud didn’t understand the accusation. He was disoriented from the pain, somehow managing to stand again. He tried to remember how it had happened.

“He asked if I had trouble sleeping.”

“What?!”

Kunsel closed in, fist raised, and all he could do was inch away pleading with any shred of sanity he had left that there must be a way to deter him.

“Don’t fucking lie to me!”

"I'm not." He lowered his fist and Cloud was left shaking.

“What did you do to him?”

“Nothing.”

Cloud didn’t know why he sounded unsure. He hadn't sought him out. He'd wanted to, but he hadn't done anything.

“Who do you think you are anyways? You don't know what you're doing. He’s not like you. He has
a girlfriend you know!!"

"…"

"That's right! So stay away from him! Whatever you're thinking you better forget about it! If I so much as hear about you looking at him again I'll kick you out of HQ personally."

"What is it that you think I could even do to someone like him."

"What did you say?!"

Cloud regretted speaking up. He couldn't help but try to argue even though all it did was complicate things. He hated what Kunsel was doing, but at least he understood why he was doing it.

"I would never hurt him."

Kunsel grit his teeth at his clarification. He hadn't been offered an instant more to worry about what to say next.

He felt the man's fist collide with his stomach and he collapsed. He thought he saw feathers cascading around them just before he blacked out from the pain.

He had an a strong impression of deja-vu he couldn't shake when he came to. Even so, all he could remember were feathers. He had no idea why he was in so much pain again. It hadn't been the first time he'd woken up in the medical bay. However, he'd never felt more disoriented than he had then.

"He woke up."

Cloud couldn't remember what had happened. His entire body hurt, but especially his left arm and his face. He struggled to focus on his surroundings. He tried to see who'd spoken, but his face hurt too much to turn and when he tried to move up instead, found himself unable to move much at all.

"Don't worry, it's just the medication, it'll wear off in a few more hours."

He'd just as soon given up. Whatever they had him on made him feel too numb to care. The nurse left and a doctor approached, picked up his chart and scrolled through the data before looking him over.

"Can you answer some questions?"

"Yes."

Cloud answered drowsily, still attempting to remember why he was there in the first place.

"State your name and rank."

"Cloud Strife, Infantry, Security Unit 36" 

"How many unreported incidents have there been since the last time you were admitted?"

"…"
Cloud stared at the ceiling. It looked different somehow.

"Strife?"

"..."

"Answer the question."

"Why?"

The doctor sighed at the bizarre retort, looking at him with concern before elaborating.

"Several of your injuries don’t match our records. You’re expected to report any and all altercations."

“I fell.”

He lied with great difficulty. He wanted to tell her the truth. He wanted to tell anyone. He started to consider that he should of left Midgar when he’d had the chance.

He had a terrible feeling that if he didn’t do something to prevent it, that Zack would be in danger. That Shinra would eventually dispose of him like any other mistake they wished to erase.

He had to believe that there was still time. Time to find a way to speak to him again. Another chance to warn him that they couldn’t simply delete.

“Are you listening?”

He saw her wave a hand in his face before checking his pupils and checking his chart again.

“I asked, what about last night? Did you fall then too?”

“Yes.”

“Strife. I can’t do my job if you can’t answer me honestly.”

The doctor sighed, setting the tablet back down.

“What happened last night?”

“I don’t remember.”

“We can show you the footage. But I would prefer not to.”

When she received no reaction she decided to give him a hint.

“Does the name Pema Kunsel ring any bells?”

“Kunsel?”

Cloud echoed back, staring at the ceiling. He knew he was in SOLDIER, but why he'd have anything to do with him came up blank. The doctor waited a long time but eventually decided to move on and tell him.

“He knocked you out while you were on duty. Highly irresponsible for a 2nd class. However, that incident only accounts for a fraction of your recent injuries.”
Cloud had trouble recalling the state the rest of his body was in. The more he focused the worse the pain felt.

“For example, the scabbing on your face and bruises on your knees and wrist are at least a few days old.”

He was kindly reminded of why his left arm felt like it had been snapped in two, and what being slammed in to a brick wall and then electrocuted had felt like

He tried to move his limbs again, just to reassure himself he was still intact, but he still felt too sedated to register very much.

“I fell.”

The doctor reached over to touch his hand, stroking it once, as if to warn him of her action before taking it in hers and turning it over to expose his palms.

“You have no defensive wounds. If you’d fallen you’d typically have braced yourself for impact. Even if you told me it was from fainting, the scabbing doesn't correspond to that type of impact.”

She held his hand only a moment longer before letting go. When she received no response she sat back down.

“Listen, I read your file. I know you’ve denied any allegations since you joined Shinra. You don’t need to keep lying.”

“...”

“Why are you involved with SOLDIER?”

“I don’t know.”

“How are you involved with SOLDIER?”

“I don’t want to be.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to be anymore.”

“Who did this to you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it someone in SOLDIER?”

“...”

“Was it Zack Fair.”

“No!”

Cloud strained from his own answer. He hadn’t meant to shout.

“Even if he’s a 1st Class it does-”

“It wasn’t him.”
He managed to negate again. He couldn’t bare to have her make any accusations towards him.

“Then who?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don't know?”

“I don't know.”

“You don’t know who bit you?”

“Huh?”

“Your neck. You have several bite marks.”

“Oh.”

“Oh??”

The doctor seemed scandalized. But he’d genuinely forgotten about that part until then.

“It doesn't matter. I bit them back.”

“What?!”

She practically shouted her question from surprise, leaning back in the chair as if to brace herself from the image before asking again.

“What happened?”

“Some punk.. In Sector 8, picked a fight.”

“Why didn’t you report it.”

“They weren’t anti-Shinra, or anything, just drunk, I think..”

He lied again

"Where you on duty?"

"No."

"You still have to report it next time."

"..."

"Shinra is in a bad state right now. We can't let people like that run freely about the city!"

She stood up to give weight to her statement before glancing back over her shoulder at the door and then back at him. He hadn't realized he was in a private room until that moment.

"We still have to do our jobs. Don't forget you're required to report any and all misconduct. Even from superiors."

"Right."
She looked over his chart one last time before setting it back down.

"Just try to rest for now."

He watched her leave and drowsily wondered again why he was there. Kunsel had done something to him? Nothing felt broken, or at least nothing felt like it was in a cast.

He'd just as soon fallen back asleep. Whatever they had him on was strong and he saw no point in resisting. When he came to again a nurse was taking down notes from the monitor he was attached to. When he noticed he'd awakened, he moved the monitor away out of sight.

"Welcome back."

The nurse greeted, but he wasn't sure it sounded like a good thing. He must have just been glad to be able to return to other business.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

Cloud answered as systematically as he always did. Sitting up as if to assure himself it was true. His face still hurt like hell, but everything else felt fine in comparison.

"The investigation was completed. Since you didn't press charges the case was dismissed and you're free to go now."

He'd turned all the equipment off before rounding the bed to remove his IV.

"Don't put any strain on your arm and it should be fine in no time. As for your face, just take two of those daily and the swelling will go away."

Cloud wondered what investigation he was talking about while he looked at the bottle the nurse was pointing to.

"Take all the time you need."

The nurse gathered the tablet and his notes, leaving the bottle of pills and departed.

When he stood again he realized how sore his body was. He had trouble walking his legs were so stiff, but he was certain he couldn't have been out for more than a day.

Once he'd changed in to the spare uniform left for him he took his phone and pills and left the room. He looked around for a few moments once he'd made it out in to the hall.

He'd never been through that section of the medical bay before. He hadn't been sure of where he was headed, but he somehow made it to an elevator, then back down to his unit's quarters.

He looked at his phone, at the date and time, and tried to backtrack on the events that had brought him here. Kunsel certainly didn't have wings, but it was safe to assume he'd knocked him out.

Despite this, why he was still returning to work he had no idea. All he knew is that he couldn't let his unit know it had actually been someone from SOLDIER this time. Some might still think he was already too involved with SOLDIER and the deserters after all.

He knew that everything, as it always did recently, relied on whether or not anyone had seen what had happened. He decided he'd take the chance no one had again.
Junon is next? I know I've been saying it forever but I think this is it
So you wanna be in SOLDIER?

Chapter Summary

Junon, here it goes

When Cloud returned to his unit and his squatmates asked about his injuries he told them he couldn’t remember what happened. They all knew he’d been sent to the medbay again, but no one appeared to know why.

He got lucky he guessed. When they’d pressed him to know more he explained that Shinra dismissed them and that was good enough for him.

“But don’t you want to know?”

“Shinra knows, if it was serious they’d have done something about it. I’m not interested.”

The room went quiet and he glanced around at his squadmates uneasy stares and looks amongst themselves. He hoped they’d all thought twice about what they did in HQ.

They were approaching the next SOLDIER exam and he clung steadily to his resolve not to attempt it. He needed to be realistic about the state he was in for once.

The more he struggled to keep up with basic tasks, the more he wondered why he stayed. He knew he couldn’t do anything for Zack. He could barely do anything for himself besides training, working, and fretting far too much to sleep.

Days became indistinguishable, but by the time his face had healed from his last two altercations he’d been assigned a new mission. Assisting a group of SOLDIER in a city-wide reactor security sweep.

He didn’t understand why he was being assigned to this. He would have asked why, but his captain shouted at him to get moving or else he’d reconsider ever assigning him to anything again.

He kept his questions to himself and headed off. He’d thought of Zack first. But his mind soon turned to the possibility of facing Kunsel again and he could only hope it wouldn’t be the case.

When he arrived in Sector 8 and saw a lineup of 3rd Class SOLDIER accompanied by what looked like double the amount of infantrymen. He lined up with them and waited.

A few others arrived and only moments later the sound of heavy boots approaching sent his heart racing. He wanted to turn to see who it was right away, but he had to stay in formation.

Zack marched out confidently, looking at every infantryman as he walked by. Except when he reached him, he seemed to instantly recognize him. He stopped for just a moment with a smile and placed his hand on his shoulder to give it a light squeeze before stepping away.

“So you wanna be in SOLDIER?”

Cloud stared back in disbelief that he’d managed to single him out. He felt weak from the
momentary touch that had him feeling like his legs were about to give out.

“Hang in there.”

Zack smiled and his gaze lingered as he turned away to walk over to the 3rds and address them. He managed to brace his legs not to give out and watched, mouth agape.

“So, is everybody here now?”

“Sir!”

“You’re all rookies, right?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“One piece of advice… no, an order.”

He looked over the men before him with an increasingly serious look, erasing all trace of his cheerful entrance. He raised his sword up before him and held it in silence. He’d closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against it for a moment before lowering it.

“Embrace your dreams. And, whatever happens, protect your SOLDIER honor.”

He looked over them with more concern that they’d all listened than conviction that they’d understood.

“Got it?”

“Sir!”

“We’re all coming back here alive, you hear me?”

Zack raised the buster sword to the sky once more and they all shared another moment of silence.

“Let’s go.”

Cloud’s heart was still racing as they moved out on their mission. They’d been tasked to clear out the monsters and defective machinery in the reactors so that the maintenance crews could get back to work.

Doubt consumed his mind. Could he have recognized him even if he was in full gear? He could have said that to any recruit right? He lagged behind and tried to get a hold of himself. He couldn’t mess up this mission.

Cloud wondered why it was that he was still considered an asset when it felt like everyone wanted him away from Zack. Hadn’t they meant that he was an asset to him, not the company? Is that why he’d been assigned to this?

He wondered how much control Shinra, the Turks, or anyone really had over the DMW technology. Maybe what they were trying to accomplish wasn’t working out after all.

The orders were two infantrymen per SOLDIER and they would split up to the 8 Reactors. He didn’t have the gal to step forward to be in Zack’s party and promptly missed his chance to more eager men.

He’d been too afraid to step forward, not only scared of being near him again, but of what he’d say
to him. Not to mention the risk of what would happen if Tseng found out he’d volunteered himself to him.

Once they’d split up, the mission proceeded surprisingly fast. He’d taken out his frustration of not being with the 1st on anything they encountered during their sweep, often enabling preemptive attacks.

He couldn’t stop thinking about the order he’d given them all about their dreams and honor. But it was only after wondering why he’d seemed to cherish that sword so much that it dawned on him, that it must have been Angeal’s.

He hadn’t noticed on their way back from Modeoheim because he’d been too concerned about Zack, but now that he got a good look at it he knew he’d definitely returned with a different sword.

He hated himself for not noticing sooner. He’d never paid much attention to Angeal, even when he’d first arrived at Shinra, but he’d heard plenty of complaints about his lengthy speeches on honor.

His party was the first to clear a reactor and were effectively debriefed without the presence of the 1st. He wanted to wait for him, but there was too much security around to loiter.

He waited out in Sector 8 that night, but still Zack never came. Then before he knew it, HQ felt deserted again. Only shortly after the city-wide reactor sweep, he heard that Zack was missing from HQ.

Rumor was that he’d been sent to Costa Del Sol on overdue vacation, but he wasn’t sure if it was true. The Turks were nowhere to be seen either, and tensions between departments were on the rise again.

Only Sephiroth remained, wandering the halls at odd hours. No one dared ask him what was going on. Everyone was still working over-time and there were new recruits being trained every day. The company was compensating for all those lost in the recent attacks and seemed to be doing a good job of it.

Cloud was left worrying each day that something had happened to Zack. He worried that he may have been sent on another classified mission, one they’d never get the details of if he didn't return.

He spent the next week hanging around the main lobby, listening in on one of the receptionists who now proclaimed herself chairwoman of the Zack Fair fanclub.

He couldn’t risk talking to her directly. It had been hard enough figuring out where he could stay in earshot and not seem too suspicious. Anything he'd say to her might be recorded and could be used against him.

Days passed and he couldn’t find out any more on the real location of the 1st. Listening to the chairwoman try to recruit fans by going on about Zack’s many attributes only made him miss him more.

Each day he regretted not trying to talk to him again during their last mission. He was so stressed he wouldn’t return he’d become restless about everything once more.

All he could do was think back to before the war had ended and try to make sense of things. His anxiety was burning him out and all he could do was continue to occupy his time, if only to avoid thinking of the worst.
He spent most of his free time training. It wasn’t the best way to avoid people but it was the only way he could concentrate on anything but his absence.

Then out of the blue one morning, explosions interrupted their training. His unit had been the first to confirm that it was Genesis copies attacking once more.

As soon as they’d contained the situation in HQ, they were the first to be dispatched to Junon. Reports of the attack on the coastal city were far worse than HQ and they needed backup. He hadn’t had a choice in the matter. He hated flying, but there he was, leaving Midgar.

He’d thrown up as soon as they’d landed. Unable to stand for a moment he had to step away, only able to watch as the others were assigned to clear debris and prepare to evacuate the citizens.

He used the farthest wall as support, but he couldn't get everything to stop spinning. He expected he’d be needed soon, but all he managed to do was lean against the wall trying to convince himself not to throw up again.

“Hey, are you all right?”

Someone questioned him, but he’d been too disoriented to recognize his voice.

“Y-yeah…”

He answered with great effort before feeling obligated to provide an excuse, turning around he began weakly

“Oh the helicopter… I got a little nauseous…”

“Hey, you’re Cloud.”

Zack affirmed softly

“Wow, you remembered me..”

Cloud regretted his words as soon as he’d said them. Zack looked hurt and placed his hands on his hips.

“Of course I remember! I’m happy to be working with you again!”

Cloud smiled weakly in response. Which ever parts he remembered, at least he remembered him. Zack on the other hand looked amazing. It may have only been a little over a week, but from the glow of his sun-kissed skin he had to assume he'd really just been on vacation.

“Yeah, even if my work is a little dull.”

He debased his involvement because he regretted passing up his last opportunity to work with him when he wasn't such a mess. Even if they were both in Junon he assumed this would be the extent of their conversation.

“What are you talking about? Rescue work is an important task!”

Zack immediately barked back. Evidently he took every component of missions very seriously.

“Anyway, once we’re all done, let’s go grab a bite to eat. My treat.”
“Really?”

Cloud questioned, but he quickly corrected his skeptic response.

“That would be great.”

He started to worry that he’d sounded too eager as the sharp pain in his gut reminded him how awful he’d felt just moments before.

“Once I’m feeling better, I’d love to go.”

LOVE to go!? What was he saying? He felt like he’d ruined the offer already, struggling not to let his panic show.

“But right now…”

He couldn’t stop talking, he felt like he was rambling but he felt like he’d start screaming if he just didn’t keep justifying himself.

“Just thinking about food is making me… Ughh.. Sorry, Zack…”

He looked at the ground, embarrassed but grateful he’d finally shut his mouth.

“Ha ha! Don’t worry about it! Hope you feel better.”

As soon as Zack had dashed off to continue his own work he’d turned back around and tried to contain the excitement of the possibility of seeing him again so soon. Had he meant tonight?

Unfortunately, as soon as he’d turned back around to see if his unit was ready to go he saw that Tseng was there too and his hopes of seeing Zack again that day were instantly dashed.

He turned back and rest his forehead against the wall for a moment longer. He just needed to keep quiet and stay with his unit and everything would be fine.

He tried to calm himself down as he took some more anti-nausea medication, shakily putting his helmet back on and returned to his unit. They were being dispatched by Tseng in to the city to round civilians up in to the bunker they'd just cleared out.

He had no idea if Tseng had seen them talking or not. He could only assume he had, since they’d probably arrived here together. Had he been missing with Tseng this entire time? On some vacation alone together?

His gut hurt so much at the thought that he wanted nothing more than to confront the Turk on that basis alone. Except as soon as he’d given them orders, he’d vanished to other business.

His unit quickly defeated any Genesis copies that lingered and soon declared the mission completed. Especially since as soon as word that Sephiroth himself had arrived in Junon reached them, they all appeared to assume that the 1st had cleared out any remaining threats and that the city was as good as saved.

Despite his idolization of the 1sts he found it hard to believe it was over so fast. Once the lock-down was lifted and the evacuated citizens were free to go he reported back to his captain and was immediately handed re-assignment papers for a position on base in Junon.

"The boss said so."
He knew he’d meant Tseng, and he knew that meant he couldn’t negotiate a way out of it. When no other specifics were discussed he accepted that it was an indefinite and permanent relocation.

He accepted without protest and walked down the deserted streets after being dismissed. Even though the lock-down had been lifted, everyone appeared to remain indoors. More than likely still shaken, it wasn't every day people lived a crisis like that.

He’d followed the address to his new barracks, but still checked the documents he was given several more times before actually entering the building. He showed the clerk the document and was given a key in return.

When he got to the right number he opened a door that lead to a small room. It contained a desk, two sets of bunk beds, storage units, and a small table with a few chairs. No one was there, and it wasn’t much of a space, so as soon as he’d dropped off his gear he’d already made up his mind to head back out to see the rest of the city.

He assumed that everyone from his unit had already returned to Midgar by now. And since Tseng had ordered him to stay here, he’d thought it obvious he must have taken Zack back with him to HQ. Thinking of them together only made him feel sick again, wishing he could have done something.

He felt grateful that he didn’t have to hide his face here while dismantling his phone. He felt paranoid doing it when he'd clearly already lost, but at least there was one good thing about a new city. He took off his scarf, button-down, and shirt before washing up and putting on a clean t-shirt to head out.

Even though the chances were low anyone would be monitoring him, he'd still feared being tracked and opted for being cautious. He put his phone and it's battery in storage beneath all his gear in one of the locked units.

By the time he got back outside he was surprised by how different the city looked while the sun was setting. He’d never visited Junon before. It was really a fortress of a city built entirely on top of one of Shinra's first military bases, facing the ocean and carved deep in to the cliff side.

He'd seen a small village on the outskirts when they’d flown in and he wondered how they felt about Shinra settling so close to them. Probably the same way anyone who’s so blatantly infringed upon would feel.

He sighed when he found he had nowhere to go. He was feeling better, but as far as he knew Zack was long gone. Even if he was still here, he doubted he'd been serious about his offer to go out with him that night in the first place.

He wasn’t paying attention to the store fronts or people who peered out of their windows as he walked down the street. He only managed to wander back to the center of the city, near where they’d ran in to each other earlier that day.

Had he not been sick from the flight here, Zack may not have stopped to talk at all. Had he been working like everyone else there’s no way he would have stopped.

Yet he had, and he’d remembered him. Reno had either lied to him about Tseng being able to erase his mind, or maybe they just had less control over SOLDIER than they thought they had.

He still couldn’t get his mind around how they could possibly erase select memories in the first place. But even if he did remember everything, why would a 1st who could have anyone’s
company want to spend time with him?

He’d probably looked so eager to accept his offer, just like some delirious fan. He felt defeated and alone, but he still tried to come up with possible ways to get back to Midgar.

He leaned against the ledge of the reinforced concrete barriers that lined the streets to look out at the sunset. The homes and businesses behind him rumbled with the sound of people finally feeling confident enough to celebrate their resilience after the attack.

He wanted to get back to Midgar as soon as possible, but all he did instead was list off every reason he could think of as to why Zack hadn’t truly intended to ask him out. And even if he had, that it certainly couldn’t be a date.

He stared out at the sunset for what felt like forever. He was hungry and knew he should give up on his self-pity and head back already, but the colors reflecting off the ocean were captivating.

He realized that waiting for Zack every night had become a habit he would now be forced to break. Waiting for a chance to see someone who wasn’t even in the same city was just crazy and surely there were limits.

“Cloud? I thought everyone left.”

He spun around, bracing himself against the barrier for support from the sudden shock of being completely wrong.

“Were you waiting for me?”

Zack asked, smiling genuinely, leaning forward as if to emphasize his question.

“Y-yeah.. I was.. just watching the sunset.”

He explained nervously, trying to cover up his admission, but Zack just gave him a skeptical look. He then stepped forward besides him, looking out over the ocean at the bright pink sky as the sun slowly descended bellow the horizon and smiled again.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?”

Cloud had turned to face him when he’d moved forward, glancing back over the horizon only for a moment at his question before turning his attention back to him instead.

“Yeah.”

Zack caught him staring and chuckled, turning towards him as well.

“Feeling any better?”

Cloud gave a sharp nod

“Much better.”

“Still want to grab a bite to eat?”

“I’d love to.”

Cloud repeated to his own dismay, even though Zack smiled back earnestly. The 1st then looked away hesitantly, rubbing the back of his head.
“Good. Because I kind of sort of just let Hollander escape, and, uh, everyone’s pretty disappointed, so I could really use a night off.”

“Hollander escaped? How?”

Cloud asked, surprised that the old man somehow managed to evaded him.

“Genesis copies flew him out right before I could catch him.”

Cloud could tell Zack was frustrated, but he wasn’t sure what to say.

“Genesis is still out there, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.. That’s what Sephiroth thinks too.”

Cloud looked down at the mention of the other 1st. He’d practically been a ghost in HQ for months now, but had he really been dispatched here too? What about HQ? He was tasked with protecting the president himself, so why would they send him away? He had too many questions to center himself.

“Sephiroth is here?”

His question was distant.

“Yeah. He’s the one who dismissed me, after saying this mission failure would go on my permanent record no less.”

Zack rolled his eyes, and sighed openly from frustration.

“Who does he think he is anyways? Permanent record.. I’ve been picking up his missions since making 1st because they just let him do whatever he wants whenever he wants.”

Cloud was surprised. He had no idea what kind of relationship the 1sts had, but it sounded less than ideal.

“Anyways! Let’s go eat, shall we?”

“Uh. Right.”

Cloud nodded again, surprised by the sudden change in tone and followed as Zack turned to head down the street.

“Losing Hollander can’t be that bad for Shinra. They’ve had him for months and nothing’s come from it.”

Cloud offered, matching his pace besides him.

“They said they were still questioning him.”

“If he knew anything, they’d of gotten it out of him by now. He probably wasn’t useful in the first place.”

“Huh..”

Zack pondered, he hadn’t questioned how long something like that could take in the first place, but he was ready to accept anything to reduce his failed mission status to any bit less failed.
“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

"But why is Sephiroth here?"

"Oh. He said some research equipment was stolen so he's going to re-examine Modeoheim."

Cloud looked up in surprise but Zack only shrugged and kept looking at all the shops they passed by, attentively looking for a place to eat.

"He seemed to think we'd see each other again soon, so he should be back in no time."

Zack added, almost as if to reassure himself. When Cloud didn't respond he rubbed the back of his head at how hesitant his own words had sounded before looking back down at him.

"Hey. Let's not talk about work anymore, okay? Just for tonight."

"Okay."

Cloud agreed without hesitation. He seemed serious about having a real night off and Cloud saw no reason not to encourage it.
Cloud had agreed not to talk about work, which he assumed meant anyone or anything related to Shinra. He worried that it didn't leave much else to discuss.

There were still so many things he wanted to know about why he’d suddenly been sent away, or still about Modeoheim. He especially worried that he seemed anxious to see Sephiroth again once he’d return since he’d just been complaining about him.

He had so much he wanted to say to Zack, to ask him, or to talk to him about concerning Shinra operations. He couldn’t believe that he was even there with him. He had to bite his lip to ground himself, trying to focus on where they were going instead.

Maybe he wasn’t losing it. Maybe it was just being in a new city that was throwing him off, or from the exhaustion of the sudden attacks they’d fought off, but none of it felt real.

It wasn’t as if it felt like a dream either, he just felt like he wasn’t there. The taller man looked more radiant than he’d ever seen him in the fading light and he wondered how he’d gotten here in the first place.

“What do you think about that place?”

Zack pointed at a busy pub on the next block.

“Sure.”

Cloud gave a nod and Zack smiled, looking back excitedly at the pub as soon as he’d received approval. Anywhere was fine, but there was something he needed to ask before he lost the courage to. Before they did this, whatever this was. He needed to try to know how much he remembered.

“Hey, uh.”

“Yeah?”

Zack looked at him when he’d spoken up but hadn’t continued, concerned by the sudden silence.

“What was that book called again?”

“Huh?”

Zack seemed confused and Cloud looked down. He gestured as if to try to remember while
avoiding eye-contact, so that he couldn’t see his dejected reaction. Looking at him was too difficult either way this would go. But he needed to be sure, so he continued, pretending to try to remember himself.

“The name of that book..”

“What book?”

His question came so plainly in response that he’d had no choice but to accept that Reno hadn’t been lying after all. Tseng really had erased their one night together.

“Nevermind.”

Cloud said as simply as he could manage past the pain welling in his chest. He’d tried to pass off his question casually, but he failed to fight back the growing fear of what would happen if they were seen together again.

He knew his unit had definitely been sent back to Midgar, but if Zack had refused to leave, then that meant that Turks would still be around too. He looked up and down the street anxiously before moving to enter the pub.

“Wait. What’s wrong? Why were you going on about some book?”

“It’s nothing. Let’s just go inside.”

He was so afraid that he could barely feel how hard his heart was pounding when they entered the pub together. He stopped and glanced around at all the people, making sure there were no men in black suits. There were groups of men in uniform, but they all looked like Junon residents, and the rest of the people were civilians.

Zack wrapped an arm around his shoulders, as if tired of waiting for him to make up his mind on where they should sit and guided him to a table. Before he knew it Zack had pulled out a chair for him, then rounded the table to remove his massive sword, leaning it against the wall besides them before sitting down.

“This place looks great. I’m so hungry I could eat a whole tuna!”

Zack joked, smiling at him as the waiter quickly approached them. The man listed the pub’s specials and asked if they’d like anything to drink with their orders.

They both ordered the chef’s special and Zack asked for the waiter’s pick from their best wines. The 1st then noticed that there was a stage at the back of the pub, but no sign of any performers or instruments.

“What kinda shows do you think they put on in here?”

He asked Cloud, still looking back at the stage.

“No clue.”

Cloud responded, but when the waiter returned with their finest rice wine he noticed Zack’s obvious curiosity.

“We have live music every night here at Juniper’s, sir. Tonight’s performance will be by a new artist, Treasure Princess.”
“Huh?”

Zack seemed shocked for some reason. But the waiter hadn’t noticed. He simply filled their glasses, left the bottle, and moved on to other customers.

“Do you know her?”

Cloud asked, attempting to understand why he looked so surprised.

“Uh. If they’re the same person, yeah.”

Zack shrugged, raising his glass to him. Cloud raised his glass in turn, but still had no idea why Zack would know a royal traveling performer.

“Where did you meet?”

He asked plainly, taking his first sip of the wine.

“Wutai.”

He spat it out.

Zack laughed and he could only set the glass back down before covering his face in embarrassment.

“Wutai!”

Cloud started, but quickly lowered his voice. He hadn’t heard anyone talk about Wutai since the war ended and he wasn’t sure how to handle the subject,

“Yeah. She’s this weird kid who looted some of my stuff. She’s always treasure hunting and drops me tips constantly, although they’re always bunk... Guess she does this kind of thing too huh? Sort of like a jack of all trades.”

Zack continued to laugh lightly at the thought of seeing that troublemaker again. He wondered why Cloud looked so nervous and reached out to ruffle his hair for an instant.

“Hey, don’t get bummied out when foods on the way.”

Cloud couldn’t help but smile back at how tender his touch had been. He hadn’t had time to apologize for being so shocked that he’d managed to make a friend in Wutai. Of course he had. It was Zack.

Their food had promptly been served only a moment later and they dug in. The food was great, the wine didn’t taste half bad, and Zack looked like he was enjoying himself.

“So, do you play anything?”

Zack spoke up after devouring his entire serving.

“Huh?”

Cloud had strayed too far to grasp his question.

“Like music.”
“Oh. No. Do you?”

“Nah. But I sing sometimes.”

Cloud seemed surprised by his admission. He tried to picture him singing but couldn't take the image seriously.

“Yeah, I kill it at Karaoke.”

Cloud couldn't contain himself and laughed in response, but Zack soon cracked up along with him before getting a hold of himself.

“Hey.. stop laughing! It’s true. I’m so good anyone who’s challenged me has been utterly defeated.”

“Utterly defeated.”

Cloud repeated, mockingly, still laughing, he reached for his drink to stop himself from saying anything more. Zack was probably in fact an amazing singer.

“I’m serious.”

Zack pouted and took a drink as well, as if finishing his glass had suddenly become a competition between the two.

“We should go sometime.”

Cloud looked away uneasily at his offer. For once he wasn’t all too eager to embarrass himself in front of the man. He couldn’t sing at all.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, you’ll love it, trust me!”

He couldn’t help but smile back at how excited the taller man was. He was actually glad Tseng had seen them talking earlier that day. If he hadn’t ordered him to stay in Junon he’d of been the one back in Midgar by now.

The door to the pub swung opened and a young woman with red hair walked in. She was wearing a suspicious black suit and tie and gave the room a quick glance before making her way towards the bar.

“Who is she?”

Cloud asked, worried as to why Zack looked so upset at the sight of her. It hadn’t looked like she’d noticed him at all.

“She’s a Turk. Give me a sec, will you?”

Zack made sure he gave him a nod before he got up and walked straight over to her at the bar. Cloud couldn’t see much of the redhead anymore. She’d looked so young, how could she be a Turk?

He moved so that he could watch as Zack gestured angrily. It appeared that she’d raised her hands defensively in response, but he couldn't hear what she was saying, only Zack’s voice resonated over the crowd.
“I don’t care what your orders are. This is getting ridiculous!”

People started to stare at them. Zack was poorly concealing his frustration, having to take a step back to calm down until the other clients’s concerned looks subsided. He’d lowered his voice and they talked briefly before he appeared to give up, turning his back to her and rolling his eyes as he returned to their table.

“Whatever..”

The 1st sighed when he sat back down and Cloud stared back at the Turk wearily for a moment longer before focusing his concern on Zack.

“What’s going on?”

Cloud questioned even though he could already guess the answer, trying to mask his own fear with severity in his voice.

“Says she’s just here for a drink.”

“…”

“Yeah, I know.”

Zack affirmed sarcastically when Cloud had no response to the blatant lie the redhead had offered. He sighed again and filled their glasses back up.

“Well, no harm in having a drink right?”

The dark haired man smiled, moving his chair over just enough so that Cloud would stop glaring at Cissnei over his shoulder, raising his glass back up to him.

Cloud was taken aback by how he stubbornly tried to resolve the problem. As if out of sight, our of mind, worked for cases like this. But if he didn’t care that they knew they were out together then he shouldn’t either, right?

He worried that Zack just didn’t know the half of it, and he expected that if they continued, that he was essentially putting him in danger. He looked down at his drink wearily, ready to cut their losses.

“Zack, maybe we should go, if there’s a pro-”

“There’s no problem.”

Zack insisted immediately. It hadn’t come off as dismissive, just that he was overconfident he wouldn’t allow any more interruptions. They’d finished eating and when the waiter came to clear their plates Zack ordered another bottle.

Cloud had gotten used to the taste by the end of his second glass and felt his face getting flushed already. At least he didn’t care how tired he was anymore now that everything felt slightly out of focus.

For a moment he almost thought that the wine was enabling him to accept all of this, but he still couldn’t believe they were really just smiling at each other across the table again. By the time the second bottle arrived they were talking about what they liked about Junon.

"You've never been to the ocean before?"
Zack asked suddenly, as if alarmed it had been missing from the blond's life prior to today.

“Nibelheim is far from the sea, up in the mountains, so it’s the first time I’ve been able to really stop and take a gander.”

Zack couldn't help but smile while he reminisced about his own village in turn.

“Gongaga's pretty close to the coast, so I spent half my time playing on the beach growing up.”

“Lucky.”

Cloud smiled, picturing Zack chasing innocent creatures back in to the waves as a child. Although, thinking of the beach only reminded him of the rumors behind Zack's absence and he couldn't stop himself from bringing it up.

“How was your vacation, by the way?”

“Oh.”

Zack leaned back in response, and by the look on his face it must have been more than a little disappointing.

“It wasn’t much of a vacation really. More like forced time off. There’s all the time in the world for vacations, but why send me away when HQ needs us most? Just look at today.”

He complained openly and looked weary about the whole experience, like he hadn’t gotten any actual rest at all.

“I don’t know what’s going on with the company, but it was strange. You’re our only other 1st.”

“Right! I can handle anything. I don’t understand Tseng half the time. He's always worrying for nothing.”

“Huh?”

Cloud didn’t know what else to say and took another gulp from his wine to avoid blurting out just anything.

“Don’t get me wrong. He works hard, but sometimes I just can’t tell what he’s thinking.”

“Has he ever…”

Cloud trailed off, regretting his question already. But he needed to know, even if it was true and he was erasing everything. If it was true and there was a chance he was listening in on them, he wanted him to say it out loud.

“Ever what?”

Zack asked, lost from the question.

“Have you two ever..”

Cloud had miscalculated his resolve and couldn’t quite finish formulating his question. The sensation of his face burning up was too alarming to continue, although Zack had gotten the gist of it.
“N-no! Tseng and I?! What gave you that idea?”

Zack rubbed the back of his neck, as if disturbed that he had just considered it himself, or self-conscious that Cloud had.

“I don’t know.”

Cloud was poorly concealing his face with his glass and Zack raised an eyebrow at him before leaning in on an arm. With the utmost seriousness he posed his next question.

“Are you jealous or something?”

“Uh..”

Cloud tried to look away, but the way Zack was smiling slyly at his own question was too endearing not to appreciate. At this point, he didn’t care if he did sound jealous, maybe it was better than coming off as crazy.

“He seems controlling, that’s all. I don’t know why I asked. Besides, don’t you already have a girlfriend?”

“Huh? Who told you that?”

Zack looked puzzled rather than confrontational, and Cloud felt like it hadn’t been his place to ask. He tried looking away to avoid answering again. Zack gave up and clarified.

“I guess guys talk, huh? She’s just a friend, a girl, but a friend.”

“It’s not serious?”

Cloud asked, surprised he seemed so open about it.

“No, not really.”

Zack laughed at how relieved the younger man looked at his answer, leaning in closer over the table.

“What about you, Cloud? Got a girlfriend?… or a boyfriend?”

Cloud couldn’t hide his unease when he leaned forward. When he’d asked if he had a boyfriend he’d just about felt his soul depart from his body. He had been so ready to answer no and move on that when Zack added to the question, leaning in with so much curiosity, he was left speechless.

The thought of even just wanting a boyfriend, let alone it possibly being someone like Zack embarrassed him to the point that he could only assume it was all some joke. He’d just about gathered the courage to ask him why he’d say that. If he looked gay, or if he was mocking him. Except his frustration vanished when he saw Zack had already turned away, as if shyly retreating from him, casting a hand to the side nervously to dismiss his own question.

“Who has time to date anyways? I mean, lots of guys I know are already engaged, sure, but what’s the rush?”

“I don’t know.”

Cloud answered with a shrug when Zack looked back at him and they both smiled at each other again. Still, he couldn’t help but worry how much of his time had been taken away from him so
far. If Tseng was really this manipulative, maybe he wasn’t the first one he’d attempted to erase from Zack’s mind.

He couldn’t help but try to glance past Zack to see if the other Turk was still watching them, but all he was doing was making Zack anxious too. He took another drink and started to feel the room sway as the 1st leaned further in on one arm to block his sight again.

“So what is there to do in Nibelheim?”

“uh..”

Cloud had moved back apprehensively, setting his glass down to rub the back of his neck awkwardly before crossing his arms on the table. He attempted to center himself and focus instead of always moving away. At least that question was easy.

“Nothing.”

Zack laughed at his earnest answer before raising his glass to him.

“Ditto Gongaga.”

Cloud couldn’t help but laugh with him. He’d never felt so free to laugh at such small things before. He’d already lost track of how much he’d drank and raised his glass to cheers him back. He could barely taste the bitterness anymore.

“Do you miss your folks?”

“I’ve only got my mom back home, but yeah, I miss her. What about you?”

“Nah, not really.”

Cloud couldn’t help but be surprised at his answer, which pressured the other man to clarify.

“Uh, well, I mean if ever I get real vacation time, not some forced retreat, I’d go visit them in a heartbeat. But I know they’re fine, you know?”

The blond nodded back and took another drink to avoid commenting. He started to feel drunk from his numerous avoidances and tried to convince himself to slow down.

“I’m not ready to visit.”

“Why not?”

Cloud pushed his glass away on the table to avoid reaching for it again and tried to ground his hands in front of him, wondering why he’d admitted something like that so suddenly.

“I haven’t accomplished anything yet. But your parents, they must be proud of you.”

He’d praised him, but wasn't able to look at him.

“Nahh, my parents hate Shinra.. but your mom must already be proud of you. You’re out here working hard every day already. That’s an accomplishment.”

Zack answered back with such certainty, despite his lax position, leaning against an arm on the table, smiling lazily at him.
“Thanks..”
Cloud didn’t know what else to say, he’d felt his throat start to burn, as if the proper reaction would have been to cry. He felt so relieved at his encouragement, but it was probably just the alcohol.

“Why do they hate Shinra?”
He’d swallowed hard before asking the question. Partly in an attempt to change the topic, but also because he was worried about his relationship with his parents now.

“Nuh-uh. We agreed no company talk, right?”
Zack waved a finger at him, as if scolding a child, before picking up his own glass only to find it empty. He took the liberty to fill their glasses back up once more.

“Sorry.”
Cloud had barely whispered his apology, fidgeting with his hands nervously when he thought Zack wasn’t looking. He kept digging his nails in to the palms of his hands every time he broke eye-contact until he could face him again.

“Go on, ask me something else.”

“Uh..”
Zack leaned back in after taking another drink and held his gaze intently, offering him his undivided attention.

“Ask me anything you want to know.”
Zack insisted coyly, but when he saw Cloud look away he bit his own lip to hold back from saying anything else. He watched the blond's face turn red again and how his eyes kept darting back at him tentatively before reconsidering over and over.

He wasn’t sure why he’d put so much emphasis on his question in the first place and reached across the table to stroke his arm as if to apologize for it. When Cloud finally held his gaze again he slid his hand over his and kept leaning forward.

“What are YOU doing here, old man?!”

“UH?”
Zack pulled back, letting go of the younger man's hand immediately at the interruption. Cloud looked just as shocked at the sight of the young girl with short black hair dressed in an over-sized black poncho who stood before them.

“I'm, we, uh, we’re-”
Zack stuttered in a failure to answer and the girl sighed dramatically at the sight of them.

“Anyways! I don’t have the time to talk to you. It would take too long to educate you on everything you’re doing wrong right now. I have an engagement to blow all your minds. So sit up straight at least, or even that poor nerd will leave your sorry ass behind.”

She kicked one of Zack's overextended feet back in and tapped his forehead to force him to sit up before sticking her tongue out at him and heading towards the stage.
“Old man?”

Cloud asked while laughing, he hadn’t registered anything after those words and the sight of Zack left completely disarmed, it was too much to handle.

“I don’t think she’s even old enough to be in here..”

Zack whined, before he realized that Cloud was laughing at him and pouted again, taking another large drink before complaining loudly.

“What is she even going to play? What instruments fit under a poncho?”

The stage was empty and she’d just settled a single table on to it. Glaring back at them across the room Yuffie slid out a laptop and connected her phone to it.

“I made an app on my phone that I record loops and sequences with and then I add the beats!”

“Phone music?!”

Zack asked, scandalized, but when all he got in response was another crude gesture from the girl he turned back to Cloud who attempted to explain.

“I think she means electronic music.”

“Huh?”

Zack let his head drop to the side in defeat from his own confusion.

“Recorded parts can substitute for actual instruments or vocals, the sounds are just pieced together. I’m sure songs you already know have edited parts like that.”

“Oh.”

Zack tilted his head in the other direction, as if attempting to absorb the new information, but when the mysterious girl took the microphone she’d just hooked up to the pub’s sound system and to her laptop they both looked back.

“I’m Treasure Princess, and if you want to get a taste of this, someone's going to have to get this bitch out of my face.”

Cissnei was on stage trying to ask her to identify herself, but as soon as a couple people stood up near front stage she backed down and Yuffie only grinned, throwing the cable for the mic victoriously over her shoulder.

“Now that that’s taken care of. Let’s start it off slow.”

She hit some keys on her computer and a mellow beat started off before she took up the mic again

“All black.

From head to toe.

You can’t see me inside the club.

All I wanna do is sip from the bird.
The goose from the bottle, ya heard?"

Zack had laughed when he saw Cissnei retreat back to the bar, visibly embarrassed that she’d almost started a brawl while trying to question the “princess”. He laughed even more, although he held himself back not to laugh over her performance, when he thought about how funny it would be if she was actually Wutai royalty.

“That isn’t music, it’s just weird sounds, and talking.”

Zack complained once he’d managed to stop laughing, turning back to Cloud who had been watching her.

“I don’t know. It’s kind of good.”

Zack looked disturbed at the blond’s response for an instant before sighing and leaning against the table again in defeat.

"What is she even singing about."

"Vodka. I think.."

Zack raised an eyebrow at his speculation, but tried to ignore the pounding beats as he raised his glass again.

"Whatever. To the princess."

"To the princess."

Cloud repeated before toasting yet again. His judgement might appear impaired, but he was sure he could see the redhead calling someone from her cell and he worried he knew who.
Cloud glanced around the pub nervously once again. Treasure Princess was laying down heavy beats and Zack continued talking happily about musicians he liked or didn’t like while drowning the rest of their second bottle.

He could only think of how their night would end and if they’d ever see each other again. He took another drink even though he knew he’d probably already drank too much.

“Let’s go to magic mountain.”

Treasure Princess repeated over and over. He wondered if there was really such a thing in Wutai. Nibelheim’s mountains certainly weren’t magic. If anything they were probably cursed.

He wondered why Zack had invited him. He didn’t get what he was contributing, besides being unable to hold back his own laughter every time Zack erupted from amusement. He couldn’t think of a time he’d been happier than watching Zack laugh.

He knew that even if this night went well, that there was no way they could be together. Even if Tseng wasn’t a part of the picture, he didn’t think that any interest Zack might have in him could last.

He hated that he’d considered even being with him seriously. He didn’t want him to like him like that. He knew that ultimately it would end like he never had wanted to get to know him at all.

He felt as if nothing he’d felt from the first moment he’d seen him mattered. And if it didn’t, then he may as well let him have tonight. He’d let him have anything, but he worried that love wasn’t supposed to feel like this.

At least they will have had this time together, and a morning only he remembers. He stared at his own hands, fidgeting with his drink, feeling guilty that he’d wanted to touch him again.

“Hey, where’d you go?”

Zack ruffled his hair lightly to get his attention back.

“Huh?”

Cloud hadn’t realized he’d been lost in thought again, looking back up sharply when prompted by fingers running through his hair.

“You keep zoning out.”
Zack had kept shuffling his fingers through his hair lightly, as if to soften his observation, but when he received no response besides averted eyes, he slid his hand down to cup the side of his face.

Cloud wished he hadn’t hesitated at his question. The longer he did the further he crumbled from his own silence. He turned his face in to the warm hand, solemnly accepting the gratuitous comfort he didn't feel he deserved.

He kissed the palm of his hand, letting their surroundings vanish for a moment when he shut his eyes. As soon as his lips brushed against his skin he pulled away. Regretting having lingered in his touch, worried he’d made a mistake.

When Zack stared back at him in surprise before pulling away in turn he was certain he had. He worried the other Turk had seen, but when he looked past him, he'd had already turned around to check himself.

She was nowhere to be seen, but Zack didn’t turn back to him. He had to apologize, but just as he’d been unable to answer his question before, no words were formed. He could only look on in panic as Zack waved the waiter down.

“Check please!”

Cloud stood up the next instant to protest, except Zack had already gotten up and decisively holstered his sword back on. Walking hastily to the register without a word.

While he paid their bill, Cloud downed the rest of his glass and tried to figure out what to say to salvage their night. The next thing he knew Zack rushed back to him with two more bottles in hand and he couldn’t hide his confusion.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Zack urged, looking back over his shoulder, but Cloud was too shocked to respond. He wasted no time in handing him one of the bottles before taking his other hand and pulling him out of the pub. Then after a quick glance either way down the main street Zack gave him a smile and squeezed his hand gently before they made a dash for it.

They ran as fast as they could. He had no idea where they were headed, but his grip was strong and he wouldn’t dare let go. He felt his adrenaline take over as they ran as fast as they could down the deserted street. When they neared the end of the road, Zack started laughing.

Zack turned back around to see if they’d been followed, letting go of Cloud’s hand when he did. Cloud laughed with him, despite sounding exhausted. He could barely catch his breath as they let go of each other, but not the bottles.

The guard at the freight elevator that lead out of town had saluted Zack but neither of them had noticed. The man waited silently to be acknowledged to stop saluting. Zack hit the button for the elevator decisively and the giant door swung open. He gave the guard a big grin and ordered.

“Stall anyone else who wants to come through here. That’s an order from a 1st! Ya hear?”

“Yes, sir!”

The confused guard jumped when Zack turned his attention on him finally. Almost dropping his rifle as he turned to face them as they entered on to the elevator's platform.
The door locked shut and suddenly lights started flashing around them as the platform suddenly heaved in to a descent. Cloud stumbled and Zack moved to try to catch him even though he’d managed to steady himself, resulting in both of them laughing again.

“I hope you don’t mind. But, I thought it was time to ditch the company supervision and move our date somewhere else.”

“Our date?”

Cloud asked honestly, but Zack’s reaction made him realize he’d been just as unsure as him.

“Only if you want it to be? I mean.. Isn’t it?”

Cloud stepped forward to rest his head against his chest. He felt lucky for once. Zack wrapped his free arm around him, accepting the gesture as his way of agreeing.

“Do you trust me?”

Cloud asked suddenly, pulling back slightly from his hold. As much as he wanted this, he knew there was more to avoiding the Turks than just running away.

“With my life.”

Zack answered, smiling confidently. Cloud had only hoped for a simple yes, caught off guard by his admission and for a moment he forgot what he’d needed to do, wanting nothing more than to embrace him. He managed to focus and pulled back, bringing his free hand up expectantly between them. He looked at Zack in all seriousness.

“Give me your phone.”

“UHh..”

Zack blinked in confusion, hesitating despite his previous grandiose statement. It wasn’t like he had any particular attachment to his cellphone. Hell, he didn’t even know how emailing worked. He and technology didn’t go together. This was partly why all Shinra's security codes remained simplistic over time, because of the improbable statistic that was Zack Fair.

He handed the device to him and watched as the younger man tucked the wine bottle under his arm and popped the casing off the back of his phone, removed the battery, reattached the case and handed the separated parts back to him.

“They won’t be able to track you this way. I left mine with my gear in storage.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Zack’s excitement was dampened by the realization that it explained why Tseng always seemed to know where he was. He promptly returned the items to his pocket and with that the elevator came to a sudden halt.

Cloud lurched forward again and Zack brought his arm back up to pull him close. The door opened and Zack didn’t let go. After a moment he just turned to lead him out with his arm around his shoulders.

They walked past another confused guard, to whom Zack raised his bottle to like a salute. Cloud couldn’t help but laugh at that, making Zack laugh in turn.
Cloud sighed as he leaned in to the warmth of his body as they walked through the small village. Most houses had already turned out their lights and it didn’t look like anything was open.

“Let’s go down to the beach. I want you to get the full seaside experience while we’re here”

Zack offered, smiling down at him insistently until he got an answer.

“Ohoky.”

Cloud smiled back at him after agreeing, receiving one of his dazzling grins in return before looking on ahead. He was swinging the bottle of wine at his side with glee by the time they reached the steps that lead down to the ocean. He stopped and peered down at the deserted beach.

Zack slid his arm off his shoulders and took his arm instead to help him down the steps. He’d felt his apprehension as soon as they’d reached them. Cloud seemed much tipsier than he was and he wanted to make sure he wouldn’t fall. When they reached the sand he let go of his arm to open his bottle and took a drink while looking out over the ocean.

Cloud stepped forward carefully, he couldn’t just fall face first in to the sand on his first date. His boots sunk and he steadied himself to look over the coast. There were tons of slabs of concrete piled up at the edge of the beach as well as loads of steel pillars half-erected in the water.

Shinra was building something outside the city wall but he couldn’t tell what. He walked further down the beach to one of the stray slabs of concrete and sat down, setting the bottle down besides him before looking out at how bright the stars looked above the ocean.

Zack had followed before raising his sword off his back with his free hand, swinging it above his head as he always did, except while he took another drink this time, before planting it in to the sand. He then walked over to him and set his bottle down besides his on the concrete. Cloud was staring up at him and smiling, he couldn’t believe he was on a date with a man so unimaginably gorgeous.

"Hey, let’s go swimming.”

"What?”

Cloud questioned indignantly. His smile vanished and he was consumed with apprehension. At this hour? At this temperature? Watching as Zack started to undo his suspenders.

"Wait. Isn’t it kind of cold?”

Cloud pressed and he stopped.

"It’s not cold.”

Zack practically pouted from his lack of enthusiasm before leaning down to him with a smile.

"You haven’t even touched it yet.”

Zack encouraged before standing back up straight. He towered over him and all he could do was watch how bright his eyes shined in the darkness.

"Maybe you've had too much to drink.”

Cloud argued, leaning back on an arm in an attempt to distance himself. Glancing over at his own unopened bottle.
"Nonsense! I'm not drunk at all."

Zack huffed, grabbing the bottle he'd just set down to take another swig.

"Go ahead! Challenge me. I'll prove it."

Cloud laughed at how determined he was. It was obvious he was inebriated, but the way he insisted on absolving himself of his reproach was adorable.

"What's so funny? I'm not drunk, you're drunk!"

"I am."

Cloud admitted plainly and Zack was at a loss. After a moment longer he couldn't stay serious and laughed again. Zack couldn't help but laugh along with him before sitting down besides him.

"Fine. No swimming tonight. But we'll go someday right?"

"I don't know how to swim."

Cloud finally admitted and Zack looked alarmed. He turned fully to face him and set his bottle back down.

"Really?"

Cloud gave a nod, looking back out at the ocean, but Zack's tone quickly changed from shock to excitement once more.

"Don't worry! I'll teach you. It's easy!"

"Thank you."

Cloud was scared, it wasn't something he'd been made to do in training, even though some units did. Those that were trained to be dispatched to marine units had to.

“You know, you never answered me earlier.”

“huh?"

Cloud looked up timidly, not knowing exactly which omission he was calling him out on.

“About if you’re seeing anyone or not.”

Cloud looked away if only to hide his reaction.

“No. I never have.”

Zack watched as Cloud grew distant from his question, but by now he’d moved past worrying if he liked him back or not. He felt it. He wanted to reassure him, even though something else was pulling at his heart.

“Neither have I. I mean, I’ve had crushes before, and I’ve been on dates and stuff. But uh.. This. I’ve never felt something like this before.”

Zack clarified, as best as his memory served. He'd nervously moved his hand over Cloud's as he spoke, tracing his fingers with his own gently before working up the resolve to take his hand in his.
“Know what’s strange?”

Cloud let him take his hand, trying not to panic at the sudden question. He’d been contemplating how to tell him everything they’d taken away from him, but his prior admission surprised him too much to answer. Everything was indeed strange.

Why would he of all people make him feel different? He still didn’t understand what Zack saw in him, and despite trying to find an impasse, when their gazes met and he pulled him closer by his hand all he wanted to do was admit just how special he was to him too. But before he could speak up Zack continued.

“You feel so familiar. Like I’ve been here before. Not here in Junon, I mean, but with you. It's like I've held you before. like we’ve already kissed before.”

Cloud couldn't believe some parts of his memory were still there as Zack leaned down and kissed his gently. He couldn't feel anything else but his lips over his and his hand being held tightly.

When Zack pulled back, watching Cloud open his eyes again, dazed a moment after. He was glad that he’d accepted the kiss. Zack sighed partly from relief, but mostly because he was overwhelmed.

“Sorry.. I must sound crazy.”

“You’re not.”

Zack could feel Cloud’s hand start to shake in his. He met his eyes again only to see tears were welling up as he struggled to hold them back.

“Woah. Hey. What’s wrong? Sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you just like that. I uh..”

Zack let go of his hand to place both of his on his shoulders, rubbing them to try to get him to stop crying before wrapping his arms around him tightly instead.

"You must think I'm just trying to use some cheap line on you."

“That’s not it.”

Zack fell silent when Cloud corrected him again. He simply held him against his chest, waiting for him to clarify. It was too hard for Cloud to contain himself. He was drunk and tired and couldn't stop the tears from rolling down his face.

“We have kissed before.”

“Huh?”

Zack pulled away, holding him at arm’s length, if only to look back in to his eyes. He searched for a sign that he was joking, but his clear blue eyes left nothing to doubt.

“When?”

Zack finally articulated and Cloud tried to explain.

“You let me crash in your quarters once. A long time ago now. We.. Uh. We..”

Cloud felt crazier by the second. He couldn't believe how scared he was to talk about something that had already happened between them.
“We kissed, a lot, the next morning.”

Zack smiled at Cloud's explanation, as if he was proud of the news in a strange way before growing impatient again.

“Why don’t I remember then?”

“Tseng called you in for work.”

"So?"

Another long moment of silence elapsed as Cloud struggled to find the right way to continue his explanation. He still couldn't reason through why someone would do this to them, but at least he'd managed to stop crying.

“Tseng is using you. He's doing this to you.”

“What?!”

“I don’t know why.”

“What?!!”

Zack got up, stepping back in confusion. His outrage had probably woken up half the town above them.

“Another Turk told me. He said they could do anything they wanted, and could erase anything they wanted, including me, from your mind.”

“This is crazy.”

Cloud looked at the ground, he was ashamed of their own reality but he tried to believe that telling him was the right thing to do. He deserved to know.

“I’m sorry.”

“H-hey.”

Zack calmed down, moving back to sit besides him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Don't apologize. It's not your fault.”

“They ordered me to stay away from you. If they do something else to you bec-”

“Don’t worry about me. Look. I’m fine. I don’t know what’s going on, but I won’t let it happen again. I promise.”

Cloud stared up at his mesmerizing eyes. He wanted to believe him, but he still couldn’t shake the dread that had accompanied the conversation. He reached up to take Zack’s hand from his shoulder and held it with both of his. He had no hope that whatever Shinra was doing would stop.

“Run away with me.”

Zack stared back in surprise at his solution. He smiled and laughed lightly to try and relieve the tension. He'd never once considered leaving Shinra before.
“Where would we go?”

Cloud had been ready to apologize again. He was sure he’d call him crazy. What he’d suggested was absurd, but he hadn’t pulled away. Zack humoring him took away all his fears. Or maybe it was just the alcohol. Either way he held his hand tightly and remained hopeful.

“Anywhere.”

“What would we do?”

“ Anything.”

Zack laughed lightly again at his simple answers and ran his free hand through his own hair, looking up at the sky.

“Go anywhere. Do anything. Sort of like mercenaries? Sounds like good a plan as any to get out of Shinra.”

“Would you?”

“I don’t know.”

Cloud fell silent when he’d realized he must have sounded crazy after all. He didn’t remember, of course he couldn’t decide how he felt about him as easily as he could. He wasn’t even sure it would be the right choice himself.

All he really wanted was to keep him from harm. Even though he was monstrously powerful, they’d gotten to him, and they might again.

“I’ll talk to Tseng and sort it out.”

“No!”

Zack flinched at the alarmed refusal. Cloud had looked down after his outburst, turning his hand over in his and caressing his palm gently as if to apologize before continuing.

“It’s too dangerous. If you don’t know how he’s erasing your mind, then you won’t be able to avoid it. It has to do with your DMW. Just.. Don’t let you guard down around him.”

Zack had furrowed his brow at his warning and moved his free hand to his, taking both his hands in his instead.

“I won’t. I promise.”

Zack smiled when Cloud looked back up at him. He wasn’t certain what value promises held anymore. He was worried to the point that his heart was racing again, but then he leaned down and kissed him again. Longer and firmer this time, before pulling away and smiling again.

Cloud could feel his heart pounding even harder than it had when he’d essentially asked him to elope. If it hadn't shattered his rib cage by now he decided he may as well continue embracing his fears. He let go of his hands to bring them up and around his shoulders, moving them tentatively up his neck, fingers running up through his hair to pull him back down for another kiss.

Zack moved his hands to Cloud’s waist when he pulled him down to him, following his direction effortlessly. They kissed for a long time and with more tenderness than they had before. When Zack pulled back he sucked on his lower lip teasingly for only a moment before smiling proudly.
“So, tell me more about the time I invited you over.”

Zack insisted, but Cloud lingered after the kiss, lips parted and breathless. Looking away at the question to think it over.

“We had a drink and talked at first. I told you about my insomnia, but you took it as some sort of personal challenge.”

Zack laughed, knowing he would have.

“You read to me that night, and before I knew it I woke up next to you.”

Cloud ran a finger back down this neck, tracing the length of his spine. The more he spoke the more he could hear the embarrassment in his own voice.

“You were holding me, and when you woke up you did this..”

Cloud leaned in and brushed his lips against his neck, nuzzling in slightly before kissing his earlobe. He held on to his shoulders not to lose his balance as he trailed kisses down his neck, then pulled away shyly. He couldn’t believe what he was doing and quickly ran out of courage.

“Like this?”

Zack cross-examined, leaning in to mimic him, kissing his neck softly exactly as he had before. Cloud tilted his head away as soon as he’d felt his lips, holding on tightly. The sensation was stronger than he'd remembered when the alcohol made it seem as if nothing else but his lips existed.

He sank down from shivers that ran down his spine at every kiss, even though Zack easily held him up. Once He was satisfied with his reenactment he moved to his lips instead. The kiss was rougher, but even so as soon as he'd let a moan escape he pulled away with a smirk and whispered.

“What else did I do that morning?”

“How..”

Cloud swallowed hard, looking away to avoid his stare. He didn’t want to explain the rest. If anything he’d rather be thrown out in to the sea than elaborate further on how he'd ended up beneath him, or how he hated that they’d been under surveillance. He wondered how much of his fear of being with him that morning had been because he was scared of him, or just scared of being found out at all.

“Nothing you didn’t like I hope?”

“Ngh..”

Zack worried out loud, shifting to give him space. He tilted his head when no answer came. He was getting better at waiting for answers.

“No.”

Cloud finally managed, yet he still felt unsure. He turned around to pick up the unopened bottle he’d set down earlier and twisted the top off. Zack leaned back on one arm before reaching for his own. They both took large swigs before Zack leaned back over.

“Making new memories isn’t so bad, right?”

“Right.”
Cloud smiled back up at him before looking out over the ocean again. He hoped he’d remember this night for the rest of his life, no matter what happened next.

“When we get back to Midgar, will you let me take you on a second date?”

Zack asked tentatively and Cloud turned back, smiling brighter than before, then he remembered he wouldn’t be returning. Not unless he quit the company himself.

“I’ve been reassigned.”

“Huh?”

“To Junon.”

“What? Why?”

Zack looked appalled by the news, as if he’d just meticulously planned out their entire second date and it had been foiled already.

“Tseng’s orders.”

“You really weren’t kidding about the meddling part.”

Cloud shook his head and took another drink while Zack tried to understand what was going on.

“Why’s he doing all this?”

Cloud didn’t answer and took another long drink, but Zack was getting frustrated at their increasingly complicated situation. He took the bottle from his hands and set it back down again.

“Why doesn’t he want us to be together?”

Cloud furrowed his brow when he’d snatched the wine away from him, but his stern look told him he wouldn’t let him avoid the topic any longer. The only problem was that he didn’t know anything about Tseng. How could he explain the actions of a man disturbed enough to do this to someone else.

“It doesn’t make sense.”

Zack complained, trying to insist on an explanation, but Cloud only looked away again. The younger man wished he could do more but nothing he could say would make it easier on them.

“It’s not like it’s anti-company policy to date co-workers. Why would it be any of his business anyways.”

“I don’t know.”

Zack looked back down at him when he’d finally gotten an answer, except Cloud looked more dispirited than ever about their situation and he regretted getting angry. It wasn’t his fault.

“I should really talk to Tseng. You can’t stay in Junon.”

When Zack received no response he leaned down and kissed his forehead.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get to the bottom of this.”
Zack reassured, yet he still wanted to protest. He had no idea what to do to to convince him to stay away from the Turk. He just didn’t believe Tseng was the type of person that could be reasoned with.

Chapter End Notes

Date part 3 coming up next will wrap it up for Junon.

Then all that's left is the bit before Nibelheim!
No clue how long I'll drag that out for, but I'm open to suggestions.
Unresponsive

Chapter Summary

Warnings* non-con; alcohol; mako; poisoning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cloud looked around them on the still beach, making sure they were alone before turning back towards the 1st. He’d forgotten what they were talking about again, lost in his own thoughts, or lost in his eyes.

Zack took another swig of wine and seemed surprised to find he’d emptied the bottle. As soon as he’d set it back down, Cloud brought his hands up to cup his face and pulled him in to another kiss.

His fingers slid in to his hair and held on firmly to the back of his head as he kissed him. The SOLDIER only smiled at first before wrapping his arms around him to kiss him back properly. When they opened their eyes again Zack was gazing fondly at him before attempting to flatter.

“You’re so cute.”

“Cute?”

Cloud chocked back, even though Zack only laughed before attempting to smile at an increasingly insistent rate in order to get him to concede. He’d looked away since smiling back at him when he looked at him like that was inevitable and he wasn’t certain why he’d been so offended.

“Poor lil’ pup.”

Zack had practically cooed when he’d looked down, but Cloud’s eyes shot right back up.

“You’re the puppy.”

Zack laughed, pulling him closer again, as if holding on to him would help him contain himself. Cloud had tried to elaborate but his lips met his once more and he forgot the root of his frustration when he felt his tongue slide in to his mouth to toy with his.

Cloud had kept his hands on his chest when he’d pulled him closer, but the longer they kissed the lower they slid until he was gripping on to his suspenders while fighting back soft moans. He had tried to kiss back just as seriously, but he could barely hold himself up.

Zack pulled away when he’d felt him slide further down. He’d wanted to make sure he was alright, but the sight of him catching his breath after their deepening kiss only made him want to do it again.

Cloud worried that he’d lost track. He was convinced things hadn’t gone the way he’d expected. Even though he knew there was nothing he could say that would convince him to leave Shinra, or even take his warnings about the Turks seriously.
He needed proof. He needed to know more to convince the would-be hero to leave it all behind. He wished he could do more. That everything would stop hurting. He couldn’t fix any of it yet and he struggled to think of what to say next.

Zack had been watching him with his lips parted, inches away from him before biting down on his own lower lip hesitantly and reaching for the other bottle Cloud had barely touched.

“More?”

Zack offered first, an eyebrow raised at the question. He shrugged and took the bottle, watching his glowing eyes linger on his lips as he drank before handing it back to him. Zack took a lazy swig in turn, but as soon as he’d set the bottle down he kissed him again.

Cloud held on, wanting to get on top of him, convinced kissing would be easier that way, except that he had no strength. He felt too intoxicated to pull himself up and everything seemed to be spinning even though his eyes were closed.

He focused on breathing instead, moaning in to his mouth as they kissed. Every rush over or under his tongue turned him on, and the more Zack nibbled at his lower lip or sucked on his tongue the more he wanted to feel nothing else.

His grip weakened and he’d let go to steady himself, lowering a hand to his leg, But as soon as he’d touched him, squeezing his thigh, he was unable to resist knowing. He slid his hand further up to feel if he was as hard as him.

Cloud froze from just how hard he felt through his pants. He still couldn’t accept how big he was even with his hand on him. Zack had pulled back from their kiss as soon as he’d felt his touch, practically humming with approval as he leaned down to kiss his neck once again.

“That feels great.”

He whispered in to his ear before sucking at his earlobe and all he could do was grip him tightly in response. Zack licked the length of his neck next while stroking him tentatively. He kept kissing slowly as he reached over to place his hand over his.

He guided his hand over his cock firmly before letting go and unzipping his pants to pull it out for him. Cloud couldn’t help but stare before bringing both his hands up to stroke him. Zack had noticed his reaction and coyly leaned back to give him more room to admire.

“Like what you see?”

Cloud’s eyes flickered up to him before he leaned down, reaching out with his tongue in an attempt to take him in to his mouth. He’d always expected it to be straight forward, but he could barely fit him in.

He kept stroking the base of his shaft with his hands and ran his tongue down his length. Zack rolled his head back, letting out a soft moan at that. He tried to relax and open his jaw wider, but he could still only get the head in.

He squeezed his entire length tightly as he stroked his cock. Trying to keep up pace but having to stop to catch his breath often. He licked him slowly before he could go back to sucking, still trying to take him in further.

Zack moaned again when he sucked harder. Forcing his jaw open hurt but he didn’t care. He pulled back just enough to run his tongue over the tip of his cock before he felt fingers run through his
hair, as if rewarding him for his efforts.

He moaned in to the touch, losing his concentration entirely. He tried to suck at the same rhythm he was stroking his hands up and down, but when Zack tried to guide him lower he struggled to focus on breathing.

He could feel him throb in his mouth every time he moaned. He let him slide in further and further and he tried not to gag as he pushed in harder to the back of his throat. He was sure he’d crack his jaw before it would end despite convincing himself the pain wouldn’t last much longer if he could manage to get him off.

Strong fingers gripping his hair, keeping him steady while he pumped in faster only made things more agonizing. Cloud felt like he’d pass out if he kept forcing himself in, unable to tell if he was still breathing anymore.

He moaned despite the tears rolling down his face. Zack hadn’t noticed at all, leaning back on one arm to angle himself in deeper. He moved his head down harder on his cock as he pushed in further, filling his throat.

Cloud held his breath not to choke, letting him force his way in. He had to let go of his cock to brace himself from the pain. One hand on his leg and the other on the concrete as Zack pumped in harder and harder.

Cum suddenly started running down his throat and he moaned initially from surprise before having to swallow it all. Zack let out a long low moan, releasing his load deep inside and only pulled out until he’d finished cumming.

When he did, excess cum spilled out from his mouth on to the sand before choking for air. Once he’d managed to catch his breath he started to feel dizzy again, lurching forward.

“Are you alright?”

Zack asked once he’d come to from his orgasm and had zipped his pants back up. He worried he’d been too rough, or that he’d tasted awful, or something along those lines.

Cloud wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and was embarrassed to look back at him, but Zack hated not being answered and leaned in to try to get a better look at him.

“That was amazing.”

Zack tried encouraging instead, rubbing his back to make sure he’d been able to catch his breath. He leaned in further to smile at him, and as soon as Cloud had managed to smile back, even just a little, he kissed him again.

He slid his tongue in effortlessly and tasted himself. Cloud couldn’t believe how much pain radiated through his whole face, even though the taste of his cum against their tongues only reminded him of how hard he still was.

When a strong hand moved down to his own hard-on he was too self-conscious about what they’d just done and how little he had to offer in return. He couldn’t go on with it. He felt as if he would come from just his touch, so as soon as his hand slid up to undo his pants he tried to shift away.

Zack made a confused sound before pulling away from their kiss and tilted his head to the side. He was more than ready to return the favor, but Cloud shifted even further as soon as he’d broken the kiss.
“What is it?”

He worried softly, stroking Cloud’s leg instead while he waited patiently for him to catch his breath again.

“I’m just tired.”

Cloud offered hesitantly, unconvinced by his own excuse. He tried to stand up in an effort to gain any distance from him, only managing to stumble in the sand instead. Zack reached out and took his hand to steady him, chuckling softly at the sight.

“Careful.”

Once he was sure he’d found his balance he let go momentarily to grab the bottles, finishing off the last one before tucking them under an arm and taking Cloud’s hand again.

“Alright. Well, let’s get out of here.”

Zack lead him back across the beach. He’d stumbled a few more times, but Zack easily held him up. He looked at the moon over the ocean and couldn’t believe how beautiful it was.

Zack was smiling down at him and squeezed his hand harder when he felt as if he was about to fall back. He almost stumbled himself to catch him, realizing he was drunker than he thought he was.

He laughed lightly at their missteps, his arm around Cloud again before pulling back when he’d managed to hold them up. They’d stopped and when he realized Cloud wasn’t laughing with him he got worried.

Cloud was staring at the ground, feeling strangely numb. Number than the alcohol had made him feel all night and he wondered if he had really over done it. He could barely feel Zack’s arm around him anymore, only a firm tug made him look up again.

“Come on, let’s go see if we can crash at the inn.”

Cloud tried to hold on to him despite his sudden lack of coordination, afraid he wouldn’t be able to make it. He reckoned he should warn him that he felt like he was going to black out. He was fainter by the second and hesitated when they got to the steps that lead back to the village.

Zack had let go of him momentarily to dump the empty bottles in to the nearest trashcan before returning to him. He stared up at him and couldn’t manage a sound. He felt a strong arm wrap around him again and help him up the first step, but his knees gave out and he almost hit the steps before Zack caught him.

“Careful.”

He said tenderly before opting to pick him up in to his arms. Cloud gasped at the sudden shift and stared at Zack who was just smiling down at him.

“You’re such a lightweight.”

The 1st joked, but when he opened his mouth to apologize, or try to explain, or even protest being carried, nothing came out. Zack simply gave him a kiss on the forehead and he closed his eyes, not knowing what had been so urgent anymore.

Cloud watched him as he climbed, eyes focused ahead. He was overwhelmingly tired, and when
he’d closed his eyes for more than a second he lost all concept of his own body in his strong arms. Nothingness consumed him. His head rolled back against his shoulder and he lost consciousness.

Then the next thing he knew he’d been set down on to a bed. When his eyes opened again he forced himself to come to as he wearily glanced around an unknown room. He could only assumed they were already at the inn.

He couldn’t remember how they’d gotten there and could only manage to barely pull himself up to lean on an arm, searching for Zack. His head hurt and he laid back on to the pillow while the entire room spun out of control.

He felt awful. He’d never drank this much before and didn’t know what was supposed to happen. Even though he hadn’t drank nearly as much as Zack, and he seemed completely fine. Maybe he was just a lightweight.

His limbs felt numb and his throat and mouth burned in a way he definitely hadn’t noticed earlier. He tried to convince himself it was just the alcohol, or how tired he was, but he felt something else was wrong entirely.

“Zack?”

Cloud finally managed, after many, many attempts, searching desperately until he could see bright blue eyes making their way back to him in the dark.

“It’s okay. I’m here.”

He ran a hand through his hair and smiled softly at him, kneeling down to him. Cloud’s heart was racing, panicking that he couldn’t speak. It wasn’t that he didn’t know what to say, he could barely even manage articulating his name again.

“Zack..”

“Here, have some water.”

He’d slid his hand to the back of his head to help him up, tilting the glass to his mouth. He seemed worried at first but when Cloud managed to swallow a fair amount of water he let him lay back down and kissed him gently again.

The 1st set the glass down on the nightstand before stepping away to remove his gear. He took off his belt and armor, leaving everything including his shirt on a chair next to his sword before returning to Cloud.

He could only watch as he walked back to him, grabbing an extra blanket off of one of the other beds before climbing in with him, throwing the blanket over top. Cloud tried to turn to face him, barely reaching out to him.

“Am.. I.”

He attempted to force himself to voice his panic. The water had helped, but he was afraid he would be gone before he woke up again. Zack wrapped his arm around him to comfort him when he hadn’t finished his sentence and urged him on.

“Hm?”

“I..”
Cloud started again, in the same hesitant voice as before. He felt trapped and started to worry that Zack hadn’t noticed something was wrong with him because it was all in his head. The older man nuzzled his face up against his neck warmly when he hadn’t continued.

“Yes, Cloud?”

“Don’t go.”

Surprised by his own words, casting his eyes down as if to search for what he’d really needed to verbalize instead. But when he felt their noses brush against each other and Zack’s glowing eyes were gazing back at him he knew it’s what he’d wanted to say from the start.

“I won’t.”

It was surreal. Being held by him again. Feeling him climb on top of him again. The way the room went pitch-black every time he blinked. He smiled at how bright his eyes were and Zack leaned in to kiss him.

They kissed for a long time. He could barely remember how Zack had managed to pin his arms above his head but he felt himself more clearly under his weight if only for a moment.

His tongue ran against his neck while his other hand slid down his body. He felt his shirt get pulled off roughly, falling back as soon as it had been discarded. He tried to speak again but could only manage a whimper. He kept trying, but the cry that escaped his body instead betrayed him.

Zack had trailed kisses down his chest and had sucked down on one of his nipples. He’d looked back at him, pleased by the reaction he’d received and proceeded to twist and bite them between licks just to get him to moan louder.

“You turn me on so much.”

Zack breathed out as he kissed back down along his chest. He slid a hand down between them to stroke his cock. Kissing over his stomach while he started to undo his pants, sucking at his hipbone before pulling him out and stocking him gently.

Cloud wasn’t prepared for it, and even though he could barely move his own body, when he felt Zack slide him in to his mouth he tensed up and moaned again. He’d already let go to take his whole length in and sucked slowly.

He teased him by running his tongue around the head only when he almost pulled back entirely, before taking him down his throat again. He couldn’t hold on and when Zack moaned from having him deep inside him he came hard and long.

Zack pulled back when he was done and diligently swallowed everything. Licking up his stomach for good measure on his way back up to him. Cloud was breathing hard and flinched when he licked up his sore hip bone and across his stomach.

He felt his eyes roll back again, threatening to take him under after such an intense release, but he forced himself to focus on Zack. He’d moved up besides him again and pulled him in close, turning him to his side to spoon him.

He moved his arm down around his waist, nuzzling in to the back of his head. He was sure he’d passed out again until he felt Zack nibbling at his ear. He arched his back at the suddenly unbearable sensation.
Zack was kissing every inch of his neck down to his shoulder again and he moaned sharply when he sucked down too hard where he’d already marked him earlier. He felt him tug his pants down further while grinding in to him.

He placed a hand on his hip to keep him steady. Moving a little lower to get even closer. Cloud was paralyzed by the numbness that had spread through him and he couldn’t even react to Zack’s eager thrusts.

He accepted that this was probably all the man had wanted from him in the first place. He tried to push himself up on his arm again to move away, but only managed to roll off the pillow, moaning softly while he struggled even though his body barely responded.

His legs were tangled in his pants and he felt disgusted by all the sounds he still managed to emit despite being unable to form a single word. He let out a low whine in frustration while Zack continued grinding steadily in to his ass. The urgency creeping in on him once more of how numb he felt overwhelmed him.

He felt exhausted as if he’d just come again when he felt another hand slide down between them and push a finger in to him. Cloud choked a moan back and felt himself tense up again. Zack hovered over his shoulder for an moment before kissing his neck again. He shivered out another low moan and Zack started pumping his slick finger, then slowly inserting another. He felt himself arch in to his touch despite the pain.

“You’re so tight.”

Zack whispered in to his ear, nibbling at his earlobe when he slid in another. It hurt. He couldn’t say it. He couldn’t even yell. All he could do was whine through moans.

“I want to be inside you.”

He whispered again, moving a little lower before suddenly sliding his fingers out and angling his cock against his opening instead. The relief was brief and as soon as he felt the tip of his cock against him he held his breath.

Zack pushed in gently but every inch hurt more than the last. He winced in pain and whined out another moan. Zack stopped and kissed the back of his neck softly.

“Relax.”

He practically ordered, moving his hand up from his hip to tilt him towards him to kiss him. He felt him moan in to his mouth as he pushed further in and loved it. Zack only broke the kiss to let his head roll back, moaning softly as he worked his way deeper.

It was only when he’d kissed him over the same tender spots he’d sucked and nibbled at all night along his neck that he’d let out another whimper. Zack pushed in further, making sure he’d gotten himself almost all the way in before pulling back only an inch and pushing back in.

The sudden thrust made Cloud cry out and Zack groaned from pleasure. He moved both his hands back to his hips before thrusting in to him again. He could feel him twitch inside of him each time he slammed his whole length in.

He was torn open, crying through moans that he couldn’t control from something he was hitting inside him. He groaned from pleasure even though the only other thing he could feel was excruciating pain. He hated that all he could feel was being filled up by his cock.
Zack kept fucking him slowly. He hadn’t realized he’d already made Cloud cum again. But he sounded so good that he wanted to make it last and kept pulling out slowly before thrusting back in. Kissing his neck at every moan he forced from him.

Soon even he started to moan louder and fuck harder, thrusting in to him with more urgency. He was getting so close, but he wanted to get Cloud off again too. He slid his other hand back down to his dick, feeling cum all over the sheets already.

“You came so much.”

Zack breathed out, surprised. He used his cum-covered hand to stroke him while he thrust in roughly again. Feeling how hard his cock still was in his hand after cumming so much again so soon sent him over the edge.

He wasn’t able to focus on jerking him off. He held him tight and moaned in to his neck when his next thrust was so hard he came deep inside him. Cum filled his ass and Cloud felt himself cum again in to Zack’s hand, his face rolling back against his.

Zack slid his hand slowly from his spent throbbing cock, wiping his load off his hand on the sheets before sliding his arm back around him. He felt Zack nuzzle in to his neck again, but all he could do was feel like he was going to pass out from the pain.

When Zack tried to pull out of him he moaned pitifully from the torment of him just moving again. Even though he wasn’t as hard anymore, it hurt too much, and the feeling of cum leaking out as he softened felt too strange.

He felt his eyes roll back before they shut closed on him. He couldn’t move and Zack had stayed still long enough, holding him against him tightly, that he lost consciousness while he was still inside of him.

Chapter End Notes

that's almost it for junon
but im still open to suggestions for the part between junon and nibelheim
then it'll be back to the regular script in nibel
Post-First Time

It felt like waking up to a heart attack. All that came through his numbed senses was pain and the overwhelming sense that he’d of been better off dead.

He groaned trying to focus on his surroundings with great difficulty. He could barely open his eyes. Everything was too bright and every sound was excruciating.

Wincing through a blinding headache at an unfamiliar room. Slowly everything came back to him. Every touch, every kiss, and every word of his night with Zack.

He regretted it all. He felt so stupid, wishing he’d known what to expect, or that he’d of just set boundaries sooner. Left wondering why he’d trusted him back so easily.

He didn’t know if he’d of listened either way if he’d asked him to stop. With how drunk they’d been, and how contradictory he’d acted himself.

He could still feel his body around his. Inside his. Just barely beneath the agony he was forced to bare.

He stared at the various machines he was hooked up to who’s incessant beeping was burning out his senses. He forced himself to take in his immediate surroundings.

It all looked like standard Shinra equipment and he groaned at the irony of thinking it was possible to end up anywhere else. He shut his eyes to give himself the courage to try to move.

Trying to lean one way or another made him realize how sore his entire body was. He managed to make out a girl sitting in a chair by the door, but it took a while to remember who she was.

It was that other red-headed Turk. And once she noticed he’d woken up she slammed the book she was reading shut, stood up, then walked over to him.

“The boss refuses to fill me in”

She announced firmly, even though she’d almost looked over her shoulder from her own words, playing it off as a shrug instead.

“I’ve blocked surveillance of this room while I’m here.”

It sounded as if she was reassuring herself more than she was reassuring him. Either that or she’d meant it as a threat.

When she didn’t say anything else he looked back at her, wishing there was a point to this. She was staring down at his exposed arm.

Her expression was cold and remained neutral. He wanted to tell her to get out, but he knew she wouldn’t listen.

His head was splitting, but he’d just as soon glanced down past the IV stuck in his arm to see that there was deep bruising around his wrist.

He couldn’t focus on where the pain was coming from. He felt debilitated and high from whatever they had him on.
All he could do was remain still to avoid feeling any more of himself than he needed to. For once he was grateful for the drugs.

By the time they’d been administered in the past he’d already suffered through enough not to feel it anymore in the first place. It usually felt as if the artificial numbness erased him instead of the pain.

He remembered how hard Zack had held his arms above his head before stripping him. He let his head roll to the other side, avoiding the Turk’s continued stare.

He wondered what the rest of his body looked like while he tried to remember what happened after that, wishing that he’d of just died in his arms.

“Can you speak?”

The girl asked and he glanced back at her to see if she was serious before looking away again.

The pent up anger of not having been able to speak or move his body while Zack just, didn’t notice, reminded him exactly what he’d been through.

“Can you?”

The Turk urged on as she clutched her book tightly over her chest. She didn’t really look like she wanted to be there, but she still waited for him to answer.

“Yes.”

Her staring was unbearable, so he’d managed an answer, but he hadn’t expected his face to hurt so much from the effort. His jaw was sore to the point that it felt swollen and his voice was strained.

She’d looked away when he’d answered, as if reconsidering why she was there again. He wanted to leave if she wouldn’t and tried to sit up despite knowing better.

Pain shot up through his back and he bit back a groan to avoid yelling out. He laid back down and stared at the ceiling in abject horror.

“They’re going to keep you a while longer.”

He’d already accepted that, but her words still left him feeling confined. Panicking, wishing the pain had been worth it, even though he could barely remember anything but shouting after the act.

“You should have stayed away from him.”

Cloud met her glare out of spite and they remained silent for a long time before she spoke again.

“You almost died. Do you realize that?”

He couldn’t hold her vindictive eyes and was forced to look away while she pressed on.

“I read your file. You’ve been comatose for about..”

She quickly glanced at the clock on the wall and looked back at him.

“15 hours.”

When she received no reaction she sighed and looked out of the nearest window instead.
“I read Zack’s file too. Even though I already knew there would be nothing. He doesn’t know I stayed behind. Not that I was going to stay much longer. You never know how long comas can last. And, well, the doctors weren’t very encouraging.”

She shifted her weight again, this time glancing further away before moving on.

“Tseng had to sedate Zack. He was hysterical. He said he’d never go back to work otherwise, if he was stuck here waiting for you to wake up.”

She clarified, dryly. Her voice wasn’t as steady as when she’d began and he desperately wished she’d just stop.

“Why are you here?”

He asked, implying heavily that he wished she wasn’t. He proceeded to regret his question when she turned back to him to answer and he’d finally recognized the bible she was holding.

“I needed to tell you something. What Zack did. What you tricked him in to. You deserved it.”

He stared back at the ceiling, struggling to ignore what she had to say. He was so mad, and in so much pain. All he could think of was why they would let a person so young join the Turks.

“You tempted him in to something unnatural. He would never treat someone like that if it wasn’t.”

She looked disturbed. She was pale, and her eyes had lost the steadiness she’s began her accusations with.

“You should understand. Only a woman’s body is pure and strong enough for a man.”

She stared down at him with so much contempt he wished he hadn’t said anything at all.

“I was praying you wouldn’t wake up. But the boss said you weren’t worth worrying about anymore either way.”

She stepped away from him at her admission. Taking another hesitant step towards the exit.

“Surely you’d never attempt something so foolish again. You should just quit the company. They’ve killed for less.”

The silence was deafening before he realized he hadn’t heard the door. He turned his head painfully. His neck felt bruised as he strained to see her just standing there.

“He’s sorry.”

Their eyes met again and Cloud tried to make out how it was possible for her words to lack so much empathy. She glared at him just as coldly as before.

“He kept apologizing, over, and over again.”

She practically spat out.

“But he won’t remember. The boss insists on it. He won’t be able to tell you, but he’s sorry.”

Cloud couldn’t look at her anymore. It wasn’t that Zack realizing what he’d done to him was too painful, it was that he couldn’t stomach that even after all that Tseng still had him.
“Zack regrets it. He’s better off starting over. He’s too important to agonize over something so trivial as a mistake like you.”

Her voice started to shake, and he couldn’t tell if it was from anger, or sadness, but she went on.

“He’s not that kind of person. He’s a good person.”

The Turk finally neared the door, but paused, looking back at him as if she’d wanted to say something else. Instead the door finally sealed shut behind her.

Cloud was left alone with her words. He tried to forget, but she’d made her point and it left him wondering if his mother would have felt the same way about what he’d done.

He’d never known anyone else to read that bible in Nibelheim besides her. It wasn’t something that people talked about openly.

It was referenced constantly, in their speech, and in their traditions, but he’d never questioned her about it. He’d never even once read it himself.

He wondered if that’s what his mother had meant about temptations in the city. But they couldn’t be right. He already knew this could happen anywhere.

He just hadn’t thought it would happen with Zack. His chest seized and he shut his eyes tightly, as if controlling the pain would allow him to think clearly.

Nevertheless he refused to work through it. His own uncertainties were destructive and he felt like he’d suffocate unless he could get his heart to stop racing.

He didn’t want to deal with any of it. It wasn’t up to her to apologize on his behalf. Yet he wondered what he’d of said if Zack had been the one waiting for him instead.

He was nowhere to be seen and he worried what Tseng had already done to him by now. It was his fault. If he’d of taken things more seriously he could have convinced him to stay away from him.

He must have drifted off, because by the time he came to again, he was surrounded by nurses. They were adjusting his IV, checking his vitals and various monitors.

A doctor stepped forward and started to explain that his condition was stable and that he should be discharged soon, but that they were still running more tests to determine what had cause his acute short-term coma.

They provided a meticulously calculated time-frame for his recovery and eventual re-transfer to Midgar. They then proceeded to complain about how his body was not being punctual about said schedule.

Cloud looked at the doctor only when he’d mentioned Midgar and tried to speak again, even though his jaw only seemed to feel worse.

“Midgar?”

“Yes. Midgar.”

The doctor repeated, lowering his data pad.

“You do remember Midgar, don’t you? Name and rank.”
“Cloud Strife. Infantry. Security Unit 36. Why am I being sent back?”

His voice was just as strained as before, but he needed to understand how he was going to be able to go back so soon.

“Oh.”

The doctor looked back at his data pad and shuffled through it for a moment before instructing everyone else to leave the room.

“Well actually, you aren’t really being re-transferred, because the original transfer paperwork was declined by HQ. By the president himself actually. Because director Lazard deserted, he decided to tighten up security. So technically it’s just a transfer.”

“What.”

Cloud was lost. He had no idea how long he’d been in Junon’s medical bay by now and started to worry that he was really being sent back. That he was really going to see Zack again.

The doctor explained that he was already in the protected database of personnel that were linked to a SOLDIER operative’s DMW. In the absence of Lazard the president decided restructuring was in order to prioritize SOLDIER.

He was told that a covert unit was created within the infantry and that they would primarily be assigned to assist said SOLDIER operatives on missions.

That the covert unit was to prevent people from asking questions. When they were pulled from independent units to assist them before it had raised too many concerns.

“What.”

He repeated, confused.

“You’re being transferred to a new unit as soon as you’re discharged. If you accept, of course.”

When he didn’t answer the doctor waited for a long time before speaking up again.

“Listen, your condition when you were brought in was dismal and I’m obligated to ask you if you remember what happened to you.”

“Yes.”

“Was is consensual?”

After a long silence the doctor shifted, debating waiting any longer.

“Will you press charges?”

When he still received no answers he started tapping his foot.

“Not that it would matter either way. He’s a 1st.”

He corrected himself, before looking back over his shoulder.

“Well, it still matters. You can say it. But Shinra would just erase it even if it was declared. What I meant to ask was, will you stay with Shinra?”
“Yes.”

“Are you certain? Do you understand the risk involved in working with SOLDIER again?”

“I don’t care.”

Cloud wished he hadn’t spoken, but he’d answered and the doctor was at a loss of what else to say. He simply proceeded to walk away.

“There are services if you need to talk. Just make an appointment through one of the nurses. If you don’t change your mind, you’ll be dispatched along with the next set of recruits to Midgar by the end of the week.“

He left and he couldn’t believe what he’d done. Everything was so muddled in his mind that he had trouble recalling anything besides how painful it had all been, and how close they were while he was inside him.

He wished he didn’t want to be in his arms again. How could he, when he’d been the one to tear him open and use him like that.

It wasn’t long before he’d discovered the extent of his injuries. The deep bruising on his hips, neck, and around his wrists, as well as the 29 stitches he bore explained why any movement was agony.

He hated that they must have all assumed he’d done it on purpose. He didn’t care about his body, but he worried that they were right. That he had done it without caring if it had felt good at all for him.

He didn’t speak to anyone else about what had happened during his stay. Then once his belongings that he’d stashed away were returned to him, he was discharged and instructed on where to rendezvous for the next departure.

When he made it outside for the first time in days he was struck by the smell of the salt water and how soothing the sound of the waves were. He’d banally followed the orders he’d been given but couldn’t help stare out at the sea the entire way.

When he’d arrived at the truck no one was around and he hesitated. He felt he should keep walking, down out of Junon, and straight in to the sea.

He dropped his bag by the reinforced barrier onlooking the ocean and had to convince himself not to simply scale the wall to jump instead.

He sat down next to his bag and held his head. He didn’t know what he was doing and every thought back to their night together made him feel sick.

It took a long time for him just to steady himself not to throw up, but once he had he fished his phone out of his bag. It had become a habit to avoid thinking of anything by reading anything he could online when he didn’t have anything with him.

Luckily there was still battery, since he’d turned the thing off before stashing it. He had no missed calls, and only one missed email.

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Subject: Personnel Announcement 0207
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This is an official notification of the change in status for the following personnel.

Lazard Deusericus - Director of SOLDIER: Killed in action

Hollander - Science Department: Killed in action

He knew they were lying. Zack had told him he’d screwed up and let Hollander go. Lazard must have deserted as well. That must have been why SOLDIER was a mess.

But he didn’t care about any of that, he was angry Zack hadn’t bothered checking up on him. Then again, he knew Tseng had taken care of making sure he wouldn’t remember any of what he’d done to him.

He held himself back from throwing the useless device against the nearest wall and pocketed it instead. He couldn’t afford a replacement anyways.

With all the medical debt he’d racked up by now, he didn’t expect he’d ever be able to pay it all off. So what was the point?

He tried to calm himself down, telling himself it wasn’t Zack’s fault, that what had happened was equally his responsibility, and that he’d never intentionally hurt him.

Except that he had, and he hadn’t bothered asking if it was okay, or if he was alright while he did it. But maybe he had. Maybe he wasn’t remembering right.

He couldn’t piece together anything he’d said to him except begging him not to leave. And as far as what Zack had said, all that he could recall now were his overwhelmingly loud moans, and how much he had screamed for him to wake up afterwards.

He felt like he was going to be sick again. His gut threatening to spill out whatever he’d been holding back. Leaning weakly against the barrier he wondered if he’d be able to go through with it.

He couldn’t believe he was going back to Midgar and wished he’d just kept walking instead. He probably wouldn’t of made it a day on his own outside the city in the state he was in, but he’d rather die than go back now.

He wondered who any of the other men in Unit 44 would be, and why any of them were working for Shinra. He hated to think that it was all because of SOLDIER.

He waited for everyone to embark before he was ordered to do so. He kept his helmet on and his scarf high and pretended to sleep.

Not that he didn’t want to, he just preferred not being involved in their conversations. Being forced to listen to all the other men heading to the city’s optimistic plans for how they would make a life in Midgar was bad enough.

The road from Junon to Midgar was rough and he knew he’d made a mistake. But they were too far out for him to walk back either way. All he could do was grit his teeth a bare it.
He wished it would be possible to pretend none of it happened. After all, to Zack, none of it had, so why should he be the only one to suffer.
Chapter Summary

When your life only feels like a series of confrontations it can be confusing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in Midgar Cloud's eyes were downcast, wearing his scarf up high to hide the still fading bruises on his neck. He wasn’t interested in letting anyone know what had happened to him, even so he couldn't shake the paranoia that anyone could tell what he'd been through just by looking at him.

When he’d reached his new unit, dubiously named 44 while located on floor 44 even though there were only 38 existing squads, he glanced around the otherwise deserted hallway before entering their quarters. He didn't know how long he'd hesitated before entering, it was hard to keep track of anything anymore but he clearly remembered that when he'd patrolled the area in the past it had only been used for storage.

Earlier he'd been given a new keycard and told that only unit 44 cadets or other specialized personnel could access the upgraded floor. As soon as he'd entered the men in the room went silent, all staring at him then each other for answers before one of the men sitting around a table near the entrance stood up and walked towards him.

“Cloud Strife. Good to have you finally join us.”

The man addressed seriously until he was facing him, smiling at the surprise on his face.

“Greene?”

Cloud asked, somehow exhausted from just recognizing his former squadmate

“That’s Captain Greene now.”

The man corrected, glancing back at the rest of the squad trying to make out what they were whispering.

“Sir.”

Cloud saluted but Greene simply put a hand on his shoulder and turned to face his unit.

“We’ve served together before. You can all count on Strife.”

Greene reassured, but Cloud still couldn't quite grasp where he was. Their last conversation hadn’t ended on the best terms after the first attack on HQ. And even though the gesture had been well intentioned, his shoulder stung at the light squeeze, grateful when he removed his hand to point out introductions he'd just as soon forget.

He knew he wasn't dependable, and having them all think otherwise only made him feel worse.
He'd looked them over at least once but hadn't recognized anyone else. He still felt nauseous from the trip and the pain he was in and being stared at certainly wasn't helping. Several more introductions were made before some men lost their patience and started pressing for information.

“Why were you transferred so late? Who’s your link?”

One called, getting up from a nearby bunk.

“He doesn’t have to answer that.”

Greene reprimanded when he saw the Blond simply stare down the man who'd stood up, finishing the introductions instead. Making sure to name everyone, even those few who hadn’t bothered to get up from the back bunks before turning back to him.

“Our floor is programmed just like all of the others with curfew protocols and basic security, but know that it’s now considered optional under your rank just have them scan your card.”

Greene explained while leading him to the bunk he could use before handing him a new phone.

“Additional security measures. Your old one will be deactivated.”

Cloud dropped his bag and shoved it under his bunk before swapping his old phone with the other and Greene turned back to the rest of the unit for a moment.

“Remember everyone.

Greene raised his voice to address all of them.

“You might be a mess of a mismatched group, but this is a covert unit.

The captain looked across the room, making sure everyone was listening.

"An experimental, covert, unit. Those that leak information will be dealt with by Shinra. No exceptions.”

Greene then turned back and looked him in the eye.

“You did join voluntarily, didn't you?”

He'd lowered his voice, but something about the tone of the question unsettled him.

“I did.”

Cloud didn't want to add any more suspicion than there already was. He could hear them talking between themselves and none of it sounded good.

“Very well.”

Greene gave him a nod before returning to the pile of paperwork he had stacked at the other end of the table they shared.

"The unit was formed a week ago though, where were you?"

Another man insisted, approaching him before he could even sit down.

"Junon."
Cloud answered plainly, hoping to be left alone to settle his nerves.

"Since the attacks? I thought everyone came back."

The man still sounded skeptical, trying to get a better look at him but he hung his head low, practically burying his face in his scarf.

"I was injured. Just got back."

Cloud stated dryly.

"Sorry."

The man conceded, but Cloud could only shift anxiously, trying to figure out what kind of mess he'd signed up for. What exactly was prioritizing SOLDIER supposed to mean? He had an idea, he just couldn't accept it.

"So, who's your link?"

The first man asked again, walking over to them.

"Huh?"

Cloud had barely heard him, receiving scoffs, rolled eyes, or frustrated sighs in response until someone else clarified.

"You know, your connection in SOLDIER. Is he new?"

The man in the bunk nearby looked on curiously.

"Yea, when did you guys meet?"

Another chimed in, getting up to join the conversation

"No. We.."

Cloud looked away, unwilling to tell them anything, but they all just looked between themselves with a mixture of confusion or frustration. They'd soon crowded around his bunk and he didn't know what to do with himself.

"Sephiroth was in Junon that day, wasn't he?"

One piped up almost with as much excitement as there was accusation in his tone.

"Yeah, you're right!"

Another confirmed, spinning back to Cloud but being cut off before he could insist on the question.

"What are you saying? It can't be him!"

The one in the bunk said before laughing while others seemed to be panicking at the mere notion. Cloud couldn't believe how aggravated half the men had gotten at the mention of the 1st and backed away but there wasn't anywhere to go between the rows of bunks.

"No one's ever linked with Sephiroth besides Genesis and Angeal! What are you talking about!?"

Greene shouted from across the room, but when he finally glanced up from his work and noticed
how they'd crowded his old squadmate he got up to intervene.

“But he’s right isn’t he? Who else from SOLDIER was there that day?”

Someone insisted.

“Uh well Andrews was there, and Chambers, wait, was Gillis there?”

Several men had started arguing about who'd been there, and who'd been with who at the time.

"Who knew Sephiroth's type was tiny and frail.”

The one who'd been insisting from the start, named Williams if he could remember right, taunted him further by stepping up to him. He was just too tired to hold his anger back anymore, so when the other man moved even closer to face him down he lost his nerve and shoved him back.

He hadn't been through the door for 30 minutes and he'd already screwed up. Instead of responding something to deny the accusation he just reacted and the next thing he knew the other man shoved him back, to which he threw his fist up purely out of spite.

He hadn't had time to think, striking Williams in the face hard enough for him to stumble back in to a few others who immediately held him back. Cloud could feel his heart racing, expecting the worst, yet the immensity of his regret still failed to restrain his urge to hit him again, feeling the men around him grab his arms to restrain him as well.

“That’s enough!”

Greene shouted while pushing through to them, close to losing his nerve entirely when he saw the way they were glaring at each other. He'd only been promoted to captain a week ago, but he didn't intend to let his unit fall apart so quickly.

“I won't tolerate this kind of crap. It doesn’t matter who he’s linked to. Half of you are only linked to thirds, so check yourselves unless you want to get replaced. I have explicit permission to dismiss anyone who does not comply with my orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

The majority of them echoed back and Greene scanned the room for those who hadn’t. He clearly wasn't joking about wanting to fire them, but Cloud wondered if he really had the authority to or if it was just an empty threat.

“Why the secrecy though?”

One squad-mate insisted, even though the others had retreated back to what they'd been doing prior to his disruption.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Cloud said plainly, sitting down on his bunk and opening his new phone, wondering what the difference was with the old one.

“Course it matters. We all know each other's links”

The man in the bunk across still tried to persuade him.

“Its temporary.”
Cloud clarified without looking at him. He'd signed in to his mail account and everything was transferred, not that he needed any of his old emails.

“Links aren't temporary.”

The man said but Cloud only put his phone away and laid down, ignoring him. They went on with their business and he tried to forget what had just happened despite the ache from his right hand.

Williams looked like he wanted to kill him the next day, so he stayed away. He tried to familiarize himself with their floor instead, since these old levels were used exclusively for storage before he wondered if they’d only cleared out the one space for their quarters.

He couldn’t quite grasp that he was back in HQ, especially under such bizarre circumstances. He felt like half his unit already hated him because of what he'd done and he couldn't contain his frustration at himself for resorting to fighting again.

He looked in each room and most were indeed still used for storage, but a few were emptied out entirely and left that way, another had been converted in to a washroom, and one more in to a room with just tables, chairs, and lamps, like a study room.

He fell back in to spending all his time avoiding people. Wishing he could figure out how to take Shinra down from the inside without being found out first. He struggled to take orders seriously and Greene had already reprimanded him for it during morning training.

As for work duties, they had changed entirely and none of them were on the front lines. Greene explained that if they were to be put at risk it would only be to benefit SOLDIER. He felt like even more of a pawn in the company. Being treated like he was suddenly important only made him angry about the way they treated everyone else.

After a few days several of his squad-mates approached him after training one morning. He’d failed to brush them off and he could already feel his heart racing from the anxiety as his mind hurried through different outcomes.

“We asked around, and only one guy in SOLDIER said he knew you, but that you definitely weren’t HIS link.”

They pressed on, surrounding him, but Cloud only glared past them, desperately trying to calm down as he hurried to put this equipment away.

“He didn’t tell us who it was, but we know he knows.”

Cloud tried to walk past them after locking up, but one of them grabbed his shoulder to hold him back.

“If you don’t tell us, we’ll just get him to tell us eventually.”

Cloud shoved him off brusquely and they all took a step back. Somehow it had been enough to let him walk away that morning. He knew it would all come out if they ever assigned him another mission, but he dreaded it happening sooner than later.

The next SOLDIER exam was in just a few days, and even though half his unit was talking about taking it, he’d already decided not to. They talked about being closer to their links and by the looks of it some must have been working on it for a while. The rest seemed uninterested in remaining in the infantry in general.
He hadn’t been sleeping well, despite his new prescriptions and the boring to death clerical work they had him doing every day. He was kept awake by the silence he was forcing himself through and the stress of not knowing what to do next.

He hated the quagmire of a machine that Shinra was. He hated having to take so much care of himself to even survive it. He held on to the irony that they were helping him heal without knowing that they were harboring a traitor.

He hadn’t been thinking about missing the exam at all that morning, even though half his unit had been missing. After their regular training session he walked out of the facilities only to see Zack again, far sooner than expected.

He stopped when he’d seen him leaning against a wall in the hallway chatting it up. Several men from his unit who’d finished up sooner were talking to him, but as soon as their eyes met Zack excused himself and moved past them to him with a serious air.

“Cloud.”

Zack called, approaching him rapidly.

“That’s my name.”

Cloud meant to use the phrase as Zack had in the past, but his tone was all wrong. He was angrier than he could understand, and seeing him again so soon had him looking past him to see who was watching instead.

“You weren’t at the exam.”

He hadn't meant it, but he sounded accusatory, crossing his arms suddenly.

“So?”

Cloud shrugged.

“What do you mean, so?”

Zack just as soon lowered his arms in defeat, confused by the less than eager greeting he'd received.

“What’s it to you?”

Cloud snapped and Zack took a step back, shocked by how cold his tone was. When he'd pictured confronting him after being disappointed he hadn't shown up this wasn't how he thought their conversation would go. He placed his hands on his hips and frowned back at him.

“Wadya mean, what’s it to me? You’re the one who said you wanted to join SOLDIER.”

More men from his unit had gathered to watch and Cloud couldn't handle his anger on top of everything else. He opted for walking away from the 1st who'd only kept frowning, spinning around immediately when he walked past him.

“Uh, helllooo? I’m talking to you!”

Zack shouted, clearly irritated at being ignored before following him. Cloud knew he would never hear the end of this from his unit and was already agonizing over his decision to leave. Full well knowing it was futile, yet unable to stop walking faster.
“Wait a minute!”
Zack shouted again. He was getting upset, but expected they’d be able to talk when they’d reach the elevator. Instead he watched as he deviated down a different hallway towards the emergency exit.

“Cloud!”
He flinched when Zack called his name. He’d already swung the door open and started heading down the steps. As soon as he heard the door open behind him the guilt of not just talking to him in the first place washed over him, urging him to stop.

He knew he couldn’t outrun him. Even so, the fear and adrenaline pumping through him couldn’t stop himself from descending. It was only when Zack grabbed one of his arms that he was forced to stop, almost stumbling from being jerked back so suddenly.

“Cloud, seriously, what’s going on?”
It wasn’t that it'd hurt, he could feel his grip loosening already as they froze in place, but the way that he'd easily pulled him back to face him unnerved him to the point that he couldn't look him in the eye.

“Why are you doing this?”
Cloud asked bitterly.

“Listen. I asked about the last exam too, and they said you didn’t attend either.”
Zack admitted, worry evident from his tone, suddenly far more nervous than he'd anticipated.

“I changed my mind.”
Cloud answered plainly, wishing he could just walk away at that but he knew he'd just as soon stop him again. He wasn't the type to be satisfied with simple answers it seemed.

“About SOLDIER? Why?”
Zack’s grip loosened further and Cloud pulled back, if only from reflex at the hint of an opportunity to get away. He still didn't dare take another step up or down, leaning against the railing instead.

“Was it something I said?”
Zack pulled away hesitantly next and rubbed the back of his neck at his own question.

“No.”
Cloud answered bluntly and Zack searched for a sign that he was lying. Zack was clearly unsure about what had happened, his memories between Modeoheim and now were fuzzy at best.

“Was it something I did?”
Zack insisted.

“No.”
With the same response Zack still looked worried. Cloud felt himself lean back against the railing further, trying to avoid his eyes but the pain in his chest was telling him he wouldn't be able to say much else at this rate.

“I don’t usually drink that much, but I can barely even remember the drinking part this time. I’m sorry if I was rude to you or the other guys or anything.”

Zack apologized, even though he didn't seem to know for what, it sounded terribly sincere.

“Other guys?”

Cloud managed to question despite not wanting to hear his answer.

“Yeah, after the Junon mission. I promised to take you all out. I made a fool of myself didn’t I? Is that why you're blowing me off?”

Cloud lost his balance and almost slid down a step but Zack quickly took his arm again. He was thankful for being held up this time from how suddenly his vertigo came on.

"Are you okay?"

Zack questioned softly, but once he’d steadied himself he brushed his hand off, holding on to the guardrail firmly instead. He avoided acknowledging his question, staring over the railing at the endless shaft of darkness bellow. He tried to answer the previous question instead.

“You didn't do anything. Everyone’s fine.”

Cloud lied about the other men, he knew there were no other men. It horrified him that it was possible for them not only to erase, but to actually modify memories. He didn't know what to think anymore. He was tired of having to start over and didn’t even know if he really wanted to.

“Just ask that Turk. She was there.”

Cloud tried to dismiss the conversation further, but he couldn’t hide the spite in voice. He felt faint again and held on to the railing harder. He felt like such an idiot for bringing up the Turks so carelessly just because he was still angry at that girl.

“Cissnei?”

Zack questioned and moved closer, placing a hand on his arm again, trying to get him to look up at him.

“I don’t know. You didn’t say.”

He answered back bitterly. He wouldn't meet his eyes and tried to pull his arm away but Zack barely registered it, pressing on his questioning.

“What did she do?”

“Nothing. She just watched.”

He tugged again and when Zack didn’t respond he pulled harder.

“Let go of me!”

Cloud shouted, taking a step down in desperation to gain leverage, but when he pulled again he
only managed to slip and Zack had to step down as well to catch him again.

“Woah. Hold on.”

Zack insisted only letting go when he was sure Cloud was steady again.

“Please tell me.”

He begged and Cloud was horrified. There was no use remembering. He didn't want to fear something that shouldn't of happened in the first place. He turned back to face him, trying to look at him in the eyes and failing.

“It doesn’t matter.”

He placated.

“Yes it does.”

Zack argued plainly, but calmly, stepping forward, and then awkwardly receding the next instant.

“We got drunk. The guys probably don’t remember either. Just forget about it.”

Cloud dismissed coldly. He hated the tone of his own voice. He just wanted to get off the subject but he couldn't help his heart from pounding and he couldn't tell if it was from anger, or fear, or sadness. All he knew was that it was painful.

“I’m sorry.”

Zack practically whispered.

“For what?”

Cloud asked immediately. It wasn’t that he’d expected an apology, but being the only one who knew why he was apologizing overwhelmed him.

“I don’t know.”

Zack admitted and Cloud bit his lip not to respond anything else. He forced himself to meet his eyes after some time.

“Just don’t overdo it next time.”

Cloud offered, finally seeing the pain in his bright eyes and his reluctance to leave it at that. He’d given him a nod but Cloud reached up and gripped his shirt to pull him down to face him suddenly. Zack leaned forward in surprise, staring back wide-eyed as Cloud brushed past the side of his face to whisper in to his ear.

“Just, don’t trust the Turks.”

He’d wanted to sound convincing, but the fear came through his tone and he had to let go of him or he’d start shaking.

“Huh?”

Zack could only stare back with his mouth agape as Cloud stepped down away from him, glaring back at him as if he should take his words as life or death, only pausing before exiting at the next
Cloud avoided his unit for the rest of the day and worked late. He returned to his quarters past curfew that night, yet was greeted with whistling and cheering. More than half were missing and those left were wide awake.

“So it was a 1st!”

Cloud’s vexed reaction left little amusement among the men as they approached him.

“No one really knows about that new 1st. He was Angeal’s prodigy or something, right?”

“Yeah.”

Cloud offered back, making his way past them to dump the files he hadn’t finished compiling that day in his storage unit.

“When did you meet?”

He didn’t want to be having this conversation, still reeling from his confrontation with him earlier.

“The mission was classified.”

“Because of the deserters?”

There were gasps and the others started arguing before another spoke up.

“Have you seen the real Genesis since the desertion?”

Cloud looked away and the others assumed it meant he just couldn’t say and they couldn’t believe it.

“You did! Did he seem okay?”

“Why are you worried about Genesis?”

Cloud shot back and the one who’d asked looked guilty, stepping back while others laughed.

“I heard that Zack guy has the most links out of anyone in SOLDIER. That doesn’t bother you?”

Another asked and Cloud glared at the ground, evidently irritated.

"How does it feel to be one of seven?"

One more taunted, but he preferred not knowing how they knew it was seven people. He could only guess maybe 2, or 3, so even with him, who were the 3 others?

"Guess he's not feeling Lucky.

One laughed at his own joke.

"Is that why you're breaking up with him? You'll get transferred if that happens."

“We’re just friends.”

Cloud argued, looking up to the ceiling in frustration for a moment before looking away again back to the exit.
“Just friends?”

They questioned back, some seemed angry he was avoiding the subject, but most just laughed.

"It didn't look that way this morning. We just assumed that you were-”

The discussion started to get muddled and Cloud wanted to walk away, but he was too tired to convince himself to, cutting it off to try to end it instead.

“I don’t care if you guys are.”

Cloud clarified, crossing his arms.

“Whatever.”

Another dismissed his lack of interest and a long silence followed. Cloud was hoping they would drop it when he noticed how many of them were really missing and he doubted that so many had suddenly made it in to SOLDIER that morning.

"Where are Greene and the others?"

Cloud asked.

"They were dispatched. Big mission came up in Corel."

"Corel?"

Cloud didn't know where that was, but he knew a mission in the middle of nowhere couldn't mean anything good. At least he was thankful he knew that meant Zack wasn't sent.

Chapter End Notes

exasperatingly drawn out until Nibelheim but forgive my indulgence
Cloud had been waking up abruptly from nightmares without fail if he managed to get any sleep. He couldn't grasp the intensity of them, attempting to force them out of his mind by any means necessary.

He kept telling himself they would stop. He didn't want to accept they were even happening. Frozen in place, breathing hard, he'd dreamed he'd been dragged in and held under water that night.

He could still feel how cold the water had been and the hands that had held him down. He'd looked down at his arms, paranoid he'd missed something, but it was only a dream.

Feeling stupid for even looking. What bruises there were had long faded and according to the medical staff he should have been completely healed by now.

He couldn't bring himself to accept how much pain he was still in. He didn't care about his body. He didn't care about himself. It was easy to be reckless when all you did was keep pushing forward.

He'd barely gotten any sleep since returning, fearing more nightmares, and possessed by the idea that he needed to get information to end all of this. He forced himself to get up and check the time without making a sound.

He knew anything he did would look suspicious, but he was long past caring. Curfew would be lifted soon and he decided that since half his unit was missing, that meant training was optional.

Mornings were worse than ever. He felt sick. He'd felt sick ever since he was told he was being sent to Junon. He wondered if it had lasted this long already, and despite his healed injuries, then he’d never get rid of the feeling.

He ducked out before the others woke up and he spent that morning in the archives. He continued digging through files and was left wondering what had obsessed Sephiroth when he'd done the same.

If he'd spent over a week in here looking for something the company had done too, then could he be part of the desertion as well after all this time?

He worried about why Zack said that he'd returned to Modeoheim. He was unable to put it all together. He only felt guilty for even thinking of the other 1st and tried to focus on what he was there for instead.
He turned to look over his shoulder sharply even though no one had entered. He’d been doing it so often over the last week he started to get a cramp in his neck.

He knew he was being irrational, but every time someone spoke he felt they were accusing him of something and he couldn’t handle the realization that he was already losing it.

He didn't know why he was so stressed by the rest of his unit being in Corel, having just met them. He blamed it on being anxious about digging in to the company.

He always had the impression someone was sneaking up on him, and so everything alerted him. Every door opening, each footstep approaching had him looking back in fear.

He was still unnerved about seeing Zack again so soon and hadn’t been able to stop second guessing what little he’d said to him. He felt like he’d never speak to him again now that he knew he’d lost interest in SOLDIER.

He felt his stomach twist any time he tried to reason through whether or not things where better like this between them, since he needed time, especially to focus on figuring out how to bring the company down.

He’d come to accept that it couldn’t only be Zack who was being exploited in SOLDIER. Horrified at the thought of how many were routinely sent out to make way for new reactors.

He held his head in his hands, thinking about all the men that had been sent to Corel again. He hoped to god they would accept the proposal for their own sake.

The only reason they would send SOLDIER in is if the land negotiations weren't going well. He had to stop reading. It wasn't possible he hadn't made the connection before.

He’d only ever been on the defensive. And even when he was sent to Modeoheim, deserters weren’t exactly civilians. He couldn’t fathom that SOLDIER was really developed just to fight over more mako.

He couldn't understand how many could willingly kill over more energy extraction when everyone already lived so comfortably. They all trusted Shinra's expertise and standards without ever questioning their motive.

He realized that if there was one slogan Shinra had pushed over the years, it was that mako was the only choice, the only method of operation, of military efficiency, of control.

It felt as if everything he'd done since joining Shinra was necessary, necessary to get hired, necessary not to get fired. All necessary to get in to SOLDIER, and that he'd never questioned why he’d wanted it until everything started to go wrong.

He hated Shinra too much now to only be doing this for Zack’s sake anymore. He wanted to save him still, but after everything they’d been through, he couldn’t risk letting himself become delusional again. This was greater than either of them.

He’d left his phone in storage and had used an old emergency exit to go up a floor to the archives while carrying a handful of his own paperwork. Measures like those usually appeased his anxiety, but that morning was still weighing on him.

He got back in to the habit of working out when he was stressed. Taking breaks to do squats, push-ups, sit-ups, anything he could do without equipment. It allowed him a moment to decompress and start over.
He spent the morning reading through old files and reports and was disturbed at how many times town names were redacted. Some pages had so much information crossed out that they should have just been shredded.

He didn't know what to look for, but by back tracking through related files, it was all there. All classified under administrative research, or natural resource development.

He found that Corel was a mining town that had been listed among prospective Mako production sites years ago. Even with all the reactors they had, they still wanted to build more.

He was cautious to put every binder or folder back from where he'd taken it before going over another. If confronted, he would just claim he'd found the wrong one for his paperwork.

He rummaged through for hours, but the constant disruption of revisiting his conversation with Zack was plaguing him. He kept thinking about how to confront Tseng, but didn’t see any way the man would ever listen to someone like him.

He hated letting his mind stray. Even while reading rudimentary project proposals, or maintenance reports, while trying to line up Shinra’s implication in any known disaster over the last 20 years, he’d still think of Zack instead.

It made him feel severely nauseous. He couldn’t control his thoughts, let alone steady his own breathing. Accepting that there couldn’t be anything between them because he already had 6 other links was wearing thin.

He’d told him all he could for now. He had to take advantage of any time he had left until a mission came up again. By all odds he hoped he’d figure out what to do before then.

He lost track of how many push-ups he’d done while agonizing over the realization that he’d clearly brushed the older man off only to realize that if he lost interest in him, and if he got demoted because of it, he’d surely be fired.

He laughed until his arms gave out. Only managing to stop laughing hysterically when he rolled on to his back. The thought of how pitiful he must look on the ground if anyone was monitoring brought him full-circle back to anger.

His arms were sore, but he begrudgingly got up and held on to a shelf to catch his breath. He wiped tears from his eyes and returned to the binder filled with documentation on the Nibelheim reactor he’d been unable to finish reading earlier.

He tried to convince himself that reading something familiar might dim the fear of getting fired. Except that all it had done was remind himself of everything he’d run away from expecting to return on different terms someday.

He kept telling himself to accept that no matter how Zack ended up feeling about him, that he needed to at least try to keep his job in order to shut the company down.

The next thing he knew the sound of the door opening behind him woke him up from yet another nightmare. Cloud was so disoriented at the sight of the short redhead walking towards him that he took a few moments to even realize he was still in the archives.

He closed the binder he’d fallen asleep on and stood up drowsily, backing away as Cissnei continued to approach, forgetting all about his contingency plan.

"What are you doing down here?"
She interrogated dryly, but he still took another step back, looking away
"Nothing."

"Lying won't get you out of this."

She stood over the pile of paperwork he'd brought with him and the binder labeled Nibelheim Research and Development.

"Nibelheim? There's a reactor there, right?"

"Yes."

"I finally had time to return to Midgar to catch up on internal affairs. You've been here everyday it seems."

She advanced again and he took another step back.

"You'll have to excuse my tardiness, there are many pressing matters and I thought I'd been quite clear in my warnings. So spare me the excuses and fill me in, why Nibelheim?"

"Why not?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

Cissnei warned, moving closer again, but when he didn't respond she lost her patience. She grabbed one of his arms, moving behind him and shoving him down on the nearest desk, twisting his arm behind his back.

He hadn't seen it coming and hit the surface with a sharp grunt of pain before he realized she'd pinned him so easily. He tried to push back from the desk with his free hand but couldn't.

He was too weak, but even if he'd been able to match her strength, he had no will to fight her. It wasn't just because she was a Turk, or younger than him, but because she was a woman. He'd never been assaulted by a woman before.

"Let go."

He attempted, but only felt her push down harder in response.

"Why Nibelheim?"

"I'm from there."

He offered desperately through the pain, holding back cries while she continued to twist his arm.

"That doesn't give you permission to rummage through company property."

Tears started to fall as he struggled to hold back another scream, trying to muffle his agony, but the disgust in her voice was evident.

"What were you looking for?"

She asked with just as much impatience. She'd taken out her cellphone and was scrolling through it, keeping him pinned with only one hand.
"Nothing."

Cloud answered evenly despite the pain. Trying to keep his arm from dislocating from the amount of pressure she was placing took what little strength he had.

"I will write you up for this. I don't care that you're really from Nibelheim. Just spit it out."

She threatened, putting her phone away after having checked his personnel file, then leaned down over him.

"Why are you making trouble for the company? Is it for him? Did he ask you to do this?"

She sounded angrier by the second and he couldn't stop himself from answering through the pain.

"He didn't."

"I know you talked to him yesterday. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing!"

"What did he say? Did you tell him about Junon?"

"No!"

Cloud shut his eyes hard at the reminder but it only allowed him to picture that night so he forced his eyes back open instead, tears still streaming from them, increasingly desperate against the pain.

"He.."

Cloud started but was forced to hold back another scream, cringing in pain, he was too exhausted to hold his arm back anymore.

"Are you really this weak?"

She put more pressure on his arm to make her point but he couldn't contain himself from screaming out in pain.

"You're a waste of time and resources."

She glared down at him, but Cloud could only stare across to the other side of the room, trying to focus on anything but the pain despite the tears blurring his vision.

She started pulling his arm further back and he felt like he would pass out before she'd manage to break it. Groaning through grit teeth he regretted not taking her seriously sooner.

"Do you let everyone treat you this way?"

She asked, pushing him down harder at first before hesitating at her own words.

"Is this how he.."

She pulled back and let go of him, raising her voice as she backed away.

"Give up! If he confronts you again, say you couldn't find whatever it was. You're better off not knowing okay."

She ordered, turning to leave before looking back when he hadn't responded.
"Okay?!!"
"..."

Cloud was rubbing his strained arm, barely able to look back at her, let alone respond.

"I’m serious. Give up on him too! You'll never be useful. You're clearly a mistake."

She’d added before leaving, but he didn't have time to dwell on her orders when he saw that he was late for his shift.

He returned the binder to it's place before gathering all his files and hurrying back to his quarters to at least change his shirt. He was drenched in sweat from all the push-ups he had done earlier.

He was scolded upon arrival but otherwise his shift went on as they all had. They'd given him extra work for not respecting his schedule, but he'd already taken up the habit of staying late after work anyways.

It was yet another opportunity to stay anywhere quiet and deserted before it was necessary for him to be elsewhere. He needed the time to think, especially that night.

If he could piece anything together, he looked up what he could through the company's intranet. Things he couldn't easily access otherwise since computers weren't set up anywhere but in administrative offices.

They’d been having him go over piles and piles of reports on Security personnel in the infantry to transcribe the information in summary for the new database. Shinra was finally going paperless it seemed and he hated every moment of it.

He especially hated having to decide what was pertinent information about perfect strangers, and even less about the ones that he knew. He started to doze off again, wondering what that Turk thought Zack was using him for information on.

Maybe Cissnei was right when she said he was a mistake. Seeing Zack again so suddenly had left him shaken, hoping he could forget about it all.

He could only dread how their next mission would go. He wasn’t sure if he should convince him to quit, or convince him to take the company down with him instead.

Cloud worried he’d lost his conscience long ago when it came to him. He managed to doze off once again before the sound of the door to the office opening woke him up and he lifted his head from off his arm suddenly.

He stared at his monitor for a second, forgetting what his nightmare was about when he saw articles on Shinra's arrival in Nibelheim left open. He closed his browser as quickly as possible before looking back at who had entered.

Zack was already standing just a short distance away from him, smiling at him with his hands held behind his back almost shyly.

"Working late?"

Zack asked casually, but Cloud stood up stiffly in return, staring at him as if he doubted he was really there.
"Yeah."

"I knew you were a hard worker, but they don’t really make people work past curfew do they?"

“No.”

Cloud answered, glancing at the nearest clock instinctively, noting that it was indeed almost curfew. He tried to work up the resolve to leave and avoid whatever this was.

His heart was racing, and Zack was definitely really there. The pain in his arm from that morning reminded him it was all real. He turned his back to him to save his files and turn off the computer.

“What do they have you doing down here anyways?”

Zack stood tall before him, smiling while looking around the plain office with curiosity all the same.

“Nothing important.”

Cloud answered bluntly as he then gathered up the portion of paperwork he’d set aside for for next day. Fumbling with the stacks of folders for an instant, he had to lean on the desk to steady himself.

He hated always having the same reaction to him. His chest hurt, the pressure was suffocating and he couldn't think, holding the stack tightly in his arms while literally trying to get a grip.

“It has to be something?”

Zack insisted, clearly about to go off on some speech about how all work was important again when Cloud snapped.

“What do you want?”

“What?”

As soon as he’d heard the confusion in his voice he'd turned back to him to apologize.

“Sorry.”

He apologized, wishing he hadn't said anything at all in the first place. He dreaded making things worse between them and looked past him, frustrated that he was blocking his only path to leave.

“No, I’m sorry. Whatever happened, I didn’t mean it.”

Zack was staring at the ceiling , hurt and perplexed, providing yet another makeshift apology.

“That’s the problem.”

Cloud pointed out, resenting the spite in his voice, but unable to contain himself.

“What?”

Zack was just as confused, but Cloud clarified.

“You didn’t mean it.”

Silence crept in between them and Cloud checked the time again before attempting to step around him.
“I’m sorry if I didn’t mean it?”

Zack offered, or questioned, while stepping in his way, but Cloud was too anxious to tell the difference in his tone anymore, raising his instead.

“Stop apologizing!”

Zack took a step back from shock before furrowing his brow and stepping back firmly in place not to let him pass.

“Fine. But I have this feeling that I-”

“Shut up. You don’t even know what you’re apologizing for!”

Cloud cut him off, glaring at the ground, frustrated he couldn’t get past him.

“Woah, hold on. I said fine. I’ll stop. Just tell me what didn’t I mean?”

Cloud looked up, frozen by his plea. It made no sense to him to share pain that the other man was better off not knowing.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Cloud answered, visibly aggravated as he tightened his grip on his paperwork. He tried to move past him again, but Zack didn’t hesitate to move in front of him.

“It does.”

“Not to you.”

"That's not true."

Zack was getting frustrated as well, taking a step closer, but Cloud was almost past him and he panicked.

“Wait!”

Zack’s hands flew up from behind his back to block him, except all Cloud could see were the flowers that suddenly sprung before him. Zack even seemed surprised himself, pulling back shyly for an instant before offering them to him.

Cloud was stunned. He didn't understand the offer. He wanted to refuse them, but Zack’s pleading gaze disarmed him, causing him to almost drop his files.

“I wanted you to have these.”

Zack stepped closer, still holding out the bouquet of mismatched flowers. Cloud had almost reached out for them, tightening his grip on the files he attempted to balance in one arm.

He wanted to be upset that they were just another apology. Or that it wasn’t customary to receive flowers. Except all he saw was how much he’d wanted to make him smile.

Zack's face was reddening at an impressive rate while he hesitated and he couldn't believe how embarrassed he looked, shyly glancing at anything but him while he waited for a response.

Zack couldn’t stand feeling flustered. His hand still outstretched with his gift. He scratched the
back of his head with the other for a moment before caving in and speaking up again.

“I, uh. I mean, I can get you something else if you don’t like them.”

“No. I do.”

Cloud finally took them, staring down at them, wondering why he felt guilty for accepting them.

“Really?”

Zack's relief was apparent, his hand remaining outstretched for a moment in disbelief.

“They’re beautiful.”

Zack smiled wider and shifted his hands to his hips, as if victorious, and Cloud couldn't help but smile back at how happy he looked.

“So, you're done with work, right? Can I take you out to make up for last time?”

Cloud looked back down at the flowers. It had all been his fault last time. He wouldn’t let it happen again. But doubt crept in and he wasn’t sure it was worth the risk.

He kept staring at the flowers he'd tucked between the files and his chest and tried to think of an excuse to say no. Except all he felt instead was excitement and he resented himself.

“Well?”

Zack insisted keenly, but just as he did his phone went off and he looked angry at the interruption, putting his hands together to apologize first.

“Sorry. Hold on.”

Zack answered the call dryly, looking around the office again.

“Hello? ...Oh, whatever. Don't even. I already told you, I'm still annoyed with you. Get a 2nd for something that simple.”

Zack shut his phone off abruptly and returned it to his pocket, acting like nothing had happened, but when he saw Cloud's shocked expression he chuckled.

“Sorry about that. Tseng’s been.. annoying, lately.”

“I see.”

Cloud answered evenly, but his heart was racing from the fear of what Tseng would do next, staring down at the flowers anxiously again before Zack repeated.

“So, are you free?”

Cloud didn’t know what to say, uneasy, captivated by his shining eyes once more, he quickly looked away, nervously balancing all the items in his arms before speaking up.

“I should go.”

“It’s not that late. Let’s go out, just for a bit.”

Zack insisted, but when he still got no response he took another step forward and Cloud inched
away, backing up in to his desk awkwardly.

Zack dropped his arms along with his shoulders and looked dejected by his reaction before tilting his head in suspicion.

“What’s up? It’ll be fine. Half your unit is missing anyways.”

Zack tried a different strategy when he still received no response.

“We can do anything you want. My treat again.”

Zack was smiling his best smile.

“Just the two of us?”

Cloud asked hesitantly, but Zack didn’t seem pleased by the question.

“What’s wrong with that?”

Zack retorted and Cloud shrugged, avoiding his persistent gaze by setting his things back down on his desk. He then stuck the flowers in a half-empty glass of water on his desk before locking up his files.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun!”

Zack encouraged, gesturing excitedly as he always did, raising his fists decisively. Cloud leaned against his desk, still wondering how to get out of it, yet succumbing to his smile.

“Okay.”

“All right! Let’s go!”

Cloud moved to leave the room, relieved when he let him pass. Zack followed, but only after whispering his thanks to Aerith for the luck first.

As soon as they were out in the hallway Zack easily matched his step, smiling down at him fondly until they got to the elevator. He then turned to him after hitting the button.

“So, where do you want to go?”

He got closer and raised his arm as if he was going to bring it around him, so Cloud raised his own arm to meet his instead, turning away from his reach.

Zack stopped and they stared at each other for a moment before he recognized the gesture and tapped their forearm together with a smile.

“Anywhere.”

Cloud answered, relieved when Zack returned his awkward gesture again.

“Karaoke?”

The excitement in his proposition was excessive, but Cloud didn’t falter.

“Anywhere but Karaoke.”

Cloud’s tone was decisive and Zack instantly dropped his arms, dejected for an instant before
bouncing right back.

“Okay, okay, anywhere else it is.”

Zack followed Cloud in to the elevator when it arrived and hit down for the lobby.
They stood in the elevator in silence for a moment. Cloud stared at the descending numbers on the display while Zack stared at him.

He wanted to say something, anything to break the tension. He was feeling more and more self-conscious by the second, shifting uncomfortably, afraid to meet his wandering eyes.

“How’d you get that?”

Zack gestured to his left wrist and Cloud looked down at the red marks that were already showing signs of bruising. He wanted more than nothing to be out of sight, but he knew hiding it would only encourage him to get a better look.

“In training.”

Cloud shrugged and Zack looked concerned, confused even, until the elevator stopped and they exited without sparing an instant.

“So, how’s the new unit?”

Zack hummed his question, following him through the lobby. Cloud tried not to react, but all he could think of was if Williams would still hate him if he even made it back from Corel.

“Average.”

He answered plainly, staring ahead. He couldn't bare to look at him anymore. He still couldn't quite grasp that they were leaving the building together.

“Huh?”

Zack was baffled. By attempting to sound neutral, he just came off as detached and he didn’t quite understand, almost missing a step when they crossed the doors before debating.

“Your squadmates I’ve met so far seemed really nice. What do you mean they’re average?”

“Nothing.”

Cloud didn't want to explain, whatever he was thinking it was never good.

“What? It can’t be nothing. If you don’t think they-”

Zack started, but quickly got cut off.
“It’s nothing. I just had a disagreement with one of ‘em, the rest are fine.”

Cloud admitted quickly, not wanting to draw out the topic, he had disagreements with a lot of people.

Zack softened his frown despite being cut off, giving him a sympathetic look in return. They’d reached the central square of sector 8, heading towards sector 7.

“What kinda disagreement?”

He hadn't wanted to press but when Cloud failed to elaborate he felt obligated to ask, met only with a shrug instead.

“Was it about Links?”

He insisted again, finally catching his attention

“Huh?”

Cloud almost froze in place, trying to push the details of said fight to the back of his mind when he remembered he was right.

“That’s all your squadmates were going on about when I dropped by looking for you earlier.”

Zack admitted, trying to make light of the situation despite his reaction, still wishing they could just talk about it.

“Oh.”

Cloud couldn’t affirm or deny, the anger at what any of them might of kindly said to him had already seized him until he realized he was overreacting. He’d always let anger get the better of him.

Zack waited for a response, matching his heavy pace easily, albeit practically hovering with impatience. He smiled nervously before looking off to the side to ask.

“So, what’s a Link?”

Cloud’s eyes widened at the question, avoiding Zack’s when he looked back at him. He was still terrified of not knowing how any of it worked, but he had to accept that it was better to talk about it now and get it out of the way, rather than pretend they had something special.

“The people you’re linked with. With your DMW.”

He explained plainly, keeping his eyes ahead.

“Oh!”

Zack smiled at finally being clued in, his surprise changing to a laughter the next instant.

“That’s what they meant.”

He laughed again.

"Sorry, I’m so used to it, I forget I have that thing in sometimes.”
Zack attempted to lighten the mood, but Cloud wasn’t smiling back, he only watched as he rubbed the back of his head where the chip was installed anxiously. Even if he couldn’t feel it anymore, he still remembered where they’d implanted it.

“How many do you have?”

Cloud asked, turning his eyes to the ground, but when Zack stopped in the middle of the street he turned to face him hesitantly, regretting the question.

“Uhhh..”

Zack was the one looking away for once, still rubbing the back of his head, nervously meeting eyes for just a moment before attempting to sound as casual as possible.

“A few. Why?”

Cloud shrugged in response again, wishing he could just apologize or admit it wasn’t any of his business. He wanted to but he couldn’t bring himself to before Zack spoke up again.

“I guess you already know? You’re one.”

Cloud stared up at him in fear at his admission before realizing how affected he was, looking away in yet another vain attempt to compose himself. Unwilling to let himself suffer in his presence even if the uncontrollable pain in his chest told him he didn't have a choice.

Knowing he was one and hearing him say it were two very different emotions, he’d discovered. It was only when he glanced at him again to see how flustered he'd become waiting for a response that he wished he could say something, but seeing him like that was too hard to acknowledge.

“So was Angeal.”

Zack admitted next, eyes cast low, and Cloud couldn’t believe he’d confirmed anyone else, let alone another man.

“I think he’s still alive.”

His tone had been even lower and Cloud took a step forward in shock. He wanted to say something, or do something, anything. All he could manage was to keep his voice from shaking in response.

“That’s a good thing, right?”

He couldn't bring himself to step any closer, dreading his answer.

“I hope so.”

Zack looked up again, giving him a small smile before being confused by the horror that crossed the younger man’s face.

“Isn’t Sephiroth in Modeoheim right now? What if he finds him first?”

He couldn't help but question, if he'd survived, was that why he'd been sent?

Zack shook his head violently and crossed his arms suddenly.

“He would never. He still cares about him too.”
He answered in such a matter-of-fact way that Cloud felt guilty for worrying. He’d just never heard of Sephiroth ever showing mercy to traitors or enemies of Shinra. The realization that he really didn’t know anything about the desertion made him feel worse for implying anything at all.

“Sorry.”

Cloud apologized, wishing he could apologize for everything else too.

“No, it’s okay.”

Zack reassured before continuing awkwardly, shifting his hands to his hips.

“Actually, Sephiroth’s a Link too. The others are all friends too, or at least I thought so.”

He added sheepishly at first, before ending on an uncertain note. Everything he'd said about the Turks had him questioning some of said deep friendships.

“Oh.”

Cloud answered faintly before looking back down the street reflexively looking for a way out. He wondered why he didn’t feel surprised another 1st was close to him too, let alone Sephiroth. He’d already had his doubts about Angeal, but him too? If he liked men like them, then why had he ever been interested in him?

“What do you mean, Oh?”

Zack asked defensively when he just fell silent.

“Nothing.”

Cloud turned away, trying to sign for them to just drop it and continue walking, but they had no actual destination and Zack only moved closer, rounding him to block his path.

“That was a really personal topic, you know. You shouldn’t just answer -Oh-.”

Cloud wanted to apologize again but the way he’d moved to confront him had him stepping backwards, staring at the ground instead. The tone of their argument had his heart pounding, but he wasn’t even certain what they were arguing over.

“I’ll just have to ask you something personal in return. It’s only Fair.”

Zack cracked a smile at his own joke and Cloud didn’t know if he was more surprised by his malleable sense of conversational justice, or his terrible word play.

“So, who was the last person you kissed?”

He asked, staring him down for an answer.

“What?”

He wasn’t sure he’d heard the question right, but the indignation of his response made him realize he knew exactly what he’d asked. Wishing he could avoid his curious gaze he took another step back and Zack bit his lower lip in response, waiting for an answer but letting his patience fail him.

“Too personal?”
Zack asked, smiling apologetically but all he could do was stare at the ground, unable to bring himself to lie to him or tell him the truth.

“Look, I was only asking because, I have a feeling it was me.”

His tone had changed entirely and Cloud still felt guilty for dragging them through this again. Somehow he was piecing things together and he was reminded of how ill-prepared he was to face any of it yet.

“Did I, kiss you? Is that why you’ve been avoiding me since Junon?”

Zack pressed on when he still received no response, unable to stop himself from finding out if his hunch was right.

“I’m not.”

He lied, and Zack’s expression sombered further. It was evident that all he was doing was hurting him. He felt faint again, glancing around them to make sure no one was listening in on their very awkward conversation.

“If you’re angry you can say so.”

Zack practically begged.

“It won’t happen again.”

He vowed next, trying to coax the truth out of him, but it only made him feel like a fool unable to face it. He remembered how he’d asked him to run away with him, making his chest tighten again and his throat start burning, fighting back tears. He hated how pitiful he must have looked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Cloud finally managed and Zack shook his head instantly in protest.

“Of course it does.”

“I thought you didn’t remember.”

Cloud gave in, rubbing his forehead in frustration before glancing up at him again, as astonished as ever by his serious gaze.

“I don’t, exactly, but if I did, then I meant it.”

Zack admitted, swallowing hard before averting his eyes again. He’d stared at him with such an intensity that he couldn’t accept this could be happening in the middle of sector 7.

“Why me?”

He finally asked, giving in to all his insecurities before he could get a hold of himself.

“Huh?”

Zack stood in disbelief while Cloud felt foolish for asking, instantly regretting it from how much he smiled next, leaning in to emphasize his response.

“Why you? Because you’re smart, and you’re hardworking, and the nicest guy I’ve met. You’re a
country boy too, and you’re really soft on the eyes.”

He strung his answer with compliments, clearly amused.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Cloud sounded deeply offended somehow, dismissing the deep blush creeping over his face by moving past him to head back down the street while Zack laughed softly at his huffed response, following after him.

“Which part?”

Zack kept chuckling when all he could do was frown at himself for not accepting anything he'd just said. Clearly he was just joking, he'd convinced himself.

“Hey, c’mon, you asked.”

He tried to brush off what he'd just said but couldn't resist making fun of it just one more time.

“Does this mean you won’t tell me what you like most about me next?”

Cloud finally glanced back up at him, pouting when he saw his cheeky smile at his own question. He had to bite his lip not to smile back, looking at the buildings and shop fronts as they walked by them instead.

“You’re unbelievable.”

He sighed out his remark but Zack only thanked him jokingly before laughing again.

“Hey, weren’t we supposed to find something fun to do?”

Zack reminded him, deciding to drop his demands for compliments.

“Right.”

He managed anxiously, staring at all the things for sale.

“Any ideas?”

Zack asked but he just shrugged and he was starting to get tired of it. Looking for places that were still open he read off shop names to him while they made their way in to sector 6, hoping something would spark his interest.

They’d walked past block after block and hadn’t passed anyone in a while besides a few patrolmen. He wondered if it was a result of the recent string of attacks, barely paying attention to the places they passed by.

“Oh this place is pretty good too, if you’re hungry.”

Zack just kept suggesting things, receiving no definitive responses besides vague head movements from the blond.

“Looks like Bowling 2000 is still open too, whatever that is.”

He had stopped to look inside the bowling venue out of curiosity but Cloud shook his head. Crossing in to sector 5 they’d slowed their pace and he started to worry they wouldn’t find
anything.

“Wow.”

Zack let out as they walked by a large shop with a window display. Stopping to make out exactly what had caught his eye, it appeared to be a gaudy purple gown.

He glanced up at him in confusion then frowned back at the rest of the gowns. The store was closed and filled entirely to extravagant evening-wear.

“That one would look good on you.”

Zack said next, but he couldn't tell if he was being serious.

“Wh-”

Cloud stopped himself from swearing, swallowing his anger at the insinuation that he'd ever wear a dress for him before turning it back on him.

“Only if you wear this one.”

He pointed abruptly at the most revealing dress in his proximity, an open-back shimmering yellow gown and Zack laughed before leaning towards him to answer.

“Whatever you want.”

He felt his chest seize at the thought of going through with it, turning away to press on instead.

“Not interested.”

Cloud huffed, ashamed of how hard his heart was racing from such a stupid joke. Even so, he'd soon matched his pace.

“I was just kidding.”

Zack was quick to deny his offer when he saw how upset he was, but Cloud was still attempting to process the embarrassment. He was angry he'd suggest he wear something like that for him, and even more at why he'd suggested that he should do the same. He started to doubt he wanted to understand how the older man really saw him.

First the flowers, and now this. Even if Zack did like men, it didn’t feel like he was being treated like one. Then again, he was nothing like his other links so why would he? He could only conclude that he’d rather be seen as nothing than -cute- to him.

“Oh this place. They have great items and they’re still open.”

Zack suggested and Cloud stopped to look at the shop, thankful for any excuse to stop picturing him in that dress. It didn’t look like much from outside but he didn’t want to waste another second, entering the store without a word.

They were soon greeted by the owner who seemed surprised to have any customers that night, immediately chatting Zack up on how quiet the city was as of late because of all the monsters and how SOLDIER needed to do a better job.

Cloud browsed the store silently, listening to Zack promise that he'd make the city safer. He recognized a lot of different weapons that were used in the infantry being sold, but the others were
far odder.

He looked over all the ones on the main wall display before moving through rows of various items grouped in no particular order. He couldn’t afford half of the things in the store himself and wasn’t going to let Zack waste anymore money on him.

“See anything you like?”

Zack came to hover over his shoulder but he moved on as soon as he’d asked.

“Not really.”

He noticed a baseball bat ridden with nails leaning in a corner between two displays. Lifting it up Cloud tried to figure out why they’d have something like that when they were already selling so many sophisticated weapons up front.

“That’s not for sale!”

The owner called out as soon as he saw Cloud holding the item. He nodded at them before looking back at the bat. Despite it’s crass design it felt like it could do a lot of damage.

When he looked back over his shoulder, Zack looked almost afraid, staring at it in his hands. Cloud smiled and put it back down before moving on to Zack’s surprising relief.

“Looks easy enough to make.”

Zack commented uneasily, but Cloud chuckled suddenly.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think Shinra would allow it.”

He shrugged off again, moving on to other items.

“Right.”

Zack was stunned by the sound of his quiet laugh, relieved that the mood had finally changed somewhat. Smiling lazily at him before returning to the task at hand, pointing out a set of accessories as they approached the next display.

“These have pretty good stats.”

Cloud had been reading over them too and nodded, ready to move on before Zack picked up an earring.

“+15 Magic each. Nice.”

Zack held up one of the small opals to his ear to see if it’d suit him and smiled, but as soon as Cloud saw what he was doing, he moved away. He’d never questioned the pearl earrings they all received when they became cadets. He’d never thought of changing it, but Zack was already heading over to the owner.

“I’ll take these.”

Just the thought of sharing a set with him had him panicking again. He felt entirely useless, deciding that he needed air and simply exiting the store in a daze. He’d only made it a few steps away before leaning against the brick wall of the next store to wait for him, feeling foolish for getting overwhelmed so easily again.
He felt light-headed and realized he hadn’t had anything to eat besides the ration he’d had that morning. Trying to return to a normal diet after being discharged from Junon had proved difficult and he hadn't been eating much in general. He was rubbing his forehead, trying to calm down but when he heard the sound of the shop’s door his heart was still racing.

“Cloud?”

He looked up to see Zack exiting the shop while fiddling with his own ear, evidently swapping his piercing for the newly purchased one. They seemed almost identical, but if you looked closely you could see the tones in the opal.

“Are you alright?”

Zack asked as he approached him, receiving only a nod in return at first before he managed to speak up.

"I just needed air."

He justified, struggling to face him at all.

“Oh okay.”

Zack smiled, pointing at his ear next.

“What do you think?”

He was still fishing for compliments

“It looks good.”

Cloud answered softly to Zack's surprise.

“May I?”

Zack asked next, reaching out to brush his hair behind his ear. When he shivered at his touch and looked away, presenting his ear to him, he went ahead and with surprising dexterity removed and replaced his earring easily. He then dropped his old pearl in his hand when he was done.

“Yes, looks good.”

He nodded to himself and smiled as Cloud quickly pocketed his old earring. Still leaning heavily against the wall he felt infinitesimal in his presence, feeling entirely undone by such a simple gesture, still feeling his fingers on his skin.

The next instant Zack was leaning in and he immediately raised a hand to his chest to push him away, except as soon as he pressed against his chest he felt himself lean in as well, meeting his lips with little regard to anything else.

He felt the taller man smile in to their kiss, just as he always did at first, but he couldn’t blame him, it was euphoric. Even such a tender embrace had him wishing he'd keep him against that wall, forcing himself to turn away in disgust at his own thoughts.

“That was just a thank you.”

Cloud made up the first excuse he could think of, moving away from him anxiously despite the way Zack was grinning in return, heading towards sector 5.
“I’m glad you like it that much. I thought it could be a gift to commemorate our link.”

Zack sounded assured, joining his side once more but Cloud couldn’t look at him. He wished he could stop acting like everything wasn’t alright, but the guilt of still wanting him despite everything that had happened was overbearing.

He started to think that Cissnei had been right. If he felt this sick over just a kiss, it had to be wrong. He must be the one misleading him after all.

“So, where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

Cloud answered absentmindedly.

“Wanna go back to my place?”

Zack had sounded overly casual to the point that it sounded nervous, but the look in his eyes when he didn’t answer right away cemented his embarrassment.

“No.”

Cloud finally answered but couldn't look at him when he answered. Living the other man’s emotions at every decision they made was agonizing. He was far too easy to read.

“We’re almost in sector 4 now, we’re bound to find something else.”

Zack added quickly, albeit cheerily, trying to make up for an innocent suggestion.

“If you could live anywhere, where would it be?”

Zack asked, doing his best to break the tension that had settled between them.

“I’ve never really thought about it before.”

Cloud was struck by the question. He’d gotten as far as wanting them to run away together the last time he’d thought about living at all, but he still hadn't considered where they’d go. Or where he'd go, if none of it worked out.

“Maybe a comfortable house on the outskirts, near Kalm?”

Zack suggested, hoping he'd manage to reignite some sort of conversation.

“Really? you don’t want a Shinra-mortgaged condo for your future wife and child?”

Zack’s tone had been earnest, but Cloud was unable to retain his bitter commentary on Midgar’s token lifestyle.

“Children!”

Despite his sarcasm, he was immediately corrected and he could only stare as Zack went on about his future plans.

“I love traveling, but if I had to settle down there’d have to be plenty of space. I’d rather be somewhere I can commute in from, instead of stuck in a place like this.”
Zack smiled as he elaborated, as if he could see it all so clearly already ahead of him. He was too stunned to say anything before Zack looked to him expectantly.

“What about you?”

“I don’t like the city either. It doesn’t feel like a place for people, let alone children.”

He admitted, staring at the ground.

“How many do you want?”

He asked in turn, as if knowing the answer wasn't worse than avoiding it, trying to accept it didn't concern him.

“At least two, but more would be nice.”

Zack continued before Cissnei spoke up unannounced from behind them.

“Kids? Already? Aren’t you skipping a few steps Mr. Fair?”

“Cissnei!?”

Zack jumped around from surprise, but Cloud could barely bring himself to face her again.

“Zack. What are you doing out this late, with a cadet?”

She turned her stare on to him and he knew he’d be no help. He couldn’t handle whatever she had to say in front of Zack, turning to head off down the next street without a word.

“What does that have to do with anything! Why are you here?”

Zack attempted to counter her question, but he’d already lost his nerve. And when he glanced back over his shoulder, said cadet was nowhere to be seen.

“Cloud?!”

He felt guilty for leaving. He should have been the one to tell her to fuck off, but he hadn’t wanted to lash out in front of him.

Fear of his own anger, and of what might happen, had made him leave him alone to sort it out. Fear slowed his pace, but he couldn’t turn back.

“Looks like he left. Smart kid, but what was all that talk about children?”

Cissnei had turned to the side, acting disinterested in her own question.

“Damnit. Didn’t I tell you to stop following me around!”

Zack raised his voice again and Cissnei crossed her arms.

“I was just passing by and happ-”

“No you weren’t! I’m sick of these games with you and Tseng. Stop following me. And stop texting me when you know I’m busy too!”

“Zack. Would you k-”
“I’m serious!”

Zack yelled back over her as he turned to leave. He turned the same corner and started running to catch up, looking back to make sure she wasn’t following.

“Hey Spikey! Wait a minute!”

Cloud didn’t react, walking on stubbornly, but he’d soon reached him and fell in to his pace.

“Sorry about that.”

Zack sounded exasperated, bringing an arm up around his shoulders when he noticed him looking back over his to make sure they weren't followed either.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. It’s none of her business anyways.”

Zack tried to squeeze his shoulder gently but Cloud only moved out of his reach. Reminded of how much his arm still hurt from that morning he stared on ahead.

“So uh, what were we talking about?”

Zack was trying to pretend everything was under control but Cloud couldn’t shake the anger he’d felt towards her. He hated how complicated everything was.

“Oh, right, moving to the country.”

Zack laughed and Cloud started walking faster, still on edge from their sudden encounter.

“You can’t be serious.”

“What?”

“About us.”

“In the country?”

Zack tried to understand where the conversation had gone wrong again when he realized they were no longer heading towards the next sector. They were reaching the edge of sector 4 instead. Repairs were still under way in the furthest parts of most sectors and Zack wondered why Cloud didn't notice.

Some buildings still hadn't been repaired, and where holes had been blown through to the support beams, makeshift steel grating patched roads. He spent most of his time in and out of HQ that he hadn't noticed Midgar was still in bad shape, losing his nerve at his own question when Cloud hadn't responded.

“Uh, I’m kidding. I’m just kidding. It could be nice? It was just a thought. I didn’t mean me and, you, exactly. I don’t know why I brought up kids earlier either. Sorry.”

He covered up what he'd said with ease, following him to the edge of the city.

“How would we, anyways.”

Cloud added dryly, but he just smiled back.

“There’s always adoption.”
Zack's suggestion struck him to the point that he got lost in his thoughts, starting to hate the word Sorry so much that his directness always prompted him to be. He hadn't been kidding at all, yet his lack of a response only created another unbearable silence between them.

“Um, anyways. So why do they have you doing office work nowadays anyhow?”

He asked next, ever changing pace.

“Because of you.”

Cloud answered bitterly despite himself, reaching the edge of the city.

“How?”

Zack sounded shocked, making him regret his accusation.

“New unit, new orders.”

He tried to brush off, looking at the ruble around them.

“Why?”

Zack was starting to lose his nerve, staring down in to the pitch darkness bellow them.

“Everyone in my unit is on stand by, for SOLDIER.”

He admitted, still unsure why he'd accepted in the first place.

“You're all Links?”

Zack asked but when he nodded in return he had no choice but to look away for a change.

“Are you pissed at me?”

He asked next but Cloud could only look back up in confusion.

“How?”

He hadn't wanted to engage him, but the thought of being angry at him was too absurd to accept.

“Is that why you quit on joining SOLDIER?”

Zack asked next out of desperation, taking a step forward when he still didn't answer.

“No.”

He didn't see the point in lying anymore.

“Then, why?”

Zack reached out but he'd just as soon taken a step back.

“I don’t trust them anymore”

He practically spat out, looking back around at the destroyed sector.

“You don’t trust me?”
Zack asked sincerely.

“No, I don’t trust Shinra.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading
as always
Please comment
Chapter Summary

How difficult is it, to have a difficult conversation twice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You don’t trust me?”

Zack had asked instantly, nothing but self-conscious.

“I don’t trust Shinra.”

Cloud responded dryly. He felt as if he’d finally gained some ground until he looked out over the edge of the city. There was nothing but darkness surrounding them below and he was reminded of all the nights he’d wanted to jump.

Zack stood with his arms folded, staring him down for an explanation before sighing when Cloud didn’t elaborate. He turned away to look up at the reactor beyond the bridge where they were standing.

“Not a lot of people do these days.”

He was surprised by his answer, realizing then that Zack had certainly already been through all this when Angeal deserted. Little did he know, half his links hated Shinra.

“We were on the wrong side of the war.”

Cloud wished he’d sounded more remorseful, coming off just as dry as earlier. When Zack didn’t turn back he worried he wouldn't understand. He’d fought Genesis and Angeal over Shinra, but this was different.

“It wouldn’t have ended if-”

Zack turned back around to argue, but stopped abruptly when Cloud advanced on him. He watched with bewilderment when he took one of his hands in his.

“There shouldn’t have been a war.”

He averted his gaze despite his decisive statement and Zack could only continue to stare in disbelief.

“Mako doesn’t justify what was done.”

Cloud elaborated after some time, but it took everything he had not to let his anger show through his voice. Instead he held his hand tightly between his, as if praying for his understanding even though he’d never prayed before, troubled by the thought of how many had perished for nothing.

“I warned them to stand down.”
Zack recounted suddenly, but his tone was pleading for innocence.

“They were protecting their homeland.”

He responded plainly, loosening his grip inadvertently. As soon as Zack felt it, he took both his hands in his next, shoulders sagging down with grief.

“It was necessary, they all said it was necessary.”

Zack tried to remember Angeal’s orders, but he could only see how eager he’d been to please him. Cloud watched his desperation as he’d gone silent, frozen in place himself.

“I was only following orders.”

He justified again, but his voice was small and Cloud hated how much pain there was despite his choice of words.

“I know.”

Cloud accepted, not expecting more.

“I’m sorry.”

The remorse in Zack’s voice was clear, but he couldn’t bring himself to embrace him. He only felt regret vividly when the weight of the conversation set in and it was too painful to continue. He hesitantly pulled his hands away.

“That’s why I gave up on SOLDIER.”

He hadn’t known how else to divert the conversation from the war, even though he hadn’t been on the front lines, the guilt was enough as it was. He dreaded knowing more.

“Are you going to leave Midgar?”

Zack questioned worriedly, watching him retreat slowly.

“Not yet.”

He said apprehensively, taking another step back.

“But you will?”

Zack tried to hide the panic in his voice but failed.

“Yes.”

Cloud’s was blunt, thinking of what to say next instead of thinking through his answer, but Zack looked devastated at the thought. He hated that look on his face.

“Shinra isn’t doing anything except building an army to get more Mako. More Mako for what?”

Cloud practically spat his question, but he hadn’t intended to sound so angry. Almost tripping over a stray slab of steel while backing away he crossed his arms to stand his ground.

“For people?”

Zack attempted to counter, clearly uncertain of his stance as he barely gestured.
“People aren’t any happier with more appliances.”

He stared at the ground as they resumed arguing, if only to divert his glare. It was becoming too difficult to keep this up, he knew he needed to give up already.

“I guess not.”

Zack ceded and scratched the back of his head.

“They’re not using you to defend Midgar, they’re using you to get more Mako. There’s no glory in that.”

His tone was just as bitter and Zack’s head dropped lower when his shoulders sagged again from his words. Wishing he could stop himself from the harm speaking his mind brought with it, he anxiously moved on.

“Half my unit is doing that right now. I can’t.”

Cloud held his arms tightly across his own chest, worrying about their mission.

“Where?”

Zack had thought people were missing again, but with all the new recruits to train it was hard to keep track.

“Corel.”

He confirmed, hoping they’d return soon without further tragedy. Everything about this was difficult, and he didn’t believe it was possible to feel so much in such a short amount of time, yet he couldn’t help but go on despite his shaking voice.

“When we first met, I asked you what it was like to be in SOLDIER. I wanted to know how you felt about it, because I didn’t know what I was after anymore.”

Cloud admitted and looked up at Zack to make sure he remembered. The look on Zack’s face when he did made him realize that he knew what he wanted to admit next, but he bit his lip to stop himself.

“I didn’t know how to answer then. And I guess I still don’t.”

Zack spoke up earnestly.

“I wanted to do good for others, and I thought that being a hero was the best I could do.”

He smiled sadly with a shrug before adding.

“I wanted to be someone.”

“You’re someone to me.”

Cloud was surprised by how quickly he’d responded but forgot all his fears when he smiled back. He held his gaze long enough to realize he’d stopped breathing, turning away to catch his breath in an attempt to get a hold of himself.

“I didn’t feel like a hero after Wutai, and it wasn’t because they gave all the credit to Sephiroth.”
Zack rolled his eyes at his own admission before looking back up at the reactor.

“I didn’t question anything. I just wanted to impress Angeal.”

He sounded remorseful, despite his self-deprecating tone.

“Everything was different after the desertion. When I finally made 1st I thought I’d be happy. But everything had already changed.”

He continued, but Cloud hated the look of regret on his face and wanted to tell him everything had been wrong from the start. He tried to chose his words but all he could focus on from the desertion were those terrible wings.

“What they’ve done to Angeal, and Genesis, will it happen to you too?”

He couldn’t contain his worry, he wanted to reach out to him once more, but felt guilty for letting go in the first place.

“I don’t think so.”

Zack had looked down at his hands, as if doubting his own statement. He didn’t quite understand either, but those were Hollander’s experiments, project G. He doubted he had any part in all of that.

“Hey don’t worry, I feel fine.”

He tried to reassure when he saw his friend was agonizing at the thought. The horror of his body possibly mutating and decaying had shaken him to the point that he’d reached out and wrapped his arms around his waist, hugging him suddenly. He could feel both their hearts racing and he felt terrified.

Zack didn't say anything, he simply wrapped his arms around him in return and let him rest his head against his chest. They stood together immobile for some time while he tried to calm down, except all he could think about was how last time they’d been this close, he'd asked the man to run away with him.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Cloud whispered, holding on tighter at his own admission.

“It’ll be all right.”

Zack assured, bringing a hand up to stroke the back of his head.

“How?”

He questioned, only a little louder, pulling back to look at him.

“We’ll figure it out.”

Zack sounded so sure.

“We’ll figure it out.”

Cloud repeated, fixating on his use of we as he gazed up at him as if those words had been all the courage he’d needed. Zack gazed back down at him, sliding his hand to his neck before leaning and pulling him closer when his lips pressed against his.
He closed his eyes, consumed by the warmth of his strong arms and his body leaning in to his. He slid his tongue in to his mouth as soon as he could think to. Zack’s body sank down against his readily in response, smiling in to their kiss again while Cloud sucked on his lower lip.

When he slid his tongue back in to his mouth and around his he heard Zack moan softly. Somehow it was different than all the moans he’d heard from him before. He couldn’t help but kiss deeper in response, almost losing his balance trying to support too much of his weight while their kiss deepened.

Zack tasted too good to stop. He wanted to push him down and climb on top of him the next instant to kiss him harder, but he couldn't accept how strong the impulse was. It was obscene to him how difficult it was to break their kiss then, turning away he brought a hand up to cover his mouth while he caught his breath.

He was ashamed. It didn’t feel real. He was so happy even though he felt like he was making a horrible mistake again. He hadn’t been clear about what was really going on, but it was too painful to explain.

Zack had taken a moment to catch his breath himself. Trailing fingers absently over his own lower lip, lost in thought for a moment from the sensation before leaning down to attempt to meet his eyes again.

Cloud refused to look up, panicking when he felt an arm wrap around him to pull him closer again. He roughly stepping out of his embrace, keeping his eyes on the ground.

“We shouldn't see each other for a while.”

Cloud said through pained breaths.

“What?”

Zack was blindsided, staring back in shock. When he didn't respond he stepped forward again, causing his friend to step back in turn, both freezing in place once more.

"Then what was that?"

Zack's voice rose with panic, but Cloud wasn't thinking of a justification, he just needed to warn him, again.

“I just, could you just, avoid me for a while? You should keep avoiding the Turks too. All of them.”

Cloud changed his mind, wanting to drop the topic all together. He wished he could focus, but the guilt of wanting to leave him ignorant tore at him.

“What's /for a while/ ?”

Zack asked, still bewildered by their kiss and unable to grasp the blond's change of heart.

“You know I’m not saying that because I’m jealous, right?”

Cloud wondered why he hadn’t noticed how fast his heart was racing again until that moment. The look of dejection on Zack's face silenced all else and he felt as if he’d lied. He was jealous of his other links.
“Right.”
Zack’s voice was as distant as his delayed response. He scratched the back of his head from abject confusion.

“I’m only worried.”
Cloud justified anxiously, trying to figure out what to say to make things right, but anything he could say would only make things worse.

“You don’t have to worry about me.”
Zack reached for his hands to reassure him, taking them in his to pull him back closer to him gently. Cloud was left staring down at their hands, abandoning his resolve to keep his distance once more.

“That’s what you said last time.”
Cloud sounded bitter and Zack could only tilt his head in confusion.

“About last time…”
Zack hesitated, squeezing his hands uneasily.

“We drank too much.”
He repeated dryly.

“Yeah, but, we.”
Zack started and Cloud cut him off.

“We kissed, that’s all.”

“Like we did just now?”
Zack pressed, managing to get him to look back up at him. His curious look and faded blush only made him feel worse for avoiding it.

“I knew I hadn’t just dreamed of it.”
He whispered to himself and Cloud flinched, but he didn't let go of his hands. Terrified of what else Zack might remember, he desperately tried to reorient the conversation.

“That’s not the problem.”
He practically snapped.

“I’m just trying to understand.”
Zack protested softly.

"One second you're smiling, the next you're running. You say you're leaving, but then you kiss me. And what do the Turks have to do with us anyways?"

Zack complained openly, caressing his hands gently as if compensating for it at the same time, but he was right.
“I’m sorry.”

Cloud’s voice was barely a whisper. The knot in his stomach was nauseating. He wasn’t making any sense. He squeezed his hands in return, but could only glare at the ground to try to steady his train of thought.

“Tell me. What's the problem?”

He encouraged, waiting patiently, but Cloud felt immobilized swallowing hard before realizing he’d frozen up again, rushing back through what he’d meant.

“The Turks. I don't think any of them know much more than we do. They’re ordered to put the company first like the rest of us. But that’s not why I said don’t trust them. I said it because they’ve taken it too far. They're always watching you. They won’t take any risks with you. They treat you like the company's property.”

He felt like he'd said too much, wishing he wouldn't make things worse.

“I know.”

Zack answered plainly and he still regretted his choice of words. He needed to make it clear they couldn’t be reasoned with but Zack spoke up again.

“I told Cissnei, and Tseng, to back off. I’m sick of it.”

He sounded serious, but Cloud wasn’t convinced.

“They won’t listen.”

He argued.

“They’ll have to.”

Zack insisted and he finally looked back up at him. His bright eyes gave away more pain than determination and he looked away from them again.

“She confronted me this morning.”

Cloud admitted weakly, unsure of why he’d told him at all.

“Cissnei?”

Zack questioned, squeezing his hands again to try to get confirmation but Cloud kept staring at the ground. He had managed to convince himself that Tseng watching Aerith was because she was the last of her kind, and that they followed him in case more work came up, but they certainly had no reason to haunt Cloud too.

“Why would she?”

Zack pressed again when he got no response, trying to lean down to get him to look him in the eye, but Cloud couldn’t.

“Are you linked with her too?”

Cloud’s question was neutral, but Zack immediately pulled back, hesitating to answer.
“I mean, yeah. I thought we were friends. What did she say?”

Zack didn’t sound certain anymore.

“She said she was following Tseng’s orders.”

“What?”

Zack couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“What orders?”

Zack continued to protest, attempting to pull Cloud back to him when he pulled away but hesitated to restrain him further when he refused to meet his eyes once more.

"I don’t want to make things worse.”

Cloud whispered again, staring down at their hands when Zack refused to let go, feeling stupid for trying to outmatch his strength again. It was only then that he noticed how awful the bruising around his wrist had gotten and how sore it felt being pulled by him.

“You aren’t. They can’t just.. Cloud. Did She do that to you?”

He pulled away again despite the pain and he let go this time. Zack had already had plenty of time to inspect his arm again and quickly boiled over when he didn't deny it.

“That skinny little-!”

Zack stopped himself from going off further, turning his attention back to Cloud, trying to get a better look at him overall, worried he'd missed so much more.

“What happened? Wait. You weren’t going to tell me!?”

Zack looked back at their surroundings, as if to check if they were being watched.

“Spikey?”

Zack prompted again when he still hadn’t received a response. Cloud could only smile at the nickname he’d employed again. He’d never had a nickname that wasn’t an insult before.

“It wasn’t my first warning.”

Cloud's smile had just as soon faded

“For what?”

“To stay away from you.”

“What! Why? It’s not like it’s anti-company policy to date within the ranks. Why would it be any of their business anyways.”

He’d repeated the same argument as in Junon and Cloud laughed to Zack’s great surprise.

"What’s funny?”

Zack was clearly upset, but the blush dominating his face had Cloud's attention wavering again.
“Sorry.”

Cloud had to take a moment to center himself before explaining, rubbing his forehead in frustration.

“You're a 1st. Everything is always Shinra’s business.”

He explained, but Zack still felt uncomfortable, crossing his arms.

“Right.”

Cloud wanted to brush off the debate, too tired to get in to all of it again. He wearily looked off to the side instead, trying to sound calm.

“Do you remember, when you said you’d felt like you remembered something, between us?”

“I remember. You still haven’t answered me.”

Zack had sounded frustrated, and he pause that came next was long. He swallowed hard. Their kiss had confirmed to him that he wasn’t having some sort of false déjà-vu, or twisted fantasy, but that they had definitely already kissed before, and so he waited patiently for an explanation.

Cloud was staring down the grating of the unfinished road beneath them in to the darkness. It was hard to believe so many people lived beneath Midgar. It took a long time before he was able to articulate his next question.

“Have you had that feeling with Tseng before?”

For once Zack didn’t react, no confusion, or embarrassment, simply frozen in shock. He just as soon looked back down, wishing he hadn’t asked. He knew he didn’t have to ask if they were linked. Or if he had feelings for the other man. The way he’d rushed to his side in Modeoheim was proof enough he cared for him, telling him any more would only be painful for both of them.

“What do you mean?”

Zack finally responded, but there was no emotion to his question, only the doubt and tension that he’d repeatedly ignored resurfaced in his mind. Thinking over their latest argument over Aerith, he tried to figure out if he’d missed anything. He hadn’t been angry he might lose her to him, he was scared he might lose him to her? Or both?

“Tseng’s never..”

Zack tried to justify that nothing had happened between them, but between his sudden realization that he may have wanted there to be something, and how Cloud even knew, he was overwhelmed.

“We’ve never..”

Zack looked like he was about to cry from frustration despite the blush taking over his complexion. He shook his uncertainty off and looked irritated the next instant.

“Are you trying to change the subject off us? What kind of guy do you think I am?”

Cloud was taken aback by how quickly he’d turned to denial, but it seemed he wouldn't be able to remember after all.

“I don’t just kiss everyone I have a thing for just like that. That was my FIRST kiss you know?
Well, our second."

Zack quickly corrected himself on the night's events, but couldn't help focusing on everything that might have already happened.

"Or third kiss? Cloud, what’s going on?"

He was shaking, but so was Zack, and he looked like he was still holding back tears. Cloud couldn’t stop himself from reaching out for him, bridging the distance to hold him once more.

“I’m sorry.”

Cloud whimpered in to his chest. He’d only wanted to warn him about Tseng, the Turks, Shinra. Warn him again, about anything he could, but he didn’t know what else to say. He felt guilty for it all despite knowing better.

“Stop apologizing.”

Zack was relieved to turn that one back on him for an instant, loosely wrapping his arms around him in return.

“Just tell me.”

Zack pulled back to get a better look at him when he received no response, raising a hand to brush his bangs out of his face, but Cloud only looked further away.

“Tseng is erasing your memory. He’s the reason you can’t remember some things.”

Cloud couldn’t bring himself to be more specific. It was too painful to recall, but the anger that was building in the other man began to worry him.

“He's what? What things?”

Zack was outraged and Cloud felt faint at the question. He shouldn’t have gotten in to all that again so quickly. He tried to move away but Zack still had a hand on his waist and the other on his arm, keeping him close.

“Like Junon.”

Cloud answered dryly, wishing his head would stop spinning while he brought his hands up to hold on to him.

“But, why?”

Zack pressed.

“I don’t know.”

Cloud slumped, he had to take a step closer to lean against him. He shut his eyes hard to try to fight off his sudden loss of orientation, but everything just kept spinning.

“If he thinks this is all just some game. I swear,”

Zack hadn't noticed, easily supporting his weight, he tried to control his mounting anger at the situation.
“Zack.”
Cloud interjected.

“Yes?”
His concern was immediate.

“Don’t.”
Cloud ordered.

“Huh?”
His confusion was apparent once more.

“Please don’t. I can’t go through this again.”
Cloud begged into his shirt, holding on firmly.

“Cloud.”
Zack's voice was heavy, holding him back tightly he couldn't believe what was going on. It all felt too familiar, too strange even to grasp. He knew it must be real, but he couldn't accept Tseng would treat him that way.

“I've been ignoring all of them since I got back. No DMW maintenance, no examinations. I won’t let anything happen, I promise. But I can’t just do nothing either, not after how they’ve treated you.”
Zack tried to assure him but he received no reaction.

“No.”
Cloud finally protested. It had taken everything from him to manage not to pass out. He hadn't been eating or sleeping properly since Junon and it was catching up to him.

“No?”
Zack questioned, attempting to lean back to get a better look at him.

“You can’t settle that in my place.”
Cloud argued, managing to hold himself up when everything finally stopped spinning, distancing himself avoiding his concerned stare.

"Together then?"
Zack offered but Cloud couldn't see that going well either, glaring at the ground again.

"Let's just go."
Cloud tried to turn away again.

"Leave?!"
Zack couldn't hide his surprise, still holding him at arms length.
"No. Just, go back, for tonight."

Cloud sounded exasperated.

"But, what about us?"

Zack pleaded, wishing he knew why things got so complicated so fast.

"I just,"

Cloud started hesitantly and Zack let go of him weakly.

"I need time to think."

Cloud explained, his gaze still fixed on the ground.

"Right. That's all right."

Zack tried to be supportive but the hurt in his voice was transparent. Cloud turned to lead the way and hesitated when he saw the illuminated tower in the distance. He didn't want to go back, but he couldn't leave him behind either.

Chapter End Notes

I really hate Shinra and the war
Thank you for still reading!
Comments always welcome
Cloud started back towards HQ, concentrating on avoiding all the construction materials that awaited assembly scattered about, making sure there was actual ground to walk on as they made their way back.

Zack remained silent for once and it chilled his bones. He felt like he'd done everything wrong again, but he'd given him as much warning as he could for now, what happened next was out of his control.

By the time they'd reached sector six, Zack sighed, like he'd been holding his breath the entire way. He stretched and held his hands behind his head as they walked, looking ahead steadily.

"This is crazy."

Zack sounded exhausted

"Welcome to the trip."

Cloud encouraged bitterly and Zack laughed, but it soon turned sour.

"How many times, has it been?"

There was a long silence between them once more before Cloud was able to answer.

"Only twice."

Zack sighed deeply again.

"Only?"

Cloud didn't respond and so Zack changed his tone again.

"When was the first time?"

Despite the simple question, he couldn't help but distance himself before answering.

"Here. In Midgar."

Zack didn't seem surprised, moving on to the next question.

"What happened?"
"Nothing."

He answered bitterly and regretted his own transparency.

"Cloud."

He hated everything he said to him. None of it felt right. The tone of Zack's voice pleading for him to stop lying only hurt more.

"We."

He started, but couldn't bring himself to recant, nor could he bring himself to tell him the truth.

"We."

He tried again but still couldn't continue. He kept his attention fixed on the way back to HQ.

"We..?"

Zack insisted, following him closely, but dropped the smile when Cloud shot him a hesitant glance.

"I hate being the only one who remembers."

Cloud agonized instead and Zack had to walk faster to keep up.

"Then tell me, maybe I'll remember."

He couldn't answer and Zack was growing weary.

"Why haven't they done the same to you? If they're so committed to getting between us?"

There was another unbearable silence between them before Cloud finally clarified.

"I don't have a DMW."

"Right."

Zack replied as he lifted a hand to the back of his own head again, dread covering his face as he touched the spot where the chip had been implanted.

Cloud couldn't tell if he was relieved or not that he'd dropped the conversation after that. He hated how dryly he'd responded, but it was the only conclusion he could come to.

The guilt he felt every time he tried to avoid what had happened almost felt familiar now, but all he could focus on was the tension rising and how much he wished Zack would say something else.

Soon they'd made it back to HQ without another word. They'd crossed half the city together and he felt like he'd wasted all of it.

They rode the elevator in silence. Cloud had been expecting a confrontation as soon as they'd arrived, but no one besides patrol greeted them, or more precisely, greeted Zack.

Once the elevator started moving he'd selected his floor and Zack shifted anxiously before crossing his arms. He eyed the numbers as they rose and him in turn. When the elevator stopped he looked up at him to say goodbye but he spoke first.

"You'll let me know when I can see you again, right?"
"Yeah."

Cloud answered with a nod before stepping out of the elevator. Barely able to look him in the eye, he just couldn't bare the consequences of any other answer right now.

"Promise?"

Zack's plea forced him to stop and look back at him.

"I promise."

Cloud placated just as easily, yet Zack still looked overwhelmed. His smile at their promise quickly faded and he placed his hand over the frame to prevent the elevator from shutting suddenly.

"Listen. Even if it isn't about us, if something else happens because of any of this, you'll tell me right?"

He stared back in surprise, worried Zack might step out from worry if he didn't manage to say anything.

"I promise."

He repeated. He hadn't expected him to insist, but it was easier telling him what he wanted to hear. Zack offered another brief smile before letting go, allowing the doors to finally shut between them.

He hated to watch him go. Zack's last worried look only reminded him how much he was in fact worried about him in return.

For all he knew Tseng was waiting for him and he'd only managed to confuse him more. He wanted to do more, but he didn't know what.

It was only when he turned back to stare down the empty hallway that he was reminded of how awful he'd felt all night. While walking towards his unit's quarters he tried to reassure himself he'd done the right thing.

Hoping Zack would have better luck this time around, he worried that his own ended here. He'd crossed too many lines, surely they'd get rid of him now. He worried what Cissnei had reported back and what Tseng would do next.

It was too much to worry about. Cloud tried to think back over what he'd even said to Zack, but he became fixated on one admission the man had offered him instead.

When they'd been talking about children, he'd told him how he really felt about him.

/It was just a thought. I didn’t mean me and, you, exactly./

He repeated Zack's words in his mind and stopped walking. His face was so easy to read that he hadn't been paying enough attention to what he'd actually been saying.

He knew he'd be happier raising kids with someone else. He was just wasting his time with him. And now that he'd warned him about the Turks again, he could stay out of his way.

Of course he was just a thought to him. None of what they'd done meant anything long-term to the other man, it was just a thrill to him, so it didn't matter with who.
Cloud brought his hands up to his face, shutting his eyes tightly to force himself to stop spiraling. He refused to let himself break down over the thought of losing him again when he knew it had been absurd from the start.

He took a deep breath and steadied himself. He had no idea what time it was, but he expected everyone should be asleep.

Prepared to be silent he stepped through the door, only to freeze at the sight of his squadmates staring back at him with surprise that turned to excitement.

"He's back!"

"Look who it is."

"Hey Cloud!"

"Welcome back, slacker."

They greeted enthusiastically. Whistling and shouting only indicated that they must be intoxicated. A quick glance confirmed that they were sitting around an emergency lamp on the table near their gear drinking.

"How'd it go?"

Cloud stared back at one of the men who'd gotten up suddenly to question him, wondering what he meant, until he remembered that Zack had come here before finding him at work. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten that they all knew.

The next second he turned around and went to step back out the door. But, the one who'd approached him, something Colton, grabbed hold of his shoulders and pulled him over to sit him down at the table.

"Woah, not so fast there. Where do you think you're going?"

Colton chuckled at his own question and gave him a pat on the back before returning to his own seat.

"Come on! He found you, right? That's why you're back so late?"

Someone else asked, and others encouraged him to speak up. Some then complained about him skipping training, others complained about Zack not even being that interesting to even be a 1st, while the rest told them to shut up so they could hear about the date.

"Nothing happened."

Cloud intended to get them to drop it by being as blunt as possible. He was too exhausted to engage in whatever this was. Staring at the empty cans and bottles cluttering the table, he wondered how long they'd been at it.

"What do you mean nothing?"

Colton insisted first, but the rest were quick to complain as well.

"Where did you guys go?"

Another interrogated.
"Out."

Cloud shifted in his seat, thinking of how best to end the conversation.

"Out where?"

One more pushed.

"Just, out, for a walk."

He tried to sound as disinterested as possible.

"And nothing happened?"

"Nothing."

Again he remained neutral, but they all started sighing and complaining again.

"You're such a liar."

One, named Wolfgang, finally accused.

"Ok."

Cloud tried to brush off, but his tone made it clear that he was about to lose his nerve.

"Don't be like that. We're not idiots. We saw how he looks at you."

Colton tried to argue, reminding him that he'd been one of the men there the morning he'd shown up after training. He and Wolfgang.

"So?"

Cloud was sick of their prying, but his sarcastic response had some laughing. He wanted to leave. Glancing back he noticed Colton had gone to fish a few more drinks out of a cooler while continuing the argument.

"So? So you were out with one of the hottest guys in Shinra. Spill."

The last thing he could see himself doing was describing how he'd kissed a man, who happens to be a 1st, and for what? For all this pain.

"We just talked."

Cloud wanted to tell him to fuck off, but he knew that if he started that it wouldn't end well. He figeted with his new earring, angry they even expected details from him.

Some of the guys laughed at his answer again, and a few leaned in curiously. As if analyzing his face further would give them any clues.

He tried to stand up to leave but Colton had finished distributing the drinks and placed a hand on his shoulder again to stop him. Handing him a can instead.

"Here, have one."

Colton gave him a slap on the back again in an attempt to motivate him before returning to his own seat.
"Yeah, chill out man."

Another encouraged, but he was already sick of what any of them had to say.

"C'mon, you're not fooling anyone with the straight act. What's going on with you two?"

Cloud was angry that they were right, yet he knew he was too exhausted to think clearly and didn't want to make things any worse than they already were. He opened his drink and took a long swig to buy time.

"Just tell us already"

Colton agonized childishly.

"It doesn't matter."

Cloud said.

"That again?" "Come on!"

They continued to complain.

"I'm not seeing him again."

He finally admitted after another swig.

"What?"

Colton almost spat his drink out, followed by a barrage of questions.

"You're quitting?"

Wolfgang spoke up above them, but Cloud couldn't grasp their sudden concern for him. He'd preferred it when they were clearly uninterested in his life or success.

"I might."

He conceded.

"You broke up with him?"

Colton asked urgently and he realized that their interest wasn't in him at all, it was all just about Zack.

"You're gonna get demoted. Or worse, fired."

He warned, but Cloud only shrugged.

"I know."

He took another drink, hoping that would be the end of the conversation, but Wolfgang stared at his arm for longer than necessary.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."
Cloud answered after downing the last of his drink. Lowering his arm anxiously, pretending he hadn't noticed him notice.

"Who gave you that?"

When Wolfgang questioned again, others peered down at him to figure out what. Cloud sighed sharply, moving to get up instead.

"No one."

With that he turned to leave the table and was relieved no one tried to stop him. Colton leaned over the table to get a better look, but he'd already walked to his bunk.

"Did he do that?"

Wolfgang pressed and Cloud stared back at the table. He was having déjà vu of all the times he'd been asked the same questions, but the others took his silence as an admission.

"Shit! Is that why you fucking dumped him? Christ, Cloud."

Colton jumped right in and Cloud ignored them, unlocking his storage and dumping his phone and items in to it instead.

"What did he do?"

Wolfgang asked again and he was unerved by the fact they hadn't moved on to other things by now. He didn't care if they kept drinking he just wanted to sleep.

"Cloud?"

Another called when he still didn't respond and he hesitated to lay down. What else could he do but ignore them at this point. He dumped his boots off and noticed for the first time that night how much his feet hurt.

"That shit's not right."

Colton complained bitterly, getting up and making his way towards him.

"It wasn't him."

Cloud finally spoke up, turning to face his squadmate who appeared not to be able to drop it. He hated having to defend someone they apparently knew nothing about in the first place.

"Then who?"

Colton snapped back immediately. The atmosphere had changed entirely and he felt worse by the second, wishing he'd covered it up like he'd meant to.

"It doesn't matter."

Cloud tried, too tired to argue. He couldn't let them think he'd hurt him, but he didn't have the patience for this.

"What? Really, man?"

Colton only stopped advancing when he'd reached the bunks, leaning against the frame drunkenly.
"You know you can tell us, right?"

Cloud felt it had been sincere, but he didn't see what difference it would make.

"Of course it matters. We'll pay him back for you."

Someone shouted.

"You're just protecting him aren't you?"

Wolfgang accused but Colton looked back at him and they exchanged confusing gestures while the others just kept asking more questions.

"I'm not."

He hated how pitiful his voice sounded defending him now.

"He is."

Wolfgang accused him of lying again and he wanted nothing but to fight him, but he was right. Cloud sat down on his bunk. He couldn't be bothered with continuing this.

"My boyfriend can take care of him, he isn't afraid of some freshass 1st."

Another offered but Cloud only ignored them.

"What did he do?"

Colton asked, sitting on the bunk opposit his. The question hung between them while he struggled to convince himself his anger was misplaced.

"Nothing."

He finally answered, but the rest of his unit looking on with so much confusion, concern, and hostility had him about to loose his mind.

"Was it an accident?"

"What did he do to you?"

"Did you say no?"

He didn't want to keep arguing. They weren't listening to him. He'd only wished to be done with everything. He couldn't accept how things always got twisted around him.

"Shit. Cloud."

Colton sounded like he'd guessed the worst of it.

"A guy like that isn't worth it."

Someone else called from the table.

"I'll teach you how to get over him."

Colton offered next, getting ahold of himself.
"Over him?"

Cloud stared back, too tired to figure out how they'd gotten to this.

"Yeah. You were right to dump him. But now you just gotta forget him."

Colton stood back up to make his point.

"How?"

Cloud asked, looking on to the others who were all nodding along for a reason he hadn't grasped yet.

"Don't give in. Ask yourself if he loves you. If the answer is no, then you need new rules."

"One, don't pick up the phone."

"You know he's only calling cause he's drunk and alone."

"Two, don't let him in."

"You'll have to kick him out again."

"Three, don't be his friend."

"You know you gonna wake up in his bed in the morning."

"And if you're under him, you ain't getting over him."

"You've got new rules. Count em."

"Three?"

"Got it?"

"Yeah."

Cloud had no idea what he'd just witnessed.

"Just remember the rules."

"And if all that doesn't work just call us. We'll take care of him for you."

Cloud finally laid down, closing his eyes eagerly in momentary relief while he tried to process whatever that excessively animated speech had just been.

They simply went on to talk about someone who supposedly kept failing said moving on challenge.

He thought their rules were exaggerated. He doubted they were possible for him. Even if they never spoke again, he'd still consider Zack a friend.

Knowing he'd have no say whether or not Zack decided to drop by again, he could only hope that he'd take his request for space seriously.

Which left only the first rule. He could only pray his phone wouldn't ring anytime soon.
thanks for reading
The morning alarm went off, propelling him from his incessant nightmare. This time Genesis had been there, impaling Zack's foot to the gas pedal so that they couldn't stop.

All he remembered was his screaming even before they crashed. Sephiroth's silhouette laid motionless across the hood despite their inevitable demise while Genesis stepped over him in the back seat.

"Do you wish for the power of eternity?"

He asked with urgency, eyes fixed on his, leaving him nowhere to go. The next thing he knew the alarm was blaring, except that he could still feel the glass from the windshield shattering over them upon impact.

He sat up and held his head to feel that it hadn't really happened. He was so sick of the dream. Sick of waking up feeling numb from pain and unhinged from adrenaline. Unwilling to get up, but even less willing to speak to any of his squad-mates after all their free advice last night.

He got up and changed quickly. He had his boots on by the time any of the other men noticed him.

"Where are you going?"

Wolfgang called.

"We're giving training a pass too until Greene gets back."

Colton encouraged after noticing him as well.

"Okay."

Cloud answered, but he'd already gotten his things out of storage and was leaving anyways.

"Aw c'mon. Stay. We're going for brunch later."

The persistent man complained and sat up, but everyone else seemed interested in sleeping in. He on the other hand, was not interested in brunch.

He walked straight towards the door. He could practically feel what Colton would say next. He braced himself not to stop no matter what only to come face to face with a SOLDIER and Cissnei entering their quarters instead.

"You."

Cissnei accused immediately, freezing in her tracks as soon as she'd stepped inside.
"Where were you going without the rest of your unit? Finally deserting?"

She accused, staring him down, but he didn't know what to say. He didn't know why she was here.

"He's not a deserter."

Wolfgang called in his defense while he finished getting dressed and moved in to formation besides Cloud.

"You're all late on protocol, Unit 44. This is unacceptable. Especially from you, Bogdanow."

Cissnei stated coldly, staring Wolfgang down with the same contempt she had for him.

"I see that you are all painfully under-performing in the absence of Captain Greene."

She rolled her eyes at the men still scrambling to get dressed while the rest lined up as fast as they could.

"After several complaints, Shinra had no choice but to ask me to intervene. My name is Cissnei of the Turks, and Todd here is to remind you all that you aren't a part of SOLDIER. You're just useful to SOLDIER. I don't have much time to get you sorry lot back up to speed. I have another SOLDIER candidate I need to secure, so stop wasting my precious time and get moving!"

Cloud grabbed his helmet and held back a sigh before following them out. He was so angry at her he wished he didn't know what anger felt like anymore. It's all he knew he could feel for so long and he was sick of wanting to hurt people.

He tried to read her expression, but all he could see was condescension. She only droned on about how she was an expert candidate profiler and how she'd never pick any of them for SOLDIER while they made their way to the training facilities.

"Fuck SOLDIER."

Wolfgang was quick to interrupt.

"What?"

Cissnei stopped and looked back at the man who'd derailed her train of thought.

"I said, fuck SOLDIER. I'm not here to be one of them."

Wolfgang spoke up again. There was no question that he meant it, but the calm in his tone unnerved him.

"Watch your mouth. You wouldn't be here if you weren't fucking the goddamned Vice President."

Cissnei yelled back, evidently unnerved as well.

"I thought you meant I wouldn't be here if I wasn't also fucking Will Gorski, 2nd class SOLDIER."

Cissnei didn't know what to say and Wolfgang only pressed.

"I'm here to work. Same as anyone else. Which is exactly what we were all doing before this unit was even thought up. So who do you think you are showing up out of nowhere and bossing us around, suit?"
"You-
Cissnei started but hesitated with great discomfort until Todd intervened.
"We don't have all morning!"
The man shouted and Cissnei steadied herself. She turned back to lead on, cussing under her breath.
"Shut up and hurry up, slackers!"
Todd shouted again and they followed. Cloud wanted to thank Wolfgang for speaking up but the smile he gave him told him he already knew.
"You guys are a mess."
The SOLDIER complained when they'd all lined up again in the training facilities, clearly noticing that most of them were hungover.
The training would have been worse if the others had been able to keep up pace. Thankfully for once he wasn't the worst one. It was painful nonetheless, but at least they all failed to impress together.
The SOLDIER seemed to be having a grand time debasing them and pushing them to their limits. Two of the men had already passed out and by then Cissnei simply left.
"This isn't worth my time!"
Her words were bitter, but when the ordeal was over he was just confused. He had expected worse. He was always singled out during these crackdowns but nothing happened this time.
He felt like he'd been imagining things suddenly, as if what he thought was normal was actually just paranoia. He showered quickly and went to change but hadn't realized he'd sat in front of his storage unit for so long.
"Hey, Cloud."
He flinched before looking back.
"Hey. You alright?"
Wolfgang asked, walking up to him after showering.
"Yeah."
Cloud answered, not bothering to look back at him again. The man was consistently adverse to towels and it made him uncomfortable.
"You know anything about that surprise training?"
Wolfgang asked, staring down the back of his head, but Cloud just shrugged before answering.
"No."
He got dressed and Wolfgang did the same. He was relieved he didn't press him for more information. Even so, before leaving he felt the need to warn him.
"Stay away from the Turks."

Wolfgang nodded and he left. He had to get back to his work while there was still time. Not his job, but to his digging. He had to find something big enough that would bring the company down.

Cloud headed up the emergency staircase, uncertain of what to do with himself once he'd find whatever it was he was looking for.

He was convinced he should have developed a plan by now. Someway to disrupt their operations, or at least resolve to leave on his own, but he couldn't come to terms with either.

Flight after flight he tried to think, but every thought he tried to focus on soon became muddled with fear and uncertainty.

He was so exhausted he'd almost missed the floor. Once he got to his work department, 3 hours ahead of his shift, he didn't think anyone would notice, except he forgot one detail.

Beautiful flowers were staring him in the face when he got to his desk. Anxiously he pretended not to notice them and unlocked his desk to take his computer and files out.

"Are those yours?"

Someone asked, obviously about the flowers.

"No."

He answered, hesitating to leave once he'd gotten his things.

"Who are they for?"

Another asked.

"I don't know."

Cloud denied, but judging by the look on their faces, must have come off unconvincing, so he made up a plain excuse as he picked up the glass stuffed with the bouquet.

"There’s no note. It must be a mistake."

He was about to take them away from sight when his boss suddenly stepped out of his office.

"Strife. My office, now!"

Cloud set them back down and complied immediately. He could only assume orders had come down from above, but was soon skeptical when he man started shouting about the flowers.

"Why are those on your desk?"

His tone was heavy with stress.

"I don't-"

Cloud started but was quickly cut off.

"Don't lie to me!"

He practically jumped when his boss slammed his hand down on the desk separating them
suddenly. Hesitating to respond, he glanced back over his shoulder and saw everyone was watching through the glass walls of the small office.

"I'll get rid of them."

Cloud offered finally, hating how dejected his tone was.

"That's not what I asked."

The older man snapped back, leaning over his desk as he continued to yell.

"You know personal effects aren't allowed on your desks! Why are you willingly disrupting my department?"

When Cloud didn't answer he raised his tone again.

"I'll ask one last time."

Cloud wanted to walk out. He was sick of fighting over every little thing, even though he continued to stand stiffly listening.

"Why are those here?"

His boss insisted

"They're just flowers."

Cloud attempted bitterly but was met with more anger.

"Just flowers!?"

The man fumed.

"I forgot them."

Cloud attempted again with no success.

"I knew you were full of shit! I already know why they're here. I wanted you to come clean but you can't even do that."

The man looked disgusted as he continued yelling. By now Cloud wondered how soundproof the man thought his glass office was, because he'd heard him chewing out other employees before and it wasn't.

"I'll have you know I already requested to fire you and was denied. No surprise why after watching the security files."

His boss rounded his desk, if only to shout at him closer.

"Connections don't mean shit down here, but a 1st? Really?! Do you know what kind of shit that brings with it? Well not in my department."

The man moved closer again and watched as Cloud only averted his gaze.

"Don't you realize how unproductive everyone who's even seen the flowers will be? You have no fucking idea do you? If you even think about opening your stupid mouth to any of them."
Cloud's heart raced while the man kept yelling. He wanted nothing but to hit him. Except he knew he couldn't and all the adrenaline mixing with his anxiety wasn't helping.

"Of course you have no idea. God damn sheltered faggot. I saw who it was on the tapes. Stomping out chatter is costly. I can't handle your shit and meet deadlines!"

The man continued shouting in his face.

"A fucking 1st! Really? You? Why are they all gay? What the fuck is wrong with SOLDIER?"

Cloud didn't see any value in defending himself at this point. He wished he'd of just fired him by now. He wanted to walk away but he worried he'd lose control if he tried restraining him.

"Didn't you even read the fucking handbook?"

His boss scrutinized on. He had not, and when no answer came his boss erupted again.

"You fucking ignorant prick. Just because they're covering for you doesn't mean you don't deserve to be put in your place!"

He was so close now he was forced to step back. He realized this was why he hated being close to anyone. From all the men who'd tried to make it clear that they knew better than him. The urge to throw him over his own desk was becoming unbearable.

"Like I said. I'd fire you just for being so stupid, but guess what princess? All I could do was suspend you. I hate this fucking company. They'll have to accept transfer papers eventually and then you'll be someone else's problem. Now get out of my sight you fucking shitpacker."

Cloud steadied his breathing to contain his anger. All he could do was walk out without a word. He glanced at the others, frozen at their desks, staring at him as he made his way back to his.

He left the department keycard on his desk, took the laptop in one hand, then the flowers from the glass with the other and left immediately.

He didn't want to hear what any of them had to say. All he could feel was the water trailing down the stems and over his hand, dripping to the ground as he walked away.

He hated walking away even though there was nothing he could do. It wasn't like hitting anyone had ever solved anything either, but god did it feel good. He went down several floors to one of his storage units and sat down in front of it.

It wasn't until he'd gotten there that he felt the tears in his eyes. He didn't know why he was so shaken. His boss had been high-strung since the first day and he couldn't care less about the job or what he'd said.

He was already in enough debt to the company, what was a little more? It didn't really matter. He cried until he could feel his face again.

Staring down at the flowers he had no idea what to think anymore. If he didn't remember anything then why bring him something like this? The petals were so delicate and he had no idea what to do with the bouquet

He opened the storage unit and stared at his supplies for a long time trying to figure out how to keep them safe. Finally opting for making space at the back and taping them upside down to let them dry out. He'd seen it before and he thought it was the least he could do.
He wanted desperately to talk to Zack again, but he couldn't bring himself to think of what to say. Besides, he'd break that rule if he called him. He laughed at the advice he'd been given, but he knew he was just scared to make things worse.

He couldn't help but worry about the others again. His heart started racing every time he thought of Zack with someone else. It didn’t matter how minor the interaction. It made him feel crazy for not questioning thinking about anyone that way himself.

If Zack liked him too, then why did it matter? Why couldn’t he stand the thought of him touching anyone else? He worried he was only using it as some sort of an excuse to be angry.

He felt like all he did was cause conflict. Did it even matter if he loved more than one person? All he felt was guilt when he realized he still didn’t believe Zack really loved him in the first place.

It had all felt so rushed, so circumstantial. Yet he couldn’t believe he had actually wanted Zack to forget about him and move on when it had hurt him so much to be erased the first time.

His vision blurred and he was alarmed for an instant before wiping the stray tears from his eyes. He felt so messed up, but he couldn't worry only about Zack anymore. He needed to do more.

He felt so stupid for panicking. He didn’t want to die, but he had no idea what Shinra would do next and he’d forgotten until then how much pleasure they’d taken in executing deserters.

He needed to do something soon or just get out once and for all. He wanted desperately to run away, anywhere where he wouldn’t feel like every decision he made was wrong.

He’d stared at the flowers, deliberating until someone else came in to the storage area. He stood up and concluded that it was useless to keep thinking about Zack until he figured out what to do next.

He stuffed the computer in an equipment bag to avoid questions, locked the storage unit, and left. He was so anxious he felt like he was losing his grip again.

He couldn't decide where to go, so he went to eat instead. Except, once that was done he still didn't have a direction. He took the stairs up to give himself time to think again.

It wasn't that he enjoyed the exercise. He even hated it, especially after being yelled at all morning, but it was still the only way he could think clearly about what was at stake.
Fruitless Pain

Chapter Summary

I again apologize for my characterization of Tseng but all I remember from the original was him pistol-whipping everyone up the head.

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry I haven’t updated this work in ages. This part was hard to set up and get through for a lot of reasons and I had to take a break from the fic overall. Besides, after the next bit that becomes Zack’s last DMW memory of Cloud it’s basically downhill to Nibelheim and I’m not ready for their story to end again.

Cloud climbed and climbed, as he had many times before, but could still not think of a way to succeed. He got to floor 47 before he realized he’d forgotten himself along the way and went back down to 44.

Relieved to see the coast was clear he locked himself in one of the storage rooms on their floor before sitting down and leaning against one of the rows of desks that had been piled up. He took the laptop out and made sure he was still connected to the network.

He didn’t know where to start or how long he had left either, so he started anywhere. Exhausted, he looked through archive after archive of documents that had yet to be restricted in their new system. He was afraid of getting caught and suddenly of never being able to return home.

He had spent so much time worrying about what he’d say if he ever saw his mother again that he hadn’t considered the possibility of not seeing her again. He rubbed his forehead out of frustration, trying to calm down from what felt like another crisis. Yet even so, thinking of his hometown had reminded him of Zack’s and instead of letting his anxiety devolve he decided to look up what he could find on Gongaga.

Typical classifications weren’t flagged by the new filling application and he only found a single report when he’d resorted to checking what files were listed under rejected production sites. He was horrified to find that the very first reactor built had exploded and not only killed everyone inside it, but that it had taken out half the town with it as well.

The names of the victims were redacted and he could feel himself shaking. At first from grief, all those people, and it was just another incident erased to them. But also from anger, as he wondered if that’s what Zack had meant when he said his parents hated Shinra. He didn't understand why he didn’t as well if he already knew.

Cloud had to put the laptop down not to smash it. He was besides himself with anger and fear of not understanding how the Shinra could get away with all of this. Unable to breathe anymore
surrounded by piles of office furniture he removed the rechargeable battery from the laptop to ensure it was completely shutdown and slid it underneath a pile of file cabinets where it couldn’t be seen before getting up.

He just needed to get out. He tried to assure himself that it was just a break and that he’d think of a way to find a weakness in the company. He just didn't know how, and he didn't think anything they'd done would ever be atrocious enough to spark an uprising in Midgar. People only saw what Shinra broadcasted either way.

How could he reach that many people? He'd have to know how to hijack their comms system and he wasn't that good with computers. He especially doubted the feasibility of taking out the Shinra family either. If anything the rest of the corrupt ranks would surely take over and continue operations. Besides, how would he ever gain access to them? He made his way out and down the hall to the elevator, luckily not crossing paths with anyone again.

He expected everyone was on work duty around this time. Once on ground level he walked out of HQ without another thought. He wanted desperately to settle his nerves, but he couldn't shake the dread of what happened to Gongaga. The city was cold at this time of year even though his uniform was meant to be warm enough.

He thought walking through the streets would clear his head, but it only made him feel worse. Cloud stared at the the ground along the path he dredged before stopping on the bridge over the train that lead to the slums and looked down at the tracks. Besides the highway, this was the only way out of the city.

He wondered if that’s why he couldn’t stop dreaming about that stupid car crash. Was it a warning not to leave the city? Or that he should leave another way. Tired, he leaned over the edge while trying to remember when the next departure was. Except the longer he stared at the tracks the more he considered another way of leaving the city, a permanent way. He felt sick again, remembering how much he had wanted everything to end in Junon instead of coming back to Midgar.

He hadn't accomplished anything and all he knew was how much he still wanted to give up. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd thought things were right. When he'd promised his mother and Tifa that he'd become famous? Famous for what? Wrecking lives?

He felt his throat start to burn and realized he'd been clenching his teeth not to cry again. Come to think of it. A lot of people died working at the reactor in Nibelheim too, and Tifa had especially suffered for it. He stared down, unable to understand why he hadn't made the link sooner like she had, listening for the train for a long time. He wondered why lying to her saying he'd be able to protect her had ever made him feel capable.

He leaned further, knowing he’d lose his balance if he kept on, but the only thing that brought him back to his senses was the thought of leaving Zack behind in all this mess. He stepped away off the bridge and feeling disoriented from his lapse in objectivity, forcing himself to keep walking on despite himself.

He knew he couldn’t risk lingering on the thought again, not after coming this far, or it would have really been all for nothing. He walked down quiet steps to the next borough and was surprised by a man leaning against the wall, looking at him as if he’d been waiting for someone before looking displeased.

“Hey you.”
The man addressed, but Cloud barely acknowledged him continuing on his way.

“You’re with Shinra, aren’t you?”

The man questioned, stepping away from the wall to follow him.

“So?”

Cloud questioned back. He was wearing his uniform, but had left his helmet and the rest of his gear in storage since getting fired that morning. He’d forgotten to cover up for a reason that escaped him in that moment, suddenly realizing he needed to return right away.

“Hmph. I don’t know where you Shinra people get off, being so arrogant...”

Cloud didn’t know what to say and carried on, but the man continued.

“So what’s up with the herds of monsters roaming around Midgar and Kalm?”

The man questioned, with an angrier tone.

“Herds?”

Cloud stopped, but he had no idea. Their numbers had only started increasing when he was stationed in the slums, but it had been months since he’d been taken off the front lines.

“What? Don’t tell me you didn’t know about this either! Didn’t you say you were with Shinra?”

Cloud took a step back. All he had were questions, but he wasn’t sure the man would remain civil with the way he was shouting and staring him down suddenly.

“Here’s something else you should know then.”

The man raised a hand dramatically as if to warn him, his expression worsening.

“The study of planet life tells of the legend of WEAPONS, guardians of the planet. When they sense the planet’s danger, they are roused to destroy that which ills the planet.”

He recited ominously before lowering his hand.

“What does that have to do with the monsters?”

Cloud questioned back again, ignorantly it seemed.

“They’re Shinra’s fault right?” The man accused and Cloud could only lower his head. He didn’t know why he hadn’t figured it out, but the reports were only around reactors, which means he had to be right.

“That which ills the planet. Sounds like the Shinra Company to me.”

The man continued, stepping closer.
“Yeah..”

Cloud couldn’t help but agree and the man was surprised, lowering his eviscerating glare suddenly.

“You agree?”

The man actually seemed glad for an instant before taking another step forward.

“Then join Avalanche. We need people on the inside too.”

He offered, with as much enthusiasm as his speech on WEAPONS.

“Avalanche?”

Cloud questioned back, taken off guard.

“We’re followers of the study of planet life. We want to take Shinra down.”

The man explained and Cloud couldn't believe who he'd just stumbled upon. He carefully shifted to get a look around them, not seeing anyone, but all he could know was that he was definitely not dreaming.

“What do you know about Mako?”

The man questioned him suddenly, crossing his arms.

“Not a lot. It’s highly restricted information.”

Cloud admitted, still staring over his shoulder, worried that their meeting was some sort of set up.

“All we know is that the planet’s in pain because they're taking it.”

The man looked angrier than when he'd first addressed him, but all he could do was stare back in shock at the idea of the planet itself suffering.

“It feels slower. Colder. Our only theory is that the planet will die if Mako extraction continues. We don’t know how long it will take, but effects are felt anywhere there are reactors. Everything dies off, the air changes, temperatures drop, and monsters appear.”

He explained, glaring at nothing in particular before looking back at him.

“The planet is dying?”

Cloud was still dumbstruck.

“Right. That’s why Shinra deserves to be stopped. Whether it be by Avalanche or the WEAPONS.”

The man insisted, uncrossing his arms to put a hand on his shoulder when he failed to respond.

“You understand don’t you?”
The man asked but Cloud only flinched at his touch, taking a step back to get out of his grasp.

“Yeah.”

Cloud agreed despite his unease, still scanning their surroundings.

“Good. If you're serious then meet back here at this time in a week.”

The rebel offered before turning to go.

“Wait.”

Cloud hesitated, it had been too much to take it, and he still feel they had little chance of success.

“What?”

The man asked, his annoyance quickly turning to concern when he saw the look on his face.

“Be careful talking to Shinra employees. It’s dangerous to talk about the company.”

He warned, albeit unsteadily.

“Dangerous? More like useless. I talked to a big SOLDIER guy the other day who didn't know anything too and he even thought monsters and WEAPONS were the same thing. I mean, what an idiot.”

The man scoffed and walked off and Cloud had the creeping suspicion it may have been Zack. He looked around again to make sure no one had overheard them before leaving.

As soon as he rounded the corner he started walking faster. He was so disoriented by the encounter that he could barely calm his nerves. He walked past building after building, all detailed with sharp metal railing and fences that had always bothered him.

Everything was so unwelcoming. Once he’d made it to the central square he was relieved he hadn’t actually been lost. stopping to calm his breathing before knowing he’d have to go back to that cursed building.

A woman wearing a navy suit and white blouse suddenly stopped walking and stared at him. He looked at her and hesitated. He knew he should have looked away but she was frighteningly beautiful.

“You.”

She started, and Cloud attempted to walk away in response. He was sick of being accosted, already having too much to think about for one lifetime.

“You look miserable, were you fired today?”

He’d thought the woman's question was insane until he realized she knew, and that she’d seen in his eyes that he knew she knew.

"You're the blond from HR!"
She shouted at him as he continued walking away.

“Wrong guy.”

He denied.

“It is you! What did you do? Why would he send you anything, let alone flowers? There are no flowers in Midgar. He isn't even here is he?”

She followed him as if on a crusade, her heels echoing down the alley coming after him.

“You misunderstood.”

He tried to shake her off, walking faster, but she persisted.

“How could the great Sephiroth ever like someone like you. Look at you!”

She continued to shout as they crossed in to sector 7. Several people along the route were already alerted but more approached at the mention of Sephiroth’s name. Soon he was cornered and without a way out and he doubted they’d just let him run away from something so excessively dramatic. He turned to face the woman instead.

“They weren't from Sephiroth.”

He offered, looking for a way past the civilians that had gathered around them.

“Do you think I’m stupid! I heard the rumors first hand. I would know, I'm the silver elite chairwoman! You were sent flowers from the 1st Sephiroth and you got fired for flaunting it!”

The woman accused, towering over him.

“I can't believe it's true! How could a wonderful man like Sephiroth be, be, interested in someone like you?”

She was practically wailing at this point and he wished he hadn't exposed himself earlier and had worn a helmet out. He'd been too anxious to think right, but whatever he needed to do, it was far from over, he couldn't lose his mind now.

“What's going on here?”

Tseng stepped out of nowhere through the crowd and Cloud cringed at his luck.

“That guy is screwing around with a 1st! It’s not right!”

The woman shouted, quickly moving to the Turk's side for assistance.

“I assure you that isn't possible. All 1sts are offsite on important missions at this time. Please calm yourself.”

Tseng lied to the chairwoman with a sharp tone in his voice before moving towards Cloud, giving him a cold smile.
“Not a word.”

He warned under his breath, circling him to cuff his wrists.

“Wait.”

Cloud tried but Tseng only twisted his arms further behind his back, forcing him forward to move past the crowd.

"As if he'd send flowers from far away and he didn't even bother to hide it! He must have made it all up you should lock him up for slander! To think anyone would attack the reputation of the greatest SOLDIER Shinra has ever seen so crudely!"

The woman continued to shout, convinced a wicked plot was afoot.

“I’ll take care of this.”

Tseng assured her before marching him back to HQ.

“What do you want?”

Cloud protested as they crossed the main entrance but Tseng only twisted his arms further back again, forcing a groan of pain out of him. He was escorted without another word through the executive elevators to a secure upper floor. He'd been up here once before with that other Turk.

He hadn't noticed the first time but the walls were clearly reinforced and there were far too many cameras. He was led down a desolate hallway and in to an interrogation room not unlike any other. It felt like so long ago since that first warning, but he could barely grasp where he was, let alone everything that had happened up until now.

Tseng pulled a chair back and shoved him in it before reaching down to secure his cuffed hands to the back of the frame. He then walked out without another word, letting the door lock behind him leaving him alone. His arms already hurt from being twisted and he could barely move against the cuffs.

Looking around the only thing he noticed this time was a small light in the top corner of the room nearest to the door. He had no idea how long he could stand being left like this. He let himself hunch forward as far as he could, trying to steady himself through the pain. He had no idea how long he waited for whatever would come next, barely able to contain his anger by the time he heard the door open again.

He watched as Tseng walked back in before glancing back up out of curiosity and noticing the light in the corner was gone. The Turk didn’t bother to sit across from him at the table as the other interrogators had, walking up to him instead.

Cloud couldn't stand the sight of him now and wondered if that's how he felt too. He couldn’t remember what he’d seen in him when they’d first met, all he could feel was his contempt and how much he wanted to give it right back.

“Nothing to say for yourself?”
Tseng taunted, sitting on the edge of the table.

“What do you want?”

Cloud repeated and Tseng sighed.

“What I wanted..”

The Turk began, with great indignation.

"Was for you to mind your own business.”

His tone was cold and when he reached out to stroke his face next the gesture was so unexpected that he flinched at the touch, anger replaced momentarily with confusion and disgust before he felt him grip his jaw and force him to look up at him.

“I was convinced my subordinates had given you a clear warning to stay away from him. Even so, I received another 20 page report on your continued failure to respect my authority last night.”

Tseng reprimanded, but Cloud could only glare back, wondering how Cissnei could possibly have filled 20 pages on their escapade and why he thought he could control them like this.

“What autho-”

Cloud attempted to reproach, but the hand that was clamped firmly around his jaw slid down to his throat and squeezed his neck, cutting off whatever he'd thought to argue. He could still breathe, if only barely, gritting his teeth not to cry out in pain.

“This authority.”

Tseng was glad to clarify, squeezing harder until he could feel him struggle before letting go.

"Now, why not explain to me why you insist on ignoring my warnings and persist in distracting a so easily distracted 1st from his crucial work?”

Tseng watched impatiently as he caught his breath, groaning from pain and frustration.

"He insisted w-"

He felt his fist come down hard against his face instead, losing his train of thought. He was already boiling with rage from the pain and wanting nothing more than getting out of those cuffs to show him exactly how he felt about getting beat.

“He isn't the problem here, you are. Do you really think your personal pleasure is worth more than Shinra’s goals?”

Tseng's tone alone turned his stomach, groaning in pain he struggled to contain the better of himself.

"I told him everything. He hates you."

Cloud spat out, and was immediately punched again in return.
"He won't remember any of that soon enough again."

Tseng relativised, letting only a hint of amusement at how much he withered in pain betray his smug tone.

"The real question is, what would be more satisfying, disposing of you myself, or letting him watch your execution for treason out in the main square?"

Cloud couldn't answer, still reeling from the pain as blood ran down his face. He winced and grit his teeth again not to cry out. If there was anything he hated more than being in pain, it was showing it.

He couldn't help but struggle against the handcuffs. Breathing hard and unable to move away from his reach, all he could do was lean back stiffly, trying to get a grip on the fact that this could really be the end of the line for him.

"Who do you think will help you now? The president?"

Tseng taunted, letting out a displaced chuckle to himself, still leaning against the table he reached for his bloodied face, causing him to recoil as far as he possibly could.

"No one."

Cloud answered, desperate to comply despite how much he wanted to kill the man, assuming no one had seen him get forced through to detainment.

"Exactly. You aren't important. Especially not to Zack. He has too many links already. The way you've been treated so far has just been part of protocol, you don't actually matter to the system."

Tseng explained coldly, but no matter how hard he held his jaw he couldn't force him to meet his eyes.

"You should have begged your unit for help when you had the chance to suck up to them. But you didn't bother to get to know any of them, did you? Did you know that Wolfgang knows the president's son personally? Did you think you'd find a way out of all this on your own?"

Tseng laughed and let go of him only to get up and round his chair.

"He's a special one that Wolfgang. Sure he's linked with some SOLDIER named Will, but he's also sleeping with the president's son, and some woman in the science department, and a couple other civilians. But in your case numbers are the problem, the lack of them that is."

Tseng rambled on, but the amount of cynicism that he felt from his tone had him feeling aggravated to the point of nausea until the feeling of his fingers around his wrists caused him to flinch from the pain, groaning when he realized he'd just undone the restraints.

"You. You're always alone yet you couldn't move on? You're the anomaly in all of this. I blame myself for clearing you for duty. I hope you'll understand why I had to take matters in to my own hands."

Tseng said, staring down at him without an ounce of remorse.
"Stop."

Cloud started desperately, holding his own sore arms hunched forward in pain.

"Shut up."

Tseng ordered, taking hold of his hair to pull him back up to attention as he moved back around to face him.

"I cleared your background check myself. I should have read your file more attentively, but you were just collateral to me to get the mission approved back then. The combat ops system recommended you solely based on the terrain, but I should have noticed then how empty your god damn file was."

Tseng spoke with such disdain he didn't know how to stomach it anymore, raising his strained arms up to take hold of his in a vain attempt to make him let go, only to receive another punch in response.

"What kind of piece of shit accomplishes nothing at all after working here for over a year and then decides to get in my way?"

Tseng was finally letting his anger come through clearly and Cloud felt light-headed from the realization that it was over, reaching out in an attempt to avoid another strike.

"He's not your-."

Cloud attempted to accuse him of something, loosing focus from being punched too many times, all he could feel was his legs giving out and the man's fingers gripping the collar of his shirt to hold him up. He wished he could fight back, he wanted nothing more than to pull him to the ground and break his jaw, but the sensation of knuckles against his face quickly reminded him of how much pain he was in as he struck the floor.

"What do you know?"

Tseng shouted back after hitting him.

"You changed him. I tried everything I could to correct the algorithm after Modeoheim, but you.. You've done something."

Tseng rambled on with unquestionable spite, pacing around him as he lay on the ground before turning back to him only to kick the empty chair over, watching him flinch as it crashed against the wall and concrete floor.

"Who are you anyways? Some fucking kid who lets anyone walk all over him? What does he even see in you?"

He stepped on his chest as he lay on the ground, and pressed until he could feel him trying to push him off with all his strength.

"Is that just it? Does he really just like walking all over you, that god damn much?"
Tseng spat out, stepping harder until he started screaming.

"You must be some kind of stupid to stick around after all this."

Tseng removed his foot, leaving Cloud to cough, turning over on his side as he struggled to breathe again.

"Did you really think I'd put up with any more interference from the likes of you? He hasn't run tests in weeks."

The Turk continued to complain, observing him writhing in pain on the ground.

"He won't speak to me."

Tseng admitted bitterly, pausing for a moment before kneeling down to him.

"Just because of you."

He reached out to touch the side of his face purely out of contempt.

"Besides, I'm sick of the way he looks at you."

He added before leaning in with a look he couldn't describe.

“Do you still think your pleasure is worth more than Shinra’s goals?”

Tseng leaned in closer, except when Cloud didn’t answer he then grabbed a chunk of his hair again and pulled him back to his feet. He forced him to the table and pushed him down over it next.

Cloud could only continue to wince and grit his teeth again not to cry out when his head hit the table, trying to get a grip on what was happening with the ringing through his ears.

“Well?”

Tseng ran his hand through his hair, watching the blood drip from his face on to the table, his other hand twisting one of his arms back again.

“That's the problem isn't it? You've clearly forgotten all about your place in Shinra.”

When Cloud failed to respond except to groan in pain Tseng pulled his arm back harder, forcing him to cry out again.

“There are many more men who outrank you who’s pleasure is paramount to the company's success. ”

Tseng released his hair and slid his hand down his back, pressing hard until he reached the hem of his shirt and pulled it up, running his thumb back up his spine.

“If you’re desperate enough to make up rumors about Sephiroth to get attention when you already have Zack running after you then it doesn’t matter who's attention it is, does it?”

Cloud felt sick, but he couldn't move out of his grasp. He could only watch as his blood pooled on
the table beneath him, wishing he knew how to make him stop instead of wishing he could pay him back.

“There are still plenty of 3rd class SOLDIER who still need links. They’d of been be happy to keep you busy, but you couldn't accept it was over for you.”

Tseng pretended to care, sliding his hand back around his neck the next instant.

“Stop.”

Cloud managed, too distraught by the idea of replacing Zack to even realize he’d spoken again until Tseng hit him again.

“Who said you had a choice?”

Tseng laughed bitterly as he contorted in pain beneath him, certain he'd felt his ribs crack.

“Fuck you.”

Cloud spat out, besides himself with rage despite being overwhelmed with agony. Even so, he regretted his words as soon as he'd said them.

“Really?”

Tseng asked before letting go of his neck and grabbing his hair again to pull him up off the table, forcing him to scream in pain as he struggled against broken bones.

“Are you feeling fucked enough yet?”

Tseng asked bitterly before shoving him back down and leaning in to him gratuitously.

“You don't know the meaning of the word.”

He mocked.

“You really are an idiot.”

He added without remorse, leaning in to his ribs until he couldn't stop screaming before reaching up to grasp his throat again.

Cloud struggled against his weight, in too much pain to even keep crying out. When he pressed in to him harder he could barely breath. It was difficult to feel anything at all besides the blood dripping down his face and the hand around his neck.

He tried to say something, anything to get him to stop but he couldn’t articulate through the agony and lack of oxygen as tears started to pool in his eyes as he groaned incoherently.

“Why would you keep making the same mistake? You wanted to die. Is that it?”

Tseng squeezed harder, leaning in closer to hear him say it.

“Well? Is this what you wanted?”
He insisted but even if he’d wanted to answer he couldn’t. All that came out were choked whimpers until Tseng finally released him.

“Say it.”

He ordered again, watching as he struggled and coughed, desperately trying to catch his breath.

“I...”

Cloud had deja-vu of the last time he’d been forced by a Turk to say he gave up. Maybe he should have.

“You’re too dysfunctional even to be used by other SOLDIER. I should just sell you in the slums instead.”

Tseng warned, laughing as he considered a worse fate for him.

"I'll give you one last chance to stay alive, because those animals don't tend to make their toys last."

He threatened, watching him groan in agony while leaning down over him again.

"Can you do that, Cloud?"

Tseng taunted again, pressing down harder when he didn't receive a response.

"Yes."

Cloud struggled to answer, his voice hoarse from being choked repeatedly.

"Can you follow the rules?"

Tseng asked impatiently.

"I know the rules."

Cloud managed albeit spitting up more blood.

"Well, do you still think he loves you?"

Tseng urged.

"He doesn't."

Cloud responded as coherently as he could. But he didn't know if he was being honest or if he had just told him what he wanted to hear.

"What are the rules?"

Tseng asked as he smiled out of morbid amusement.
"Don't speak to him."

Cloud started, certain at least about the first, but he could barely concentrate from the blood loss alone.

"Don't let him in."

Cloud was surprised he even remembered what his unit had told him.

"Right. And?"

Tseng insisted on the third rule, sliding a hand through his hair again, if only to threaten him to finish.

"Don't be his friend."

Cloud answered before he could feel him grip the back of his head again, somehow relieved when he felt it slide back down his side instead despite how much he wished he'd never touched him.

"That's good, and why not?"

Tseng encouraged, resting his hand above his broken ribs, pressing lightly with his fingertips.

"Not to end up under him."

Cloud answered crudely, finally realizing the position he was in while struggling not to pass out from the pain.

"That's right."

Tseng confirmed with a heavy breath and Cloud couldn't hold on any longer. The last things he could discern where the chimes of a cellphone and a strong hand against his face.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all those who are still reading
Last Resort

Chapter Summary

After pushing Zack away and suffering despite it, Cloud is left to resolve what it is he could possibly accomplish at Shinra before it's too late. The plot afoot would forever change the company if he were to succeed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cloud woke up to shouting. Debilitating pain was all he could feel, but that wasn't anything new. Too drowsy to make out what was going on he could barely manage to move while trying to understand where he was.

"I won't say it again. It's against protocol and you shouldn't be here, leave!"

Someone yelled.

"Don't even think of calling security in on the Turks' affairs."

A woman threatened back.

"The cadet isn't even conscious yet! What do you want? I can have you notified when he's stable."

They suggested, setting something down on a table near him. It was impossible to tell what from the sound alone, but he couldn't bother to keep trying to force his eyes open.

"I'll wait."

She answered, her tone serious and unchanging.

It hurt, his whole face hurt to the point that he felt delirious. He felt plastic and wires and heard machines, struggling to make sense of the rest only made his splitting headache worse.

Worrying about what was happening allowed the fear of coming close to death creep back in on him. He remembered that Tseng had beat him, but he'd been certain he was about to kill him, unsure of how he'd survived.

"Can't you see you shouldn't be here?"

They shouted again, returning to him when his heart-rate began accelerating. Checking his vitals before trying to get him to look at them.

"Can you hear me? You're going to be alright."

They assured him as he put the rest of the pieces together. It had taken time, but he'd managed to focus long enough on the doctor at his side to understand that he was in the med bay again and that the Turk waiting for him was Cissnei.

"I brought him in."
Cissnei insisted. She had in fact carried him in hours earlier, still covered in his blood herself.

"That doesn't change anything!"

The doctor shouted back, taking a few steps towards her next.

"You need to go."

They ordered and no answer came, but by their tone they were clearly losing their patience.

Cloud groaned, feeling immobilized by his anxiety alone as he tried as best he could to read the various monitors he was hooked up to in an effort to focus on anything at all, struggling to even turn his head.

"Fine! Do what you want! Just like everyone else at this god damned company!"

The tired and frustrated doctor walked out of the room the next instant.

He heard Cissnei take a few steps forward, but when nothing but silence followed he struggled to look up. His vision had finally managed to focus, but he couldn't bring himself to face her. Even if she had brought him here, he couldn't believe she was trying to help.

"I'm sorry."

She offered to his great surprise.

"I told you many times to stay out of it."

She added, unsure when he still didn't respond, staring at the monitors instead of her.

"I risked my job to get Tseng called out of Midgar."

Cissnei offered next, feeling desperate, not even able to tell if he could hear her.

"I've never seem him like that before."

She offered next, ashamed she hadn't know what he was capable of after working with him for so long.

"I need to ask you something."

She admitted, but when he remained silent she continued.

"Cloud."

Cissnei started, still standing at the end of his bed.

Cloud didn't understand anything, and his head hurt too much to try to either way. He leaned on an arm and attempted to sit up but couldn't stomach the agony of being reminded he had cracked ribs despite the astonishing quantity of drugs they no doubt had him on. He looked up at the machines again, wishing his heart would stop racing.

"I need to know who else is too close to him."

Cissnei asked, unsure if they'd get anywhere at this rate.

"He sent me to deliver his messages. Had he sent any others?"
She insisted, asking louder. If she was going to go up against the Turks she needed to know who else was too close to Tseng.

Cloud still couldn't meet her gaze, and even less answer. He couldn't think of what to say when everything was just a mishmash of fights in his memory, forcing his eyes shut he tried to will the pain to subside.

He didn't want to talk to her about any of this. All he wanted was to see Zack, but even just the realization that he still couldn't forget him had him spiraling.

He felt delusional at how weak he felt for wishing he'd fix everything for him, knowing it was impossible. He'd barely managed to hold on to life, yet Zack was nowhere to be seen once again. There was no such thing as heroes.

"Do you understand me?"

Cissnei asked impatiently, worrying that it would only be a matter of time before the others figured out why Tseng had been sent away.

"This isn't his MO."

Cissnei continued uncertainly despite yet another prolonged silence between them.

"He disappears people, he doesn't sloppily leave them to bleed out where anyone could find them. If I hadn't of been trailing you, you'd be dead."

She explained, yet still no answers came.

Cloud tried to speak and even though he didn't know what to answer, the pain was too much. Groaning as he came to realize just how delirious with anger he still was.

"Tseng."

Cloud finally managed to spit out, even if he regretted saying anything at all. He struggled through the urgency of not knowing what came over him to say his name. He wanted to forget any of it happened.

"I didn't know what he was going to do."

Cissnei justified suddenly, but she still looked down on him with so much disdain that it was difficult to read her intent at all.

Cloud still had trouble remembering what had happened. All he could recall was blood on the table beneath him.

"What he said about Zack.."

She started suddenly but he still couldn't look at her. She struggled with her words, still horrified by what she'd seen and what she worried he would have done if she hadn't intervened.

She'd been tasked with investigating their AVALANCHE problem. That's when she'd noticed them in sector 8 and trailed them up to the interrogation facilities. She sneaked in to the surveillance hub after Tseng had cleared it out to cover up what he was about to do.

She'd never expected to see him go so far in an interrogation before. She'd never seen him that frivolous and violent, so by the time he'd started ranting about Zack she accepted things were much
worse than she'd thought.

By the looks of it he wouldn't last much longer and she knew she had to do something. She'd called another Turk she'd known was on a high-profile mission who agreed to call for emergency backup and had the president himself deliver Tseng's new orders by saying that they hadn't been able to reach him.

She knew that only a direct order had a chance of stopping him in the state he was in. She'd recognized the look on his face when he'd thrown the blond over the table and she could only pray the president would call fast enough.

She remained lost in thought and Cloud didn't know what to say to her. Zack hadn't been able to remember when he'd asked him about it before, besides, he was still distraught from coming to an inch of his life once more.

"I should be dead."

Cloud didn't know which incident he was referring to anymore. He'd fallen off a mountain, fought monsters, and been beaten more times than he could count, but he was still here.

"If he wanted you dead, you'd be dead."

She answered bitterly.

"I intervened, had him called out of the city on emergency business, but he can't know about any of this."

She admitted again, nervously staring at the several cameras around the room. Even though she was already running dummy footage on them, she was afraid she may have missed something.

"What do you want?"

Cloud asked, forgetting his ribs again so soon, groaning when he tried sitting up unsuccessfully.

"Don't move."

She reprimanded sharply.

"I'm fine."

Cloud answered plainly out of spite through grit teeth.

"I'll handle Tseng, just tell me if anyone else is involved."

Cissnei urged again, but she wasn't exactly sure he was understanding her.

"He."

Cloud tried to speak but he could barely remember anything past Tseng punching him repeatedly. He struggled but he managed to remember another man who'd clearly worked for the Turks, but all he could remember was how they'd all easily overpowered him.

He knew Tseng's hands had done more than break his bones, but he couldn't piece anything together besides how agonizing it had been. He had been angry for far too long that it had been hard to accept that there were still worse things that could be done to him.
"Why would you help?"

Cloud asked, still wondering why she'd changed her mind now after everything.

"I thought Tseng's loyalties were with the company, clearly he's taken another path."

Cissnei's voice was practically shaking, not wanting to remember what she'd seen him do.

Every time he shut his eyes, he could only feel the pain of every strike he'd been generously given. Still feeling the full weight of his body as he leaned in to threaten him, as if he was still holding him down against that table.

He tried to forget it, but he couldn't help from remembering how much he'd screamed when he'd pulled his shirt off despite having just cracked his ribs.

"How long is he gone for?"

Cloud asked anxiously, trying to pull himself together.

"Let me worry about that."

Cissnei attempted to assure him, but she didn't know what she was doing. The one person she thought she could trust was now at the center of all her fears, taking a step back out of shame that she hadn't noticed any signs sooner despite having encountered that type of psychopathy before.

"There were two others."

Cloud admitted next, making an effort to look at her finally.

"Who?"

She asked hopefully, lowering the arms she'd kept rigidly crossed.

"I don't remember their names. One had red hair too, taller than you."

Cloud offered to the best of his memory.

"With red marks on his face?"

Cissnei had only one guess, but she'd rather verify it.

"Right."

He could barely even nod, closing his eyes to try to remember the first Turk that brought him in.

"And the other, he was bald."

He added, exhausted at the realization of how many times he'd been told to stay away from Zack. He worried he'd get them both killed at this rate.

"With a lot of piercings?"

She asked.

"Right."

He confirmed again before returning his gaze to the ground.
"Anyone else?"

She insisted.

"Not from the Turks."

Cloud didn't have anything else to offer her, not knowing what to do about any of it either way.

"Thanks. Now I need to contain the situation, so keep out of sight. Seriously this time."

She said before turning to go.

"Wait."

Cloud spoke up when she turned away, desperate to believe that she'd succeed.

"Keep him safe."

He pleaded suddenly, hoping that whatever she was planning would really keep Tseng away.

"I'll try."

Cissnei said, heading towards the door.

"Just stay out of things for once. I may not be there to save your neck again."

She continued softly despite vaguely facing him again.

"And, sorry. For the things I said about you and Zack. I just don't want him to get hurt again."

She apologized, giving in to the guilt of having blamed him for everything, not to mention having kept Zack away from others as well. She'd thought her only competition had been another woman until Zack started paying the blond so much attention. She'd thought her only competition had been another woman until Zack started paying the blond so much attention.

Zack's friendships had appeared so naive to her that she'd misjudged his interest in her and everyone else in his life for that matter. She didn't feel like she deserved to interfere any longer, but she'd only ever done it to protect him. She'd always known where his special interest from the slums would end up and it broke her heart to think of Zack having to live through her just vanishing in to the science department someday.

If she ever considered herself Zack's friend then she had to at least try to help him. Whatever they had that she'd denied herself understanding, she had to accept it now. For all she knew, this would be the last time she'd see any of them if things went south.

She vanished out the door the next instant and Cloud was left staring at it, trying to remember what horrendous things she'd said to him as he fought to stay conscious. He hadn't felt whole in so long, he couldn't remember when he even had anymore.

After being on an intensive regenerative spell Cloud for hours he was declared virtually fine according to the medical staff, even his mind wave readings had improved somehow despite feeling worse than ever. He hadn't felt whole in so long, he couldn't remember when he even had anymore.

He ignored all of their concerns about his recent whereabouts as always, returning to his bunk if only to rest for a while longer. Despite the recent advancements in Materia usage, he still experienced abnormal side effects such as his bruises taking longer to heal than most and listening
to doctors complain about their statistics had never been enjoyable.

He kept his head down and tried desperately not to think of every moment he'd wasted since Modeoheim thinking about Zack. He felt like he'd lost all perspective a long time ago and that's why he'd gotten so screwed up in all this, struggling not to keep falling apart because of it.

"I heard the president is planning a party to celebrate the peaceful contract in Corel, the guys are going to be back on Thursday."

One of his squad-mates spoke up to cut the tension from their awkward reunion. It happened to be in two days when all the men were scheduled to be back, and despite wanting nothing to do with the party, he was relieved they were returning safely.

The rest of his squad continued chatting about what they were looking forward to at the party and planning exactly how many substances to purchase for it and who they wanted to go with.

Cloud remembered how hopeful he'd been at his first company party shortly after being hired, not feeling entirely excluded by his first squad he'd followed along only to find himself extremely bored.

He felt cheated for having longed to make friends for so long, only to be surrounded by men who only wanted to drink and talk about how many people they'd shot for the company.

He told himself he always expected too much, deciding to focus on work and keep out of sight instead. He didn't have time to worry about friends while focusing on just getting by.

All he knew is he didn't have much time. Tseng could show up to finish what he'd started, but he wouldn't hesitate to fight back next time. He kept his rifle close and weighed his options as he always did, between finding a way to bring the company down or running away.

He felt like a coward for still considering it. He was starting to feel like being a coward might be better than dying. He'd been so complexed that he hadn't even realized that it was the morning of the big party until his phone rang and he almost had a heart attack.

He'd been avoiding his unit and had left their quarters before anyone was awake as he always did, except he'd forgotten he'd put the phone back in his bag. He'd taken his things out of storage and put the phone back together to make sure he hadn't missed any important orders by reflex when he got back from the med bay. He was still so drowsy from the treatments that he hadn't been thinking when he'd packed it in to his bag.

He'd been huddled up in the storage rooms doing researching on the different departments within the company, trying to gain some clarity on whether or not his plan would have any impact. He'd immediately thought it was Tseng until he read the name scrolling across the screen and dropped it.

Zack Fair was calling him, except by the time he'd picked the device back back up he'd gone to voicemail. He sat frozen starring at a blank screen, too afraid to even attempt calling him back.

He convinced himself it was just because the party was that day, that he must have only been calling about that. After all he'd agreed to let Cissnei take care of things. Tseng wasn't supposed to be around, so Zack was supposed to be safe.

He did want to call him back, but he couldn't risk making things any worse, removing the battery from the device once more before storing it away with the laptop he'd stolen, reasoning that he wouldn't need either of those things anymore if he went through with his plan.
He'd been wandering a lot those past few days, unable to stop thinking about what Tseng had done and what he wanted to do to him if they were to ever crossed paths again. He could barely piece any of it together besides repeatedly being punched in the face and choked, constantly left wishing he could just forget about all of it.

All he'd known for sure before was that he'd wanted to meet that AVALANCHE member again. The only problem was that it was still in 3 more days and he was starting to doubt he'd get any news from what Cissnei was attempting.

He had to trust that she would do whatever it was she was planning within the Turks as soon as possible. He told himself he had to do whatever he possibly could as well and that the party that night was too big of an opportunity to pass up.

Everyone would be drunk, security would be at a minimum and he could blend in easily to wait for an opening to get close to the president. He'd agonized about the plan all day but still ended up sneaking down through the emergency staircase to go get changed in full gear.

Despite his resolve to make a difference his heart started racing every time he thought of seeing Zack with someone else at the event. It didn't matter how minor the interaction that flashed through his mind, it made him feel crazy for never having questioned his clearly obsessive fondness for him before.

He couldn’t stand the thought of him touching anyone else and he worried he was only using his jealousy as an excuse to be angry at him. He felt he'd been too angry at everything for too long now and knew it was time to let things go.

Did it even matter if he loved more than one person? Regardless of how Zack felt about the 6 others, he still didn't believe he'd pick him over any of them, especially if all his memories were intact.

He refused to admit to himself how painful it had been the first time he'd been erased from his mind. Seeing how easy it was for him to go on with his life without him had hurt him in ways he wasn't ready to revisit.

He knew it wasn't his fault, but he couldn't bare to think of any of it anymore. One instant he was walking towards the storage facilities, the next it felt as if the floor gave through. He gripped the safety railing and tried to steady himself despite the horror of feeling like he was still falling.

He felt so stupid for everything he'd done, and for what he was about to attempt, but he didn’t want to die without accomplishing anything. He had no idea what Shinra would do next but remembering how much pleasure they'd taken in executing deserters wasn't making his plan any easier.

Even if he succeeded, this may be the end of it for him. Surely he wouldn't be able to escape from what he was about to do, expecting that they'd either execute or imprison him. Either way he'd never see Zack again.

He was struck by the fact he couldn't tell when the last time he hadn't felt nauseous or in pain was. The absence of the memory convinced him things were better off this way. He'd made his way to his old storage unit to keep out of sight while everyone prepared for the party.

He desperately needed to calm down, shaking by the time he'd opened the locker to get his gear despite having forgotten all about the flowers he'd hung in the back.
He started to panic when he'd realized he'd frozen at the sight of them. They'd lost their vividness but they were still intact, but just the memory of being handed them felt like being suffocated by his hands instead of all those who'd previously attempted.

He stumbled back and the unit closed automatically, failing to detect a human presence in proximity. He hadn't even felt loosing his strength that time, falling back in to the next row only to slide down to the floor.

His chest and throat hurt incredibly even though no tears came. He wondered why he couldn't cry and if it meant he'd truly given up on him. Bringing his knees up to lean on them, wishing he could stop from thinking of every second they'd spent together since meeting on that mountain.

He felt stupid for forgetting about the flowers despite how hard it had been to accept them. He couldn't get back up just yet, trying to get a hold of himself he knew there was more to what he believed he was doing than just trying to save one man.

He had to focus on why he came back to Midgar. It wasn't just to help Zack, or anyone else being used by the company. There was more to all of this and he needed to at least gain some leverage to the cause.

Whoever they were, those that have studied the planet, he believed them. He couldn't know if all of it was true but he couldn't help feeling that the planet was really dying.

He thought it would have been impossible, but it was true that no one had ever used this much mako before, and what did they really know about it? If they were really the reason for all those monsters, and if the planet would slowly cease to produce life, then Shinra had to be stopped.

He managed to pull himself together some time later and changed in to full patrol gear, checking his ammo over and over again. He was too stressed to head down to the main floors yet but he knew it would be easy enough to blend in with security.

They were always disorganized anyways, and especially at events like this most were more interested in sneaking drinks than keeping watch. Everything was going according to plan so far but he still felt like he'd fail.

Once he'd worked up the nerve to go down he managed to get close enough to where the president was giving another of his unending speeches on prosperity to keep an eye on him. He almost convinced himself to attempt what he'd been plotting right then and there but he knew he'd be stopped before he could reach the old man.

His heart raced from just thinking about going through with it. He felt it was necessary, but he'd never seriously considered killing another person up to that point outside of self-defense. He didn't know if he could go through with shooting him, or if it was better to try another way and stand a chance of getting out alive.

He'd fought so many times before. He'd fought for his life, fought to prove a point, fought to protect others, fought to teach a lesson, but never to kill before. He wondered if he'd always had it in him or what circumstances had brought him there today.

He still wondered what kind of factors allowed for men like those surrounding him to murder civilians and foreigners alike with a mere order. He couldn't think of all that without thinking of Zack and all he'd done to help end the war.

Then as if by design he saw him in the crowd on the top floor of the main hall. Zack walked
through the room swiftly, scanning everyone he passed by, entirely ignoring anyone who attempted to speak to him despite the ongoing speech.

He watched him brush past everyone, he looked calm, but he was clearly looking for someone even though he hadn't even changed out of his uniform. All off-duty personnel were encouraged to come in formal wear.

He on the other hand pulled his scarf up higher, even though he was far away and he'd quickly crossed the room to head down to the next level, he was terrified that he would notice him.

He felt horrible for ignoring his call that morning, but he'd been too afraid to speak to him. Even now, even if he had the courage, how could he say goodbye to him? It would draw too much attention if he tried.

He would rather be forgotten. Whether he be killed or imprisoned in this obscene building because of what he was about to attempt, he could only hope Zack would never know that it was him.

People were drinking so much during the agonizingly self-gratuitous presidential speech that he started to understand why so many even drank at all. He was anxious for everything to wrap up as soon as he'd lost sight of the 1st class SOLDIER he believed he never should of had the honor of meeting.

It was a long time before the old man ended his speech and passed on the podium to Heidegger and Scarlet next. He watched carefully as the president was escorted back towards the executive elevators.

Cloud soon followed cautiously, taking them up to the gym on level 64. He hoped it was the least suspicious path, even though no one seemed to notice him. People who got on and off the elevator barely looked at him, laughing about avoiding the opening speeches.

He got off and hurried down the hallway to the inner stairwell, making it all the way up to floor 69 and carefully stepping out, making sure no one was around. He made it through to deserted gateways out to the grand staircases. He looked around and wondering why there was no one.

He'd been ready to lie to security, but the further he climbed up the elaborately large staircase the more he felt like something was wrong. He looked back down bellow, making sure no one had followed him before finally noticing one man guarding the door to the 70th floor's presidential suite.

He'd only seen it twice before, when they'd gone to and returned from the Modeoheim mission, having passed through the private landing pad connected to it. He was anxious, walking with a heavy step towards the man who stood in his way, thinking he'd already ruined things when he hesitated to salute him.

“Strife Unit 44, I’ve been ordered to relieve you of your post.”

He announced, barely able to keep eye-contact. Terrified that he wouldn't believe him, but he'd barely finished his offer that the man stepped forward.

“What, really?”

He asked, holstering his rifle immediately.

“Yes, the ord-”
He attempted but the man had already patted his shoulder roughly out of thanks, rushing past him.

“That’s great! Cya!”

The man simply ran off after throwing his suspicions down the drain, more intent on joining the party downstairs than finding out who deserved a worse fate than his.

This was it. Cloud stood facing the last door. Unsure whether or not the president was alone, but willing to risk whatever would happen next.

"Hoo boy."

He said to himself, holding on to the rifle slung over his shoulder tightly.

Chapter End Notes

For all those still reading, thank you for your patience with this update
This year is not a good year

I hope you enjoyed this part despite the previous atrocities by our favorite secret service man and I hope you all enjoy what comes next for a change
You Can (Not) Escape

Chapter Summary

Cloud decides to try to kill president Shinra
Things don’t go as planned
They never do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cloud waited for the guard to vanish down the grand staircase and out the floor below before approaching the door to the president's office. He was shaking by the time it slid opened, walking in with a heavy step to stand before the very man he came to assassinate.

He appeared to be reviewing documents and shuffling through pictures, but he couldn't make anything out. His heart was racing faster than he could even register at that point. He still hadn’t come to terms with the fact that he was really going to go through with his plan.

He stood, his helmet slung low, staring at a very surprised old man who suddenly gawked at him from the other side of his massive desk as soon as he'd noticed him.

“What is it? What’s taking so long for him to arrive!?”

President Shinra shouted, standing up in outrage.

“I.”

Cloud started before stopping himself. He just needed to point his rifle at him and get it over with, but he could barely speak let alone reach for his gun. He couldn’t accept getting this far and not going through with it either, struggling to breath with every passing second.

“I’m not here about that.”

He managed to speak up after taking off his helmet, ignorantly blaming it for suffocating his resolve when it didn't even cover his mouth. He thought he’d be able to focus if he could just breathe but he knew there was no going back now. He didn’t have to care about his escape plan anymore, so it didn’t matter if anyone saw him do it.

“Then what do you want? You’re supposed to be standing guard.”

The president stared back curiously as soon as his surprise faded from the sudden disruption.

“Since he’s late, I wanted to ask you something.”

He made up anxiously staring at the helmet between his hands, still not entirely certain as to why he persisted in wasting time talking. If he could end things quietly he may just be able to get out before whoever it was he was waiting for showed up, and then maybe he’d make it out alive.
“Well? Step forward!”

The old man ordered impatiently and he advanced. The closer he could get the easier it would be, but the way the president was staring down at him was unsettling.

“Are you aware that the reactors are damaging the planet?”

He asked as clearly as he could despite fearing his reaction. He wasn’t ready to do this, but he’d already gone too far. He thought that if he could make why he was doing it any clearer he’d manage to pull the trigger before it was too late.

“Sure. Sure they could.”

President Shinra answered casually and he couldn’t believe he could give such little regard to throwing their entire world away for monetary gain.

“You really don’t care about Gaia.”

He said, taking a step closer to the giant desk while pulling on the strap of his rifle. Clearly reminded of his conviction to kill him, he just hadn’t know how much wanting to do it would terrify him. He urge to plaster his entire desk in bullet holes just to make a point was stronger than he’d anticipated.

“That’s some dangerous shit you’re babbling.”

The old man scoffed, leaning back in his chair confidently.

“Even if it is true it won’t matter soon. Once we find the promised land we’ll have enough Mako to do anything we want.”

He elaborated, giving him a crooked grin before leaning over his desk to stare him down again.

“You can’t be serious.”

Cloud muttered in response, frozen by the realization that the old man couldn’t care about anyone else surviving because he was clearly deluded. He couldn’t understand why he thought Mako would spare Shinra from a dying planet.

“Don’t tell me what I can’t take seriously, boy. We can leave this planet if we really need to. We’ll be able to do anything the ancients could do!”

The old man laughed heartily before leaning over again, clearly amused by the shock on his face.

“You have incredible eyes, and without Mako even.”

The president commented, but the longer he stared the more uncomfortable he got. He couldn’t bring himself to say anything else, looking away in abject anger at the thought of Shinra escaping a dead planet only to do the same thing to another world.

“Be a good cadet and come give me a closer look.”

The president ordered and Cloud couldn’t understand how the conversation had taken such a strange turn. Even so he rounded the desk, gritting his teeth as he finally reached the fat old man who’d spun around in his chair to face him. For all he knew he could of had a father like this, and he was suddenly grateful he’d never known his.
“They’re so bright already. Think of how they’d look if you joined SOLDIER.”

The old man suggested, leaning forward in his chair to scrutinize him.

“Why are you looking at me like that? There will always be another planet.”

He questioned next when all he’d managed to do was to glare back, shaking at the thought of reaching for the knife in his boot. He knew that if he couldn’t take his life in a potential struggle then he’d be forced to attempt to shoot him instead, leaving little options for escape with raised alarms.

“Have you ever done any acting?”

He hadn’t heard the old man’s question, thinking of whether or not he should just shoot himself after getting it over with. He eyed the terrace that lead to the landing pad and was reminded what the easiest way out was after this was over. He felt light-headed, vertigo overtaking him once again forcing him to try to keep his balance.

“Well?”

The president asked, confused when he suddenly dropped to one knee before him.

“If you’re this eager then assist during my appointment. I can get another guard.”

The old man offered, shifting in his chair awkwardly from excitement to lean down to him while he slowly reached for the knife in his boot. He couldn’t manage to focus on what he was about to do, gripping the hilt tightly.

“Mr. President!”

Zack called out abruptly, not knowing what else to say after he saw Cloud suddenly kneel down behind his desk. He’d searched high and low all day, but this was the last place he thought he’d find him.

He’d started searching with floor 44 earlier that afternoon, but when he’d gotten a less than inviting welcome from his squadmates he went back to worrying about what he’d done and why they kept going on about rules. He was too used to everyone looking up to him just because he was a 1st that he underestimated his reach.

He worried about what it was he’d done to make his friend mistrust him all day while searching. It was only when he’d circled back around at the party after the end of the president’s excessively long speech that he’d seen a tuff of blond hair sticking out of a cadet’s scarf that he felt he’d finally found him.

He managed to follow him to floor 64 with surprisingly little trouble. He was lucky no one else was going up at that time, everyone was coming back down to finally party since the speeches were ending, but when he saw on the display that the elevator had stopped on the gym he was confused.

He follow up to the same floor but couldn’t find him anywhere in the deserted facilities. He started to panic, running back down the hallway back towards the elevator, trying to think of where he could have gone if this wasn’t the floor he’d been assigned to until he remembered stairs.

He sprinted to them and by the time he’d started climbing he heard a door open from far above. He ran the rest of the way up to floor 69 and hurried out in time to catch sight of him again just before
he vanished past the floor’s empty reception hallway.

He had no clue Cloud did security for the presidential floors sometimes, or if he’d really confused him with someone else. He assumed that he must have just been too busy working the event all day to bother calling him back and that it couldn’t be because he hadn’t wanted to.

Despite his optimism he hesitated whether or not he should go up to bother him at all. If he was just guarding the 70th floor then he’d have time to talk, wouldn’t he? When he glanced out at the grand staircases he wondered what he was really doing following him like this.

It was only when he climbed to the upper floor and saw no one standing guard that he felt something was wrong. He’d walked right in to the penthouse office without hesitation, but to his great surprise found Cloud standing behind the man’s desk speaking with him.

He could barely make out their conversation, something about acting, but the fact that he was too close to the old man was already enough to concern him, seeing him kneel down next had forced him to interrupt. Standing in the middle of his office in terror.

The president had spun back around with a jolt as soon as he’d yelled out his name, surprised to find a SOLDIER finally standing before him after waiting for so long.

“You’re late! The contract was very specific! I don’t care if you’re new this is-”

The old man started barking but he soon recognized the puzzled young man before him and stopped.

“Contract?”

Zack asked, looking past the president at Cloud who’d managed to stand back up and apprehensively step back. He wanted to start yelling, thinking of reasons why his friend was all alone with the president and why he shouldn’t be there, struggling to keep his composure.

“Wait, you’re my new 1st, aren’t you? Zack was it?”

The old man asked, clearly distracted by his impromptu introduction.

“Yeah?”

Zack answered, although he hardly sounded certain in place of the hundreds of swears he'd wanted to say instead.

"Did Tseng finally convince you?"

He old man asked eagerly, straightening his suit in anticipation.

“No. Convince me?”

Zack questioned at a loss, clearly disturbed by the little he’d overheard, watching despite all his intentions to follow while Cloud suddenly rounded the immense desk to leave.

“Nevermind.”

The president dismissed quickly, clearly there had been a mistake in his arrangements and his assistant would be hearing about it.

“I was just talking to the young cadet here about joining SOLDIER.”
He attempted to cover up the misunderstanding, turning back to glance at the blond but he’d already put his helmet back on and made it past his desk, heading towards the exit.

“Uh, sure. He’ll join any time now if he keeps working hard. But I guess he really should be getting back to his post.”

Zack spoke up, insisting on excusing him to attempt to defuse the situation, heading after him before the president could say anything else.

“Sorry to have disturbed you!”

He shouted back at the old man before all but breaking out into a run as soon as he’d passed the door. Cloud had surprisingly already made it down the winding staircase without falling. He ran past the still deserted reception and out into the hallway next.

"Cloud! Hey! Where are you going?"

He shouted while running after him, trying to get his attention, but he only kept running almost making it to the elevators before he caught up with him.

“You can’t just leave your post!”

He yelled, desperate to try to get him to stop before grabbing one of his arms and pulling him to a halt.

“Let go!”

Cloud shouted back as soon as he felt his grip, shoving him before he could even realize what he was doing. He was terrified by what he’d almost walked in on him doing back there, seeing little choice but to make a run for it on the spot.

He could have seen it all, he could have been covered in blood, a knife plunged in to his neck. Instead he’d frozen, and now he knew Zack would never let him escape, but he had to convince him it was the only way somehow.

“I said let go!”

He yelled again, struggling to breathe after running like his life depended on it after what he was convinced had just been another panic attack with the president.

The fact that he hadn’t stabbed the old man the second he’d gotten close enough had him spiraling out with the fear that he wasn’t strong enough to do the right thing after all.

“Cloud calm down!”

Zack urged, surprised by how roughly he was pushing him back, barely managing to hold him still by taking hold of both his arms.

“I have to go back!”

Cloud shouted, glancing back at the elevators before eyeing the empty hallway they’d come from. It wasn’t too late until whoever it was the president was waiting for actually showed up.

“Back to work? Sure. But what were you doing with the president? What’s going on?”

Zack asked with as much concern as he could maintain through the shock of his own question. He
tried to get him to meet his eyes but by the time he did he was chilled by how distant his stare was.

“I’m trying to help end this.”

Cloud attempted to explain, pulling back from him again, but his reticence to let go only angered him. He knew he couldn’t break free, like so many times in the past, but before he knew it he’d taken hold of both his arms as well and pushed him up against the nearest wall with all the force he had in him.

He felt him stumble back and hit the wall with a satisfying thud, surprised by how much he’d missed what it felt like to change his odds even if it wouldn't last. Even though his adrenaline still ran high he couldn’t feel him letting go and he worried he’d never get back to the 70th floor at this rate.

“End what?”

Zack questioned, still shocked from being slammed up against a wall. He was baffled by his sudden strength, not knowing if he really couldn’t push him off or if he was just going crazy trying to understand the look on his face. He’d followed him on a whim but this wasn’t how he’d expected the night to go at all.

“It’s my only chance!”

Cloud agonized, surprised he’d managed to hold him still for even an instant. He soon gave up hope that he’d understand no matter what he said, lowering his arms instead. The further he slumped down the more he felt his grip loosen in turn, hands sliding down his arms only to stop at his wrists.

Zack stared back at him in shock, his knees still felt weak, his heart was racing, and his breath was irregular. He still hadn’t quite seized what had just happened, just realizing how aroused he was when he felt his hands slide further down to his only to feel him pull away painfully.

He’d never felt quite that way before, intoxicated by the swiftness with which he’d moved his body to the point of loosing track of whatever they’d just been arguing about. He was still leaning against the wall to try to process what he’d missed despite Cloud backing away from him slowly.

“Only chance?”

Zack questioned desperately, trying to get a hold of himself until a frighteningly acute sensation of deja vu came on. It felt as though he was about to fight a friend again, but he couldn’t, not him.

“You have to let me do this.”

Cloud tried to turn back, unaware of how lost Zack had become in his own stupor.

“Wait, Cloud.”

He called, catching his hand before he could make another run for it, desperate to snap him out of his sudden vendetta.

“Do what?”

He questioned roughly, embarrassed by the disdain and jealousy in his voice. He knew there was no time for any of this if they got caught leaving the president’s office without a valid reason.
“I was going to desert the company.”

Cloud finally admitted. He didn’t want to tell him everything but when he thought of what he’d really seen, scared and on his knees behind the old man’s desk, he knew he rather tell him the truth.

“I was going to take the president down with me.”

He added solemnly when Zack only managed to stare back in shock again.

“You were gonna murder him?”

Zack took hold of his shoulders firmly next, if only to ensure he was hearing correctly.

“Why?”

He insisted when no answer came, concerned why he’d go so far over rumors about monsters and hidden weapons.

“I don’t expect you to understand, just let me finish this.”

Cloud responded, refusing to look up at him.

“Cloud, what the hell?”

Zack retorted immediately, leaning down to get a better look at him under his helmet.

“Don’t talk to me like that, not like everyone else.”

He pleaded, afraid of what was really going on and whether or not this was the only choice.

"I’m sorry."

Cloud answered, realizing how angry he’d been at him for interrupting his reckless plan in which he couldn’t even recognize himself anymore.

“You can’t just kill the damn president, Cloud.”

Zack attempted to reason but he was still feeling lost. It wasn’t that he was particularly fond of the old man, he’d never even talked to him before, but he couldn’t believe his friend would take a rebel group trying to destabilize Shinra so seriously.

“I’m doing it for you too. I’m doing it for everyone. Please don’t stop me.”

Cloud still sounded desperate, suddenly pulling free. He was too scared to let himself give up just yet, but the longer he stared in to his bright eyes the less he wanted to fight.

“We need to get out of here, if he wasn’t suspicious before he must be now. And he was waiting for someone, right? Let’s go.”

Zack moved to block his way again, getting tired of their dilemma.

“No.”

He answered sharply, glancing back to make sure no one had arrived yet.

“You know I can’t let you pass, right?”
Zack asked, clearly anxious that his bad feeling would turn out right, but he was about done with his antics.

“I have to.”

Cloud muttered, barely taking a step forward before feeling arms around him again and his entire center of gravity suddenly shifting. Finding himself promptly slung over his shoulder, groaning from the pressure on his freshly healed ribs as he struggling to get down.

“What about your family! What about mine?”

He yelled, unable to to break loose despite his anger escalating while he carried him back towards the elevators.

Zack needed to calm him down, he needed to make him see that this wasn’t his only choice, that it wasn’t the solution, but the longer he held on the more he struggled.

“Cloud please just listen to me.”

He pleaded, holding his legs firmly, easily containing his disdain until he noticed him trying to slide his rifle off his back.

“Shut up! Just let me go!”

Cloud was reduced to yelling at the top of his lungs while Zack pulled him down in to his arms to take hold of the gun before he could take a swing at him with the hilt. When the elevator doors opened before them and another SOLDIER walked through he awkwardly set him back down.

“1st class Zack Fair.”

The SOLDIER greeted his superior, hesitating to salute him out of sheer surprise of watching him set the evidently distressed cadet down while he tried to assess the situation.

“Uh..”

Zack took a step back, watching Cloud straighten his helmet and sling his gun back over his shoulder, too surprised by the sudden confrontation to say anything.

“Is everything okay, sir?”

The other SOLDIER asked but Zack only nodded vaguely at the 2nd, eyeing Cloud to try and gauge whether or not he was going to make a run for it again.

“Uh, yeah, of course. Everything’s super fine.”

He lied through a tense smile, taking another step away from Cloud while every brain cell he had worked desperately for anything to cover up why he could of been carrying him away screaming from his post.

“Okay.”

The 2nd acknowledged plainly. He was average looking, but carried a bag with him as he passed them by the next instant. He was no doubt the one the old man had been waiting for from the way he hurried on, but he had no time to think about what business he had with the president, they had to get out of there now.
When he finally looked back at Cloud he could see how distraught he still was, watching him hit the button for the elevator then pull off his helmet to press his forehead against the control panel out of exhaustion.

“I couldn’t just let you do something like that. You’re just not thinking right.”

Zack justified, but didn’t dare to reach out to him. He couldn’t tell what he would do next, hoping the worst was over with.

“Shinra needs to be stopped. You know it too. Anyone working here should know it.”

He spoke up without looking back at him. He’d managed to steady himself enough to put his helmet back on and step in to the elevator as soon as it arrived.

“Cloud, tell me what the hell is going on, is this about those WEAPON fanatics? I can’t just let you leave after all that.”

Zack followed him in, trying to think of a plan.

“Then arrest me.”

He suggested coldly, glaring at his chest instead of looking up at him. He didn’t know what else to do but to dare him to follow through with his duty as a 1st.

“Cloud..”

Zack sighed before turning back to the controls and selecting the parking garage below the main floor.

“You should be at the party.”

Cloud attempted to change the topic, backing away as soon as the glass elevator started moving. He wasn’t supposed to be confronting him at all. He’d thought he’d never see him again when he decided to throw his life away to send a message against the company.

“I’m not interested.”

Zack answered as sharply as he had all night, crossing his arms. He tried not to be upset at him but he always did a poor job of hiding how he was feeling, glancing away before huffing and staring him down again.

“I was looking for you.”

He admitted next, glancing back at the floors counting down anxiously.

“All day, actually.”

He sighed, turning back to him.

“Look, if I hadn’t followed you, and if I hadn’t stopped you, what do you think would happen to Midgar? Do you really want to leave all these people up to gangs and terrorists?”

He questioned, holding his arms tightly over his own chest to avoid gesturing in outrage.

“No one should live here.”
Cloud finally responded, still staring at the ground as they descended.

“People can’t just leave! Not just like that.”

Zack argued, thinking of all his friends in the city, and in the slums, worrying what would happen if Shinra couldn’t keep them safe.

“You don’t understand.”

Cloud muttered while looking back up at him, wishing he knew how to make him see things differently, but the way he threw his hands up next made him wish he hadn’t said anything more.

“How can I when you won’t explain!”

Zack shouted despite his resolve to stay calm.

“Why won’t you tell me anything? You’ve been ignoring me ever since.”

He kept gesturing dramatically until he realized what he was missing. He could only go back to worrying what else he couldn’t recall clearly.

“Ever since Junon.”

He kept forgetting he was still missing the big picture, but he honestly didn’t know what else to blame for feeling so lost.

Cloud was surprised he even still remembered that day at all, fearing bringing any of that up when they were moments from reaching the main floors.

“What aren’t you telling me? Or you just don’t want to see me because I’m SOLDIER, is that it?”

Zack kept on questioning him dejectedly, desperate for answers.

“It’s not that.”

Cloud’s voice was barely audible, struggling to speak up while he towered over him, knowing there would be no way to escape without causing a scene with that many people.

“Then why won’t you tell me?”

Zack insisted, placing a hand on his arm, albeit losing confidence when he still didn't look at him.

“You were really going to kill him?”

He questioned next, still not believing what he’d seen in that office.

“I don’t know. I wanted to.”

Cloud answered, shutting his eyes tightly. He could feel something eating away at his anger, but he couldn't tell what it was through muddled grief and despair.

“We need to get out of here.”

Zack said abruptly, prompting him to finally meet his eyes again.

“Out?”
He asked, freezing when the elevator suddenly halted. He thought it was over, that they'd reached the main floor, but they were just above it and passengers boarded instead.

“Yea, will you? There’s some place I’ve been wanting to take you.”

Zack only moved closer to speak, entirely ignoring the intoxicated people heading back to the party.

“They won’t let us.”

Cloud kept his voice down, glancing at one person attempting to gain Zack’s attention.

“Don’t worry.”

Zack smiled before turning to the people trying to ask him what his next mission was or if they could have a selfie but he simply brought his arms up around them to guide them out of the elevator as soon as they reached the event hall.

“Alright, everyone out!”

He said encouragingly, ignoring their pleas for him to join them as he held down the close doors button, making sure they alone continued down to the garage level. When the doors opened again it only took a moment before Zack rushed towards the largest armored vehicle in the parking lot.

“Cloud, let’s take this one!”

He suggested, barely looking back to ensure he was even cooperating. The malaise on his face in that instant was enough to show he couldn’t bring himself to face what they were running from.

Cloud watched him circle the truck to climb in and start the engine, turning to stare at him on the other side while he hesitated to even open the door. He stared back towards the elevators as soon as he’d met his eyes, anxious to follow.

“We can’t just leave in the middle of an event like this.”

He protested, still fidgeting with the door handle even though he'd finally opened it, every instinct within him dreading getting in.

“Why not?”

Zack asked, leaning over towards him to insist. He always did whatever he pleased and he thought that getting out of the city was the only way to help him clear his head.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

He gestured impatiently for him to hurry and get in when he didn’t budge.

“They’ll know.”

Cloud stated finally, looking back out at the deserted parking garage once more.

“I don’t care. Can’t we just go together right now and figure the rest out later?”

Zack leaned back in the driver’s seat after his own question, almost ashamed for trying to force him to come with him despite his best intentions to help.
Cloud on the other hand couldn’t believe what he’d just heard, staring back up at the man he’d pined over for so long now he didn’t know how to respond. He felt himself start to smile despite how scared he was of showing him, trying to figure out why it felt so wrong despite how happy he was.

“Cloud.”

When he said his name again he couldn’t bare to keep thinking of worse case scenarios, climbing in to the vehicle at a loss with himself. He couldn’t understand how he could run away instead of finding another way to take the company down.

When he got in he couldn’t bring himself to meet his eyes again. He was ashamed of always putting him first, but he couldn’t bear to hear the pain in his voice anymore than he could stand their time apart.

When he finally glanced back at him as they rolled out of the garage without a hitch he was struck by how happy he seemed. He was smiling at him as if he’d just won a medal. He could only blame his unease about the road ahead on all the nightmares he’d had of leaving the cursed city, feeling as if the high-way was going to give out beneath them the faster he drove.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

I’m just glad they’re back together at this point I didn’t realize how long its gotten, but maybe I’ll finish it before the remake comes out

and as always

comments welcome
Cloud couldn't remember when he'd shut his eyes so vehemently, his heart had been beating so hard he’d lost himself. It was only when he felt a hand on his that he opened them again, realizing that they'd really made it out of the city together.

He'd been gripping the edge of his own seat anxiously bracing himself for a crash that hadn’t come, but as soon as he could feel Zack's hand caressing his he pulled it away. He felt horrible for the way he meekly returned his hand to the steering wheel, glancing at him with concern.

Despite the unquantifiable relief he’d felt from his touch and the realization that they’d made it somehow he couldn't manage to calm down. When he finally looked back up at Zack he could barely hold his gaze, focusing on the road ahead instead.

Seeing how calm he still was while he drove through the darkness started to unnerve him more than anything, worried that he'd only dragged the older man in to more problems by letting him help him escape.

"Are you okay?"

Zack asked once he’d gathered the courage, not wanting to upset him further, but he could barely read anything off him besides fear. Trying not to stare back, he struggled to keep an eye on the road.

"Yeah."

Cloud's answer was as automatic as ever, refusing to admit that he'd thought they would die before they even got out of Midgar, yet here they were, alive. He'd dreamed of this exact moment so many times before, and so many times it had ended horrendously.

He couldn't shake the feeling that if he met his eyes even once more it would cause them to careen to their deaths. He'd thought it was inevitable that it all be over soon, convinced he'd lost it all even though he hadn't accomplished anything, let alone dismantle Shinra itself.

Even though he'd tried his best to forget the nightmares that had plagued him, he only managed to pick them apart instead. He knew it couldn't happen the same way, Sephiroth had always been present and he was in Modeoheim. He felt crazy for even thinking about him showing up to seal their demise, but it left him wondering where Angeal and Genesis ended up if they were still alive.

He tried to think back to why he'd kept dreaming of the four of them in that car, and why he was convinced they were all doomed along with Shinra. Remembering his nightmares stressed him to the point that he started to feel sick to his stomach.
He leaned against the door to stare out the passenger window, trying to steady himself. He couldn't bare to make this any harder on Zack than it was, he was just trying to help him after all. He thought leaving Midgar would appease the pain in his chest, but it only threatened to break him down the further they got.

He’d left his phone in HQ before his assassination plan fell through, but he knew Zack had his. Besides, there was surely the same type of tracking hardware in a vehicle this size. He had to trust that Cissnei had really taken care of Tseng somehow.

He glanced back at Zack again hesitantly, feeling queasy from the guilt of still not wanting to tell him everything even though he knew he should. Being caught by him had to mean something. Not killing a man for the first time that night had to mean something.

He didn’t know where to even start telling him everything that had been taken from them, feeling like the little he’d told him so far had been awful enough. He had to hope he’d be brave enough to, but the faster they drove the sicker he felt.

“Do you leave for missions like this a lot?”

Cloud finally spoke up, trying to make up for his persistent silence despite struggling to steady himself and his stomach.

“Yeah, all the time! There’s nothing to do in HQ.”

Zack was happy to oblige the question, looking at him only a moment before checking his mirrors, noting that there was still no sign of anything or anyone following them.

"I usually do jobs for the company, you know, retrieving stolen goods or clearing out monsters or rebels. But I leave for other things whenever I can too."

He went on, only to be met with silence in return.

“You haven’t?”

He asked next, but Cloud hadn't quite followed, still trying to get a hold of himself at the thought of how many people opposing Shinra had met their demise at his very hands.

“What?”

Cloud looked back up at him after taking his helmet off. He hadn't realized he'd kept it on until then, too used to it and too caught up in the rush of running away with him.

“Left the city?”

Zack clarified, smiling when he could see his whole face again despite how anxious and terrified he still looked.

“No. Not since Junon.”

Cloud felt awful at just the mention of the fortified city, but the truth was he just didn't go anywhere ever. Even before meeting him and having his life turned upside down, he never knew what to do with himself anyways.

“Oh.”

Zack didn't know what to say, feeling bad for even asking before bringing his hand up to his
shoulder next in another attempt to reassure him.

“Well, despite how tonight happened, I'm glad it did.”

His voice had become so soft that Cloud let himself get lost in it and the sensation of his hand moving up his shoulder to his head next, running his fingers through his hair. He stared back up at him, but Zack only offered a quick smile before watching the road ahead.

"The sky's really clear tonight, we'll get there in no time."

Zack continued to try to reassure him, but he'd leaned out of his reach, staring out the window anxiously again.

"Where are we going?"

Cloud asked dryly, unable to focus on much he felt like he'd really hurl if he didn't manage to steady his breathing soon. He always got this way in cars, planes, helicopters, everything, and he hated it.

"It's a surprise."

Zack teased, trying his best to keep his tone gentle in response, but could only be concerned as he watched him frown in dismay.

"I don't like surprises."

Cloud reproached, not knowing what else to say seeing as he hadn't even had the sense to ask before climbing in with him.

“I've wanted to work another mission with you for a while now.”

Zack admitted next, but nervously went on when he got no response.

"The tasks I get assigned are all really boring, I didn’t want to drag you along on something like that.”

He explained, clearly hesitant about justifying himself.

“Besides, I was going to ask except we were taking a break or whatever right? I just thought since we didn't plan on it but we're out here now, why not? If you're not up for it I get it. I'll take you back whenever you're ready.”

He elaborated, trying to get Cloud's attention again, left worrying where he went when he got lost in thought like that.

"Ready? I can't go back."

Cloud couldn't understand what he was thinking. One of the people who saw them leave would surely report them, walking back in to headquarters would mean certain arrest.

“We don't have to talk about all that right now. It's just I've been thinking a lot about this. I get a lot of emails from this kid who's been messing with me, sending me these clues about rare treasure but then they're always bogus and I always end up making her cry. Except this time I got a tip from an anonymous source and I've been really curious if its big stuff.”

Zack went on, explaining his recent antics.
"Want to check it out? We could get rich, plus it'll get your mind off everything."

He encouraged again when he still received no response, keeping his eyes on the road ahead despite his impatience for an answer.

"Treasure?"

Cloud questioned, trying to figure out why he was having such a bad feeling.

"Really valuable items I hope."

Zack lit up as soon as he'd spoken again, afraid their trip would be a lot harder than he'd imagined, scared from seeing him so distant again.

"I wanted us to try to find it together. Dip out before that anon notices we took it, whadya say?"

He proposed, offering him another warm smile.

"If they're sending the tip why don't they get it themselves?"

Cloud couldn't help but be skeptical of this mystery person's intentions, staring up at the stars through the passenger window if only to avoid his overbearing optimism while he tried to get everything to stop spinning.

“Oh, well there are tough monsters sometimes you know, but don’t worry, nothing we can’t handle together.”

Zack explained plainly, trying to make it sound as easy as possible, practically beaming at the prospect.

“Okay.”

Cloud agreed out of necessity to say something, anything at all, but his friend couldn't hold back his glee.

"Alright!"

Zack shouted, giving him another pat on the shoulder even though he refused to look back at him this time.

“If we get rich, then we could go anywhere we want.”

Zack encouraged, looking up at the stars when he noticed he was still staring at them.

"Then we won't have to follow orders anymore, we'll have enough to do anything we want."

He went off, as if trying to convince himself more than him.

"Is treasure hunting in the dark really a good idea?"

Cloud didn't sound sure of his own question, still feeling awful from trying to calm his nerves for so long, but at least the stars were beautiful.

“Hah, not really.”

Zack admitted.
“Figured we could camp near the fields they pinpointed the rest of the night, then start searching in the morning?”

He elaborated and Cloud could only stare on ahead, trying to figure out what direction they were heading towards, but he couldn't even do that. He felt too sick, closing his eyes again in a vain attempt to steady himself again.

“Alright.”

He agreed to Zack's plan despite the sudden urge to jump out of the moving vehicle. He could feel his heart start to race again and had to take his hand off the door not to open it. He hadn't known what he’d been planning by leaving the city besides getting some air. He hadn't gone so far as to consider how much time he'd want together and what an entire treasure hunt would entail.

He didn’t know why he was so scared, angry at himself that it was only making his nausea worse. Despite what had happened between them in Junon he still wanted to believe that it wasn't Zack's fault. He had no reason to believe what he’d done was intentional, only that he'd failed to stop it from happening.

He blamed himself, but not even remembering whether or not he’d tried to stop him hurt more than anything he'd done to his body. He didn’t know how to trust himself around him anymore and it terrified him that he'd just escaped Midgar with him.

He had to remind himself that Junon hadn’t been their only time together. He tried to remember the first night after Modeoheim, when he’d been sleep deprived to the point that he’d managed to pass out to him reading to him, and how he’d longed to wake up in his arms again ever since that morning.

He’d wanted everything to be fine between them for so long yet somehow he wasn’t sure anymore. The way he'd first held him completely unashamed of spooning him had filled him with too much apprehension. He couldn't understand how he could touch him that way when he barely knew him.

It made him feel used if anything, and scared that the anonymous mission would end up no different. He had to convince himself he wouldn't loose focus on getting back to Midgar after all. Staring out in to the darkness he still couldn’t make out where they were headed.

When Zack finally stopped the vehicle even the gradual halt was a rude wake up call. The urge to vomit he’d suppressed had returned in full force, prompting him to open the door and jump out the next instant.

“Cloud?”

Zack called, confused why he’d exited so quickly until he rounded the truck to find him throwing up on the other side.

“Hey, are you alright?”

He asked while placing a hand on his shoulder gently, but Cloud only shrugged him off. He watched as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve roughly.

“I’m fine.”

Cloud tried to assure him even though he’d turned away, still bracing himself against the vehicle to catch his breath.
“It’s nothing.”

He insisted, glancing back as Zack climbed in to the vehicle through the passenger side before emerging again with a canister of water, handing it to him in a hurry.

“Here.”

Zack offered quietly despite the way he shoved it at him, trying not to be overbearing despite his deepening concern.

“Thank you.”

Cloud didn’t know what else to say, quickly taking a gulp to rinse out his mouth and spit it out before drinking some. He was about to turn back to him to explain when they were suddenly attacked by monsters.

He hadn't even gotten the chance to reach the rifle he’d left in the truck before Zack wiped them out with a few swings from the blunt side of his massive sword, turning back to him with a grin.

"Don't worry I'll clear out the area. Stay here."

Zack assured, making sure he met his eyes to acknowledge his order before doing as he promised. He scouted the grounds and got rid of any other creatures lurking.

In the meantime Cloud gathered himself, feeling guilty for always getting sick and not being able to help it. It had to be another reason he never traveled, though, still not understanding what he wanted from him to find the treasure, he had no tracking skills or strength to offer whatsoever.

He stared up at the sky leaning against the side of the truck, surprised by how bright the stars were out here. Even in Nibelheim they were often shrouded because of the reactor.

He turned after a moment to walk to the back of the truck, getting some supplies out. He set up a tent first then returned to get tools to gather wood when Zack came running back, finding him holding an ax.

"Too easy! What'd I miss?"

He asked, clearly energized by his run around the perimeter despite freezing at the sight of him.

"Are you feeling any better?"

Zack asked with a seriousness that shook him, but Cloud still couldn’t quite face everything yet, holding his thoughts back as he stepped out with the ax over his shoulder.

"Do we have enough time for a fire?"

Cloud asked, stepping past him before he could register his question.

"Yeah! Now you’re talking!"

Zack exclaimed with as much excitement as ever when he’d finally grasped his offer, albeit the decisive look on his face while he scouted for the nearest wooded area had him swallowing hard.

"Want a hand with that?"

He offered but Cloud only shook his head. He hadn't chopped logs in ages, and if anything was
going to help with how brittle and detached he felt it may as well be this, feeling wood split apart was grounding.

Despite how tired he felt, gathering enough wood for a fire had helped his nerves and allowed him to forget how sick he’d just been. He found Zack had piled up supplies by the tent and appeared to be filling the tent with a ridiculous amount of sleeping bags and blankets.

“Hey, want some marshmallows?”

Zack asked, crawling out of the tent as soon as he returned.

“Marshmallows?”

Cloud asked, only able to stare back puzzled before trying to decide where to build the fire downwind. He dumped the logs down before suddenly being handed a bag of the fluffy treats.

“I convinced the rest of SOLDIER to pack better supplies. Y’never know when you’ll need to make smores.”

Zack said, smiling at him while he looked down at them then at him.

“What’s a smore?”

Cloud asked, but couldn’t help but smile when Zack burst out laughing in response. Even if he had no idea what was so funny he couldn’t help but feel how exhausted he really was, He just felt left behind, wishing he knew why Zack looked so happy despite everything that happened that night and if he’d ever manage to feel like that some day too.

He had to accept that stargazing and marshmallows weren’t such a bad idea after all. He set the bag down by the rest of the supplies, but by then Zack had knelt down to start building the fire, trying to light it poorly. He soon joined him to help.

“Here, lend me that.”

Cloud asked after leveraging the logs correctly, motioning to the newspaper he'd left by the ax.

“It’s okay, I’ve got it.”

Zack still tried to manage lighting it, but Cloud was already crumpling the paper for an easy starter.

“I would have gotten it, if you’d let me.”

The taller man continued to fuss, letting him place the paper under the logs despite his efforts.

“I gets cold up in Nibelheim.”

Cloud said, but he smiled at how endearing he looked when he was frustrated, taking the lighter from him next.

"If you leave a space like this, it's easier to light."

He said while lighting the paper and watching it work its way in to the first log.

“Oh. That’s cool.”

Zack admitted, glad he hadn't resorted to using his fire materia after all.
“I’ve never really made one, fires are only for really big ceremonies in Gongaga.”

He shared, feeling like he needed to explain why it wasn't a basic skill for him, but the truth was that someone else always took care of it when he worked missions. Besides, he was never cold.

“Like what?”

Cloud asked, sitting down near the fire, reaching for a rations bar from the supplies before they started getting in to the snacks, hoping it would help appease his stomach, forgetting when his last real meal was. It usually took a long time for his motion sickness to wear off but puking sometimes had the opposite effect.

“We make bonfires for for the harvest, or for weddings, stuff like that.”

Zack elaborated, oddly shying off by the end of his answer. He stood there awkwardly, not knowing why things still felt so off, but he was too afraid to bring up why they'd left in the first place.

Cloud couldn’t help but smile up at how nervous he looked in that moment. He felt guilty for ever thinking that someone so kind could ever want to cause him harm.

“Uh, hold on.”

Zack said, quickly glancing around them.

“I’ll go get sticks.”

He rushed off with clear priorities on toasting snacks, leaving Cloud staring at the fire. It reminded him of reading books by the fireplace back home and he couldn’t help but think of being in bed with him again, and of the book he’d tried to read to him that first night.

“Here.”

Zack said as soon as he'd returned, handing him one of the sticks he'd fashioned out of dried branches. He then took his sword off, planting it in to the ground by the tent before sitting down near him and grabbing the bag of marshmallows.

"I love these things."

He said, smiling as he stuck one on his own stick and started spinning it over the fire, leaning over on his free arm.

"They're sorta like little clouds."

Zack added, cracking a smile instead of laughing at his own joke as he usually did.

Cloud couldn’t help but smile back despite purposefully stabbing and roasting his own little cloud from the bag.

"Except this one's a rain cloud now."

Zack said after realizing he’d stared at him too long and ending up setting his on fire. He quickly blew it out, dangling the charred treat between them to get a better look at his friend’s annoyed expression, laughing before eating it whole.

Cloud would have smiled at his joke, but it only reminded him of the kids who'd called him just
that while dousing him from the town's water tower. He wasn't exactly fond of any wordplay on his name because of them.

"Hey, yours is on fire too."

Zack warned before laughing and sticking two more to roast.

"Oh."

Cloud hadn't managed anything else before it melted off his stick and in to the fire. He'd been staring at the fire instead of paying attention and sighed, reaching for another.

"Are you feeling any better?"

Zack asked, still concerned about earlier, recalling that he'd been sick in Junon too, but he didn't remember why.

"I think."

Cloud didn't sound sure of himself for a change, but it was far better than being brushed off entirely.

"That's good."

Zack smiled, but hesitated, looking back at the fire.

"Listen, about tonight."

He started again, but he wasn't quite sure how to bring up what had happened with the president, or if he should wait until tomorrow, realizing how tired he seemed when he looked back.

“Wouldn’t you rather have been drinking and dancing?”

Cloud asked dryly, keeping his eyes on how golden the treat was becoming.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Zack answered before eating his set of half-charred ones.

"Shouldn't it?"

Cloud asked passively, cautiously consuming the sugary snack. He bit it off the stick, left surprised by how good it tasted as it melted in his mouth.

It had been so long since he'd eaten anything so sweet, let alone any sort of desert. He hadn't been able to afford anything extra, living off rations and what little they were paid hadn't made it easy for him.

He only looked back up when he'd swallowed it, realizing that the older man had never answered him. When he met his gaze again the look in his eyes struck him.

“The party only would have mattered if you'd gone with me.”

Zack finally admitted in a tone that didn’t quite equal the intensity of his look before staring back at the fire.
"Zack."

Cloud didn't know what to say, feeling himself sinking from the dread of constantly letting him down. Practically flinching when the 1st turned back towards him and stood up.

"May I?"

He asked, extending his hand to him suddenly.

"Huh?"

Cloud was lost again. He felt it had been happening far more often than necessary, but he couldn't put together what was going on. He dropped his stick, staring up at him in surprise.

"Have this dance."

Zack clarified, smiling patiently.

"I don't know how."

Cloud said, unable to bring himself to reach for his hand, but when Zack leaned further to take it he felt himself get pulled up uneasily. He was embarrassed, wishing he wasn't quite so strong, or quite so tall and charming.

"Neither do I."

Zack responded as confidently as always despite his admission, taking his other hand in his just as easily.

"But I've seen it enough times."

He justified, pulling one hand up to rest on his shoulder before wrapping his arm around him loosely, guiding him with the hand he'd taken first.

"Would you have asked me to do this in front of people?"

Cloud asked anxiously, holding on tighter while picturing them on the gigantic event floor, surrounded by couples dancing with far more elegance than they could muster.

"Yea, why?"

Zack asked plainly, smiling down at him.

"We're awful."

Cloud scoffed, but couldn't help but laugh, admiring how little other people's regard mattered to him.

"Oh, come on, it's the effort that counts, right?"

Zack continued to smile warmly, waltzing with him slowly besides the roaring fire to a song neither bothered to imagine.

"You're right."

Cloud conceded before resting his head against his chest. He knew that this was what he'd felt
from the start. A comfort that was both inspiring and encompassing as he sank against him while spinning ever slower by the fire.

He felt wide awake for once, despite the lethargic pull of their dance, coming to terms with the feelings he’d first had for him. His unwavering smile, and the warmth it brought him, holding his hand tightly while his other slid up his shoulder to the back of his neck.

When he met Zack’s bright eyes again he felt him falter, hesitating to hold his gaze when his fingers ran through his long black hair, suddenly pulling him closer instead of keeping pace.

Cloud felt him let go of his hand only to wrap both arms around him in response, feeling his lips against his the next instant. He closed his eyes and gripped one of his suspenders for support, smiling in to their kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Are they going to get rich?

Well you all know they don't but imagine what could have been at least just a little while longer

I can't believe the remake will really come out in 8 months and I can't promise I'll finish this story before then honestly I was just writing this to bide my time until it was released but who knows maybe they'll get to Nibelheim by then at least or maybe I'll learn to edit faster
Chapter Summary

for all those still actually paying attention

I hope you enjoy the smut and I hope you like the treasure hunt up next too

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They kissed, and kissed, and then some more, until he could barely feel the tips of his toes on the ground anymore, being held so tightly in his arms that he'd lifted him up. He held on tightly, arms around Zack's neck once again.

He couldn't help but run a hand through his hair slowly, if only for the satisfaction of how soft it was at first, but then to pull him closer as he saw fit. The deeper they kissed the more he felt he'd drown in his own desire.

He didn't know what had snapped him out of the intensity of their tongues exploring each other, if it had been the crackling of the fire or something in the woods, but his attention had soon twisted back to their inevitable fate. He had to break their kiss, staring down in to the fire as he loosened his grip.

The realization that he'd once more abandoned any resolve to keep a distance from the man just because he hadn't been able to refuse a dance had him reeling. He couldn't trust himself to do anything at all, let alone protect the other man.

He felt his feet touch ground hesitantly when Zack set him down, breathing deeply from their kiss, watching him try to catch his breath himself as he stepped away. He didn't know why he'd had to stop, just that if he touched him again he might not be able to put an end to it.

"Would you have done that in front of everyone at the party?"

Cloud asked as steadily as he could, struggling through the muddled anger that had suddenly come over him. His voice was nearly shaking, still unable to fully piece together why his conflicts in judgement persisted despite their many attempts at reconciliation.

"Uh."

Zack started, clearly searching for his words. He was still surprised he'd pushed him away despite how passionately he'd just been kissing him back, practically dazed from how heated it had been while he tried to focus on his question.

"If we were there."

He started, trying to put things in to perspective, wishing the blood would return to his brain faster.

"And if I had."
He continued vaguely, stepping closer to him again to try to get his attention, still irked about not being looked at when he talked.

"Would that have been a bad thing?"

He asked, trying to smile at him sincerely. He was unsure how he'd have behaved at such a grand company function, but he didn't see a problem with it either way. Biting his lower lip while waiting for an answer, anxious to get back to it.

"People hate me enough already."

Cloud admitted after some time, his incessant caution granting him a worst case scenario of everyone out to get him as some had when the rumors of he and Sephiroth briefly circulated.

No matter how many fights he got in, he never thought much of them when they were always instigated by one maladjusted individual. He'd only learned to never lower his guard, but the thought of people collectively hating him terrified him to a point he couldn't even begin to understand it.

"What?"

Zack took a step back out of shock before catching himself and quickly moving back to take his hands in his, trying to get him to meet his eyes again.

"No one hates you, Cloud."

He tried to assure him but his dear friend only kept staring at the ground.

"Forget it."

Cloud said dryly, haunted by what he'd said to him that first morning. Something he'd never anticipated hearing. That he could tell him anything, because he was different. Not being as open with him in return only tormented him.

"That's the last thing I want to keep doing."

Zack started to sound desperate, rubbing the back of his hands with his thumbs.

"How could anyone hate you."

He said, staring down at him endearingly despite his forlorn tone, squeezing his hands tightly when he finally met his eyes again as if afraid he'd step away the next instant.

"You'd be surprised."

Cloud finally offered, lost in how ethereal he looked in the glow of the fire again despite his better judgement. He wasn't smiling anymore but there was a determination as if his own fear enthralled him.

"Then no one has to know."

Zack said despite his unease, wishing he knew why he thought so little of himself, or why he'd want to hide their relationship.

"If that's what you want."
He added, uncertainty getting the best of him as to the appropriate course of action, leaning down lower to him when he didn't revoke his gaze.

"I don't know."

Cloud admitted, unable to let go of his hands despite how ashamed he felt for actually wanting everyone to know they were in love. Even so, he couldn't accept why dating a 1st instead of becoming one bothered him so much.

"I'm sorry."

He apologized, taking another step away as he wondered why he could feel his senses fading out, forgetting how exhausted he was.

"Don't be."

Zack assured, but when he felt him sway again he let go of his hands to take hold of his arms to support him, being met with hands on his chest to keep him away instead.

"You told me I was different once, that you could tell me anything."

Cloud shared suddenly, keeping him at arms length he surprised Zack to the point that he froze in place.

"I thought you were crazy at first, saying anything that crossed your mind."

He went on, unsure of what exactly his point of his admission had been.

"When did I say that?"

Zack asked, confused by memory he was evidently lacking, staring down at his hands on his chest that kept him at bay.

"A long time ago."

Cloud finally spoke up, trying to understand why he still couldn't confide in him.

"Cloud."

Zack protested, worried by his tone.

"I'm no different than anyone else."

Cloud attempted to justify, stepping back but he soon felt arms wrap around him again despite his resistance.

"You are."

Zack assured him, scared of how much he was missing even though there was no doubt in his mind that he was so much more than just different.

"I've really never met anyone like you before."

He admitted gently next, trying to hold him close despite his hands on his chest keeping them apart.
"And its not just because you're the only other backwater expert I know."

He insisted sincerely, trying his best to recall the conversation he'd referred to but there were no traces of it left in his mind.

"Am I not special to you too?"

Zack asked when he still didn't get a response, letting his veiled insecurities get the best of him for a change. Loosening his embrace only enough to lean down to attempt to plead with him, meeting a decisive gaze instead.

"I've always."

Cloud started, but his stare soon turned in to another frown, embarrassed by how long he'd felt mesmerized by him. He could feel his heart beating faster while he waited for him to continue. He couldn't stand the feeling of his strong arms around him any more than the toned muscles beneath his hands. Gripping the fabric with both hands suddenly, unable to bare touching him anymore than letting him go.

"Always what?"

Zack insisted, feeling his hope return at the change in his tone despite the way he'd suddenly pulled him closer by his sweater.

"I've always admired you."

Cloud had just as soon released his grip at his own admission. He'd forgotten why he was convinced he didn't matter to Zack even though he'd been honest with him from the start. The least he could do was try and be transparent in return, but all he felt was unhinged.

The next thing he knew he felt his lips on his again and while he pulled him closer. He felt weak being held so tightly, letting his hands slide back up to his shoulders for support before realizing what he was doing again.

Despite his worn out nerves he tried to keep his focus on his lips, on how good he felt being smothered with affection, but he couldn't breath, forcing himself to break yet another embrace.

"I'm sorry."

Zack apologized just as soon as he turned away from him.

“I just, didn't expect you to say that, and I couldn't tell if, uh."

He tried to justify, finding it hard to hide the fear in his voice anymore. He felt incredibly guilty for kissing him against his wishes despite how clearly he kept pushing him away, worried he wasn't thinking right himself anymore.

He let the pit of embarrassment at how eager he'd been to resume touching him dredge it's way through him when the younger man remained silent. It took time but when he realized how exhausted he must be after everything he'd gone through that night he let it go.

"I'm really sorry, Cloud. Look, I might not remember everything, but I know I meant what I said to you, and I’m sorry if you don't feel the same way."

Zack fumbled through his assurances, taking his arm to try to direct him towards the tent.
Cloud started after some time, unsteady on his feet when he turned back towards him instead.

"Yes?"

He answered patiently.

"I didn't mean for any of this to end up on you."

Cloud agonized as openly as he always did, worried about what reality either of them had left.

"It won't. Trust me."

Zack confirmed plainly before leading him back in the right direction.

“We’ll be fine. Come on, let’s just get some sleep.”

He encouraged, opening the tent to help him in first, reassured he'd even still accepted his help at all.

“Go ahead, I’ll put the stuff away.”

Zack said before turning back to gather up the food he'd left out, in hopes of not attracting anymore monsters. After locking it all back up he returned with water to put out the fire.

He stared at it for a moment longer, feeling remorseful that they hadn't celebrated the flame until it'd gone out like all the ceremonies from his youth. He'd known there hadn't been enough time either way, but he couldn't shake the regret that he'd ruined their night.

Still he felt bad for dousing the flame, watching the smoke in the darkness for as long as he could still make it out. He only hoped things would be better in the morning and that they could sort things out then.

He took a drink from what was left in the water canister before realizing he needed to take a leak. He'd been looking for him most of the day he hadn't even thought of it sooner, taking a quick jog to the nearest bushes before returning to the tent.

Cloud had pulled off his boots and sat on the far side of the tent waiting, unsure what to do. He tried to convince himself he really was just too exhausted to think at this point, pulling his knees up to his chest he waited anxiously until Zack crawled in to sit besides him.

“We’ll get rich tomorrow, you’ll see.”

Zack encouraged, pulling some of the extra pillows he'd thrown in earlier closer to get comfortable.

“Yeah?”

Cloud practically whispered, glancing back at him as he lay on his stomach, yawning into the pillows he’d piled up.

“Definitely.”

Zack sounded as confident as always.

"Good night Cloud."
He said intently, offering him a fond smile.

"Good night."

Cloud repeated, forgetting how overwhelming his gaze was in pitch darkness, missing it as soon as he closed his eyes the next instant.

He stared at him for some time, as if in disbelief that he'd be able to fall asleep so quickly without bothering to remove any of his gear. It was against company policy to remove it on missions, but this wasn't exactly official, and he'd never worked one overnight before himself.

He hated even the thought of sleeping in his gear, unhooking his belt and suspenders attached to his shoulder plates, removing them quietly before laying down and facing away from Zack.

He tried to think of anything but him, swallowing hard he couldn't help but focus on how loud his own breathing was while his heart continued to race, trying to focus on how steady his breathing was laying besides him.

He'd been certain he'd keep talking to him, keep trying to hold him, to satisfy whatever it was he inspired within him. He shifted further uncomfortably, hoping that he wouldn't notice how troubled he was.

He stared at the tent wall in the darkness, expecting to suffer through another sleepless night as he always did. He couldn't decide whether he was upset he hadn't tried to touch him again, or if he was simply distraught that he still wanted him to.

Before he knew it he'd rolled on to his back and drifted off himself, ever as lost in his habitual strife. His eyes opened to the brightness of the sun already peering through the thin material of the tent and he couldn't believe how warm and well rested he felt until he realized his forehead was pressed firmly against his back.

He thought he'd be left feeling that tension all night but instead he held on to his shirt, curled up to him. He felt embarrassed, warm, but more importantly he felt safe waking up with his face buried in his sweater, the strap of his suspenders against his cheek.

He recoiled suddenly, realizing that he'd moved up to him in his sleep and how desperately he wanted to wrap his arms around him. He forced himself to shift away instead, hoping he wouldn't notice but the yawn that came next terrified him.

Zack soon rolled over lazily, not having wanted to wake him any earlier than he had to, but he couldn't help smiling at how nervous he looked when he met his eyes next.

"Did you sleep well?"

Zack asked but he'd just as soon averted his gaze again. He couldn't stomach why he wanted to run away still, becoming desperate to convince himself there was nothing wrong with what they were doing.

When he felt Zack's hand on one of his he let go of the fist-full of sleeping bag he'd been gripping on to, meeting his kind patient eyes again. Somehow he couldn't imagine the frustration within himself ever diminishing.

"Next to you, who wouldn't?"

Cloud repeated what he'd said to him that first morning, ever nostalgic of waking up in his arms he
turned his hand beneath his to link fingers.

"Why does that sound so familiar."

Zack said, expecting it to come back to him any second, but he couldn't quite grasp when he'd heard that before.

Cloud leaned up on his other arm, slowly moving closer to kiss him. He felt Zack's hand squeeze his tighter as soon as their lips met, making him feel like he knew what he was doing for once in his life.

“Wait what was that?”

Zack sounded baffled, leaning back to catch his breath as soon as he'd broken their kiss to ask the question.

“Have you said that to me before?”

He insisted, flustered, and entirely unaware he'd been the one to say it before turning back to him, biting his lip at how good he looked moving closer over him. Smiling simply because their hands were still intertwined.

“Actually, never mind. Just kiss me again.”

Zack pleaded the next second, too eager to wait for him to lean in he pulled his hand to bring him closer instead. He hadn't felt this happy in so long he could barely contain his excitement, smiling up at him.

Cloud tried to frown at how quick he was to pull him over his chest, but he couldn't help smiling back at how peaceful he looked, wondering if things could really stay this blissful. It was too good to believe, watching him with lips parted, expecting another kiss.

If only to try to make Zack feel remotely as nervous as he did every moment he spent in his presence, he watched the deepening blush on his face for as long as he could resist. He brought his free hand up to his face, leaning heavily on to his chest as he leaned back in slowly, kissing him as tenderly as he always had at first.

He felt Zack shift, pulling him further on top of him as he wrapped an arm around him. All he could feel was how hard they both were, wondering why he wanted to stop everything even though he continued to suck on his lower lip, unable to break away from his touch.

He didn't know why he'd only felt the fear behind his own racing heart then, but when he put his hand on his chest to pull back he felt how fast his was racing too. Zack only smiled at him, even know he knew he'd seen his surprise before being unable to meet his gaze anymore.

He felt the hand on his back guide him closer and he knew he'd already lost his resolve, closing his eyes to kiss him again. He squeezed his hand back while he sucked his tongue next in a way that made him moan deeply beneath him.

Zack had no shame in making his satisfaction known, giving himself up to their kiss entirely, it felt as if he was melting beneath him and he’d never felt so powerful laying on top of him. Despite his healed injuries, his ribs were still painful being held so tight, but nothing could muddle his pleasure.

He felt Zack’s hands slide down to rest on his hips, shifting him to a more comfortable position
against his erection. He'd never imagined just grinding against him could feel this good, but when he felt his hands back up his thighs to reach between them he had to break their kiss to let him undo the buttons on his uniform.

Cloud leaned back, straddling him while pulled off his over-shirt, struck by the way he looked lying beneath him in the morning light, his long dark hair draped over several pillows, biting his lip before he lost his resolve and pulled him down for another kiss.

He'd kissed him back eagerly, but despite being left in an undershirt and scarf he remembered the bruises on his body from his last encounter with Tseng. The few mauve and brown ones on his arms were barely noticeable anymore, but the ones on his ribs and back were still painful reminders of his last warning.

He felt Zack slide a hand up his shirt next, flinching from just how sensitive his skin was under his fingertips, suddenly desperate to hide the state he was in. Before he could think he reached for his hand and managed to hold it down instead, kissing him deeper while using his free hand to undo his suspenders next.

Zack was quite literally loosing his mind. He felt like he'd died and gone to heaven with how good he felt grinding up against him with their tongues down each other's throats. He was more than willing to let him control the pace with how complicated things had been, welcoming the reciprocity.

Cloud felt lost against his body, feeling himself moving in to every touch too heavily. When he finally broke the kiss to catch his breath, feeling entirely too comfortable grinding against him by then, he moved on to kissing down his neck gently in an attempt to regain his focus.

"Fuck me."

Zack said between breaths, his heart still racing, pulling his hips down against him hard enough to be unpleasant, but he'd just as soon let go of him, embarrassed by his own words.

"I."

Cloud had pulled back but didn't know what to say, he had no idea what he was doing little yet how exactly to fuck him.

"Sorry."

Zack was quick to correct himself, taken aback by his own demand and how much he'd meant it. He had never even thought of going that far with him, at least he couldn't recall ever thinking of going that far, but god did he want to.

"I don't know why I said that. I've never even."

He continued to fret from embarrassment, suddenly less appreciative of his position while he stared back at him. He worried what else he'd said to him that he couldn't understand why he'd say it when to his knowledge, he didn’t know how either.

Cloud brought a hand up to his face, wanting to reassure him, but apprehensively covered his scar, the side he often avoided. He didn't want to remind him of it, but all he could focus on instead were his lips, brushing his thumb against them tentatively, he couldn't help but think of how much he didn't care what else he wanted from him.

He slid his thumb in his mouth as soon as Zack parted his lips, letting him suck on it while he
reached down to undo his belt next. He was surprised by how good even just his tongue against his
thumb felt, worrying something may be wrong with him when he couldn't think anymore from just
that.

“Is this really alright?”

Zack asked nervously when his hand slid from his face so that he could use both to pull off his belt.
He then reached for his shoulder plate, pulling it aside as well. He was confused to say the least,
but it took all his energy not to cum from just being undressed by him.

Cloud didn’t answer, moving his hands back over his shoulders before moving one back down to
undo his pants. When he felt his throbbing hardon he started to regret going so far, frustrated by his
constant deviations.

He was convinced that he had to try again, if anything to undo their mistakes, but maybe just
because he wanted to do better. He shifted over him to have more room to pull him out, stroking
him slowly before reaching back up to take off his sweater.

Zack readily shifted to help him pull it off, but he was so pleased with his advances he sat up until
he met his lips again, shifting until he was sitting in his lap while kissing him deeply. When Cloud
was breathless again he then pushed him down with a smile cheekier than most at switching their
places.

He ended up on his back with his legs spread apart while Zack crawled over him to kiss him once
again. He couldn't help but be surprised, wrapping his arms around his neck when he felt a strong
hand trail down his side, flinching when he inadvertently slid over his ribs.

Zack pulled back when he felt him move away from his touch, watching him pant to catch his
breath. He wanted to wait for him to touch him again, but he'd already reached to pull his shirt off
only to be met with a hand on top of his again.

“Zack.”

Cloud breathed his name in between hesitant moans when he'd slid his other hand had up his shirt
anyways, brushing his fingers over his hard nipples. He couldn't think clearly anymore, letting him
suck on his earlobe while he reached down to undo his pants next with his other hand.

Zack was more than satisfied with his soft moans while he buried his face in his scarf, kissing
down his neck. He sucked at his skin a little harder when his hand brushed against his cock and
gripping it the next instant, feeling him arch his back beneath him.

He’d pulled him out firmly to stroke him as he’d done, but the contact with the cool air and Zack's
firm hand was too much of a contrast that he felt as though he was going to blow his load then and
there.

“You sound so good.”

Zack said, watching him breathless beneath him.

Cloud slid a hand behind his neck to pull him back down in to a kiss before he could say anything
else. He was too embarrassed from making so many obscene sounds despite his struggling self-
control, reaching down to stroke him back with far less coordination than he did.

When Zack broke their kiss next he smiled before moving down on him, sliding both his hands to
his hips while he took the tip of his cock in to his mouth. It happened so fast that after he'd licked
back up his length he took him entirely in to his mouth the next instant.

He felt like he'd sunk in to the layers of fabric beneath him, trying to relax despite being unable to stop moaning at every thrust. It felt too good, as if his mouth was too hot, but he couldn’t calm down, running a hand through his long hair out of desperation to feel him closer while he sucked him.

Zack took his length easily all the way down his throat, his tongue caressing his balls greedily when he'd reached the base. It was all too much for him to handle, and being so tense already it only took those few deep thrusts before he came, suddenly filling up his mouth.

He was only a bit surprised he’d finished so quickly while swallowing his modest load. He made sure he had finished before releasing him, licking his lips neatly and shifting up to lay back down besides him.

Cloud's entire body had trembled from the heat of his mouth, effectively reduced to a moaning mess while he regretted every sound he'd ever uttered in his life. It had felt amazing, so much more than he could have remembered from their first time.

He rolled over to face Zack and their eyes met once more. He was smiling brightly as he always did, even more tenderly in that moment while he reached up to brush his sweaty bangs from his face.

Cloud didn't know if he could but he thought returning the favor was the least he could do. He moved closer, even though all he could remember was how difficult it had been to even fit him inside.

He moved down on one arm, underestimating how weak his orgasm had left him when he didn't manage to move down far enough to reach him, pausing with a hand on his stomach to regain his senses.

Zack watched attentively and moved further up instead to meet him half way, eagerly pulling his loose-fitting pants down further exposing himself in anticipation when he'd guessed what he was about to do.

Cloud glanced at Zack when he moved up, not understanding at first that it was to help him get in to a comfortable position. He was afraid he was going to leave for a second, but his smile soon reassured him enough to look back down at the largest cock he'd ever seen again.

He had been half hoping his memory had exaggerated his girth but he was just as big as he'd recalled. Shifting further on one arm he stroked him with his the other before he started licking him.

Zack tilted his head back at the first touch of Cloud's tongue trailing up his length. He shivered with pleasure while he seemed to warm up to the idea of sucking him more and more each second, licking all of him.

When he was sleek he took the head in slowly, pacing himself and teasing the tip of his cock with his tongue while he tried his best to fit him in. He kept stoking the base with one hand, leaning further over him.

He tried to take him down his throat but he wasn't able to. The attempt to go deeper earned him a deep moan, but all he could do was continue to lick his length to calm himself to try again, stroking him firmly while he caught his breath.
He then shifted higher to get more leverage as he took him in to his mouth again, trying to suck at an even pace despite the pain from opening his jaw that wide. His low moans continued to reward him in pushing a little harder at every thrust.

He had to keep his eyes shut tightly while he sucked, unable to stop himself from moaning softly from surprise when strong hands slid through his hair, keeping his hair away from his mouth while he sucked.

Zack moaned louder in response, feeling the vibration against his cock he rolled his head back while gripping his hair tighter.

Cloud thought he’d been managing until he started guiding him, pushing him down against his cock deeper and faster. It hurt but all he could do was stop stroking his base to hold himself steady, gripping his thigh while he moaned the harder he thrust in.

All his moaning against his cock had Zack over the edge, pulling him down longer each time until Cloud thought he might choke. Yet he still couldn’t bring himself to stop, or even keep quiet from the pressure of his cock filling up his throat.

It was only when he was graced with the sound of his own name being called out repetitively between deep moans that he felt him cumming straight down his throat for what seemed like loads.

He couldn’t believe how much there was compared to him. Doing his best to swallow everything he felt dizzy by the time he pulled out and let go of his hair, letting his head fall back from satisfaction again.

“Cloud, that was.”

Zack started when he moved back up to lay besides him. He felt weak for not being able to keep up with him, feeling used until he prompted him to look back at him with a hand under his chin.

“You’re amazing, Cloud.”

Zack said, leaning in to claim his lips yet again, feeling so right kissing him deeply despite tasting each other all over their tongues. He never wanted that morning to end.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!
Another Way Out

Chapter Summary

Here's to dreaming of making it big

in respects to Zack Fair's birthday i hope this chapter gives you all the love and appreciation for him

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He stared down at Zack’s exposed body and contemplated how defined his chest was, down to his perfect stomach and his pronounced hipbones, and how enticing he was when he suddenly shifted closer to him.

He could only look away out of embarrassment from fixating on how much he wanted to keep touching him despite having just broken yet another kiss. He didn’t want that morning to end either, but he felt too weary to continue.

Zack leaned over him further despite the way he continued to avoid his gaze. He let himself get lost in the relief of closing his eyes when he kissed him gently again. Zack's lips felt amazing against his, still high from the excitement of getting off and getting him off that it felt too good to be true despite how much his mouth hurt when he opened it for him.

He started to feel himself get hard again when Zack slid his tongue back in to his mouth. He couldn’t possibly handle anything more if they were really going to fend off monsters all day looking for treasure. He knew he should stop, but he couldn’t help himself from sucking on his lower lip instead of pulling away completely.

He felt himself shift eagerly beneath him, wanting nothing but to pull him on top of him to feel his body heavy against his. He loved the way he made him feel, but he had to catch his breath, worrying for all the wrong reasons as soon as he'd managed to break away from his gaze.

“You’re so thin.”

Zack noted with no particular intonation. It wasn't how he'd said it, but the way his hand slid down his waist that unsettled him to the point he couldn’t respond. His mind graciously jumped to the conclusion that his simple observation meant his interest in him was purely superficial.

When he slid his hand slowly back up underneath his shirt, brushing his fingers against his soft skin, he felt himself recoil in a way he couldn't control. He shifted away and sat up suddenly, relieved that he’d even let him.

“What’s wrong?”

Zack asked, pulling his hand away as soon as he'd flinched, worried he’d offended him but not knowing what to say to take it back.

“Nothing.”
Cloud answered, nervously tucking himself back in to his pants before moving further away, reaching for his boots next. He felt stupid and cowardly for overreacting, worrying about their day instead.

“We should go.”

He said, looking for his gear as soon as he’d buttoned his pants back up.

“Where?”

Zack asked, quickly doing his pants back up as well, but clearly unmotivated by the suggestion.

“Didn’t you want to get rich?”

He reminded, looking back at him only to see that he hadn’t followed until just then. A smile soon plastered his face nonetheless.

“Oh, yeah.”

It all came back to him.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Zack said, fastening his belt back on next, trying his best to ignore how uncomfortable he was still half-hard at the prospect of finding treasure.

“Did you really forget?”

Cloud asked impatiently, biting the inside of his cheek to fight how much he wanted to crawl back over to him and stop him from getting dressed. Disappointed in himself for changing his tone so carelessly again, he tried to soften his frown with significant difficulty.

“What? Of course not. Don’t look at me like that.”

Zack practically pouted, less than appreciative of his accusation while he tried to find his top he’d kindly discarded earlier.

“It was your idea.”

Cloud added, feeling useless for even pointing it out even though Zack seemed distracted by watching him search for the rest of his gear.

“Unless this was all you wanted.”

He didn’t know why he’d said it, gripping his own button-down shirt tightly when he found it among the many pillows scattered about, hesitating to put the uniform he hated back on.

“Huh?”

Zack was taken aback, but just as soon moved to lean over towards him, placing a hand on his head gently to get him to look at him.

“What? Hey, come on.”

He ran his hand through his hair before lowering his own head with embarrassment.
"I mean I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping you’d, well, that we’d, um, do all that. I mean, it was seriously, something."

He said, softly by the end of it. He was always so confident, it was hard when his nerves got the best of him, trying to focus on his promise instead.

"But I was serious about that special item."

He added, ruffling his hair lightly before pulling back, making sure he met his gaze again before continuing.

“I said we’d get rich together, so let’s get rich.”

He smiled at him before turning to fetch his own armor and fastening his suspenders back on. He then gathered up a pile of sleeping bags and pillows, carrying the majority out with him.

Cloud was left in the mostly emptied tent, putting his shirt and gear back on. He then exited the tent to find Zack throwing the stuff back in to the back of the vehicle.

He took the last items out of the tent before collapsing it, it was only good for one use, for some reason he’d always found that strange, but Shinra loved disposable things.

He picked up the mangled piece of trash that was left in the shelter’s place and took it with the rest of items over to the truck while Zack retrieved his sword, giving it a quick brush off to get rid of the dirt before fastened it on his back.

“All set?”

Zack asked eagerly, practically bouncing in place.

“Alright, let’s mosey.”

Cloud announced and Zack couldn’t help but smile back at him. He loved when he suddenly said things he’d never heard in his life before.

“Let’s mosey!”

Zack repeated bringing his arm up towards him in excitement. It took Cloud a moment to remember what he expected before raising his own arm to meet his, tapping them together in a gesture of good faith their mission would be a success.

The 1st then smiled, slinging a bag with a few extra supplies over his shoulder and handing him a ration.

“This’ll have to do unless you’re up for some foraging.”

He suggested with a smile.

“That’s okay.”

Cloud assured, accepting the bar and walking on ahead with Zack in tow, who seemed only mildly disappointed that picking berries wasn’t worth a detour.

It was only when he noticed him rubbing his jaw after eating that it occurred to him that things may have gotten too heated that morning. It only made him feel worse when he lowered his hand as soon as he saw him staring.
“Does it hurt?”

The guilt in Zack’s tone brought up too many feelings for him, turning back immediately to correct him, unwilling to worry him an instant longer.

“No.”

Cloud assured poorly, as if showing him his face alone would convince him.

“Are you sure I didn’t-”

Zack asked, reaching out to brush his hair out of his face to get a better look. His lips looked redder than usual but that aside and the blush creeping over his face, he only looked embarrassed.

“It's fine.”

Cloud cut him off, turning out of his touch once he’d gotten a good look to keep hiking. He'd never been fond of being stared at, and something about the way he stared at him always made him feel overwhelmed.

“Hey wait.”

Zack called after him, feeling terrible for letting himself get carried away even though he started to doubt it wasn't the first time. When he didn’t turn back he hurried after him, letting his regret shine through.

“Cloud.”

He called out, letting fear get the best of him when he still didn’t look back up.

“What?”

Cloud asked, keeping his eyes on the ground ahead, wishing he’d stop prying. He felt undeserving enough as it was, talking about what they’d done only made him feel despicable.

“Don’t be upset.”

Zack whined, insisting strongly for an answer solely with the look in his eyes.

“I’m not.”

He said, but not meeting his gaze only caused the taller man to step closer, practically walking backwards to try to get him to look up at him.

“So we’re okay?”

Zack didn’t know what else to ask. But he knew something was off, unable to risk it being about them with everything else they already had to take on.

“Yes.”

Cloud confirmed with little interest in elaborating despite the way he kept staring.

“Hey, look at me.”

Zack coaxed, unconvinced by his hollow answer.
“We’re okay.”

Cloud snapped despite his resolve to stop answering him harshly. He met his eyes as ordered to, but the smile on his face at his answer was too endearing not to smile back at him.

He’d thought he’d offered enough assurance to continue their quest, but Zack had just as soon stepped closer. He couldn’t help but keep smiling at him as he took hold of him, leaning down to kiss him instead.

He’d practically frozen at his touch, strong hands on his arms had effortlessly pulled him in to a warm embrace. Barely able to stand the heat of his lips on his he felt he wanted nothing more than to just keep his eyes closed, obligating himself to pull back suddenly.

“You’re letting your guard down.”

Cloud warned, glancing back around them when his paranoia finally got the best of him, making sure nothing had appeared near them in the wide open fields.

“Afraid someone will beat us to the treasure?”

Zack teased before shrugging at the prospect.

“Maybe I should have said we were looking for something else. Sounds like you want the payout more than me.”

He continued before laughing, unable to follow through with his own charade. He was too excited to find rare items himself, looking on ahead.

“You’re the one who wanted the money.”

Cloud spat back, not amused by the turn in the conversation as he continued on ahead. He wished he could control his tone around him, instead of questioning him just to gain some form of high-ground.

“So, you don’t want any of the money?”

Zack asked with his hands behind his head, clearly trying to get a reaction from him while following patiently.

“I didn’t say that.”

Cloud reprimanded, only glancing back at him to frown at how smug he was acting.

“So you won’t leave me even if we get rich?”

Zack asked next with the same amused smile, but he could only look back in disbelief.

“What?”

He asked, confused by the hint of laughter hiding behind the way he bit his lower lip, terrified by the hope in his eyes at the prospect of any serious future together.

“I meant when we have enough to do anything we want, we’ll still stick together, right?”

Zack questioned, but he sounded like he was certain of it already.
“I’ll go anywhere with you.”

Cloud gave in.

“Anywhere?”

Zack questioned despite all his assurances, taking one of his hands to make sure they were really standing in that field together.

“I’m here right now, aren’t I?”

Cloud stated dryly, despite wanting to reassure him by squeezing his hand. Trying to compensate for how vulnerable he’d just sounded, he was frustrated he couldn’t manage to address him with the respect he deserved, feeling childish for not being able to hold his gaze as always.

“That’s true.”

Zack noted, delighted that he’d agreed, but lost in contemplating the way he held his hand tightly.

“Are we doing this or not?”

Cloud asked in an effort to press on before letting go. Except when he’d taken another step ahead a handful of monsters suddenly approached, prompting him to draw his rifle.

“Right.”

Zack snapped out of it as soon as they were ambushed, grabbing on to his sword out of habit before having another idea and raising his other hand to use materia instead.

“Check this one out! I’ve been leveling it a ton since Junon, just stand back a little.”

He warned with more excitement than anything, but when the entire ground before them gave away to what looked like black lava Cloud couldn’t help but step back in terror.

He watched the monsters that had confronted them literally dissolve in to the ground before the phenomenon vanished and with it any trace of their adversaries.

“What the hell was what?”

Cloud asked, staring at the intact ground in disbelief. He’d seen healing, water, fire, and lightning, even poison, but he’d never never seen any materia like that before.

“Huh, I’m not sure. It’s called Darkness.”

Zack answered keenly, as if absorbed in thought over the power’s origins for the first time.

“I figured it was some kinda gravity thing or something.”

He went on, but Cloud was left with a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach from what he’d just witnessed.

“What other materia do you have?”

He attempted to change the subject before moving on ahead. He wiped his forehead, wondering how he could sweat so much from seeing something like that, but to his relief he hadn’t seemed to notice.
Zack proceeded to list off all the materia he had on hand which appeared to be an incredible amount to be toting around. Except he’d read it off his inventory list so he had no choice but to believe him.

He also proceeded to explain all materia types, effects, and enhancements to him. He was surprised by how long he’d been talking for despite the many monster encounters he simply eradicated with one spell of Darkness, content with nods while he basically taught him everything he knew about magic.

“Hey, actually.”

He started after smiling at him fondly, reaching in to a pocket and fishing out a bright orb.

“Here take this one.”

He handed it to him with a smile, but couldn’t help tilting his head a little when he didn’t quite grasp it.

“It’ll keep you safe.”

Zack assured, even though he let his smile fade to relief when he finally accepted it.

“Thanks.”

Cloud didn’t know what else to say, meeting his muddled expression with far too much fear. He equipped the sphere that held Fire with only some difficulty. He’d used some in training before but the company refused to “waste” valuable materia on them, only SOLDIER were given any.

He’d never thought he’d have enough gil to purchase any himself. He hated depending on anyone and having Zack worry about him only made him feel uneasy while he wondered if he could even use it on anything that wasn’t just a target.

They walked for what felt like hours without saying a word, just fighting monsters. He seemed particularly impressed with the range he was able to cast Fire despite how much more impressive his magic was, simply wandering from loot crate to loot crate.

At first he’d been too focused on settling his own nerves to notice the silence between them, but after so long he started to worry their morning had been a mistake after all.

Cloud looked back over at him and the smile on his face in return surprised him to the point he couldn’t help but smile back. The older man just as soon took a step closer, wrapping an arm around his shoulders as they continued walking.

“Where do you want to go next, you know, if we do find that rare item?”

Zack asked, and in that instant the uncertainty he’d thought had dredged its way back between them vanished as if the thought of anything taking away their happiness had been absurd to begin with.

“I don’t know.”

Cloud said, at a loss from how equally painful thinking of having him or losing him was and wishing his mind would just give him a break already.

“Oh, come on.”

Zack pouted, giving his shoulders a light squeeze to insist that he come up with a better answer.
“There must be some place?”

He asked next, never managing to remain patient for very long.

“Fine.”

Cloud answered if only to steady his tone before glancing up at him.

“Gongaga.”

He couldn’t think of anywhere else. He’d never made any plans to go anywhere since arriving in Midgar.

“Really?”

Zack practically shouted before laughing. He had to let go of him to contain his own amusement, Gongaga was the most boring place on earth to him. If Cloud wanted to see it, he’d show him, but he couldn’t tell if it was a joke.

“Really. I want to see where you grew up.”

Cloud insisted dryly, if only to enjoy the look on his face when he realized he actually wasn’t joking. The way Zack looked at him in that moment was beautiful, a look filled with awe and warmth until he chuckled again.

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll take you.”

Zack finally assured after exhausting himself from his own anticipation.

”I thought you liked your hometown.”

Cloud questioned, uneasy as to why he’d found it all so funny, despite how honest he’d tried to be.

”’Yeah! I do!”

Zack was quick to correct him.

”It’s just, there’s nothing there really. Isn’t Nibelheim like that too?”

He answered plainly, looking back at him when he’d slowed his pace.

”Maybe I miss that. Maybe being out in places like this reminds you how big the world really is.”

Cloud didn’t know how else to say it. He missed walking for hours in nature. Not that this never-ending field was particularly beautiful, but he’d just realized how much he’d missed the quiet of it all.

”Good. I want to go to all sorts of places with you.”

Zack sounded as confident as ever, smiling back at him fondly.

“But first, I guess I’ll introduce you to my family. They’ll love you.”

He grinned at him, wondering if that was the reason he’d picked his hometown.

“What’s your family like?”
Cloud asked, surprised by his own lack of embarrassment at the idea of meeting them. He was too curious to let worrying about what they'd think of him, or their situation. He couldn't let any of that ruin what he was about to tell him.

“My mom’s the nicest person basically.”

Zack started, glancing on ahead when they fell in to pace side by side again.

“She’s amazing, and strong, and my dad too, but he’s gone for a long time sometimes. He’s a good fisherman, and my mom hunts too and I used to help sometimes but mostly we spent time tending crops. They taught me everything they know basically.”

He went on, enjoying recounting his youth.

“They sound great.”

Cloud said, smiling back at him trying to picture what they looked like, or what fishing and hunting was really like. No one had every taught him skills like that, and they weren’t a priority in training unless you were needed outside HQ.

“What about yours?”

Zack asked next, a little embarrassed he'd gone on for so long about himself.

“My mom is kind too. She bakes for the local store, I used to help her and she’d sometimes tell me stories about working at the Shinra Mansion before they left town.”

He shared, unsure why he'd never asked her more about Shinra, but the harder he thought of it the more he realized she'd refused to talk about them as soon as he'd decided to leave town.

“What about your dad?”

Zack asked, expecting more to his story before realizing his mistake from the look on his face.

“I don’t know.”

Cloud started, but he wasn’t sure if there was anything to be said.

“I remember asking, but she never told me what happened.”

He admitted, staring at the ground as they walked.

“I guess I assumed he’d died in the mountains. A lot of men have.”

He hated the sound of his own voice. It wasn’t that he was particularly sad he couldn't remember his father, it was because he’d remembered how sad his mother had been when he’d tried bringing it up.

In truth he’d never wanted to see her that mournful again and had avoided the subject. After so long he’d forgotten it was even strange that everyone had big families, aunts, uncles, and cousins, everyone except him.

“I’m sorry.”

Zack said, bringing an arm up around his shoulders again.
“It’s fine. I want you to meet my mom, and I want to meet your parents even though they’ll probably hate me, right?”

He asked, finally bringing his eyes up off the ground to meet his, but leaned his head against his arm by the end of his question. He felt uneasy from the surprise on his face enough to continue before he could respond.

“I don’t even know how my mom will react. I mean, even if she is the nicest person ever too, so what does that say about any of this?”

He agonized, as he often did, returning his stare to the ground before the 1st pulled him closer, giving his shoulders a light squeeze.

“Why? What do you mean?”

Zack asked, still surprised by how quick he was to change his tone, trying desperately to follow his friend's ever-changing train of thought.

“Because I’m just some guy, there’s nothing special about that.”

Cloud said, struggling to contain whatever fear he'd allowed his heart to be submerged in.

“Don’t be silly, they’ll love you.”

Zack tried to appease, leaning in closer to try to get him to smile again, but when he didn't look up he planted a kiss on top of his head instead.

“Don’t worry! What’s wrong with a couple of regular guys travelling the world together?”

He smiled down at him again, but when he still wouldn’t meet his eyes he went on instead.

“Oh come on, there must be somewhere you want to visit.”

Zack encouraged cautiously. He didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but it was the biggest of deals to him. He desperately wanted a future with the younger man and part of that was making plans with him, and so he needed to fix as many goals together as reasonably possible.

“Uh, I heard there’s a place where they race chocobos.”

Cloud suggested absently, unsure of how he'd heard about it anymore. It had probably been in one of the company newsletters or something he'd heard through chatter. Turns out that a lot of people
at Shinra were big on gambling and there were bets on said races.

“Bill’s Ranch?”

Zack asked with a hint of the excitement he'd been trying hard to contain. He'd been told too many times his energy was a lot, but he honestly just wanted to do cartwheels had it not been for his skepticism of chocobo racing being cool.

“Right.”

Cloud confirmed, he was sure he'd heard of Bill before. He remembered hearing of fairs and carnivals for different occasions, but that their popularity had plummeted in the last few years due to monster attacks.

“Alright, it’s a promise.”

Zack said, lowering his arm to rub his back while smiling at him.

“We'll visit the ranch and then one more spot on our way. I heard there’s a giant snake in a marsh near there, I can’t wait to check it out!”

Cloud smiled while Zack went on about the massive snake and how easy it would be for him to defeat it, but how cool it must be and how huge it must be to be called a giant and what type of marsh it was for it to be home to such cool snakes.

The blond couldn’t help but wonder how he could get so excited about an over-sized snake, but then again, with the types of creatures that had started showing up everywhere he worried what else was out there.

He wanted his own sense of adventure back, but he could still feel his heart seize any time he thought of how narrowly he’d escaped an encounter on his own the last time he'd patrolled the slums. He did fine taking out a few creatures while Zack covered him, but he knew he’d never win against a giant serpent.

“Are you scared?”

Zack asked without a hint of humor, trying to make sense of why he'd fallen silent so suddenly again.

“Why would I be?”

Cloud answered roughly despite all his efforts to keep his composure, yet he failed so easily every time. Sighing when he tried to think of a way to explain that didn't involve his unwillingness to risk losing him to some monstrosity before they'd even made it off the eastern coast.

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

Zack tried to soften his question, worried by the sharpness in his voice, but he was certain that whatever it was, was bad, when he distanced himself from his reach next.

“You don’t have to worry, I’ll be with you.”

The tall man tried to assure him, but Cloud was too focused on frowning at the ground to notice what was coming up ahead. It took everything he had to even just turn back to him, but when their eyes met again he couldn't help but smile.
They stood in the middle of what felt like an endless field, only god knew where, surrounded by flowers and sunlight. They were both contemplating how happy they were, but their reveries were soon interrupted by enemies of the one true state.

“It’s Shinra!”

Someone shouted as soon as they’d come in to view and the next thing they knew 3 men were running towards them over a small hill in the distance.

“Come and get it!”

Zack shouted back, stepping away from the cadet to reach up for his sword but he was stopped instead.

“Wait!”

Cloud ordered, grabbing his arm before he could reach his sword, pulling him away from the impending battle as quickly as he could.

“Why are we running away?”

Zack shouted despite following him. The younger man had slid his hand down in to his, squeezing it tightly to lead him away, making him experience things he never imagined he could in that moment. It felt like flying somehow, except that it felt serene, as if they were lighter than anything in the world together, unlike the very rough but very real flights Angeal had taken him on.

They had to run a good distance to get out of sight, but by the time they looked back, they saw the anti-Shinra scavengers hadn’t bothered tailing them, leaving them to catch their breath.

"Didn't think I could take 3 guys at once or what?"

Zack asked cheekily, turning back to face him after making sure they were safe. He regretted his joke as soon as he'd asked it, wishing he'd said something about how he never wanted to let go of his hand instead.

"That's not it."

Cloud tried not to sigh at how bad his question had sounded, trying to come to terms with why he'd made him flee with him.

"I could take 2 thousand guys you know."

Zack wasn't sure his confidence was rightly placed, but something about the way he was looking at him was making him increasingly nervous while he continued to caress his hand laced in his with his thumb.

“Of course you’d want to fight them.”

Cloud didn't know what else to say, turning to figure out if they were any closer to any alleged treasure, wishing he could just change the topic instead.

“Well yeah, they attacked us.”

Zack answered quickly, checking the map on his phone quickly with his other hand, reorienting himself.
“They’re just people.”

Cloud insisted, letting go of his hand to cross his arms in an effort to keep his own frustration in check. He didn't know what would have been worse, watching those men get bludgeoned by his sword or melted in to darkness by that over-powered materia of his.

“Just people? You heard them, they were anti-Shinra.”

Zack huffed, upset he'd let go of his hand. He felt childish and needy, trying to get a grip on why they were suddenly arguing again.

“I can't fight for the company anymore.”

The cadet explained while staring at the ground, but Zack wasn't satisfied.

"We're not! We're just investigating a possible threat, and there might also be loot."

He tried his best to appease him, but Cloud only sighed again.

“Finding it is one thing, but I won’t kill over it.”

He tried to make himself clear but Zack only looked more distant.

“Monsters don't count huh?”

Zack asked, staring off over the fields, trying to plot a new route to avoid thinking about any of this. Suddenly wondering if that's why he liked summons that much, monsters you can defeat, but who keep coming back for you.

“Monsters are just monsters”

Cloud confirmed bitterly. He didn't know what was left to say about Shinra when he'd just tried to get rid of the president of the company, the same company they were meant to continue working for as if nothing had changed.

“Right.”

Zack continued to stare down the horizon, lost in remorse from letting Angeal fool him by claiming he was a monster himself just so that he would fight him. He couldn't help but worry about how he felt if he was really still somewhere out there.

“I'll try to avoid fights, but I swear I won’t let anything happen to you, even if that means killing.”

Zack promised, looking back down at him, trying to remember what was clearly more important than the company.

Cloud tried to smile, but it was hard when he couldn't help but worry from the look on his face. He could only try not to make things any worse when they resumed their hunt.

“Are you sure you know where we’re going?”

Cloud asked anxiously after as long as his patience would hold out for. They hadn't found anything new in some time and it started to feel like they were just backtracking because of him.

“Of course I do!”
Zack shouted, causing another awkward silence to settle between them. He then looked at the GPS on his phone again, clearly doubting himself despite his confidant outburst.

“Can I see that email?”

Cloud asked, taking a step closer tentatively.

“Huh?”

Zack wasn’t sure he followed, still too focused on wanting to find more crates hidden about the fields.

“The anonymous tip.”

He clarified, lending his hand out for the phone.

“Oh, sure.”

Zack gave it to him after a bit of navigating to find the message.

/ Just between you and me

I can’t tell you my name, but
I know something of interest to you.
I heard there’s a secret item
somewhere in the fields.
If this got into the hands of an anti-Shinra group, Shinra would be finished.
I suggest you find it before it’s too late.

-Anonymous \

“I just hope its not that whinny kid messing with me again.”

Zack complained when he handed his phone back to him.

“It looks like spam.”

Cloud sighed.

“Only one way to find out!”

Zack continued on confidently despite having searched for what felt like hours already.

Chapter End Notes

thanks again endlessly to all those still reading even though the story has gotten so long

we’re only heading back to Midgar after they find said treasure so buckle in
Cloud wished he'd held off talking about the company at least for a while longer. He'd enjoyed their morning together to the point that he was still flustered from it and let his own resentment get the better of him.

He felt exhausted even though he'd gotten more sleep than he had in weeks, if not months, worried that something else was wrong. He just couldn't quite isolate why. Forcing himself to press on and ignore it, hoping whatever it was would pass in time for them to find the treasure they searched for.

He hated the silence between them, but he had always been so quick to end conversations or to confront anyone who instigated one with him. Always ready to argue and fight other people for saying the wrong things, he'd never imagined how hard wanting to say the right thing could be.

He had always expected the 1st to realize he wasn't good at anything but conflict and tire of him. Anyone else he'd met before had understood his problem sooner than later. He'd just never known that all the fighting would turn out to make him such a difficult person to be with.

He'd never predicted he'd turn out to be so bitter or petty after so many years of defending himself and those who didn't deserve being hurt without reason either. He had always thought he'd done the right thing, that it was necessary to stand up for himself and to say his part even if it meant getting beat up.

He simply didn't feel the same about violence anymore and it was scaring him. He didn’t know when it had changed, only that when he imagined what Zack must have gone through in Wutai, he could barely contain himself from accusing him further. He just knew he didn't want to hear the truth, feeling sick again he soon realizing how faint the beaming sun was making him while they searched onward.

Living in Midgar made sunlight rare, even though no one ever talked about missing it. The day had been almost too calm out in that beautiful field and clear skies. He still couldn't shake the sense of dread tormenting him, trying to remember what the last thing his friend had just said before he’d gotten lost in thought again.

"Wait, what whinny kid?"

Cloud asked after following the SOLDIER in silence for some time.

Zack had a system usually, of wandering aimlessly until he got a mission cleared notification which meant he had to be near the last chest. It worked out, usually, but since Cloud was here, he'd been
more than slightly distracted from the hunt.

"Just this annoying kid who keeps using cheap tricks to steal from me. Big on hating Shinra, actually. You'd like her."

The 1st shrugged off his question, only feeling guilty when the younger man didn't find his joke funny.

"I'm sure I would."

Cloud agreed dryly, wondering if it was the same kid from Wutai they'd crossed paths with in Junon. He wanted to ask, except that he didn't want to bring up any more erased memories either. He didn't want to dwell on how bad things had been, he just wanted to find a solution to their current predicament.

"Of course you would."

Zack repeated back just as dryly, or at least he attempted to, even though pettiness didn't suit him at all. He felt childish, shifting nervously to cross his arms while he tried to come up with an apology, except his friend spoke up sooner.

"The president knows the reactors are damaging the planet."

Cloud said, unable to stand avoiding the subject any longer. He rubbed his own forehead out of frustration at not being able to sum it up any other way.

"What?"

Zack wasn't quite sure how the conversation had jumped back so suddenly, halfway through what he thought would have been a decent apology he was caught up suddenly worrying about Shinra again.

"That's why you were going to murder him?"

The hesitation in the 1st's voice made it clear that he still didn't quite believe what he'd witnessed.

"That, and everything else."

Cloud confirmed, meeting his gaze once more. He was struck by how unsure the older man still seemed despite how clear he was trying to be. It was as if he didn't grasp the urgency of the planet's crisis.

"About the president."

Zack spoke up after some time trying to come to terms with everything. Walking through such a beautiful field he couldn't feel any further away from the reality of it all. Even so, he feared continuing the discussion with how poorly things had gone previously.

"I thought people liked him. What do you mean by that and everything else? Did you decide to assassinate him because of those rumored WEAPONS too?"

The 1st questioned, watching his friend staring ahead with a steadiness he'd rarely seen in his eyes before.

"Weapons?"
Cloud could barely remember the conversation he’d had with the Avalanche member prior to being arrested by Tseng. He hated being so displaced after a fight, fearing that the worst parts would come back if he thought it through hard enough.

“A few weeks ago I talked to this weirdo who thought the planet was going to awaken big bad creatures to purge all evil. WEAPONS, he called them.”

Zack explained, watching him closely hoping he hadn't heard the same rumors.

“As if we’re all equally complicit in Shinra's sins.”

Cloud scoffed at the mention of purging all evil. He was still trying to remember why Tseng had taken him in the first place only to regret that endeavor when he remembered the woman who'd been shouting at him in the streets.

“Cloud?”

Zack prompted out of concern when all he did was stare at the ground after his statement.

“Sorry.”

Cloud apologized for drifting off again, reaching out for his hand weakly. Hesitating just as soon as his fingers slid across the other man's palm only to feel him take hold of his hand eagerly.

“We’re not evil. We’ve just made mistakes.”

The cadet added while looking back up at the taller man, wishing he could justify the choices that had brought them together but in truth he just wanted to move on.

“Shinra can find another source of energy right? If Mako is that bad.”

Zack reasoned, giving his hand another light squeeze as they walked together. He wished he could change the past, left worrying that they would never have met if it wasn’t for Shinra.

“They peacefully negotiated a reactor in Corel after being rejected, that was a first.”

The SOLDIER added, trying to give him a sign that change within Shinra was still possible.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Cloud said, losing his focus easily under the pressure of not being able to get through to him.

"I think I talked to someone like that too. He said the longer we keep using Mako the faster the planet will die.”

The cadet added, desperate to remember what else the supposed extremist had shared with him, but all he knew for certain was that he'd agreed to meet him again.

“People need Mako until we find something else though.”

Zack offered, but was shocked when the hand he'd been holding so gently was suddenly taken away from his grasp.

“None of what we think we need matters if the planet dies.”

Cloud said after moving away from him.
“But when’s that gonna be? The planet looks fine.”

Zack couldn’t help but be skeptical, if only to counter the dreadfully hopeless information. Finding himself less than skilled when it came to defusing tension after all.

“You’d rather doubt that it’s true?”

Cloud asked with a seriousness that shook him, staring back at him over his shoulder.

"Uh."

Zack shifted anxiously again, slowing his pace, he hated feeling like he was always on the wrong side of their arguments.

“You said the president knows, right? Why would he knowingly just kill the planet?”

Zack sounded more confused than anything, doing his best to keep his tone calm.

"I don’t know."

Cloud tried to remember what else the president had said, but he only remembered how angry he’d been at the old man, and then at Zack for stopping him. Feeling light-headed again suddenly, trying to piece together why he’d yelled so much.

"He thinks he has a way out of it."

The blond said, finding it increasingly difficult to remember clearly.

"How? It’s the whole planet?"

Zack pressed, trying to keep pace with him.

"I would have asked more questions if you hadn’t interrupted."

Cloud sounded bitter, feeling awful for what had happened despite his incessantly petty responses.

"Maybe he thinks Midgar can be spared, or maybe he wants a way off of Gaia. Didn’t you see all the extra funding going to their space program?"

The cadet asked, praying he’d believe him.

“Huh?"

Zack was just as much at a loss as ever.

“And all those monsters, what if they’re really coming from the reactors?”

The blond added, remembering the fear most citizens shared, that the monsters weren’t coming from far away but from the reactors themselves.

“How?"

Zack didn’t know why he still wanted to defend the company. It was true that he’d had to sweep the reactors more often for monsters with no explanation as to why their numbers were rising.

“The planet’s trying to stop us from taking Mako by making monsters?”
The SOLDIER tried to make it sound real by saying it out loud, but he still had trouble believing it.

“I don't know!”

Cloud shouted even though he couldn't bear to let himself get angry at him again. He felt ashamed for not being able to discuss anything calmly, worried he always took things too far.

“I stopped taking any of it.”

Zack admitted, slowing his pace suddenly.

“The Mako injections?”

Cloud had to be sure, worrying about what stopping so suddenly could do to him he had to turn back to him.

“Yeah. I mean I guess I'm a little tired or whatever, but it's fine.”

Zack placated, telling himself he wasn't more anxious than usual, or sad than usual, or more stressed out than ever and that all of it couldn't be because of Mako withdrawal.

"I didn't want to face Tseng after our last argument, something just didn't feel right and if any of that killing the planet stuff is real on top of everything else, then it’s better that way!”

The 1st added anxiously, trying to smile at the blond even though he refused to meet his gaze this time.

"Yeah."

Cloud agreed, wanting to say more but he was terrified. He realized that he'd let his anger over Shinra blind him when he still knew very little. Just the mention of the Turk's name had him reeling from his last encounter with the deranged man.

He finally looked back up at Zack in an effort to confirm that he was really alright without the injections. Instead he found he looked just as scared as he felt despite the strong arm he’d brought up around his shoulders to reassure him.

“They’ll know what I did. They’ll know you helped me.”

Cloud insisted suddenly, knowing there was no way he could fix what he’d done back at HQ. Even so, he leaned in to his comforting embrace, listening to the oddly calming sound of the taller man's racing heart.

"They won't find out."

Zack was quick to try to defuse their hopeless situation, bringing his free hand up under his chin to try to get him to look at him again.

"Cloud?"

The 1st asked but Cloud could barely hear him anymore. He felt the ground giving in, that wretched sensation of free-falling that always graced him in his weakest moments. Above all else, he knew he was powerless to help him either way.

“You have to come back to Midgar with me.”
Zack said calmly, feeling his weight against his body, moving his arm to his waist to hold him up. He was certain he'd be able to talk his way out of any accusations, but he just didn’t trust him.

“I can’t.”

Cloud couldn’t even think of it, terrified of being separated from him, or worse. He tried to pull away as soon as he came to grips with how desperate he felt, unable to even stand on his own.

“If you don’t come back you’re just deserting and Shinra will come after you. But technically you didn’t actually do anything wrong yet, you only talked to the president for like what 5 minutes, right?”

Zack tried to reason with him, unable to still his own fears too busy holding him close to notice he couldn't manage to push him away. He didn't want them to keep arguing over things they couldn't possibly predict.

“I traded places with a guard to get to him.”

Cloud admitted, if only to be truthful. He was finally able to stand on his own again except that he couldn’t pull away, not realizing how tightly he’d been holding him until then.

“No one’s going to report that.”

Zack assured, trying his best to sound optimistic despite his worried look. He was smiling at him, but it felt like he couldn't even see him.

"They must already know."

Cloud shook his head.

"Come on, I can make up something."

Zack suggested, trying to stay positive he brought his hands up to his shoulders to give him a light squeeze.

"Like what?"

Cloud was honestly at a loss staring back at him.

"I'll say it was my fault, because I dared you to ask the president if he liked chocobo racing or something!"

Zack offered, giving his arms another squeeze as if it would convince him of his plan, but the blond just as soon burst out laughing.

For some reason the idea of asking him such an inane question compared to what he'd intended on doing struck Cloud as hysterical.

"What? I'll just say I was drunk at the party when I dared you to do that. Its an obvious cover right?"

Zack tilted his head further, as if expecting him to concede that his strategy was foolproof, but the younger man just couldn't stop laughing.

"Hey, come on.."
Zack had to pull back, letting go to watch the blond wipe tears from his eyes and try to catch his breath, unsure whether or not he was laughing at the plan or at him anymore.

"It's, well, it's something."

Cloud offered, too exasperated to continue planning a way out of the inevitable despite Zack's best efforts.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Zack huffed, crossing his arms.

"It's great, but it'll never work."

Cloud shrugged.

"Why not?"

Zack immediately pouted in return, throwing his hands up as if to suggest he find a better idea instead.

"They love their rules more than anything. They'll do worse than fire me."

Cloud justified, missing the early days when he'd first joined the company when getting fired was the biggest of his worries. It all seemed so insignificant now.

"Not if a 1st ordered you to do it."

Zack said, almost too certain of himself.

"Whatever."

Cloud said, keeping his gaze on the ground. He didn't want to disrespect him, but he couldn't shake the doubt that if he'd of been able to stop whatever Tseng was doing to him he'd have done it sooner.

"Hey, come on. You just have to pretend nothing's wrong when we get back, okay?"

Zack tried to encourage when he saw the look on his face, he hated seeing him like that.

"Try out for SOLDIER again and they'll all be fooled."

The 1st added, but his words had come off more bitter than expected. He was really starting to hate overthinking things so much.

“Look, whatever you chose to do, we’ll deal with it together from here on out, okay?”

He tried to assure the younger man, certain the situation wasn’t as bad as his friend had made it out to be. He’d barely seen what was going on when he’d walked in on the cadet and the president, but he still hoped he was right.

“Just don’t try anything crazy again and everything will be alright until we figure out what to do. I promise.”

Zack smiled despite the frustration in his voice, wishing the blond would at least look at him again.
“Okay?”

He asked again patiently when still no answer came.

“Okay.”

Cloud finally repeated, reaching out for his hand again. It felt wrong to rely on the other man so much when he’d just called him crazy on top of it all, but he couldn’t tell what would bring on a real change in his perspective on Shinra anymore. He couldn’t help but feel powerless to change their destiny.

"Okay, but before we go back, we have a mission to complete."

Zack smiled, squeezing his hand gently.

"Yeah."

Cloud nodded hesitantly, left hoping his heart wasn’t only racing for bad reasons. He had to believe he was this confident for a reason when they resumed walking side by side.

"Listen, can we just forget about Shinra for a bit? At least until we find that treasure?"

Zack asked, but the question had felt like being punched in the gut to the cadet for some reason.

"Zack, I can't-"

The blond tried to explain that he couldn't just pretend none of this was happening. He hadn’t realized why the thought had terrified him so until he realized they’d tried before, in Junon, and today couldn’t end like in Junon.

"Hey come on."

Zack interrupted, misreading the dread in his eyes for surprise when they spotted some ghouls creeping nearby.

“Wanna see something cool instead?"

The SOLDIER asked excitedly, reaching in to his pocket.

"Have you ever seen a summon before?"

He questioned next, showing the cadet another materia. He hadn’t weighed his options for very long, calling upon the one he thought would be his favorite.

"Check out this sweet baby!"

Zack said before a much larger than average chocobo suddenly fell from the sky besides him and they started hopping in what appeared to be some form of dance together.

Cloud couldn’t believe his eyes, not only was their little jig to die for but the chocobo itself appeared to have gold feathers, sparkling until they both jumped high in to the air and came down with the strongest joint kick he’d ever seen in his life, completely obliterating the small monsters that had been unfortunate enough to approach them.

"Wow!"
Cloud exhaled finally, not realizing he'd stopped breathing at how impressive their display had been. Sad the mystical chocobo had already vanished even though he was grateful he'd showed him at all.

"Wasn't that cool?"

Zack asked, prouder than ever that he'd succeeded in making him smile again.

"Wow!"

Cloud said again, louder this time, besides himself with how exhilarating seeing such a mystical being appear out of nowhere had been. Overwhelmed with how soft and cute the giant chocobo had looked, suddenly jealous that Zack got to call upon it whenever he pleased.

"Pretty great, huh?"

Zack laughed before smiling at him, relieved he'd gotten his mind off Shinra but worried over how shaken he looked.

"Wow."

Cloud repeated a third time, at a loss, still feeling himself shouting from pure amazement in his own mind.

“Sorry, just give me a second."

The cadet had to sit down in the soft grass in an effort to calm himself. He’d felt fine a moment ago besides his own stress, but he'd genuinely never seen anything as cool as a summon in his life before and was clearly having trouble taking it in.

"Are you ok?"

Zack asked, chuckling when he knelt down besides him to ruffle his hair.

"Yeah, yeah. I just, I'm fine, really."  

Cloud placated nervously. He was embarrassed by his concern, grabbing on to his hand to try to get him to stop messing up his hair.

"Mm, okay."  

Zack said before planting a kiss on his forehead and standing back up. He’d received the mission completion notification just then, which was his favorite part usually, except the look on his friend’s face had been a far better reward than he’d ever imagined.

"Now where's that treasure?"

The 1st asked himself, scanning their surroundings. He still didn't get why Shinra just left crates all around random places, but here they were, searching for the one with supposedly very rare loot.

"Oh there it is."

Zack said the next moment, walking up to it.

"Huh?"
Cloud muttered when he heard someone run past him. He got back up only to see that it was the same disgruntled kid they'd crossed paths with back in Junon.

“One, with Wutai’s woes forever in her heart!”

The young rebel stood with conviction before the SOLDIER, hands on her hips.

“Two, through countless, tireless training sessions!”

She continued to shout, standing firmly.

“Three, armed with new skills to beat Shinra!”

She glared the man down, despite being half his height.

“Now it’s up to me to restore Wutai’s glory! Today is Shinra’s last day!”

She suddenly ran forth, standing before him expectantly.

“Zack, you’re gonna help restore Wutai’s glory too, right?”

Cloud called suddenly, quick to meddle in their conversation after her speech. He'd asked the question as seriously as he could, trying his best to put the 1st on the spot, enjoying the way the taller man's eyes darted between him and the rebel suddenly.

“Oh, yeah, alright, that's right.”

Zack said, shifting nervously when Yuffie suddenly directed her attention back to him after flipping Cloud off, clearly not believing either of them.

“Then give me my treasure!”

She demanded, threatening him with quick jabs from her fists. She had no interest in what his scrawny friend was playing at. Goal-oriented as ever she focused only on the rare loot the SOLDIER had just claimed.

“Listen, forget about the treasure.”

Zack started, hoping he'd be able to talk some sense in to the kid for once.

"You can’t keep coming to dangerous places like this. You could have gotten hurt.”

He warned, trying to get her to look at him seriously but she was just making a frustrated face again.

“I.. Want… My treasure!”

Yuffie yelled, struggling to contain tears of exasperation at never being able to get the Shinra pawn to heed her commands, turning to run away quickly when he still showed no signs of giving in.

“Hey!”

Cloud shouted, running after her.

"Hold on!”

He yelled again, but he'd just as soon lost sight of the crying child despite the fact they were
standing in an open field. He worried that it was too dangerous for her out there as well. Left looking around himself trying to figure out which way she could have gone before giving up and returning to Zack.

“She always does that.”

Zack shook his head, knowing that if he hadn't been able to catch her by now, neither would he. Still, he was glad he'd tried.

“Is she sending you on these aimless hunts because of what you did in Wutai?”

Cloud confronted immediately, surprised by his own tone as soon as he'd caught his breath from running after the child.

“I’m not sure.”

Zack admitted cautiously, in truth he hadn't given it much thought yet, what with everything else.

"She only ever cries about treasure, and never answers my questions. She’s so frustrating."

He went on, running a hand through his long black hair anxiously looking back across the field.

“Shinra's going to meet it’s end, one way or another.”

Cloud said firmly before heading back the way they came. He couldn't bear to negotiate anymore, knowing there was no way out of going back to Midgar with him.

“I guess.”

Zack sounded distant in response, not noticing he'd already started heading back. He was lost in memory, worrying about what he’d said to the young girl back when they first met in Wutai and why she wouldn't stop emailing him now.

When he turned back to his friend only to see the cadet walking away he was filled with regret, realizing that he was right to hate him. He hadn't realized until then just how far from being a real hero he actually was.

He jogged to catch up to the blond, holding back everything he wanted to say to him, and everything he still had to apologize for.

“What was in the chest anyways?”

Cloud asked, glancing back back him anxiously when he'd finally caught up with him, feeling horrible for walking away out of anger in the first place.

“Oh, yeah.”

Zack took out the item they’d come all this way for to show him, finally matching his stride again even though any joy from completing their objective had already vanished.

"An Assault Twister ability enhancer." He said and Cloud was surprised it was actually something that sounded good even though he couldn't make out what the item did by just looking at it.

“Is it worth much?”
The cadet asked, handing the item back to him.

“About 1300 gil.”

Zack stated plainly, he'd forgotten all about the money with all their arguing about Shinra.

“Fuck off.”

Cloud breathed out in surprise, expecting him to say he was joking.

"Huh?"

Zack blinked, unsure whether his response had been positive or negative.

"I meant, really?"

Cloud corrected himself.

"Oh, uh, yeah. It's not that much, but I trade a lot with other guys in SOLDIER."

Zack confirmed, but couldn't help but laugh just thinking of the way he'd told him to fuck off. And despite the confused look the blond gave him at first they were finally smiling back at each other again.

He was relieved that it looked like the younger man was at least happy they'd completed their goal. Even so, he felt guilty for thinking it would fix anything, worrying about everything he'd done the faster the blond walked back.

The pair cleared a path back just as easily as before, but it felt as if they were avoiding talking about Wutai the entire way back to the truck. Avoiding talking about the child who'd ran off crying, avoid talking about anything at all.

The longer they walked in silence the more Cloud felt that he couldn’t look back up at him even though he desperately needed to. He couldn’t keep wracking his nerves around Zack just because he was scared of what he'd say to him.

“So, how did that kid even get your email?”

Cloud asked after some time, trying to sound as casual as possible despite his nerves and somehow still managing to come off condescending. Unable to stop worrying about the girl, convinced she was too young to be fighting with the resistance. He could only accept that when your homeland was taken over it didn't leave much choice.

“Good question.”

Zack started, rubbing his chin to think for a minute.

“I’ll have to ask her if she pulls something like that again.”

He assured, bringing his hand back down as a fist in the palm of his other hand, as serious as always about the objectives he set for himself.

Chapter End Notes
They should have adopted her and joined the rebellion
Cloud drank some water, tired from their excursion even if he hadn't done anything except shoot a few monsters. Constant stress had its limits, he felt his own thoughts wearing down on him wondering why he was having so many fits lately.

He switched his rifle to his other shoulder and sighed, wishing he could just enjoy what little time they had left together. He wanted to prioritize him, but he couldn't stop thinking of the kid who'd run off, feeling guilty that they weren't looking for her.

He considered convincing Zack to turn back but he doubted they'd actually find her with how quickly she'd vanished. He could only keep wondering how the child and SOLDIER first met in Wutai and what she may have witnessed during the takeover, too afraid to ask for the truth he agonized over returning to Midgar instead.

He tried to calm down, focusing on his breathing while they walked back through the fields. The sun was slowly making its way down the afternoon sky, and much like their morning, the weather couldn't be more perfect. Despite the light breeze and bees buzzing in the tall grass nearby he was still wracked with unease, wanting to say something, anything at all, except all he could think of doing was begging him to desert.

After some time he finally forced himself to look back up at the tall man again, meeting his gaze pensively. He was struck by how serious he looked for a change, always expecting him to smile at him he tried to take a deep breath to speak but he couldn't manage to before he spoke first.

"Will you give me time to sort things out?" asked hopefully.

"Don't pull anything else against the company until we make a real plan."

He warned next when all he did was stare back up at him, unnerved by the look in his eye.

"Ok."

Cloud conceded, even though he hadn't meant it. He didn't know why lying came so easily, even with him, whether it stemmed from contempt or cynicism it was somehow enough to appease the other man.

"Good."
Zack nodded, looking back ahead.

“It’s not like getting rid of the president would have done much anyways. There’s still Heideger, Scarlet, Palmer, uh... Hojo, and the Turks, who are leading operations too.”

He elaborated, trying to get a better handle on everything they’d been through and why his friend had been dead set on the president. They were going back soon and he needed to understand what they were up against.

"I mean, what would it take to stop producing Mako?"

Zack continued, considering the hypothetical, glancing back down at the blond who'd only resumed staring at the ground, he worried he wouldn't be able to reason with him but went on all the same.

“We’d have to take over headquarters to shut down all the reactors just the two of us, then somehow keep them shut down while we travel the world to shut down all the other reactors. It would be impossible to pull off without help.”

He reasoned, waiting for confirmation, hating the heavy silences between them.

“We’d almost have to convince the whole company to help us.”

The 1st sighed, staring back down at him still before chuckling to himself.

"Ha, maybe Yuffie can show me how to spam mail.”

He joked, but quickly swallowed his own amusement when the younger man looked back up at him with a sharpness he could only be weary of.

“An email wouldn't be enough. You’d have to make a public statement, and even then, what wouldn’t they do to erase it, and you. You can't do that.”

Cloud said with the seriousness the other man's life merited. He hadn't meant to give him such a cold warning but he'd thought everything over a million times already and he was sick of every terrible outcome he'd dreaded for them.

“Don’t say that. If we have enough evidence it'll work. People will believe it.”

Zack sounded as confident as ever, trying to ignore the tired look he'd just given him in response. He was sick of making him angry, or of him being angry all the time in general.

“If there’s a resistance we need to figure out how many are in Midgar.”

Cloud suggested, wondering if he'd be able to meet that one rebel again.

“I uh, actually, the company already knows where they are.”

Zack spoke up hesitantly, struggling to keep an even pace with the way the other man sped up whenever he said the wrong thing.

"I got the orders to take them out, I just haven't yet because they haven’t really caused much trouble except steal some supplies so far and I had higher priority things to take care of.”

The 1st justified, although he had no idea why, knowing the blond's stance on the Wutai resistance by now and feeling ashamed he'd never questioned any of it before.
“We should talk to them.”

Cloud suggested, still unwilling to return to Midgar, but at least this way they had a chance to do something that mattered.

“Okay.”

Zack agreed, thinking all his choices over, unsurprised he'd avoided missions that entailed actual work because Cloud had been right, it usually involved fighting other people instead of just monsters or faulty security equipment and he'd started regretting his actions.

“We will. Just give me time to make things right, I promise I can.”

He added, relieved when the blond finally smiled back at him. He felt relieved beyond words, except something held him back still. He had too much to think about and when they finally neared the truck he stopped short of reaching it to sit down in the grass.

"Let's take a break before leaving, ok?"

Zack suggested, to which the younger man simply shrugged.

"Sure."

Cloud said but he had too much on his mind too, continuing to the truck anyways. He was unsure why he'd been dismissive besides the fact he still felt dehydrated and stressed to the point he couldn't understand his own thoughts anymore.

He climbed in to the armored vehicle to fetch some more water, sitting on the edge of the back of the truck for a moment after to collect himself. He couldn't pretend like everything was fine for Zack's sake anymore, no matter how much he hated being seen as weak he just couldn't stand what was happening to the world, or what had been happening to them, he couldn't stand any of it.

If they were really going back he needed it to be over already because he felt like he was going to loose his mind. He shoved the water canister back in before getting up to close the door, rounding the truck to look back at the 1st who'd laid down in the grass.

He had trouble understanding how the other man could always remain so positive, worried that no matter what they could attempt they were bound to fail against Shinra. Or worse, that he'd make more mistakes and endanger him when he was supposed to value him more than anything.

He'd always been reckless, since his youth, and that'd never been a problem to him except he knew it always had consequences on those he cared about the most. Shaking he had to lean back against the truck to steady himself for another minute.

It had been a long time now since he'd thought of Tifa's accident and the feeling of free-falling that always accompanied it. He hated feeling guilty, feeling as though he was always complicating things, of making everything worse than it should be.

He had to focus on what had to be done next, trying to think of Zack's voice telling him that it would be fine, that everything would be okay, unable to believe his poor imitation of the other man's sentiments was actually helping, he just wanted to talk to him.

After some time he managed to center himself enough to walk back to the 1st in the field. Suddenly absorbed in the sound of the wind in the grass and the steadily increasing beat of his own heart again. He felt more anxious than ever, barely able to keep his focus on him staring at the sky.
Consumed with dread over going back, yet unable to bring himself to ask him to run away again when he knew his mind was made up. He watched how peaceful he looked laying in the grass staring up longingly. He wanted to lay down with him, tell him everything, but it was too painful to drag their trip out any longer.

“Zack, we should head back soon.”

The cadet suggested, knowing it was wrong, that they shouldn't, if only they didn't have to. He stared down at the older man waiting for an answer, except that he didn’t move an inch in response causing his heart to sink.

“Something the matter?”

Cloud couldn’t help but ask even though he looked so serene staring at the sky. He didn't know why he was so anxious that he'd ignored him, he probably just wanted to nap longer, and he was clearly overreacting even though he'd managed to keep his tone calm.

“Eh, just guy stuff.”

Zack answered awkwardly before jumping up to his feet with a sudden swing, as he often did. expecting a smile back but the blond looked worried. Something had clearly been on his mind and he felt found out.

Cloud was ready to turn back when the taller man took another step towards him, then immediately down to one knee before him.

“Zack?”

He questioned, surprised to the point he couldn't breathe, worrying about what was going on and why he had to kneel down for it.

“Cloud, there's something I need to ask you before we go back to Midgar.”

The SOLDIER started, staring back up at him with a seriousness he rarely shared.

"I uh, I know I might be missing a lot, but I feel like I've had this question in mind from the start." He elaborated earnestly, trying to keep his tone steady but failing the next instant.

"Uh, listen, I know you might not believe me but I feel it so clearly. And I know I should wait for a better time, if it wasn't for everything else, but I can't go on not knowing any longer.”

Zack admitted, fidgeting with his hands at first before gesturing grandly, trying to emphasize what he wanted to say but the terror in his friend's clear blue eyes had shaken him.

“Please let me just, I know it's too soon to ask, especially like this.”

He went on nervously, quickly loosing the confident tone he'd had only moments ago, almost hesitating to continue.

"I mean I don't even have a ring yet." The 1st chuckled awkwardly, forcing himself to regain his composure, knowing he'd have to bear his response whatever it would be.

"It's only been a few months since we first met in Modeoheim, but it feels like a lifetime. And if
you don't feel the same way, then I need to know."

Zack went on, smiling back up at him weakly, hoping with all he had that he did feel what he felt so profoundly even if it was difficult to describe, he had to try.

"Cloud, you’re the strongest-willed person I’ve ever met. From the first time you ever smiled at me, up until this moment together, I always knew I'd never meet anyone like you again."

The SOLDIER brought a hand up over his own heart, continuing louder than he'd started.

"Listen, I know that everything you’ve told me and what we’ve already been through isn’t making any of this easy, but all I know for sure is that we’ve come this far and I still feel as strongly as I did that day."

Zack explained, finally regaining his confidence, his smile growing as he came to terms with what he had to ask the younger man. He finally felt ready, except tears started streaming slowly down his beloved's face before he could finish.

"Hey, hey wait, don’t cry."

Zack almost got up reflexively, reaching out for his hands instead, trying to reassure him while worrying about what he'd already said wrong.

"I’m not crying."

Cloud denied even though he clearly felt the tears dripping down his face to the ground between them. Unable to reach up to wipe his face he held back a sob that threatened to take over if he continued to give any thought to how much his words were hurting him.

"You're so stubborn. But I love that about you."

Zack said while squeezing his hands tightly, deciding to continue all the same.

"My mama always told me that when I met the one, I’d just know. I mean I never believed her, especially because she was always dreaming of the day I'd fall in love too like she had when she'd met my dad."

He shared, smiling up at him despite the tears that kept streaking down his face, starting to worry that it was all too much but unable to stop himself.

"And it's not that I didn't believe her because I didn't look, of course, I was open to meeting the right person, I just never knew what she'd meant before. I never knew, not until I talked to you on that mountain."

He said, squeezing his hands a little tighter in his, pulling him closer anxiously, wishing he knew how to make his tears stop.

"Cloud, you just. There was something between us stronger than anything I've ever felt before. Stronger than beauty, than warmth, than touch itself, stronger like a pull, a gravity that I haven’t been able to get out of my mind ever since I saw your face for the first time."

He explained himself quickly, but with so much emotion, never letting go of his hands no matter how much he wanted to emphasize what he'd just said to him with a grander gestures.

"You’re my one."
Zack breathed out, his tone heavy and unwavering.

"I never felt I had to exaggerate your place in my life, like I do with everyone else, with you I've tried so hard to just be a good friend, I just didn't know how else to approach you because it felt so different from everyone else I've bonded with, but I knew right away I was meant to see you again."

The 1st let go of one of his hands to reach up to his face and wipe his cheek gently despite how much he was still crying. He needed to know the truth no matter how hard it would be to hear it.

"No matter what comes next, I know I could only ever feel this way about you and I know that's a lot, and you don't need to answer me right now or even say that you want to, just please that you might someday?"

Zack asked hesitantly before taking a deep breath.

"My light, Cloud Strife, will you marry me?"

Zack proposed, still terrified by the distant look in the younger man's eyes.

"How can you?"

Cloud accused, finally able to avert his gaze to the ground he reeled from everything he'd just said to him. He frankly couldn't handle the shock, recoiling angrily he pulled away.

"How can you do this?"

Cloud repeated under his breath, still unable to stop his tears he practically chocked his next words out.

"How can you ask that."

He went on, distraught, gathering what little strength he had left to reassure himself his legs were still supporting his body to move back.

"Cloud?"

The 1st asked, watching him take another step away, one knee frozen to the ground from the sudden dread of being rejected. This wasn't at all how he'd just imagined it going when he'd planned on proposing 20 minutes ago.

"Why would we marry?"

Cloud asked before turning to walk away.

"Guess that's a no?"

Zack called back wearily, having only taken two seconds to replace his dejection with frustration with the way he was acting, there were kinder ways to say no after all.

"You don't even trust me!"

The blond shouted without even turning to look at him, making his way back towards the truck even though he had no idea what he was doing. The mix of emotion brought on by his proposal had made him too angry to sort through, feeling himself walking faster.
"What?"

Zack was just confused now, standing back up in the field finally, watching him walk away from him yet again he started to worry he'd read him wrong this entire time.

"You're the one who's crazy if you think getting married would change anything!"

Cloud yelled back, reaching the armored vehicle he considered stealing it for a brief moment before continuing past it, wondering which direction to go in. He felt like either way was more trouble than it was worth, starting to seriously panic before he turned back to the truck and noticed the back doors.

"What good is something like that?"

He couldn't stop shouting at the other man even though he couldn't see him anymore, opening up the large armored doors again he decided what was best for all parties involved was to be alone if just for a minute.

"Why would light have anything to do with me? You're actually crazy!"

Cloud couldn't stop himself from yelling. Everything he'd held in, every insecurity about the other man manifested in doubt. He made sure to engage the manual interior emergency lock before crawling to the nearest crate to lean back, exhausted from having cried so much and his own anger.

"Crazy!?"

Zack had finally followed him to the truck when he heard the door slam, only getting more frustrated when he reached for the handle only to find he'd locked himself in.

"Are you being serious right now?"

He yelled back, yanking on the door another time just to be sure. He had to admit to himself he found it hard to calm down, and that maybe the Mako withdrawal was having effects on him after all.

"Go away!"

Cloud yelled, regretting his words as soon as he'd said them but he was too angry to talk to him. He hated that he'd felt it appropriate to gloss over their situation with something as traditional as marriage, as if it made any of it better.

"You do realize I can just break the door off right?"

The 1st asked, crossing his arms to contain his own aggravation, starting to believe he was really crazy he was embarrassed that he'd gone from proposing to yelling back at the younger man within minutes.

"Cloud listen, I'm sor-"

Zack tried to apologize but he just kept shouting from inside.

"Stop! Just stop lying to me!"

Cloud yelled back without bothering to listen, holding his head between his hands, trying desperately to get a hold of himself.
"I'm not lying!"

Zack yelled back then proceeded to sigh deeply at himself, steadying himself to calm down, he turned back to press his forehead against the steel door.

"Yes you are! Making up shit about fated love and magnetic energy! I'm not a child! I don't believe in that crap!"

The cadet couldn't stop shouting, frustrated that the pain in his chest wouldn't subside.

"Are you saying I'm childish? Get the hell out here and say that to my face!"

Zack shouted back the next instant, clearly still letting himself get absorbed in the argument. He had a hard time hearing the younger man through the armored vehicle but he really really hated being called a child.

"You're unbelievable!"

Cloud yelled back, his tone still left little to desire, pulling his knees up tighter to try to center himself he still couldn't manage to stop panicking. He tried to convince himself he hadn't really proposed, that it couldn't be true because it must mean something else to him, feeling more delusional by the second.

"Cloud, please just open the door."

Zack couldn't accept he'd use what he used to think was a compliment, but with that tone. Worrying he'd gotten him wrong from the start and that he really was the one acting crazy over something he'd imagined.

"No."

Cloud yelled back despite their short time together flashing before his eyes. He couldn't stop the feeling that it was too late even though they were still talking at present.

"Why are you really doing this?"

Cloud asked next, unable to tame the fear that had taken hold of him ever since the man dropped to one knee in front of him. He'd never even seen a real proposal before and honestly thought no one did that sort of old-fashioned gesture anymore.

"Is it just to make sure I go back to Midgar with you?"

He yelled his second question, clearly angrier than he should be from such an accusation, hesitating to open the door just so he could yell at him face-to-face instead.

"What?"

Zack yelled back, bringing a fist down against the door with a loud bang, far too frustrated to contain himself anymore.

"Of course not!"

He shouted again, taking a deep breath the next instant, calming himself to ask him to open the door again calmly.

"Cloud!"
The SOLDIER started, but his voice was still far too loud and he had to take another second.

"Open the door please."

He managed to ask politely, running a hand over the cold steel in hopes he'd be able to calm down too.

"You can't just say all that stuff when I had already agreed to march right back in to Midgar with you."

Cloud continued to yell, but the way he'd banged on the door had unnerved him. He struggled with what to do next, and how long the other man's patience would last while he broke down.

It wasn’t about how much he loved him back, but precisely about why he hated himself that forced him to push him away as much as he had. At every comment about his appearance, to every suggestion that he was desirable in any way.

He’d wanted him to want someone better from the start, but anytime he even mentioned another person’s name his heart stopped and he knew he couldn’t go on like this. He’d leave him one way or another and he knew his heart wouldn’t be able to take it.

"Cloud, please open up. I'm sorry, let me apologize properly."

Zack asked, still talking himself down internally from just breaking the door open.

"What's the point?"

Cloud shouted, but his own voice shook and he couldn't handle arguing anymore, pulling his head down lower between his knees.

"How can you have the nerve to ask."

He mumbled to himself, but Zack couldn't make anything out anymore.

"Cloud?"

The 1st called back, trying his best to be patient.

"Cloud?"

He prompted again a little louder, starting to wonder if everything between them had only ever been physical after all, or whether he was really missing something major.

"Hey, I said I'm really sorry! Please let's just talk about this."

Zack raised his voice louder when still no answers came. He was getting frustrated again, if only for how bad he felt forcing him in to a date and then on to a stupid mission when he'd clearly never wanted to be with him from the start.

"I get it okay! Why would we marry I'm a complete idiot, just! Just please say you aren't really mad at me!"

The 1st begged, leaning against the door to press his ear up against it, praying for any sort of response.

"We can still stay friends right?"
He urged a little louder, his hope starting to fade.

"Are you actually mad at me?"

He asked louder still when no answer came, his own frustration threatening to rise again.

"I am!"

Cloud shouted back finally, shaking his head. He just needed to think, but he couldn't concentrate when his heart was still pounding out of his chest.

"Why?"

Zack called back pitifully, sliding down to sit on the edge of the bumper.

"Just shut up!"

Cloud yelled back, clutching his own head tighter he tried to focus on breathing if anything at all.

"Cloud, please."

The SOLDIER was relentless.

"What did I do wrong?"

He tried next, desperate for answers, his own insecurities starting to terrify him the longer the blond continued yelling at him.

"Enough god damn questions!"

Cloud kept shouting, wishing he knew what to say to get him to stop, or to make himself stop.

"Please just open up?"

Zack pressed, he just couldn't accept that he'd been unreasonable towards his friend, with how much they'd shared already, he couldn't accept not knowing what he'd done wrong in fear of ever doing it again.

"Go away!"

Cloud yelled, his tone just as aggressive as when he'd first stormed off but it kept cracking, feeling like he was about to start sobbing again.

"Fine! Then I'll just drive us back! You can stay in there the whole way if you don't care."

Zack finally gave in and stepped away, convincing himself that maybe they both just needed time to cool off.

"Wait!"

Cloud shouted back immediately, getting to his knees as soon as he'd pictured being trapped the entire way back.

"No, hold on!"

He yelled, stepping back over the pile of sleeping-bags and pillows the SOLDIER had thrown in after packing up the tent that morning to reach the door.
"What? Open up then."

Zack responded impatiently, turning back.

"Cloud?"

The SOLDIER called again when he still didn't open up.

"If you leave me back here I'll get sick again."

Cloud used his fear of car-sickness as an excuse, but he still hadn't unlocked the door, clutching the emergency latch anxiously, doubting why he'd shut himself inside in the first place.

"Then open up."

The tall man went on, head hung low until the door finally swung open.

"Thanks, look, I know I shouldn't have asked something so big so suddenly."

Zack started, trying to read his expression but he'd turned away to move back and sit against some of the crates.

"Look, I'm sorry. Please. I get it ok, proposing was stupid! Just let me apologize face to face."

He kept pleading, climbing in to join him.

"I never thought it'd make you angry. But now that its clear you don't want anything to do with me that way I'll just have to accept that ok? I'm sorry for yelling, and everything, I really am."

The 1st continued apologizing as soon as he'd sat besides him, but couldn't manage to meet his downcast gaze.

"Forgive me?"

Zack peered down further but Cloud remained slumped, head hung low.

"With everything we're going through, and something like that, only calling more attention to ourselves."

Cloud mumbled, trying to remember what else the Turks had threatened him with. He didn't want to think of what they did to SOLDIER that stopped obeying them, besides dispose of them and announce them KIA.

"Huh?"

Zack was confused by what he meant by more attention, wondering if he should have specified that he didn't mind keeping it a secret.

"Do you think this is just a game?"

Cloud asked, but he regretted every word as soon as he'd raised his tone. He knew he was still just lashing out but he couldn't control his voice or his fears.

"Of course not!"

Zack was quick to defend himself, regretting raising his voice again as soon as Cloud shifted
further from him.

"I value our friendship, first and foremost, and if I put that in question then I couldn't live with it. Please just tell me what I've done wrong, I never meant to hurt you, I'm just, in love with you."

The SOLDIER continued to plead with him, using every inch of self-restraint within him not to take his hand.

"I wanted more. I'm sorry if I assumed you did too, it's just. I thought you felt the same things."

Zack was confused, still looking for more signs that he should have backed off sooner.

"You could have anyone."

Cloud said, looking up only to see the older man leaning further down to finally meet his eyes.

“You’ve got to stop having such a poor opinion of yourself.”

Zack said sternly, leaning on one arm towards him.

"You don't know me."

Cloud answered bitterly, confident in his own appraisal.

"I want to."

Zack insisted, leaning closer despite his prior rejection.

"What?"

Cloud wasn't certain he'd understood, leaning back against the crates he tried to focus.

"I want to get to know you better."

Zack clarified.

"If you let me."

He added and for the first time Cloud realized that no matter how much time they shared, the things he knew he could never admit he wanted would always be too painful to bear. He'd never wanted to know what true love was before because how could anybody have it and lose it and not lose their mind too.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for anyone still paying attention to this work
Chapter Summary

this conversation ended up longer than expected so at least one more chapter before they return to Midgar writing Zack has made me soft uwu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I just needed to know how you felt about me, that's all."

Zack explained, wrestling with accepting his response. He'd been prepared to accept it either way when he'd first knelt down, he just hadn't expected it to be this bad.

"I'm sorry it was too much."

He apologized sincerely, watching the younger man's face for any sign of a reaction now that he'd appeared to have calmed down.

"Give me one more chance?"

The SOLDIER practically whispered his question, worried the increasing frustration in the blond’s gaze wasn't a good sign. He braced himself against the crate he’d leaned on as if the sensation of his back and arms pressed against the steel would change anything in that moment. He just needed to sit still long enough to hear him out, feeling that he had to make it easy for him to reject him but he'd never felt worse in his life.

"It's too much."

Cloud insisted. He could somehow feel to his core that their future could only end in a horrifying way and despite how irrational it was he couldn't shake it from the back of his mind.

"I'll do things right this time."

Zack promised as easily as he promised anything, shifting to lean on one shoulder to turn towards him.

"I won't say weird things or put you on the spot like that again."

He continued in hopes that he could alleviate any tension.

"I won't try to kiss you or ask you any more inappropriate questions."

He offered hopefully, unsure if he couldn't stop promising things because he thought he was doing the right thing or because he needed to know if he wasn't as quickly as possible.

"You don't remember half of what we've been through."

Cloud finally spoke up but his tone was as unreadable as the look on his face. Staring down at the
mess surrounding them he struggled to focus on what they were discussing, fixating on how sudden the proposal had been.

"How could you ask me something like that."

He continued before Zack had a chance to respond to his first comment, feeling his heart start to race again when he finally met his eyes again.

"I know."

Zack swallowed, ashamed to have caused his beloved so much distress, trying to maintain eye-contact but feeling guiltier by the second.

"I just-"

He tried before being cut off by strong hands gripping his sweater and tear-stained lips meeting his when the blond suddenly took hold of him. He moaned from surprise at first and again when the sensation of his tongue sliding over his was enough to make him give in, letting him push him back against the crate.

Cloud felt stupid, stupid for not understanding how he could be this angry and still kiss him. If anything he felt stupidly lucky that a man so amazing would even consider having him in his life, let alone marry him. It felt as if his body moved on it's own, gripping one suspender while the other slid over his shoulder, moving to climb on to his lap next.

He wondered what exactly had had possessed him to be so forward but when he felt his hands gladly welcome him, wrapping around his waist before sliding down his sides to his ass. Feeling his hands on his body was too much to focus on kissing him, moaning in to their kiss he had to pull back to catch his breath.

"I was-"

Zack attempted but Cloud's hands sliding down his chest were too distracting, feeling one hand up his shoulder to his bare neck, running his fingers through his hair, moving in to his touch he just wanted to understand what was happening.

Cloud was afraid he would loose everything to the power the 1st had over him and he couldn't understand how he could be so weak again. Leaning in he just couldn't stop kissing him, enthralled that he never resisted him, kissing deeper until he could feel how hard he was beneath him. Ecstatic when his hands finally continued exploring his body in turn, aptly forgetting how to breathe again.

He broke the kiss only to be surprised by how much more flustered the older man was than him. When their eyes met again he couldn't believed how hard he was breathing to catch his breath, too surprised to speak he contemplated how amazing it felt to be able to make someone so amazing feel that good.

"Aren't you still mad at me?"

Zack asked as soon as he'd composed himself. He felt even guiltier than before for letting him get on top of him when he thought he didn't even want to be with him seriously. He was simply too happy to care leaning back against the steel crate he wondered why he'd questioned at all.

"So?"
Cloud shrugged while holding his gaze, one hand firmly on the back of his neck while he slid the other slowly back over his heart to feel how hard it was beating.

"Isn't this what you want?"

Cloud taunted, leaning closer if only to prove his point, watching him close his eyes in anticipation only to open them shyly again when he hadn't kissed him. His tone was colder than he cared to accept, but feeling the other man's heart beating just as fast as his was overwhelming.

He regretted his words, wishing he'd had the self restraint not to climb on to his lap. He was ashamed of himself, realizing how hard he was and how much he loved seeing the older man's face redder than he'd ever seen before.

"Not just this."

Zack said in all seriousness, his forced tone making it seem like a whine, lips parted in anticipation while he prayed he hadn't said the wrong thing again and by the look on the blond's face he had.

"How could you?"

Cloud asked while recoiling, the reason he'd walked away from his proposal finally catching up with him.

"How could I?"

Zack was at a lost, trying to focus on what he was saying but the feeling that he still expected too much from him crushed him. He needed to apologize but all he could feel were his thighs squeezing his hips and the way he sat perfectly against his already hard cock making it difficult to think of anything else.

"I was just being honest."

He insisted, trying to make sense of the blond's sudden accusation he attempted to lean forward back to him but the hands on his chest kept him at bay.

"I don't know the first thing about marriage."

Cloud admitted and by the way the other man stared back in shock he felt obligated to elaborate, knowing very well that his efforts to restrain him were futile.

"I can't tell you how angry I am that you want to get engaged even though we might only have a few more hours left together."

His tone was bitter and his next words stronger than him.

"If we leave now we can have the rest of our lives."

He pleaded wondering how many times he'd dreamed of running away with him now. He only wished he knew how to justify how much anger he harbored inside, knowing the 1st was the last person he should direct it at. Even so, it was too painful to control feeling as if his life would end at the thought of having it all only to lose it.

"Cloud."

Zack started, moving his hands from his lips to his arms to lower them gently.
"What?"

Cloud asked impatiently, struggling to keep himself from crying again when he pulled him in to a hug.

"So you do want to spend it together?"

Zack asked finally, overwhelmingly reassured when the blond reached up to wrap his arms around his shoulders the very moment he’d embraced him.

"I’d be blessed to."

Cloud answered finally, letting himself give in to pressing his body against his once more. He ignored how much his bruised ribs hurt, hugging him back tighter instead to fend off more tears. Ignoring his own fears long enough to lean back in to kiss him again, encompassed with how good his lips felt on his until the 1st suddenly broke the kiss.

"I promise things will work out, you just have to trust me."

Zack felt the need to continue to promise him the world, too ecstatic for rational thought at his admission that he did want to be together to contain himself.

"I do."

Cloud assured, leaning closer again but Zack couldn't help but go on.

"You do?"

He asked, his blue eyes always shine brighter when he sought assurance.

"I'm trying to."

Cloud admitted while shifting anxiously, eager to kiss him again.

"Good, because you're stuck with me now."

Zack joked, enthralled by the way he was straddling him and the way he smiled at him just then. He’d never felt happier before, realizing then that just being beneath the other man was turning him on more than he'd imagined, moving his hands back down to his hips to pull him closer.

"Poor me."

Cloud whispered in to his ear when he shifted him higher against his hardon. His dry response earning him a troubled look from the older man until he realized he was joking. Leaning back down to kiss his neck next he enjoyed the way he moaned at every touch.

"You don't-"

Zack started, trying to muffle a moan from the way Cloud started to rock back against him while kissing and sucking down his neck.

"Seem too bothered, by it."

He managed to finish his remark, breathing hard he wanted to feel more of him, one hand undoing his belt and gear while the other reached for his scarf.
"Neither do you."

Cloud reproached while letting him take his gear off, forgetting about his own body momentarily. All he wanted was the thrill of undressing him again, taking a fist-full of his sweater once he'd pulled down his suspenders, entranced by his smile while he pulled the tight fabric off of him.

"Because I know."

Zack assured him while undoing the buttons to his uniform next, smiling back at how handsome he looked when he stared at his body that way.

"Know what?"

Cloud wasn't certain he'd followed his train of thought again, hesitating when he remembered he hadn't told him everything yet.

"That we're meant to be."

Zack bit his lower lip, but answered with the same earnest clarity he always had, still smiling back up at him while he pulled his uniform off, feeling him hesitate again.

"I'm not who you think I am."

Cloud warned suddenly. He didn't know what else to say to him, it felt as if no matter how much he loved the other man he couldn't minimize this distance between them or the shame of showing him his own body.

"Cloud."

Zack breathed from shock when he looked down finally, noticing the deep bruising over his hip where he'd lifted his shirt up and finally along his neck, reaching up to brush his hair aside to get a better look before letting go of him out of fear he was hurting him.

"I'm not as strong as you think I am."

Cloud clarified before pulling his undershirt off, watching his eyes dart from bruise to bruise along his neck, ribs and hips, accepting it was futile to hide them any longer. The sun was setting but they could still clearly see each other from the light coming through the front window, suddenly reminded of all the anxiety he'd repressed until then.

He knew things were too complicated, but having to recount everything was the hardest part. Before Zack could comment on his body, bruises, cuts, or scars, before he could ruin what would otherwise have been a perfect moment if he hadn't always been so weak he prayed he'd believe him for once.

"I don't think I could ever make you happy."

Cloud admitted, his voice shaking despite being barely a whisper.

"You deserve better."

He added but strong arms quickly pulled him back in to a hug.

"You do make me happy."

Zack tried to assure, desperate to understand what was going on, wondering if it had been another
warning from the Turks, ready to loose his patience if it was Cissnei.

"Cloud, who did this?"

He asked with a mix of concern and contempt, as willing to deal with the culprit as he was to try to heal him, loosening his hold only to equip a cure materia the next instant.

"Was it her?"

Zack insisted, casting a spell on him.

"No."

Cloud answered plainly, watching him recoil impatiently when his injuries failed to heal.

"Who then?"

Zack insisted, regretting it when the younger man only winced at his question.

"Tseng."

Cloud managed, hating what he'd done to him yet he had no idea how to tell him about it.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Zack insisted, terrified by his silence while the second Cure 3 he cast on him for good measure also had little effect. It had been a long time since he'd seen lasting injuries like those. With materia everyone was healed up within a few minutes typically.

"I didn't want to think about it."

Cloud didn't know what else to say, it was too painful to remember everything the Turk man had already taken from him.

"You pushed yourself all day."

Zack worried, wasting his MP on casting yet another spell, which despite being a significant energy boost, it was just tingly and unpleasant.

"I'm fine. Stop that."

Cloud tried to shift back to get off of him again but Zack wrapped his arms back around his waist, albeit gently, terrified of hurting him further.

"Why aren’t you healing?"

Zack asked, failing to mask the fear from his tone.

“I don’t know. I’ve been this way for a while.”

Cloud tried to explain, but it only made the other man worry more.

"You should have told me."

Zack hated to insist, but he was seriously concerned.

"I'm fine."
Cloud reached up to caress his face, wishing he hadn't shown him at all but there was nothing he could do about it now. Thinking of everything the company’s doctors had explained to him about his condition was the last thing he wanted to recall.

"Why would he do this?"

Zack was sickened, he couldn't accept that the Turk had so much malice inside of him.

"Why would anyone?"

Cloud didn't know what he was saying anymore, his confrontation with previous Turks seemed to blur together. How many times had he been held down and beaten, constantly struggling to get ahead before things turned bad.

"He must have said something."

Zack insisted, trying to get him to meet his eyes again.

"Because I didn't stay away from you."

Cloud explained bitterly, he didn't know what else to tell him besides what they'd already discussed in Midgar after their confrontation with Cissnei. He had known it would happen, and he still risked it anyways, he just couldn't believe she'd really ended up saving his life.

"He won't get away with this. I won't let it happen again."

Zack said while wrapping his arms around him tighter he didn't know what else to do, wishing he'd been there for him.

“I can’t loose you again.”

Cloud warned as soon as he could breathe again, his grip was often a lot to bear but he couldn't help but hug him back, pulling back to meet his bright eyes once more.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Zack assured letting his hands trail back down to his hips, gently moving past the exposed bruises above his pants and down to stroke his thighs, holding him down firmly on top of him. He'd never noticed, or at least he couldn't remember realizing how much he loved to emphasize his place beneath him like this.

He'd fantasized about the blond after their first meeting, even though it made him feel guilty. Partly because he’d been mourning Angeal, but partly because he’d never thought about sex quite like that before him.

"I just want to be with you."

The 1st breathed out, trying not to moan despite how perfectly the younger man's ass started rocking back and forth on top of his hard cock again.

"You don't have to promise the impossible to do that."

Cloud reproached plainly despite how thrilled he was to have made him so hard so fast again, leaning back down to kiss his neck. He couldn't stop touching him even though he knew he hadn't told him everything yet.
"I mean it."

Zack whined even though he’d eagerly leaned back to give him more access to his neck, melting in to every kiss.

"It's impossible."

Cloud felt like everything would end any minute, that no matter how many times they had this conversation it would always end the same way.

"If we go back Tseng will-"

Cloud started, head resting against his shoulder in defeat. He wished he could be optimistic too, that he could hope for the best, like he had in Junon, but how wrong he had been still haunted him.

"Not this time."

Zack assured with the same persistence he always had.

"I'm going to kill him."

Cloud vowed and by the shock on the other man’s face he knew he'd meant it.

"Hey."

Zack swallowed hard, he wanted to say the same, but something was holding him back. He knew something important was missing, and he didn't know if he could go through with it, especially after what happened with Angeal.

"Don't say that. I'll fix this."

The 1st tried to assure, pulling him closer with an arm wrapped around his waist while caressing his head on his shoulder.

"You can't."

Cloud answered dryly but Zack only hugged him tighter.

"You can't face him like that again, he’s too dangerous."

Zack warned, wishing he’d known better than to underestimate him. He hadn't been there for Cloud and this happened, he could only fear what else the Turks had done.

"I know."

Cloud sighed.

"You have to let me fix this. He doesn't know what he's doing."

Zack tried to placate, worried that he was biased because all he could remember was how much he’d wanted to warm up to Tseng when they'd first started working together. It felt like forever ago now, but mostly it felt like only bad things had transpired since then.

"He's well aware."

Cloud corrected, wishing only to repay the favor to the other man.
"There must be-"

Zack tried to reason with him, to find out more, anything that would make more sense than what he could see, but the younger man only furrowed his brow further.

"You can't forgive him."

Cloud warned sharply, attempting to get off of him again only to be restrained once more, starting to let his anger get the better of him.

"I didn't say I-"

Zack started, he couldn't let go and he didn't want to either, although he was quickly cut off.

"He's a god damned monster."

Cloud uttered while struggling against his grip, tired of trying, he'd lost his sense of space forgetting where he was momentarily. With everything that'd just happened between them he was beyond overwhelmed with emotion, fear, and more importantly the adrenaline of wanting revenge that was instilled in him since his last confrontation with the Turk.

"You won't have to face him alone again, I promise."

Zack attempted to comfort him, bringing a hand up to stroke his hair before cradling the back of his head.

"How can you promise th-"

Cloud started to protest as always but Zack was quick to insist.

"I've got this."

He said gently.

"Just let me handle him."

The 1st sounded as serious as ever, but the way he's squeezed his waist tighter with his other arm only made him feel that he was afraid as he was.

"You can't-"

Cloud tried to pull back despite how much he loved his strong fingers through his hair, wanting nothing more than to hold him back, reeling from the gravity of the matter at hand.

"Please."

Zack pleaded.

"I know I can talk to him, I just don't want you to get hurt again."

He added, leaning closer until he could rest his forehead against his, closing his eyes momentarily before continuing.

"I don't want you to worry about any of this anymore."

He said, sliding his hand from the back of his head down to cradle his face, stroking his cheek
gently.

"We'll make it together from now on, you'll see."

Ever positive, Zack smiled back fondly at him.

"Just tell me you want it too."

He pleaded on, staring back with lips parted in anticipation.

"Promise me you'll live for both of us from now on?"

Zack asked, his bright eyes far too serious in spite of the tears pooling in them.

"I promise."

Cloud answered with a certainty he'd never known before. It felt like being displaced in time, leaning forward to kiss him again, nothing else existed in that moment. Feeling too strongly had always made him question himself and his motives but there was no question that he did love him back.

Chapter End Notes

I love them so much uwu

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