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**Of Courage, Promotion and Skirmishes: A Narrative by Captain Strife Vol. I**

by **Gothams Only Wolf**

**Summary**

A coming of age story about ShinRa's most powerful SOLDIER going into battle, shifting loyalties and growing up.

Sequel to Lt. Strife's Hopeful Soul

Part I of III
Mission: Infiltrate Turk HQ, See The Frying Pan O' Doom

Chapter Notes

I'm back again with the third installment! A warning to you all, this will begin to skip in months and even years. It will pick up where Hopeful Soul left off and skip from there. The skips will be labeled.

It's my hope that you'll enjoy this one just as much as you enjoyed the rest of the series!

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some would say it started with ShinRa's greed, others with ShinRa's pride or even with ShinRa's army of troops and SOLDIERs.

The truth of it boiled down to a measure of all three.

ShinRa was about to start an era unlike any other in the history of the world and somehow, someway, manage to come out on top smelling of roses.

The problem with roses, of course, are the unavoidable fact that they have thorns.

Sephiroth snuck through the hallways of ShinRa's 45th floor, headquarters to the Department of Administrative Research—known to the rest of ShinRa simply as the Turks.

Turks were notoriously possessive of everything they oversaw.

Sephiroth, as a SOLDIER Third Class, was technically permitted to be there. He had an understanding with the Director here unlike any other SOLDIER.

Light footsteps caused him to hide in the rafters, his boot impressions faded into the carpet before the newest recruit walked over them. The recruit was stopped as Tseng, Veld's protégée, spotted the depressions.

"Someone was here," came the careful drawl.

"Huh?" At the louder voice, Sephiroth moved down the hallway on the beams, swaying to balance as Tseng spoke again.

"You're stepping where they were," was the decisive answer. "Look closer."

"Ohhh. How'd ya spot it, yo?" Slum slang in ShinRa? That was new. Sector Seven, by the sound of it, born and raised.

"They were quiet but those aren't Turk-issued prints. Likely a trooper or a SOLDIER here infiltrating on a dare. Look up." Sephiroth knew he blended in with the dark ceiling but closed his eyes as to not be spotted. "Hmm. Keep an ear out for non-familiar voices or boots."
"Can do yo!" As their footsteps faded, Sephiroth barely cracked open his left eye to spot them leaving before he closed it again.

He waited patiently, breath so shallow that he heard the throwing knife hit the beam where he'd been not a moment prior.

"Paranoia, I suppose, but better safe than sorry." Tseng sighed, tugging the knife out of the wood with an attached string.

"You're crazy." The recruit muttered.

"It's at moments like this where your enemy could strike. Pay attention before you're dead." Tseng chided like an exasperated older brother.

Sephiroth thought about it and grinned.

He dropped down, gave a cheeky whistle and darted down the hallway, laughing as Tseng let loose a Wutainese curseword in surprise.

Nicky would disapprove of that one for sure but it was fun to startle new ones out of the Turk.

"Whoa! What was that?"

"ShinRa's most powerful SOLDIER. He's faster and stronger than the rest. He's also a child. I will report you, Strife!" Tseng yelled after him.

"Have to catch me first and give the report to Director Veld!" He fired back as he skidded to a halt outside of the locked room. "Should be in-There!"

The card reader meeped and let him into the room.

Sephiroth slowly walked up to the mounted pan with the indent roughly the size of a human skull as he looked at it. He reached for the pan as if to brush the material, his open hand curling into a fist as he thought about the last person it had touched. Sephiroth heaved in a breath to calm himself as he thought about all the good that pan had done by being in the hands of his Mom.

He dug around for his PHS and took a picture to show Ms. Ifalna later when he brought Cloud to play with Aerith.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
Playing Hide-n-Go-Seek in Flowers

Chapter Notes

I'm knee-deep in cosplay stuff but while things dry and shape, why not post!

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cloud's excited for the trip down, bouncing in Mom's lap even as the train car descended. He held onto Sephiroth's PHS and was currently concentrating on beating one of the crappy games from R&D's testing 'focus' group.

Sephiroth tried not to listen in on private conversations but this one had him amused, to say the least.

"Listen, I was there. Some idiot tried to steal from a SOLDIER and almost ate it on the train. Kid had this big-ass dagger and was outta uniform but... Oh sweet Minerva."

"That him? You're sure? Kinda small to be a-"

Sephiroth glanced up and didn't stifle his grin when both men squeaked and looked the other way.

"You didn't see him move the way I did. Jus' leave 'em alone."

"Shiva that glow is intense..."

Sector Five didn't trust anyone but one look at Mom's expression and they went about their business. She walked up to the church doors and politely knocked.

When there wasn't an answer, Mom rose a brow at the empty sound behind the closed doors.

"There you are! I'm so glad you could make it down for a visit," A woman linked an arm with Mom, lowering her voice as she continued. "I'm taking you to Aerith and her mother. I'm Elmyra Gainsborough."

The unspoken 'please play along' meant that they were being watched.

"It's nice to see ya, Ms. Gainsborough." Sephiroth said as he took her free hand in his right one. "Thank you for this. My Mom's name is Anika."

"Elmyra, it's been ages. I've been so busy with work lately that it clean slipped my mind t' come down here. I'm sure you've missed seein' my little Storm an' Seph." Mom drawled out with her Nibel accent so thick it was almost too much. "Ya letters said ya been havin' a hard time lately so I figured we'd come down."

"Anika, how thoughtful. Look at you, Storm! You've gotten so big since that last picture your Mama sent me-" Elmyra stopped as they slipped into a tunnel that lead to a decently-sized house and tons of flowers. "I'm sorry if I startled you. Ifalna's legs are weak today so I thought I'd bring
"All Seph told me was that I was meetin' someone important to him an' that my Storm Cloud would have someone close to play with," Mom replied delicately. "The Turks I saw weren't disguising squat."

Ms. Gainsborough let out a startled laugh. "I knew I wasn't the only one who saw those blue suits. Come on in."

Sephiroth inhaled the scent of real flowers, the heady scent making him smile as the flowers followed them indoors with vases and pots on nearly every surface.

Ifalna was surrounded by pillows and propped up on the couch with blankets. "Hello, Mrs. Strife. I'm Ifalna Faramis. Sephiroth and I spent a great deal of our time together under the watch of a certain... person. My daughter's not much older than your son."

"Anika, please. Cloud, do you want to go play?" Mom corrected gently before talking to Cloud.

"Yes Mama." He reached for Sephiroth and Sephiroth settled his little brother on his hip. "Hide-'n-Go-Seek!"

"Let's go find Aerith," Sephiroth replied as he walked back out into the weak sunlight and flowers. "Hold on." He activated his Libra Materia, scanning the flowers to spot a small form in the upper levels of the flowers. "She's up there."

"Ohhh. How'd ya do it?" Cloud asked, trying to see through the dirt hill to the upper level.

"I did it with a Libra scan, silly. You're still too little for Materia." He replied as he bounced Cloud to get a better grip on him.

"Eee! Again, again!" Cloud giggled and Sephiroth couldn't say no to the pleading blue eyes. He lifted his little brother and gently tossed him up. "I see her!"

"Good." He dashed up the hill to hear more of Cloud's laughter as he set him down in front of Aerith. "Wanna play?"

"Can you toss me too?" Aerith asked with wide eyes. Sephiroth thought about it, briefly calculated the angle and nodded. "Yay!"

He tossed her a little higher than Cloud, catching her just as she squealed in delight.

They played tag, Sephiroth deliberately not using his heightened senses or Materia to find them. It was peaceful, what little wind there was swaying the flowers in the soil and filling the area with their full scent. He pounced on his little brother as well as Aerith with glee and only looked up when Mom called them back in.

"Sephiroth? Cloud? Snack time!"

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, etc.
Unburdening of the Soul

Chapter Summary

Contains descriptions of past abuse being inflicted on a child; proceed with caution

Chapter Notes

So, this isn't happy but it explains a lot of how I characterize this version of Sephiroth. It's exposition and a bit of a character finally breaking down after so many years of being a victim.

I have a warning as I'm not sure this chapter warrants turning this fic to M for blood and what Sephiroth describes.

**WARNING:** Sephiroth speaks about past abuse and psychological torture in the name of human experiments. It explains a lot of his reactions and maladaptive habits that will continue to appear throughout the series.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sephiroth sat between Mom and Ifalna, one hand on Ifalna's knees and casting a low-level Cure as he ate.

"Seph, what're ya doin'?' Cloud piped up as he leaned on Aerith. She leaned right back, both of them rubbing cheeks as they kept their eyes on Ms. Ifalna.

"Hmm," he chewed and thought about how to explain it without sounding like Hojo. "It's so she gets better but it doesn't hurt her while I'm doing it. Cure too quick and someone can get hurt, which means both the caster and the one it's being cast on. So slow is the way to go."

Aerith summed it up with, "Oh, you're helping my Mama heal."

"Yes." Sephiroth let go of Ifalna's knee but missed the contact almost immediately.

Ifalna wrapped an arm around him and smiled as he tucked himself under her chin while reaching out a hand for Mom.

«Mama, c'n I go play some more with Aerith? She said she had some cool stuff to show me.» Cloud asked politely, holding onto Aerith's hand almost as much as she was holding his.

«Of course you can, Storm Cloud. Just be back in when it gets dark. I don't want you to trip on anything and hurt yourself.» Mom agreed. «Yell if you need anything, your brother will hear you long before I do.»

«Yes, Mama! Thank you.» Cloud climbed the couch to press a kiss to Mom's cheek before racing after Aerith.
Sephiroth lounged in the grip of the two most powerful women in his life, knowing that he was safer than he’d ever been.

"Ms. Ifalna? Mom?" He was still hesitant to start but he knew that he needed to get it all out in one go.

"What is it, honey?" Mom made the switch back to Common, concern along the curve of her brow and in the way her mouth set.

"I think... I think I need to talk to someone about what it was like... with Hojo." He glanced down at his gloved hands and flexed them, still unsure even with his protectors of the past and now his present right there with him. "What he did to me. I'm starting to understand that my upbringing wasn't right."

Ifalna inhaled a hitched breath and he felt it as Mom squeezed his hand in reassurance.

Ms. Ifalna questioned softly, "Did you want to tell us, koneko, or a professional?"

Sephiroth froze at the mention of a doctor in any capacity other that Dr. Jakobs, who always asked before she touched him and wouldn't proceed if he was uncomfortable in any way.

"You first," He managed at a whisper. "You were there, sometimes, so you know..."

"And I would never judge you," she finished for him, her voice full of understanding, "or break your trust."

That was the reason more than anything else; Sephiroth feared that if he spoke about it to anyone else, he'd be taken away from what he'd finally found.

He took a deep breath to steady himself and started with, "The first thing I remember is Mako tanks and my body feeling like it had been set on fire... It didn't stop feeling like that for a long time after the tanks. I remember being told to pick up Masamune and being punished when I couldn't lift her up more than a couple of inches."

Ifalna petted his hair to encourage him.

"Hojo hated failure. He hated it when I got tired or sleepy or mumbled instead of speaking in clear sentences that he could understand. His favorite way to hurt me without someone seeing were needles... Mako concentrate, he called it, and it burned worse than the tanks or any other injection aside from my J-shots... It's part of the reason why the SOLDIER uniform has gloves. They covered my wounds and what little complaining I did was taken as the word of a spoiled child." Sephiroth couldn't stop even if he tried now, years of silence finally boiling over.

"The techs didn't talk to me because Hojo saw them as inferior and forbid it. I didn't even know how to interact with someone my own age, let alone the adults who weren't interested in anything more than my ability to crush solid steel with my fist at seven years old. I remember getting strapped to a table, being cut open and left to heal on my own. It took me three days to close just one cut. He left alone the visible areas like my face, my neck and my arms. Everywhere else... I have so many scars from him I can't even count all of them and I've tried."

He sucked in another breath and continued, anger making him louder than before. "Hojo sent me up against Behemoths with only Masamune and a single Cure Materia. He-He documented my body being broken and bruised after I finally took it down with a Limit Break and the only thing he could say to me was, 'It should have come sooner.' Sooner. Leveling up a Limit Break is
something most adult SOLDIERs haven't even managed yet, let alone two variants in one battle against the highest leveled Behemoth on the plains!"

Sephiroth started sobbing, tears scorching their way down his face as Mom and Ifalna both hugged him close.

Mom crooned in the back of her throat and rubbed at his chest, gentle circles slowly soothing him and slowing down his breathing. Ifalna wiped away his tears with a kerchief, hugging him and Mom close. He hiccuped, sniffled and concentrated on the nearly matching heartbeats of his protectors.

"I'm glad I packed that pan," Mom hissed, her grip tightening fractionally around his chest. "I'm glad that idiot thought my Storm Cloud was an easy target and I'm proud of the fact that I killed that slimy, rotten piece of dragon dung. I'd raise him out of his grave and do it again for good measure."

Sephiroth offered wetly, "I resupplied you with ammunition should you ever need to beat Hojo back into his grave."

"Yes, yes you did." Mom cooed as she held him in her arms. "Didn't you have that picture you wanted to show Ifalna?"

"Oh. Yeah. Hold on, my PHS-" Sephiroth dug around and emerged with it clutched in his left hand. He flipped it over to his right, tapped out the passcode on the touchscreen and flicked through his pictures until he found it. "The Turks moved it again. I had to sneak past a Turk and his recruit."

Ifalna hummed as she saw the photo and then made a noise of surprise.

"There's a reflection in the display case. Do you recognize them?" She pointed out.

There was a reflection, true enough, but the face was both familiar and unfamiliar in a way that Sephiroth didn't have words for. Red eyes glowed SOLDIER bright but none of the Turks were enhanced to that point.

Unless... Hojo had held someone else prisoner.

Dr. Jakobs had been going through all of Hojo's old files and she was still finding more and even older notes on all of the Projects that had been ongoing. Project J, Project S, Projects S2-12, Project V—all of his notes on SOLDIERs both past and present—and something known only as Deepground in it's earliest stages.

The sheer amount only lent credence to his idea of another person that had been under Hojo's vice grip.

"I don't know them but... I know enough of Hojo's projects to think that this person may have been one of them. Dr. Jakobs is keeping me informed, though she reads the files and gives me a basic summary. There are so many projects, notes and documentation that she's had to hire additional staff to get through it all; more keeps coming up from his offices and the labs." Sephiroth admitted as he looked at the photo in a new light. "I never heard them, which means the experiments done to this person were more extensive than mine."

"... I hope they know that he's dead," Ifalna murmured as she carded her fingers through his hair and pressed a kiss to his crown. "Especially if they are who we think they are."
Comment, complain, etc.
The Valentine Wing

Chapter Notes

Okay, we're back to the lighter stuff! There's going to be quite a few chapters like that but definitely spread out because those hurt to read and write...

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sephiroth felt better by the time they had to leave, as though a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He held a sleepy Cloud on the train ride back as Mom kept watch.

He handed Cloud off to Mom as he flicked his fingers into the Nibel hand signal of 'Uncertain if danger.' She hummed and shuffled Cloud against her left side and flicked back, 'Careful; love you.'

ShinRa security cooed at the sight of Cloud but insisted on verifying their information as security had tightened for unnamed reasons. After they'd stepped back onto ShinRa's compound, Sephiroth listened for anything out of the ordinary.

It came in the form of a flap of cloth and red that streaked from one corner of darkness to another. He launched after it, fairly confident in his skills with the dagger Henderson had given him.

They darted away again but the flare of red eyes kept him on target until they landed on a precarious ledge of ShinRa's highest tower.

"Why are you following me?" He questioned harshly.

"... Are you Sephiroth?" The deep voice was a surprise, although the question itself only raised more.

"It's Lt. Sephiroth Strife," he replied cautiously, "but yes, that's my name. Why do you want to know?"

"It was a name I learned of years ago, the name of an infant boy who I was unable to see. Nearly a decade I slept but someone, something, woke me and asked if I knew what had become of the child bearing that name." The stranger replied as the red gaze swept over his face and then zeroed in on his eyes. "I see that Hojo got a hold of-"

"He's dead." Sephiroth blurted. "Official word is that he slipped and fell in ShinRa's kitchen facilities but I know how he really died."

The stranger's eyes widened considerably at his response. "Who would dare ...?"

"My adopted Mom. He reached for my little brother to 'disappear' him and found that his brains were no match for her best cast iron pan." He responded dryly. "It's stupid to take a hatchling from a Nibel dragon, y'know."

The red eyes closed briefly at that before the stranger said, "I see."
"You know my name. You know that Hojo's moldering away," Sephiroth didn't know where this bravery was coming from but he hoped it didn't fade. "so I've got two questions. What's your name and would you like to come in for dinner?"

"My name is Vincent, Vincent Valentine." came the quiet answer. "... I would like to meet your Mother."

The admiration he heard made Sephiroth smile.

Sephiroth didn't know how Mr. Valentine met him inside the building but he got a proper look at his invited guest in the golden lights of the hallway.

The red cape should have stuck out and yet... If Sephiroth weren't a SOLDIER or enhanced, he suspected that Mr. Valentine would just melt into his surroundings. The gauntlet was well-hidden and it seemed as though it was once the dominant hand with the way it reached for the door handle before Sephiroth beat him to it.

"Let me explain to my Mom really quick. Watch your legs, Cloud loves new people." Sephiroth warned as he cracked open the door. «Mom? It's a guest of dragon dung coming by for a visit.»

Mom laughed and chided, «Seph!»

«Sorry.» He turned to Mr. Valentine, about ready to switch to Common to communicate.

«Dragon dung... Is that what you call him?» The Nibel is rusty and it's an older version but it's still Nibel.

Mom's breath hitched, like it was caught between a sob and a laugh. «Are you still going by Sharpshooter or do I get to learn your real name?»

She opened the door all the way, blue eyes tracing over their guest in disbelief.

«Anika?!»

Mom reached out and Mr. Valentine folded himself down to be hugged close.

"Umm, Mom?" Sephiroth questioned. "What's going on?"

She jerked in surprise but smiled at him. "I'll tell you inside."

They shuffled inside where Mr. Valentine toed off his boots, Sephiroth absently copying him as they moved to the kitchen table. Cloud was sleeping and the light sound of his breathing relaxed Sephiroth's shoulders.

Mom busied herself with the kettle as Sephiroth and Mr. Valentine descended into an awkward silence that was made up of stealing glances at one another before skittering away to look at other things.

"Seph, honey, can you get down three mugs please?" She asked as she gave Sephiroth's shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Yes, Mom." He padded into the kitchen and used the step stool to pick out three separate mugs.

"My real name is Vincent Valentine. I'm sorry for your loss, Anika. I know Fenris' passing wasn't
Sephiroth listened in as Mom moved around the table.

"Well, at least you're here now. Fenris would've loved to have seen you again."

He maneuvered carefully, padding back to the table with the three mugs to see that Mom had set out the sugar cubes and cream. "Why did you call him Sharpshooter?"

Mr. Valentine sighed heavily and murmured, "Once upon a time, I was a Turk; the best of the best and partnered with Throwing Stars. You'd know him better as Veld. I was... assigned to guard Professors Faramis and Hojo on a secretive mission without my partner. It was the first and likely last mission with those parameters."

"Oh merciful Bahamut."

"Sephiroth, are you alright?" Mom asked, well aware of his recent breakdown.

He held up a hand and looked Mr. Valentine in the face. "Was your hair shorter during that assignment? Brushing just past your jawline with no headband."

"Yes. How do you know that?" The red gaze sharpened at his question and soured at his statement.

"Because, I cut my hair to my jawline once," Sephiroth's heart was in his throat as finished. "Hojo's exact words to me were 'You look like that infuriating bodyguard,' right before he refused to see me for the next three months with the explict order to grow it out."

"It can't... Why would she..." Mr. Valentine stood up and paced, his expression torn between horror and outright fury. "Do you have a mark that isn't a scar but you can't explain how it got there? A birthmark, right at the curve of your left hip."

He lifted his shirt to show the stark, wing-like mark that had always been with him. Hojo had never gone near it and refused to look at it when he'd hurt Sephiroth.

Mr. Valentine flinched as though someone had struck him but pulled up the left side of his shirt to reveal a much larger, wing-like mark in the same rich burgundy as Sephiroth's own.

"What is it?"

"The Valentine Wing, bestowed upon our line by Bahamut himself... Or so the family legend goes."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
Mr. Valentine was his father by blood.

It was a title Hojo had claimed repeatedly; he'd crowed it loudly and often when Sephiroth had come beneath his twisted standards.

Hojo had lied.

Sephiroth couldn't contain the slightly hysterical laughter that escape from him.

"Hojo always said-hahaha-that he was it. That he was-ahahaha-my Father by blood and that I was above everyone because of-hehehehe-that fact!" He doubled over and laughed some more until Mom lifted him up and he hiccuped. "Today's just... Full of rewriting my history, isn't it?"

"Shhh, Seph. You've had a very trying day. We'll get a blood test done but it looks like you're related. Vincent can talk to Director Veld about it in the morning. I think we all need some rest." Mom soothed and Sephiroth went slack in her grip. "Brush your teeth and go to sleep."

"Yes Mom." He brushed his teeth in a haze and crawled into bed with Cloud, asleep as soon as his head touched the cool pillow.

Formation and breakfast was mostly silent, Sephiroth still emotionally raw and not inclined to let anyone at ShinRa see it.

"Are you alright?" Angeal gently nudged his pauldron and Genesis did the other side.

"... I think so. I learned something when I went to go get you plant food." Sephiroth said and Angeal nodded. Genesis quickly caught on and made a noise of understanding. "Do you think you can pick it up later?"

"Of course. I'm running low on it. Plants are really hard to keep alive above the Plate. You weren't kidding." Angeal rose a brow and they went back to regular conversation. "At least silk flowers don't wilt."

"Where did you two even get those ridiculous flower crowns anyway?" Genesis teased.

"Sector Eight. Don't lie. I know you like the way Dyne arranged yours." Angel teased right back and Sephiroth felt something in him settle.

Despite the information and the idea that he wasn't alone anymore took a while to sink in, he knew he had support if he asked for it.
"Ah-ha! Have at you!" Genesis treated his plastic knife like a sword. Angeal parried with a spoon, using the curved side to swat the knife away. It headed for Sephiroth and he blocked it with his fork, flicking both into the hard plastic table with an awful -THRONG!- sound. They quivered for a moment before Sephiroth cringed. "Whoa. That was impressive... How'd you do it?"

"Ah, I levered the edges and flicked my wrist forward to change the direction of the momentum. I might have added my own strength by accident." He explained while using his hands because Cloud liked the visuals and it helped him slow down.

"So, is that sword work?" A Cadet, denoted by the SOLDIER emblem sleeve against the trooper uniform, asked him with the helmet still covering his face. Half of the table looked amused and the other half interested.

"It's more dagger than sword but yes, it can be applied in multiple situations." He answered carefully as he straddled the bench. "Major Henderson is a master of both sword and dagger and offers lessons to those who ask."

"Dagger? I only ever see you with that big sword, umm, sir." The Cadet backpedaled as he watched Sephiroth remove the twisted plastic with a simple pull.

"I don't display it but I am equipped with a secondary weapon at all times. The Masamune may be strong and able to cut through a lot but if I lose the blade in battle or against a monster, I shouldn't be defenseless." He pulled the long dagger from it's dark sheath against his leg and flipped it to show the Cadet. "You can block with daggers and heave with them the same way you do swords but it's more about using the momentum of your opponent rather than brute force."

The Cadet nodded and mumbled out a, "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, Cadet...?" He sheathed the blade as he looked at the Cadet.

"Cadet Kusel, sir."

"I'll see you during the exams then, Cadet Kusel." Sephiroth acknowledged. He turned back around to see Angeal and Genesis looking at him with matching grins. "What?"

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
Thank you all so much for taking the time to read this fic! The support throughout the series has been wonderful and I'm spurred to even greater heights because of it.

Listen, listen, if you're lurking, go on Anon if you gotta and tell me your favorite pieces! I love hearing ideas, theories, commentary, timeline questions; you name it, I'm game with talking about it unless it's a plot point!

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I've been hearing lately that you've changed for the better but that's gonna blow up the rumor mill for days. Poor Cadet Kusel..." Genesis clicked his tongue as he finished his breakfast. Angeal and Sephiroth followed shortly thereafter and walked together to the non-VR training room after collecting their weapons.

"He can handle himself," he mentioned. "If he can look me in the face with a brand new sleeve and talk to me, especially with the rumor mill being a vicious cycle, he can not only handle anyone asking about me but keep to himself if necessary."

"Huh. How'd you figure that out?" Angeal pressed as they joined the kata group of Thirds.

"The way he smelled. With the way I am, I can practically taste it when they lie to me. He was being genuine and sincere in his interest, if a little nervous," Sephiroth shrugged, set Masamune in the corner and grabbed the reinforced shinai that ShinRa insisted on using.

Angeal had gotten better since his blade didn't shatter or break against Masamune and was working with a First to hone his sword skill. Genesis was listening to a Second who specialized in rapiers and he was writing everything down with a look of intense concentration.

Sephiroth picked out a corner and went through each of the katana forms, his stance mimicking the book he'd been given exactly. Henderson or maybe Wolf would come over to correct his forms occasionally but for the most part, here too, he was left alone.

Well, he had been alone before Hojo's death.

The three Firsts who normally went on monster missions with him had shuffled into a line and waited for him to look up. He finished his forms with a decisive flick of the wooden shinai and saluted with his non-dominant hand. "Major Cleary, Colonel Urial... Major Tyris. What can I do for you, sirs?"

Major Tyris, still covered in dried monster blood, pulled a large, sharp-edged Griffon feather from his inventory. "Someone told us that you liked collecting these feathers. Your redhead squad mate, before you ask, took it upon himself to request that if we got a Griffon mission, would we mind bringing back a few feathers for you? So we had one late yesterday and hey, can't hurt when it's already dead. It's yours if you want it, Strife."
"Thank you, sirs. I apologize for Rhapsodos-

"Don't apologize. Those damn things clutter up our inventory and if you like 'em, well, we don't have to sell them." Major Cleary chuckled. "Besides, Henderson and Wolf beat us to your surprise last year by sheer stupidity and access to your file. It's our turn now."

"Then I accept, Major Tyris, Major Cleary. Thank you, sirs." Sephiroth tucked it into his inventory and then frowned as he caught the rest of the statement. "My surprise, sirs?"

"Sweet Shiva, Cleary, you were just supposed to give it to him..." Colonel Urial slapped his hand over his face and groaned. "Could you do us a favor, Strife, and forget you heard that?"

Sephiroth grinned and offered, "Only if you teach me that unseating trick, sir."

"That-You drive a hard bargain, kid." Colonel Urial replied wryly as he shrugged. "Sure, I've been meaning to teach it anyway. We'll head out on a bogus mission so we can try it mounted on Chocobos but for now, we'll sit on the gymnastics bar. Bring your katana. We might actually be able to use the blade for this..."

The rest of his day was quiet, finishing up paperwork and getting a headstart on the new piles.

He even looked up Mr. Valentine but the system insisted that there was no such employee on the books for the Department of Administrative Research.

Formation closed as usual, Sephiroth quietly mulling it over as Angeal, Genesis and two other squads all crowded in the elevator.

The squads got off at various floors and finally they could talk when it got stuck on Floor 22.

"Major Cleary gave me Griffon feathers." He muttered. "It's as though they cleared out an entire nest. I could make a whole wing out of the amount I have now."

"Err, I may have seen it on the mission board...? I asked them to get you some since we're not strong enough to help and they weren't bad-mouthing you like Squad Foxtrot or Gulf." Genesis admitted frankly. "Angeal did this thing..."

"Gen calls it the wilted flower. I look like I'm biting back tears but it's laughter and it works a good, what, 85 percent of the time?" Angeal demonstrated and Sephiroth almost reached out to comfort him.

"Yup. The wilted flower's gotten us out of so much trouble." Genesis agreed with a laugh. "I'm totally calling yours the wet kitten."

"Huh?" Sephiroth blinked and cocked his head to the side.

"That... That was perfect. Scratch that, the confused kitten is a knee-jerk." Genesis crowed as he threw his arm over Sephiroth's shoulders. The elevator door opened and the rest of Squad Echo shuffled in. "Sirs."

Both of them looked him over and practically ignored them.

Sephiroth decided that he'd continue the conversation. "I got to work with Colonel Urial."

"What?" Genesis asked, looking at him in surprise.
"Nice. Jaega was jealous. He's been dying to get Colonel Urial to teach him that." Angeal grinned.

"It's hard. I think I almost did it with the shinai but that's because Colonel Urial's close to 300 lbs with enhancements and he's nearly six foot one. Had I used Masamune, I would've stabbed him through the shoulder and sent him flying." Sephiroth mentally pushed away the visual of sending his superior halfway across the training space. "I don't want to injure unless I have to."

"My Dad taught me that you have to make a stand on what lines you are willing to cross as a sword wielder; it's honorable that you don't want to injure someone if it's not necessary." Angeal praised and Sephiroth nearly melted when Angeal threw his arm over Genesis's. "How bad was Major Tyris up close?"

"It was alright? I mean, I've been covered in Behemoth blood and that was nothing compared to Aeronite. I don't know what it is but the same stuff that turns it silver makes it an event to be endured." He muttered as he leaned into their absent-minded petting of his hair. "Poor Major Tyris was the closest on the transport so I think it was either on purpose or he was nose blind to it after being covered in it for nearly ten hours."

"How do you know it was ten hours?" Gen prodded as he reached behind Sephiroth to braid a chunk of his hair as they got stuck on Floor 34.

"Monster missions tend to take about that much, especially if they're Griffons that were drinking tainted streams." Sephiroth doesn't admit that he knew the scent of blood as it dried because of something that was done to him years ago. "That's the team that hunts monsters that regular people can't handle. I tend to go on them when they can't spare another First."

"Oh, cool."

Squad Echo turned around when they got stuck on Floor 50.

"Strife?" Sephiroth couldn't see their expressions, hidden as they were by the SOLDIER helmets, but he could smell them; anticipation along with... apology?

"Yes sirs."

"We wanted to let you know that O'Conor was decommissioned and demoted to infantry trooper. He's been ordered to guard the Chocobo farm where we get our mounts from and help with cleaning duties. We also wanted to apologize for our behavior. No, this isn't because of Wolf's ass-chewing but it helped it along." The SOLDIERs shuffled their boots but apologized.

Sephiroth mulled it over and replied, "Permission to speak freely, sirs?"

"Granted, Strife," the second answered.

"Thank you for letting me know about O'Conor and apologizing to me with a minimal audience." He said simply. "I accept both of your apologies."

"Thank you, Strife. If you even need transport, we're your guys."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
They stayed in the elevators as Sephiroth got off with his friends on Floor 51.

"Huh. Can we come over to your place?" Genesis asked.

"Yeah. Mom's supervising a mess in the Mess. The staff screwed up the Nibel recipe she used so now she's gotta fix it." Sephiroth answered as he unlocked the door with a swipe of his key-card.

He opened the door and expected Cloud to come barreling into his legs. When no little brother was forthcoming, he kicked off his boots, set Masamune to the side and tip-toed into the living room.

The sight that greeted him made him grab his PHS and snap a quick picture to show Mom later.

Mr. Valentine was sprawled on the L-couch, his gauntlet draped over a sleeping Cloud's back as though protecting him. The crimson cape spilled over the couch's edge and pooled on the floor like it was on the cover of a love novel.

Sephiroth held a gloved finger to his lips and then gestured carefully to his shared room with Cloud. When he closed the door he breathed out and stretched, happy to hear a few cracks.

"That's what happened yesterday after I visited my friends in Sector Five," he confessed. "You can't tell anyone at ShinRa."

"Okay." Angeal nodded.

"Why?" Genesis questioned.

"Because when I went looking for his records with ShinRa, being a former Turk, he didn't exist. He's been gone for a decade and there is absolutely no record of him being here." Sephiroth countered as he paced to the window and back. "That means ShinRa worked to keep it under the rug."

"Oh. That's not good." Angeal grimaced at that. "Perhaps ShinRa is less honorable than they like to present..."

"I'd check your place for listening equipment. It makes this annoying," Sephiroth played the recording of the one he'd found under the sink, "sound. Be careful."

"ShinRa's got some skeletons. Good to keep in mind, I guess?" Genesis murmured in agreement. "We'll keep it quiet."
Sephiroth peered out into the living room and found that Mom was cooing at the sight Mr. Valentine made with Cloud, both of them rubbing away sleep with their knuckles and being surprised to see the other. Cloud just blinked and snuggled back in close, a contented hum coming from him.

"Anika is your son always this cuddly?" Mr. Valentine rumbled, his voice even deeper after rest.

Mom laughed at his question, "He's six. You probably smell like Seph since you used the shower. Speaking of, my wayward son should be here by now... Formation ended after I got through dealing with my rotating staff."

"I wouldn't blame him if he'd need some time to think after the events of last night," Mr. Valentine offered as he absently supported Cloud when he sat up.

"I'll call him. We need to-"

"Hi Mrs. Strife," Genesis piped up as he opened the door wide. "I hope you don't mind but Sephiroth invited us in to help set up his new Griffon feathers. Major Tyris gave him new ones."

"Gen and I need to meet with our mentors tomorrow so we're turning in early, Mrs. Strife." Angeal flashed a sweet smile and barely glanced at Mr. Valentine. "It's nice to see you again."

"That's sweet of you, boys," Mom hummed with a smile of her own. "You're welcome to drop by to scoop up Seph or hang out here."

"We'll keep that in mind, Mrs. Strife." Genesis turned up his charm and waved to a still-sleepy Cloud when his little brother yawned.

They left after scuffing into their boots and taking their weapons.

"I made them promise not to say anything." Sephiroth blurted after the door latched with a heavy click. "I didn't... Is that okay?"

"Seph, honey, they're your friends. Of course it's okay." Mom fussed over him, her hands detangling the braid Genesis left in his hair. "It's okay to have promises and secrets between the three of you. It's just that yours is family-related."

"Oh." Privacy had been practically non-existent with Hojo so to hear that it was expected... Sephiroth hugged his Mom before they all shared the couch.

Mr. Valentine was warm and lifted his gauntleted arm when Sephiroth accidentally pressed against him. Sephiroth looked at Mr. Valentine, at the offer and decided that he was more than comfortable to cuddle with someone who shared the wing. "Veld brought me the tests this morning. A ninety-eight percent match of blood."

"So what does it mean? Am I still under Mom or are you my guardian now?" Sephiroth asked as he looked up into a soft red gaze.

"That's what we wanted to talk about, honey," Mom mentioned. "It's up to you but Vincent and I were talking about giving you a joint last name."

Sephiroth thought about it as the gauntleted hand flexed.

Mr. Valentine—no—his father, had the same habit he did when he was nervous or overwhelmed.
Strife-Valentine? Valentine-Strife? He liked the first one better and it made more sense if it was spoken out loud. Two names in a matter of months since Hojo's death. Sephiroth sighed happily in the back of his throat as he hugged his father close.

"Strife-Valentine." His father made a wounded noise and held Sephiroth close. He hugged back with all of his strength and was met with the same. "I belong to two families now."

"Perhaps this was what my Father meant when he said that it is the Valentine way to atone." His father murmured as he pressed a kiss to Sephiroth's hair. "I could not protect your Mother from the terrible things she did but you are my greatest responsibility. I will endeavor to bring you joy where once there was sorrow."

"You already have," he pointed out.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
The Dangers of a Midgar Zolom

Chapter Summary

There is battle and an injury to Sephiroth; proceed with some caution

Chapter Notes

So, a few things! This chapter has my first skip, there's some injury and I promise there's a reason for it.

Enjoy with caution~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ShinRa was known for its bureaucratic red tape and ridiculous wait times and when it came to name-changing... Well, they found out that it took months. His father's guardianship papers took less time due to the blood test and his former partnership with Veld.

-Three Months Later: Monster Mission; Midgar Zolom; Level 53 Spawn-

Sephiroth ducked as Major Tyris went flying thanks to a well-placed swat of a Midgar Zolom's tail. Major Cleary loosed a Thundara and Colonel Urial flung a Fira III as Major Cleary retreated.

All three retreated as Sephiroth kicked off of the ground, Masamune sweeping behind him.

She flashed three times, glittering in the late sun as she cut through tough grey skin.

He whispered a spell under his breath and set Masamune ablaze, the fire damage causing the Zolom to roar.

It knocked Major Tyris out of battle entirely and lunged for Colonel Urial.

He parried the massive serpent's fangs and bared his own teeth in a snarl as they fought.

Sephiroth felt his Limit Break building and yelled, "I need ten seconds, sir!"

"You got it Strife!" Major Cleary struck again with Thundara II.

As soon as the dust cleared, Sephiroth activated his Limit Break—

The battle seemed to slow to a crawl but the reality was that he was now moving at five times the speed of everything else.

He ripped through the Zolom, the cuts punishing and brutal with the amount of strength behind them.
Sephiroth stabbed it in the throat, spiralling all the way down the massive monster and skidding to a halt as the creature shuddered under his assault.

It made to roar and blood sprayed in almost a hundred directions as it fell apart with a grisly crunch and crack of severed tendons and crushed bones.

He panted as he cleaned Masamune and sheathed her, the carnage in the background being taken care of by the more experienced Firsts.

It was the reason he spotted the second Zolom that raised it's head from a dinner of some other monster, glittering ruby eyes zeroing on the downed Zolom.

There was no way to warn his superiors and no way to dodge the even larger creature without getting hurt.

Sephiroth hitched in a breath and activated his secondary Limit Break, the burst of speed breaking his right leg from the force with which he left the ground, spun and impaled the second monster on a tall spire of rock with a surge of super strength.

He blacked out as he fell, barely hearing Colonel Urial's oath.

"By the Leviathan's spines, what-Strife!"

Sephiroth groaned as he was jostled, a heavy spike of pain making him gasp in a shuddering breath.

"Oh thank Ifrit..." Major Tyris said in relief.

"Wha-t ha-ppened?" He managed before he was gently supported and offered his canteen to drink out of to wet his throat. "Sir?"

"You saved our lives, Strife." Colonel Urial replied, tilting Sephiroth in his lap to see an enormous Zolom impaled on-Oh.

Right. It came back to him in a rush and he remembered why it was like that.

"You activated two Limit Breaks in under twenty minutes and broke your leg because of the strain, kid. I'm surprised you're even awake right now," Major Cleary chided as the team's medic. "It looks like we stumbled onto a nest of Zoloms but thankfully the rest were babies. Nothing'll spawn out here for a while."

"Oh." He looked down and sighed at the sad mess that was his right leg. From the angle... "Is the break at least clean, sir?"

"I am both impressed and disgusted that you guessed that. It should have torqued and splintered but I'm guessing the super speed snapped it before your Limit Break did." Major Cleary admitted with a grimace. "So, Hojo or mission?"

"... Hojo, sir." He sneered flatly at the mention of the man who'd been dead for nearly seven months.

Major Tyris hissed and made the mark of Ifrit as though to ward the mention of the man. Colonel Urial sighed and Major Cleary drew the ward of Odin as if to do the same. They all looked up at the sound of rotary blades and Major Tyris quickly corralled his hair into a single thick braid.
"I'm going with you on the air lift, Strife. The Colonel and Tyris will take the transport back to ShinRa. You'll be alright." Major Cleary reassured as ShinRa Med personnel lifted him onto a stretcher.

"Masamune..." He looked for his blade and didn't see her.

"Colonel has her. He'll get her back to your apartment, I promise."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
He snuffled, inhaling his Chichiue's scent with every breath. Cracking one eye open, he saw familiar red first followed by Chichiue stirring.

"Sephiroth," Chichiue crooned softly. "What were you thinking, koneko...?"

The pain, which had been a dull throbbing, returned slowly as he woke up.

"Wasn't thinking, just did it," Sephiroth muttered as Chichiue cupped his face in sleep-warm hands. "It would've killed them. No time to warn..."

"So you reacted. Oh my son, you take after your Grandmother in more ways than I can tell you," Chichiue's red gaze took in his face and crinkled at the edges as he smiled. "You did well."

They'd talked about names and the power associations held.

Father, associated with Hojo, tended to stick in Sephiroth's throat no matter the tone. Chichiue, on the other hand, was appropriate because Chichiue was half Wutainese and looked it. It also had no awful connections so both took to it easily.

The nurse bustled in and paused at the sight they made, Sephiroth's cheek against his Chichiue's chest. Chichiue barely fit on the standard issue bed but Sephiroth liked the warmth.

"I'll just check your vitals real quick and then I'll go get Dr. Jakobs. TV remote's on the nightstand if you want it." She was quick, thorough and jotted everything down in shorthand.

Dr. Jakobs walked in and picked up his chart with a sigh. She didn't look disapproving, however, so Sephiroth waited patiently to hear her.

"Long story short, you're going to get stuck here at ShinRa. We had to rebreak your leg because it was healing too fast and in the wrong direction." Dr. Jakobs explained as she pointed out the near invisible Seal. "We've isolated your leg with a Seal so that it'll heal slower but it'll heal correctly. It's why it hurts; your body is trying to fix you faster than normal and we're preventing it. You'll be back to field ready in a month but until then, we'd like to keep an eye on you and your leg."

"Thank you, Dr. Jakobs, for explaining." Chichiue softly answered.

"Congrats on the new name, Lt. Strife-Valentine."
"Thanks, ma'am."

He figured out crutches in less than fifteen minutes, humming as he zipped around the Med Ward.

"Lt. Strife-Valentine! Slow down...?" One of the nurses stopped as they noticed Chichiue as his ever-present shadow. "Umm, who are you?"

"Lt. Strife-Valentine's other guardian. I'll make sure he comes to no harm," Chichiue explained quietly as Sephiroth slowed down to snuggle under his Chichiue's arm. "Stop bothering the poor nurses. They get enough grief from other SOLDIERs."

"Sorry, Chichiue, I'm just happy to get out of that bed.» He confessed in Nibel. "I wish they'd change the sheets more often. Sitting in my own smell is awful and twice as bad considering how strong SOLDIER senses are; I'm sure you're catching it too."

Chichiue frowned at that and inhaled discreetly, his nose wrinkling behind the high collar of the cloak he wore. "Excuse me, Nurse Shada? How often are the sheets changed?"

Shada sighed as he checked two more lists and then looked up. "We change the sheets twice a week, more if they're bleeding."

Chichiue hummed softly and said with a low and almost biting tone, "Of your patient base, how many are SOLDIERs complaining about the smell?"

"We cater solely to SOLDIERs, sir, and we get that complaint almost every day." Shada answered back with a bored tone.

"Has it occurred to you or your higher ups that SOLDIERs not only have enhanced strength but also all of their other senses? That they can smell themselves and the past three patients that have slept on those sheets, despite monthly washing?" Chichiue fired back.

Shada looked up, looked at Sephiroth and then back at Chichiue with a mounting horror. "I... had no idea."

"... I'd gathered as much." came the dry response.

Sephiroth wriggled out from under his Chichiue's arm and went back to clicking around the Med Ward, happy to be moving under his own power again.

When he was released to light duty, Sephiroth expected to be mocked for the cast that ended just before his knee.

He shook his head and noted that it was old feelings welling up. They would ask about it if they were brave enough.

What he got... Well, he was pleasantly surprised.

"Did you really activate two Limit Breaks in under twenty minutes?" The first of the group was a Cadet, one that sat with Kunsel often. "Sir?" It was added as though the cadet belatedly realized he was talking to, technically, his superior.

"Yes." He answered as he made his way toward the line at breakfast. "I wouldn't recommend the action."
Angeal grabbed his tray for him and steered him away from the Cadet. Sephiroth was grateful for his friends, as Genesis was known to throw Fira if he got angry enough and he needed the space.

He stuck his leg out underneath the bench and Genesis bracketed it with his own legs to protect it. The crutches were set within easy reach.

"How hard was it to get used to them?" Genesis asked as they dug into their food.

Sephiroth shrugged as he ate, noticing his tray was fuller than normal but not complaining because healing made him hungry. "I mastered it in under fifteen minutes. I'm only like this because my body healed it the wrong way and Dr. Jakobs figured it was better to be safe than sorry."

"You're still growing too, so she's right to be cautious." Angeal agreed. "Didn't you just turn twelve?"

"Yeah." He grinned at that, patting his un-injured leg to show off his new dagger set. "Chichiue got me a new set to accompany Major Henderson's and Mom got me a silver bracer for my Materia. Cloud's card was so cute..."

"He made you a card? Awww." Genesis cooed.

"I set it on the nightstand for a week," Sephiroth proudly announced. "He's getting to be quite the artist. Mom got him some pencils and paper for his birthday."

"What? We missed it?" Angeal looked sad.

Both Genesis and Angeal loved Cloud like he was their brother too; Cloud treated them like they belonged in the family.

"There's always next year and Cloud deserves to be spoiled." He teased lightly. "I hear the troopers and SOLDIERS complain about their siblings but Cloud's wonderful. He's a blanket-hog though."

"He's seven. Of course he is," Angeal chuckled as Cloud's spikes appeared at the edge of the bench. "Hello, Cloud."

"Seph, I'm bored." Cloud pouted as he came around the side to look up at Sephiroth.

"I thought you were drawing. Wanna come up?" He offered and Cloud nodded. Sephiroth lifted Cloud into his lap and absent-mindedly offered his little brother the bite he was about to eat.

"'Fanks." Cloud nipped it off the plastic fork and leaned back against Sephiroth's chest. "Mama said that you're supposed to take it easy today."

"I'm back on duty, Storm Cloud, but it's light. Did you bring your bag?" Sephiroth countered and Cloud held it up for him to see. "Then you can guard my crutches while I do boring stuff. What about Chichiue?"

"Mr. Val-en-tine said that he had 'work,'" Here Cloud made air-quotes and flicked his fingers into the Nibel handsignal 'Took his gun' before he stole Genesis's unused spoon and attacked some of the eggs.

Angeal took out his PHS and Sephiroth barely heard the camera before it was over.

"Hey!"

"It's cute," Genesis turned it so that Sephiroth could see but not take the PHS. "You look like a
looming chikabo sibling."

He stuck his tongue out reflexively, laughing when Cloud followed without much thought.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
He was accosted halfway to his cubicle by Colonel Urial after breakfast. "Light duty doesn't mean paperwork, Strife-Valentine, it means Base Command. Come with... me...?" Urial's golden gaze met Cloud's soft blue and the man raised a brow in response.

"My brother will be joining me, as both of our guardians are occupied today. He'll be busy with his own things, sir." Sephiroth spoke quickly, uncomfortable with letting his little brother out of his sight.

"So long as he doesn't interfere with your ability to learn BaseCom, he's welcome to accompany you." Colonel Urial grumbled.

Cloud looked up at Sephiroth's commander in his usual manner. "Can I hold your hand?"

No one resisted Cloud for very long, although the slow surrender of Urial's large hand when Cloud tugged on it made for a hilarious video.

Sephiroth hid his grin and looked elsewhere when Colonel Urial's glare dared him to say something.

Base Command was a soothing voice that lead them to supply caches and sent other SOLDIERs if a mission got to be too much.

BaseCom on the other end, however, was a SOLDIER Second about ready to tear his hair out.

The sight Colonel Urial made with Sephiroth's little brother was disarming in more than one way. The Second took a deep breath, likely to yell at the other end before he stopped mid-breath. He gave his orders in a terse but cold tone before he hung up.

"Lt. Strife-Valentine reporting for light duty, sir. I'm watching my brother. He'll be quiet. What can I do to make your job easier, sir?" He promptly rattled off as he gave a quick salute before gripping his crutch again.

"Lt. Strife-Valentine, huh? Captain Andrea Milo. Sit, kid, before you fall." Captain Milo rose a dark brow at his name but motioned him into a seat. "If I teach you, it has to be on the job and you've got to be in top form. Can you keep up, Lt.?"

"Yes, sir." Sephiroth answered easily as he corralled Cloud to his side and offered his brother a cushion to sit on from his item pouch. "When do I start, sir?"
"Right now. Get that hair out of the way, you're going to be incredibly busy and it's distracting."
The Captain ordered. Sephiroth pulled it up and back in three short strokes, nabbing a hair-tie from
under his glove and left it a high ponytail.

"This good, sir?" He asked and the Captain nodded.

"Grab a headset, a pen and a piece of-" Cloud handed Sephiroth the headset and a legal pad along
with one of Sephiroth's pens from his item pouch before settling on the cushion; having borrowed
Sephiroth's PHS for music in the exchange, ear buds already in place as he stuck his tongue out in
concentration. "That was..."

"Cloud anticipated you. He does that, sir, much to everyone else's surprise. Am I ready, sir?"
Sephiroth turned on the headset with a flick of the nearly flush switch and adjusted it to his mouth
height.

"Yes, you are, Lt. Strife-Valentine. I'd suggest shortening your name but seeing as you're rumored
to be more stubborn than a nesting Chocobo, I doubt it'd go over well. Am I right?" Capt. Milo
asked point blank.

"It'd go over about as well as that Zolom did, sir, and twice as unappreciated." He admitted with a
shrug. "It's my full name or not at all, sir."

"Fair enough. We've got an incoming call. Pay attention," Capt. Milo reluctantly allowed.

"Yes, sir."

He thrived at BaseCom, relieving a great deal of Capt. Milo's workload during his training day.

He answered in a measured tone, relayed the stats of the Squads of troopers and SOLDIERs and
quickly understood the acronyms being spouted on the other end by the squad communicators.

By the end of his day, Cloud was drooling on his good knee, his left hand was cramping and he'd
drained his water bottle four times.

"How did I do, sir?" He asked as he stretched and groaned at the crack of his joints.

Captain Milo had gone from grudging to genuine respect in the hours they'd spent together.

"You practically ate my load and spat it back out in neat handwriting that I don't have to squint to see. You're more stubborn than a Behemoth and your tongue cuts deeper than any drill sargeant or disappointed superior because of how you deliver it. I wish we had more Thirds like you." came Milo's reply.

"You can thank my teachers then, sir; my parents." Sephiroth hummed as he closed his pen with a
satisfying click and tucked it away. "Mom believes in hard work and Chichiue believes that a job, once started, must be well done. No half-assed efforts, sir."

He refused to thank Hojo, may the man's soul suffer under Bahamut's talons.

"Good to know, Lt. Strife-Valentine. You're dismissed for the day but report back here at 0900." Milo replied absently as he poured over the notes Sephiroth left behind.

Chapter End Notes
Comment, complain, ect.
While I love my readers, I need feedback. I've got two dedicated folks who've, perhaps, kept this series aloft far longer than it should've gone.

Thank you and enjoy it while you can, I guess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey, I think that's the temp BaseCom."

"He yelled at Squad Delta. Delta. Dude, I'd be pissing myself. That's a squad of Firsts..."

"Mini BaseCom prevented us from falling into a nest of Tonberries. Hate those fuckers. I'm thanking the kid, if anything."

Sephiroth tuned most of it out until-

"I heard he killed the Zolom on the spire outside the Mythril Mines," came the awed comment.

"He killed the adults in the Zolom nest, according to the gossip among the Majors... Two adults in under twenty minutes and the only thing that happened was that he broke his leg."

"MP exhaustion too, from what I heard from the trooper nurses. Two Limit Breaks in under twenty minutes drained him pretty heavily. Poor kid's just now back on light duty."

"Heard that Colonel Urial took his sword back and Head Chef Strife looked like she was gonna kill something."

"That's his Mom. Duh," Kunsel cut across the gossip easily and it died down. "Of course she'd be pissed. Her kid got hurt and she wasn't there to help or hold his hand."

Sephiroth made a mental note to seek out Cadet Kunsel and see how his training was progressing.

At BaseCom, since no one could see him, Sephiroth was allowed to do with his hair what he pleased. Most of the time it was up in a messy bun that was pin-cushioned with pens of varying color and size.

Capt. Milo had laughed but realized that the pens were in a specific order and color-coded for each Squad on the field.

Other times he had it up in an elaborate style that he'd braided into it out of sheer boredom when the squads were sleeping due to time-zones or the missions were trooper/SOLDIER combinations that got done quickly.

With his crutches propped up on the desk, he listed out supply drops, monsters to avoid and even got to talk with Angeal when he was out on missions with his mentor, Colonel Jaega.
"So, how is it out in the mud?" He asked, a rare smile stealing over his lips.

"'Gen's killed so many monsters that he's in desperate need of a shower and we're all missing your under-the-breath commentary."' Geal cheerfully reported. "'Other than that, no injuries and we're all getting dinner after I finish reporting in.'"

"Supplies?"

"'Colonel Jaega's got it. He's equipped with several Materia and has enough bracers to last us.'" Angeal reassured. "'We're all good, Seph. Colonel Jaega said he hopes you're recovering well and Major Tyris wishes you luck.'"

"I'll thank them when they get back but could you pass it on for me?" Sephiroth sighed as he rebraided his hair into a different look.

"'Of course, Seph. Over and out.'" Angeal signed off and Sephiroth leaned back in his seat.

He looked over the map and the color-coded spots and worried about his best friends.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
Chapter Notes

It's nice to see that you all love the fic! Here's a little intrigue, cookies and silly Turks!

Enjoy~

If you want the recipe to Mrs. Strife's peanut butter cookies, let me know and I'll put it in the bottom of the notes in this chapter!

ETA: Recipe has been posted!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Angeal hugged him and Genesis hung back, both smelling of field and monster but Sephiroth had missed his friends.

"Gen, don't care that you smell like monster. Come here," he pouted.

Genesis joined the pile and sighed as he snuggled close.

"You smell nice. I thought that Med Ward was awful?" He asked as he looked Sephiroth over, grinning as he saw the elaborate braid.

"Hmm? Yes, but not as bad as before I was in there. Chichiue got them to change the Med Ward policy on sheets. He pointed out that enhancements mean everything, not just strength," Sephiroth replied. "Have they dismissed you yet or did you come to see me before you have to report in?"

"We're dismissed. We came to steal you from BaseCom since you're our best friend and because they sent someone else down to take your place with Capt. Milo." came Angeal's prompt answer.

"Thanks," Sephiroth grabbed his duffel bag full of paperwork, slung it over his shoulder and snagged his crutches to click down the laminated hallway. "Wait, does that mean that they took my advice?"

"There was an official memo and everything. You've been working your butt off but it boils down to not only relieving Capt. Milo but also training up new guys in case Capt. Milo has a mission from higher up." Genesis read off of the Memo. "Plus, there has to be two people at BaseCom because what if one of them gets sick? We had some close calls when Milo couldn't even see the map so they're doubling up now."

"Better redundancy than injured or killed troopers and SOLDIERs," Sephiroth countered steadily. "Accountability is what ShinRa does best so they figured out where to direct funding when it isn't into their executive's pockets."

"You sound like a true leader," A shoe prevented the elevator doors from closing and Director Veld's voice held a mild rebuke as he glided into the glass enclosure. The elevator moved up to Floor 34, where it stopped. "Be careful. ShinRa has too many listening ears to speak so freely. Drive and focus is good, ambition is treason."
"I know how to fix that," Sephiroth countered quietly, inhaling sickness with each passing breath from Veld. "I'm sure you know where to go. Your Turks are not as subtle as they think and I would suggest forbidding scents. I recognized three by smell alone."

"You think yourself clever," came the retort.

"Why hide what cannot be hidden? They know better than to gossip to the ones who keep them in chains." He spoke calmly but his heart was pounding in his chest.

"I see your father has taught you much."

"Hmm." Sephiroth dryly offered. "I'd get off soon if I were you."

"And why is that?"

"My Chichiue may be a Turk, Director, but it's the dragon you need to take heed of," he finished as he clicked out of the elevator with his crutches. Angeal and Genesis watched them wordlessly as they looked from Sephiroth to Veld and back again. "It's too bad you can't join us, she's making peanut butter."

At the mention of the Turk-favored cookies as well as Veld's favorite, Veld paled. "You wouldn't!"

"I would and I'd point them in your direction, sir." The smile that grew on his face was the last thing Veld saw as the elevator doors closed.

"Did... Did you just threaten the Director of the Turks with cookies?" Angeal managed incredulously.

"I did."

A week before Sephiroth was due to have his cast and the Seal removed, Veld stopped smelling like he'd been hovering at the edge of death.

Sephiroth could be subtle, much to Director Veld's chagrin, when he slipped the man a packet of cookies and a get well card. They were even peanut butter.

Veld scowled at him for the rest of the week but couldn't conceal the crumbs of some very familiar cookies on the edge of his blue jacket.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.

Peanut Butter Cookie Recipe

Ingredients:

1 1/4 cups of all purpose flour
1/2 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp baking soda
1/4 tsp salt
1/2 cup of butter*
3/4 cup peanut butter
1/2 cup white sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 egg
1/2 tsp vanilla extract (optional)

Preheat oven to 350 F/176 C.

*Butter has to be room temperature

1. Collect all ingredients.

2. Place flour, baking soda, baking powder and salt into a medium bowl and mix with a fork; set aside.

3. Place white sugar, brown sugar, butter and peanut butter into either an electric mixer or a bowl wide enough to use a hand mixer. Cream the mixture together. Add in the egg and vanilla extract (optional) and mix again until incorporated.

4. Slowly add dry ingredients to the wet and mix until dough is formed.

5. Form into a ball, leave in the bowl, cover bowl with foil or Saran Wrap and chill of one hour.

6. Scoop portions with a table spoon and roll into balls placed evenly apart on a baking pan with wax or parchment paper laid down.

7. Bake 8 to 10 minutes.

8. Enjoy~
Masamune vs Gungir

Chapter Summary

Mock battle and accidental injury; read with some caution

Chapter Notes

I was debating with posting this since its the second chapter with injury but I wanted to show how Sephiroth's grown since Vincent's been with him.

Speaking of Vincent! You can now read the beginning of his journey from Nibelheim to Midgar in The Expedition of V. Valentine; Semi-Retired Turk.

Enjoy with caution~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Med Ward smelled so much better as he clicked through the door held open by Chichiue and Mom.

He waited for them to join him and they sat in the waiting area for only a few moments.

"Lt. Strife-Valentine? Ah, here already then. Come with me please." The nurse led them into a room and closed the door after reviewing the paperwork on the clipboard in her hands.

Dr. Jakobs walked in and cast a Libra to see through his cast. "Looks like you're all healed up, Lt. Strife-Valentine. I'm going to remove the Seal. It's going to hurt and I apologize for the way your body is about to react."

Sephiroth immediately reached out and Chichiue caught his hands as he braced himself. Mom settled next to him and wrapped herself around his shoulders in support.

Dr. Jakobs released the Seal and Sephiroth whimpered as his body shuddered and then, with three awful-sounding cracks, grew a few inches. His grip on Chichiue's hands slackened as he passed out.

"Oh. Well, I didn't think his body would do that."

Having Masamune back in his left hand and ready to go was a relief to Sephiroth. He'd missed her quite a bit and gave a few practice swings in the empty gym to hear her sing again. Sephiroth relished in his new height, having grown just tall enough to reach the upper cabinets in the family apartment.

He went through the kata, surprised that they were a little easier and his body moved quicker on reaction. When he sought out Henderson, the man only grinned.
"Seems like your stint with the crutches allowed you to hone the way you wanted your body to go, Strife-Valentine. It's not uncommon for injured SOLDIERs to come back with better reflexes and quicker reaction times. Do you want a friendly spar?" Major Henderson asked as he unsheathed his Ifrit-blessed sword, Gungir.

Sephiroth grinned and saluted with Masamune. "Ready when you are, sir."

His world narrowed onto Gungir's edge and on Henderson.

Thrust, parry, dodge, left, right, duck, block, opening!

Sephiroth pressed his advantage and cut Henderson, driving him back until Gungir lit up.

The heat of the blade made him jump back and then he had an idea.

He retreated before Gungir, only fending off the flaming sword when necessary, feinting to the left very briefly before kicking off the ground and landing with Masamune shearing away some of the Major's unshaven scruff at his neck.

Henderson's pulse pounded and fluttered against the steel of Masamune but the man hadn't yielded yet.

Sephiroth flicked the sword away and lashed out as he left Henderson's long reach with Gungir.

Henderson grunted in pain and Sephiroth smelled the blood coating his sword.

"Sir? I'm-Ah!" Major Henderson, of all things, was smiling. He was taking Sephiroth seriously as an opponent now instead of toying with him.

He darted to the side and then, not up as the Major had anticipated, but from the opposite side in a rush of silver that left sparks flying on the mats.

Sephiroth cocked his head to the side and considered the Major as he would a mission, noting where he favored and then zeroing in on the wound he'd already caused.

He sheathed Masamune and dodged each of the oncoming attacks like they were Griffon claws bent on catching him.

With a clever flick of his wrist and stepping so that his entire bodyweight landed where he needed it to, he slammed the butt of Masamune into the already healing cut.

Major Henderson also didn't expect that two daggers would follow him to the ground, pinning him for Masamune to be held just close enough to his throat.

"Do you yield, Major Henderson?" He asked as he held the cauterized cut that had started to bleed again with his right hand while still wielding Masamune in his left.

Henderson nodded enthusiastically, "After that? I definitely do, Strife-Valentine."

Sephiroth cleaned Masamune of blood, sheathed her, pulled up his two daggers and sheathed those before he tugged Major Henderson off of the floor.

"Who have you been training with? Those daggers are nothing-A Turk?" Henderson frowned and Sephiroth huffed out a laugh.

"My Chichiue."
"Huh?"

"You've been on a long mission, sir. My new guardian, the one I share my name with, he's my father. He's also a recently-reinstated Turk and chose to show me some of their techniques."

Sephiroth explained as he reached for his bracer and his Cure Materia. "I'm sorry I injured you, sir."

"Oh." Henderson's brow furrowed and he waved away the Cure Sephiroth offered. "Could you maybe ask him to teach me? I didn't even see those daggers."

"That's all me, sir." He confessed as he finger-combed his hair back into order. "I hold back a lot but I can let loose against Firsts and my Chichiue. It's nice."

"I'm probably going to regret this but I want you to throw my dagger at the wall behind me and I want you to... 'let loose.'" Henderson offered his dagger handle first and pointed to a spot.

Sephiroth absentmindedly cast a Libra to make sure he didn't hit any vital wires.

He flipped the blade a few times to find it's center of weight and simply stopped holding back.

The impact of the dagger left a dent in the wall and then a shockwave tore it out with a shudder of the training hall. Massive cracks appeared along the original impact site and the entire wall groaned as it barely held together.

"Blizzara III!" He cast it and whined at the dent in his MP as it sharply drained to shore up the cracks with ice flooding along them.

"... Okay, that was entirely my fault. Holy Ifrit..." Henderson wheezed before he collapsed.

"Sir!" Sephiroth caught Henderson and caught a heavier scent of blood than he expected. He tucked Masamune into his item pouch, strapped Gungir to his hip and lifted Major Henderson with a grunt.

The man was dead weight at over 300lbs of muscle and no way in which to move him without SOLDIER strength or magic.

This was going to be a long journey...

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
He staggered into Med Ward and gently laid Major Henderson down before he, very calmly he thought, walked up to the desk and murmured, "Major Henderson got hit by Masamune. I don't suppose Med Ward's equipped to handle that sort of thing?"

The nurse on duty practically jumped up and started yelling orders in abbreviations that Sephiroth wished he didn't know.

"Can you carry him to a gurney?" The nurse whipped around and asked him.

"Yes." Sephiroth was beyond exhausted but lifted the Major onto a gurney and lowered him with shaking arms. He somehow found a seat and fell into it, the blood on his hands and arms drying now that they were no longer near the source.

He stared at his hands, ringing in his ears until muffled sound crashed against his ears before it popped.

"Someone go get a washcloth for the kid, ask his name."

"That's Lt. Strife-Valentine. He was in here a little less than two weeks ago." Shada answered the softer voice.

"Go get a washcloth." The order was practically barked but hands swam into view that cleaned the blood off of his arms with a warm, damp cloth. "Hello, Lt. Strife-Valentine. I'm Head Nurse Kunsel. Can you tell me what happened?"

"We were... sparring. I was testing my limits after my growth spurt and... Masamune snuck past his guard and a block and I hurt him." The story tumbled out in a rush before he whispered, "Masamune can cut through ShinRa steel so what can she do to a SOLDIER?"

Nurse Kunsel made an understanding noise and asked, "Can I see the blade?"
"This is Gungir. It's Major Henderson's. I put Masamune away because I couldn't carry her and him at the same time." Sephiroth reached into his item pouch and pulled her out in three sharp tugs. "This is Masamune." He unsheathed the blade a little and was about to test the blade against his own hand when Nurse Kunsu dropped a piece of paper against the sharp edge.

"Ah. Well, the good news is that Major Henderson is fine. He got stitched right up and he's asking for you in his room." She relayed softly.

"Oh."

Major Henderson was propped up on a pile of pillows and wrapped in clean white bandages.

"Strife-Valentine, come here. I can practically smell your guilt," Henderson waved him over. "I'm fine. I initiated the bout and I know how sharp your blade is; I've seen it cut through a shit-ton of monsters. Nah, it was that trick with the butt of your sword that did it. It's a good teaching moment. It taught me to stop underestimating you because your rank is technically still SOLDIER Third Class but your strength is beyond a SOLDIER First Class."

"I..." He glanced down at his hands, clean but still smelling faintly of blood.

"Listen, there isn't always going to be peace. You need to learn how to hurt someone and not feel guilt for every wound you cause, kid." Major Henderson sighed as he reached for Sephiroth's hand.

Henderson held it, brushed the sword calluses and tapped the center, causing his hand to reflexively curl. "You've got years yet, Strife-Valentine, but I'm not surprised in the least with the way your training's going."

"I never intended to hurt you at all, sir. It was a friendly match of skills." Sephiroth murmured as he flexed his hand but didn't pull away. "I regret that I hurt someone that chose not to hurt me when he trained me years ago. It's only recently that you've begun to hit harder and be harsher during my assessments, sir."

"I know. I'd rather have you still be a kid but..."

"ShinRa's SOLDIERs must be prepared for everything. Especially the situations that BaseCom can't wiggle you out of with some clever tactic." He huffed softly. "I need my hand back, sir. I need to let-"

"I already called your Chichiue and ShinRa maintenance. A Major's work is never done."

Henderson chuckled as he released Sephiroth's hand. "I'll be back to my old self soon enough. Go home, Strife-Valentine, after you get-Huh."

Sephiroth gave a faint smile at Major Henderson's surprise. The dried blood was the only evidence he'd been struck by Gungir at all.

"Ah, did you want her back, sir?" Sephiroth moved to unbuckle the sword when Henderson stopped him with a raised hand. "Sir?"

"You hold onto her for now. Med Ward won't allow me to keep her."

Right. They hadn't let him keep Masamune either.

"I'll keep her safe, sir."

"Oh! You better get a move on if you don't want to be late for formation, Strife-Valentine."
"Chichiue's got that covered, sir. No worries."

Chichiue deposited him into the correct spot after running at nearly top speed, startling everyone but Angeal and Genesis.

"What was-"

"It's better that you don't ask. Major Wolf's about to start formation." Sephiroth answered his fellow Third.

"ATTENTION!"

All of the SOLDIERs stood at attention as Sephiroth spotted an adult who barely meets the definition. The SOLDIERs were too well mannered to ask but the man had golden blond hair and President ShinRa's cold blue-grey eyes.

Sephiroth made a mental note but was beaten to it by the guide approaching them after formation was dismissed. "I was told you three are... special cases. Could you perhaps show Mr. Deusericus around a little and your weapons?"

"Of course, ma'am." 'Geal smiled and unsheathed his blade that he swore was similar to the 'Buster' both he and Gen talked about. "My name's Angeal Hewley."

Sephiroth kept Gungir sheathed and summoned Masamune to his grip. Only recently had the ability made itself known but it was easier than walking around with his beloved blade and she always appeared, no matter where he'd placed her.

She disappeared when Gen knelt and offered his own sword.

"Genesis Rhapsodos."

"Lt. Strife-Valentine, a word?" Major Wolf pulled him to the side and gestured to Gungir.

"Major Henderson and I had a friendly spar that got him injured, sir. The... back wall of the training facility may have to be replaced before my Blizzara III stops holding it up. He's letting me hold her while he's in Med Ward, sir." Sephiroth gave a short summary of the events that had occurred.

"Makes sense; they don't allow weaponry in there anymore. He'll retrieve it when he gets better, of course. You look odd with a sword that fits your height a little more, Strife-Valentine." Major Wolf ribbed gently.

"Very funny sir." He dead-panned before he let a small grin steal over his expression. "I suppose the Masamune is... compensation?"

"You just made a joke." Wolf blinked at that, which sent Sephiroth into laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
Urban Development

Chapter Notes

I giggled when I wrote this chapter. Puberty has struck the Strife-Valentine household, but one member in particular hates it.

Enjoy~

Since he broke the wall, the construction crews as well as ShinRa R&D had him test materials with a knife throw.

Scarlet looked overjoyed to get her glittery red nails on him.

"You're the pinnacle of human strength. Who better to test out my new materials?" She purred.

It was actually Urban Development, an incredibly small department even by ShinRa standards, that managed to create a substance that—at first glance—looked like fabric but hardened to the consistency of a wall and could be repaired with more of the same.

"What's it called?" He asked as he pulled his knife out of the brittle mess it had become.

The Director of UD was a quiet, idealistic man named Reeve Tuetsi. "The temporary name on the file, sir, is carbon fiber."

"Relatively cheap to make, even by ShinRa standards; it'll hold up to the strength of the SOLDIER ranks." He gave his blunt assessment.

"But not you," Tuetsi remarked carefully. "Sir."

"I may be all of twelve, Director, but I am the strongest SOLDIER." Sephiroth chuckled at the way the Director's jaw dropped. "If you think you can make something that will stand up to my strength... Go for it."

-Seven Months Later-

Sephiroth settled back into ShinRa life easily enough, breezing through his classes, getting a better grasp on Wutainese and slowly mastering both dialects.

He was oiling Masamune when his PHS chirruped with a notification.

From: Unknown Number

ShinRa has entered negotiations with the Island Nation of Wutai. If you've got a tutor for the language, redouble your efforts. If you don't, well, I suggest you go find one.

Regards,
Major Wolf

Sephiroth rose a brow at the need for secrecy but showed his Chichiue the message when he got back home.

Chichiue told him about hunting while finding his way to Sephiroth and how some of his hunter friends had worried so on top of rare Turk missions, he went hunting with his friends for monster parts.

"That is... telling. Wolf doesn't want the negotiation to fall through but likely ShinRa demands on the great nation of Wutai will meet with some rather serious opposition. It's better to be prepared for fall-out than to not know and not brace for impact." Chichiue sighed as he wrapped his arm around Sephiroth.

He still leaned into the touch and likely always would.

Sephiroth had been mandated to attend sessions with a ShinRa psychologist and the woman had been frank; Sephiroth was touch-starved and had been for most of his childhood.

That he was still seeking out contact, not avoiding it, spoke highly of Mom's insistence that he belong to her sooner rather than later.

Soaking in the warmth the cloak always seemed to provide, Sephiroth listened as his Chichiue purred. It was an unconscious reaction, one that—should Sephiroth point it out—would likely cease if Chichiue knew about it. He hummed softly as he finished oiling and cleaning his sword and pushed her away to that place he could call her from.

"What was that?"

"Hmm? Oh. I can pull Masamune from somewhere. It showed up months ago. Ms. Ifalna said its harmless because all magic users can do it. They just haven't found the right weapon or they aren't as close to it as they should be for that kind of technique. I've had Masamune since I was five and she has always been there, even when people weren't." Sephiroth snuggled close as he said it, trying not to talk too much. His voice was starting to crack and he didn't like it. "I-"

He snarled when it came out a squeak.

Chichiue clicked his tongue and murmured, "Valentines tend to have the worst cracking because our voices are deeper, at least the men. Valentine women are less inclined to such foolishness and mature easier."

"So, when I'm done," Sephiroth's voice cracked into a deeper register before reverting, "I won't have to suffer anymore?"

"It'll settle when you're fifteen or sixteen. You're just barely reaching thirteen."

Two years?! Oh, the misery...

"I hate puberty." He grumbled.

"Everyone goes through it. Fear not, I went through it as well and I'll commiserate with you." Chichiue reminded him.

Chapter End Notes
Comment, complain, etc.
Thankfully, he was joined in his misery by his best friends, even though they were two years his senior.

Angeal shot up twice in half as many months, towering over both Genesis and Sephiroth. He was all knees and elbows, though the constant training SOLDIER put them through straightened out any awkwardness within a few weeks.

Genesis grew too but at a much slower, steadier pace.

Before he knew it, Sephiroth was chest-height on both of his friends.

He realized that it was because they were older but he felt... left out.

Angeal, both empathetic and ever sensitive to his moods, picked up on it.

"Seph, you'll catch up. What'd your Dad say?"

"That Valentines settle late," he sighed. "Chichiue didn't grow much until the summer when he turned sixteen. Shot up like a weed," here he squeaked but solemnly ignored it to continue talking, "and filled out with farm work."

"See? You'll get there. At least Mako counters acne?" Angeal spoke of another dreaded rite of passage. "It's the one good thing about a hyper-active immune system."

"Yeah." Sephiroth wasn't the best at talks but this was causing tension in their friendship. "Umm... I noticed you and Gen are talking less."

"We, umm, we kissed. And I really... Bahamut it sounds stupid when I say it out loud... I liked it. It was a little dry and awkward but it was Gen and it felt nice." 'Geal blurted out, blushing as he buried his face in his hands.

Oh.

So that's what that was, Sephiroth mulled as he tried to think of a way to fix it.

"Did Gen like it? Have you asked him?" He pressed gently.

"... No, no I haven't had the guts to go and ask him." Angeal confessed quietly.

"Can I ask him? In your place, I mean." The movies Mom liked had often used one friend to tell another.
He didn't know how accurate they were but it worked out alright in the movie.

"That's actually not a bad idea?" 'Geal pulled his hands away from his face with hope in his voice. "If you think you're up for it."

"Of course I am. I'm your friend and Genesis's, no matter how many times he insists we're rivals." Sephiroth huffed. "I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't."

"Alright, he should be on the roof. We may not be talking but I still know Gen better than anybody else." Angeal sighed, one hand propping up his chin.

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Genesis was on the roof and he barked, "Go away, Angeal."

"You must be getting soft if you're mistaking my steps for his," Sephiroth countered slyly.

"Seph! I'm sorry... I'm so out of it these days. I almost burned myself on a Fira yesterday." Gen slid down the outer wall of the ShinRa roof and let his head fall back. "I feel stupid."

"Why aren't you talking to 'Geal?"

"He-We... I think I had my first kiss with my best friend." Genesis admitted sheepishly. "It wasn't planned or anything. I just... I was curious."

"And? Is that it?"

"Ang hates my guts now!" Genesis exploded, his eyes glowing brighter in his anger and the sharp waft of pain made Sephiroth wince.

"No he doesn't." He scoffed. "He's mooning over it. He liked it. He was scared that you didn't like him anymore."

"What?" Gen's temper deflated instantly at Sephiroth's blunt words. "Oh. I guess we've been distant, huh? I'm sorry Seph."

Sephiroth hugged Genesis when he offered one.

"You're my friends. I want you to be happy."

"So you're not mad at us? Not even a little?"

"Mm-mm." he disagreed. "Kisses are nice but I don't see the appeal. Mom gives nice ones and Cloud always kisses my cheek but... Eh."

He felt Genesis laughing. "I guess you wouldn't, not with the amount you get at home."

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Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
Sephiroth remained the shortest SOLDIER Third and the newly inducted Thirds thought they could poke fun at him.

"Look, he's so tiny..."

"He can't even reach the shinai on the top shelf..."

"Uh, guys, he's still our superior. He can also hand you your ass on a platter if he wanted. He's thirteen, not stupid." Kunsel argued, the SOLDIER helmet not hiding the frown of disapproval on his face.


"Oh, umm..."

"Go get a broadsword." Sephiroth barked, summoning Masamune from her spot and unsheathing her with the same move. If they wanted shock and awe, well—they'd get it.

Gallagher saluted with the blade and Sephiroth slid under the guard and slapped the blade from his hands with the flat of Masamune. "Pick it up. We're done when you can no longer defend yourself."

"Yessir!"

He didn't use his full strength but it was clear Gallagher needed more training.

"You're weak on your left side and you feint too often. Predictable patterns mean you can be killed by a monster or a person."

He tore through the new Thirds like a Grand Horn went through a nest of Harpies.

Only Kunsel and Johnson made a significant impression.

"Kunsel, your footwork needs practice but you handle yourself well. Johnson, find a bigger blade. The broadsword is too short for someone with your reach. Everyone else, go find yourself someone you can work with that suits your style. You're dismissed." Sephiroth thanked Shiva that his voice hasn't cracked once during the session.

"I know that." Sephiroth found that his voice only cracked around those he trusted, which were very few in ShinRa. "It's a teaching moment, as Major Henderson would say; don't underestimate your opponent because they're smaller than you. Enough small enemies and they'll cut you down and leave you drained of both health and magic. Mandragora gatherings for one, Mu packs for two and both Tonberries and Touch-Mes are more trouble than they look like at first glance."

"Right. Hey, sir, you think you could teach me that dagger thing?" Kunsel asked in earnest, showing a pair of well-honed daggers strapped to his leg.

"Of course, Lt. Kunsel." Sephiroth unsheathed his own set and grinned as Kunsel fumbled with his knives for the first few times.

They flipped them and then went into possible defensive stances.

"Lt. Kunsel, you aren't going to see or feel a knife attack until you've been stabbed. Watch for a hand like this," he showed the grip and made a move. "or listen for it. Most civilians can't hear a blade but we can and I want you use it to your advantage."

He lunged and Kunsel barely blocked his forearm with a hasty push.

"Good. Again."

Sephiroth showed him twists that would put more body-weight and SOLDIER strength behind the dagger throws but kept in mind that he's much stronger than Kunsel at the moment.

By the time training was done, Kunsel could block, defend and throw with his daggers.

Colonel Urial finally managed the 'bogus' mission, both of them traveling to the Chocobo stables to pick out a mount.

Urial got a beautiful golden Chocobo that warked at him sweetly.

Sephiroth knew that Chobobos were intellegent and some part of him was bracing for disappointment because of what was in the J-shot.

He expected them to avoid him.

To his surprise, the adults crowded him. Sephiroth giggled as they nosed at his hair and his face, soft kwehs and warks following him as he entered the stable to look to look for a solid mount.

The loose adults paused at the doors and waited as he looked.

The stabled Chocobos nosed at him too but were more polite. In the back, he spotted a large plume of blue-black and practically ran to it.

The black Chocobo warked loudly but cocked its head instead of leaning down for a pet.

"Aww, son, ya don't want-" Sephiroth paused in his reach up to look at Chocobo Bill. "That's Jax. He used ta be a racing Choco b'fore they all wanted goldens. No one's ridden him in years except fer me."

"Jax, huh?" Green met soft brown and Sephiroth nodded. "I'd like to ride him, if that's not too much trouble."

"Alright," Chocobo Bill saddled and bridled Jax and lead him out of the massive box stall. "C'n ya
get up on him?"

Sephiroth gauged the distance and nodded.

He backed up, ran a little and used his momentum to get into the saddle, his feet taking the brunt of his weight on the stirrups. Jax warked and trotted out to meet Colonel Urial's golden when Sephiroth nudged him with his knees.

"You had to pick the big one, Strife-Valentine." Colonel Urial teased.

"It... I couldn't leave him in the stable, sir." He didn't have to explain, not really, but Urial's expression pinched briefly before smoothing out again.

"Of course. What's his name?" Urial asked as they set out at a light trot across the grasslands to Kalm.

"Jax, sir."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, etc.
They ran into a few Kalm Fangs and Sephiroth found out what mounted combat was like when Jax kicked a Fang a good distance before it jumped at him. Sephiroth summoned Masamune and put his training to good use, flicking his blade sharply to remove the blood and offal.

"Not bad," Urial complimented as he reined in his wild-eyed golden. "He'd be a good war mount, that one."

"You think so, sir?" Sephiroth cleaned most of the blood off of Masamune but kept her unsheathed. Jax shuffled but slackened one leg when there wasn't any danger.

"I do, actually. Our trouble pack is a little further ahead, Strife-Valentine, but keep that out. There are other things out here that think Chocobos make for a good meal." The Colonel admitted easily.

Sephiroth cut through an entire herd of Elfadunks, two other packs of Kalm Fangs and a Levikron before they hit the Fang pack they'd been sent out for in the first place.

These were larger, almost two times the size of a regular Fang and hyper-aggressive to boot.

They divided the Fang pack and destroyed every last one.

"Are we heading back, sir?" Sephiroth asked, suddenly wishing he wasn't quite as efficient as a monster killer. He wanted to ride Jax some more and perhaps spend the night outside of the green smog of Midgar.

Sephiroth was also aware that it was childish and unwarranted of a SOLDIER Third in ShinRa's army.

"No," Colonel Urial's simple statement made Sephiroth blink. "I figured it was time to introduce you to the great outdoors. We're sleeping in a Tent that Supply packed us, we're hunting for our dinner and then I'm going to let you make your way back to Midgar after we drop off the Chocobos."
"Sir?"

"Welcome to Survival 101, Strife-Valentine."

Oh good. He'd get to use all of Chichiue's hunting tricks and Mom's lessons in skinning just about anything with a sharp enough knife.

He grinned and settled on Jax's back. "That sounds wonderful, sir."

---Three Days Later---

Sephiroth, most of his hair pulled back in a fishtail braid, made it to the edge of Midgar and went straight for Sector Six's Wall Market.

He bargained fiercely for the monster parts he'd managed to get, his teeth bared in a sharp, happy grin when the hunters realized that they weren't talking to a civilian.

"Who taught you this?" The woman was examining the Kalm Fang skin with the fur still attached.

"My Mom," he admitted proudly.

"And the haggling?"

"A friend."

"What about the hunting?"

Sephiroth vanished into the crowd at that, smiling all the way to the church in Sector Five.

He whistled an old tune and got it in reply, meaning that Ms. Ifalna was in the church that day.

"Ms. Ifalna, I brought you gifts~" Sephiroth hummed as he spotted her tending the flowers with gloves on her hands and her hands dug deep into the loamy earth of the church floor.

"You did? You were outside of Midgar for quite a while." She murmured as she hugged him to her.

"What did you bring me?"

"I brought you and Aerith ribbons and Kalm plants and I brought a staff... In case you want to learn to defend yourselves from Hedgehog Pies and stuff." Sephiroth said excitedly because, despite being dirty and tired, he was rejuvenated by the air outside of the city. He pulled away from her slightly to see if she was alright with him taking a pre-emptive action.

"I'm not upset at you for taking initiative, koneko. As a matter of fact... I was going to ask if you knew an instructor," Ifalna shook her head and her hair spilled over her collarbone in rich brown waves. "You enjoyed that 'mission' and the survival dump."

"I really did," Sephiroth hummed as he pillowed his head on her supportive shoulder. "No wonder Chichiue likes going hunting."

"How were the Chocobos?" She prodded as she reached around him to finish digging.

"They liked me." He whispered happily. "... I really liked Jax."

"You were afraid they'd sense what was in those terrible shots. No, you're a good boy and
Chocobos can sense that. I promise Jax likes you just as much, if not more so for showing no fear of him.” Ifalna chuckled softly.

"He was like me... Built and bred for one thing and then tossed aside when he didn't match the standard." Sephiroth murmured as he inhaled the scent of earth and flowers that Ifalna always carried with her.

"Oh, Sephiroth..." Ifalna stopped digging and held him close. "You're still expecting this to be a dream, that the last ten months were an illusion and that you're still in Hojo's grip. That you're floating in a Mako tank and this has been the best thing to happen to you in years."

Sephiroth stiffened and then sniffled. "What if it is? I... There's a family who loves me for me, not because I'm the pinnacle of a Program full of human weapons. I have you back, I've met so many people who enjoy my company... Would it be alright if I just... I keep turning a corner and expecting **Him** to order me down to the labs so that he can tear me apart and hurt me. **What is wrong with me?**"

"There is nothing wrong with you, sweetheart. You're a child who went through a terrible experience and you keep waiting for the other boot to drop because it has always done so." Ms. Ifalna crooned as Sephiroth sniffled against her apron. "I promise that while I can't always be here for you, myself, your Mom and your Chichiue will keep the weight of the world off of your shoulders for as long as we can. This isn't a dream, Sephiroth. It's as real as you and me."

He inhaled a shuddering breath and wiped the snot away from his nose. "Can I help you plant flowers?"

"Always."

Ifalna handed him a pair of gardening gloves and set him to work digging troughs for the new Kalm plants. For once, his strength was good because it helped him dig deep enough for the roots to soak up natural groundwater.

For once, he could forget what it meant to be a weapon.

When they sat back from their work, the church glowed softly in the light of the setting sun, what little shone down below the plate.

Sephiroth felt accomplished as he leaned against Ifalna.

"Ms. Ifalna?"

"Mm."

"Do you want me to carry you home?"

"That would be wonderful. Elmyra got me here but I don't want to ask her to come back. I know I'm heavier than I look. She has enough going on with watching Aerith and keeping her job in Sector Six..." Ifalna sighed.

"You helped Veld." He stated softly, reaching back to lace their fingers together.

"I did. I also mentioned he might find his daughter with an anti-ShinRa organization." She chuckled quietly. "I think I managed to undo almost all of your healing."
"I can come down in a week. We'll do a few hour long sessions," Sephiroth countered. "We'll start with your spine instead of your legs, hmm?"

"So you noticed."

"He always went for the nerves on you. With me... He didn't want to damage me, so it was muscles and needles and... He was worse to you." He whispered. "Are you ready?"

"Help me pack up my tools?" She requested lightly.

"Of course."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.

I have a Tumblr (bamfcoyotetango) if you want to come say hello or talk about meta!
The growth spurt he'd had helped him carry Ifalna without her feet dragging on the ground. Sephiroth settled her on the couch, arranging her legs so that they sat comfortably.

Aerith bounced down the stairs and wrinkled her nose at the smell he was giving off.

"Hello, little flower." He smiled sweetly at her but knew he'd have to take a shower soon.

"Hello Seph~" She sang as she placed her hand on her Mom's knee. Her hand glowed faintly.

"You're helping her with other things, right?"

"Right. I have to go but I'll be down here with Cloud and my Mom and-"

"Mr. Red!" She chirruped with a grin.

"Mr. Red?"

"He comes down to the church sometimes. He's got on a red blanket. It's warm." Aerith explained.

Sephiroth laughed a little. "That's my Chichiue and he's wearing a cloak. It gives off the best warmth, huh?"

"Mm-hmm!" Aerith nodded and waved as he left, gathering his boots from the doorway out of sheer habit.

Sephiroth swiped his key card and trudged into the elevator, ignoring the troopers who stayed to one side of the elevator.

He didn't blame them, not with the way he looked; blood, sticks and dirt were clinging to his hair and his uniform, what precious little wasn't dirty, wasn't in the best of shape.

"Umm, sir?" One of the troopers questioned.

"Yes trooper," Sephiroth responded automatically, his gaze flicking to the trooper before facing the elevator again.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

"Thank you for getting that Aeronite. My family lived really close to it and I was afraid they were
going to get hurt before the monster squad arrived." The trooper murmured.

"You're welcome, Trooper...?"

"Ah, Sgt. Porteous, sir."

"You're welcome then, Sgt. Porteous."

As he stepped off on Floor 22, the squad of troopers all converged on their Sgt.

"Dude, that was super brave?!"

"I think he killed that Zolom in the marshes..."

"He saved my parent's lives. I'm grateful."

By the time he made it home, Sephiroth was well and truly exhausted.

He kicked off his boots, shed most of his clothes in the laundry room and briefly dug around for bed clothes before he undid his braid in the shower.

Sephiroth was still squeezing water out of his hair when he heard a small knock.

«Seph? Are you back?» Cloud asked, yawning right after he said it.

«Yeah, I'm home. Come on in.» He hummed.

The one thing the grasslands didn't have was his family and he'd missed them more than he realized.

He twisted his hair for one last squeeze and then wrapped in a towel, twisting it so that his hair was out of the way. Sephiroth dressed in a shirt and boxers before Cloud opened the door.

Cloud rubbed at his eyes and lifted his arms, Sephiroth gathering his brother close as he limped into the kitchen for an easy snack. «Mom got cheese wheels 'n meats for when you came back. I missed you.»

«I missed you too, Cloud.» He yawned as he one-handedly stuffed his face with food and pillowed his cheek against Cloud's soft hair. «Mmm, you ready to go back to sleep?»

«Yeah.»

He put away what he didn't eat, scribbled out on the family whiteboard that he was home and fell asleep in bed right after Cloud tucked his head under Sephiroth's chin.
Chapter Notes

I've been under the weather for a bit but here's a new chapter! Seph takes his duties as older brother very seriously.

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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-Two Months Later-

Cloud's tongue stuck out as he painstakingly wrote in pen, a small furrow between his eyebrows as he concentrated.

Sephiroth read over his shoulder and hid his smile behind his hand.

Dear Zack,

My name is Cloud. Mr. Valentine asked if I wanted to have a friend from the jungle, so here is my letter asking you to be my friend.

I live in Midgar. I used to live in Nibelheim but we left.

I have an older brother. His name is

Cloud looked up at him and then back at the scrap of letter paper that had his name misspelled in increasingly hilarious and creative ways.

Sefirooth

Sepherith

Siffiroth

Sephiroth

"It's S-E-P-H-I-R-O-T-H. Just use my nickname which is made up of the first four letters, Cloud." He spelled out as he finished one pile of his paperwork.

"Seph, you should write him too." Cloud suggested as he carefully wrote Sephiroth's name.

"Why? I have 'Geal and Gen."

"Mr. Valentine said that Zack isn't old enough for kissing and he wants to be a hero." Cloud pointed out. "You know where Gongaga is, right?"

"It's like breathing in water over there and Touch-Me frogs are gross when they die... But yeah, I know where it is." He admitted as he pillowed his chin in his hand and planted his elbow beside his paperwork. "It's got a pretty night sky."
"Can I say it's from both of us?" Cloud pleaded.

"Sure, Storm Cloud."

*His name is Sephiroth and he's a SOLDIER Third Class at ShinRa. He's really cool. His hair is long and it looks like it belongs in a storybook.*

*Seph has a long sword and her name is Masamune.*

*My best friend is Aerith! We play tug-o-war and dig in the dirt outside of her house.*

*I hope we can be friends!*

Cloud

*P.S. Seph said that if you want, you can write him a letter too!*

Two letters showed up in the P.O. Box near reception.

"Lt. Strife-Valentine, sir, you've got mail in your box from Gongaga." The unhelmeted trooper at the desk called as he walked past.

Sephiroth paused and tilted his head to decipher the familiar notes in the man's voice. "Sgt. Porteous, you're on mail duty?"

"Yes-You remembered my name, sir?" Sgt. Porteous's brown eyes widened at his name.

"I remember everyone, Sgt. You said I had mail?" He murmured absently as he rolled his weight to his left leg and then his right as he stood near the desk.

"Yessir. Sign here for them, sir, and here." Sephiroth didn't understand the tone the Sgt.'s voice had taken but signed where he was supposed to for two thick and slightly battered envelopes.

"Thank you for letting me know, Sgt. Porteous. I hope the rest of your day goes easy." He said as he walked to the elevator.

Sephiroth read the blocky writing of one Zack Fair on the envelopes as he stepped into the elevator to go home after a long morning of Materia training and a spar with Major Cleary to see how his Limit Breaks, now named Class S-Speed and Sonic Strength, were progressing.

He flipped the letter for Cloud and examined the crayon drawing of stick people on the other side with a soft smile.

Aerith and Zack would be good for Cloud, seeing as how his little brother was around a lot of adults or teenagers from the program and the troopers. There was a school for the children of ShinRa employees but they were closer to Sephiroth's age and picked on Cloud because Cloud was small, though Cloud denied it.

Perhaps Sephiroth would pick Cloud up after school and show that Cloud was absolutely off-limits.

Yes, that would be a good idea.

Sephiroth chose his best uniform when he went to pick Cloud up, the dark fabric broadening his
shoulders and making him look more intimidating.

Cloud wasn't expecting him and was caught as off guard as the other students. Sephiroth was leaning against the wall and levered himself off of it without trouble as he cracked his knuckles.

"Which one hit you, Cloud?" He asked in Common grateful that his voice chose that moment to deepen further.

Before Cloud opened his mouth to deny it, the students pushed forward three others and closed ranks.

"Touch my little brother again and I will be your worst nightmare." Sephiroth growled as Cloud stood by his side. "I'll know if you hit him and know if you resort to words." The three shivered as he calmly continued. "I'm a SOLDIER Third Class. I can see you, hear you and smell you long before you will ever be able to; do not make me your enemy."

He snagged Cloud's backpack and started walking with Cloud's hand held in his own. They walked down the hallway completely undisturbed but the group fell to talking after they thought Sephiroth was out of range.

"Strife has an older brother! Why is he so scary?!

"He said he was in SOLDIER."

"He can't be any older than us but his eyes... That's the SOLDIER glow."

"He's the one my Mom's been talking about; he's ShinRa's best SOLDIER. She had picture of him with a sword and I got goosebumps..."

"Let's leave little Strife alone."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.

I have a Tumblr if you want to chat (bamfcoyotetango)!
Chapter Summary

Sephiroth is accidentally traumatized with a form of Hojo's 'training'; proceed with some caution.

Chapter Notes

I'm happy with all of the support this and Expedition is getting! Who knew that giving Sephiroth a Mom would give me an entire series?

Thank you all for continuing to read!

Enjoy with caution~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sephiroth smiled as they came to the common decision. «They'll leave you alone now.»

«I coulda handled-»

«Cloud, I know you can handle yourself. You're supposed to get scraped knees from playing with Aerith, not bruises from kicks you can't block.» Sephiroth looked around before he picked Cloud up, hugging his brother close. «I love you, Storm Cloud, but I can't stand the thought of you being hurt.»

«Like b'fore Mama rescued you?» Cloud asked.

«Yes, like that.» He hummed, saddened that Cloud knew to ask that. «I'm supposed to protect you.»

«Why?»

«Mmm, when you get turned into an older brother, they give you this... handbook.» Sephiroth explained with a grin.

Cloud wrinkled his nose and gave Sephiroth a disbelieving look. «No way.»

«It's true. It says Older Brother Handbook and the first rule is 'Protect your brother.'» Sephiroth set Cloud down on his beanbag in Sephiroth's cubicle.

«What's th' second rule?» Cloud pressed.

«Tickle your brother if he asks too many questions.» He turned on his office chair and wiggled his fingers menacingly, causing Cloud to giggle until Lt. Kunsel and Lt. Johnson peered around the doorway of the cubicle. "May I help you, Second Lt.s?"
"Just... curious about the noise, sir." Kunsel was about to salute when Major Tyris spotted Cloud.

"Strife-"

"Yes?" Cloud looked up with soft blue eyes and Major Tyris made a soft noise of joy.

"I meant Strife-Valentine, young man."

"Oh, okay."

Sephiroth was rewarded by the sound of muffled coos and sounds of adoration as he smiled at Cloud and Cloud beamed in return. "I'll be right back, Cloud."

Major Tyris lead him into his office.

"Strife-Valentine, I don't know what you're doing, but keep doing it."

"Sir?" Sephiroth was confused but snapped to attention.

"Ah, yes, at ease," Major Tyris shuffled through some papers and then plucked one out. "Lt. Strife-Valentine is recommended for reward. Trooper morality has spiked since he spoke with an effective Sgt. and the platoon has peaked in performance. 'What happened?"

"It was after my Survival 101, sir. Sgt. Porteous thanked me for taking down the Aeronite. He had family in the village nearby. He was working mail duty this morning, sir?" He admitted.

"... You remembered a trooper past a week?" Major Tyris questioned.

"Sir, I was trained to remember faces and names on the first try. His scent is discernible from the others because of the plant near his hometown. I thought all SOLDIERs..." He paused as Major Tyris inhaled a sharp breath. "Sir?"

"SOLDIERs are trained for combat. They are warriors of the highest caliber but no SOLDIER has ever been trained to recognize someone by name, face or scent after meeting them once." Major Tyris explained quietly. "Since when have you had this ability?"

"I've had it for seven years, sir." He sighed. "I started training at five."

"The secretary on Floor 36-"

"Heather Jones, sir, recently pregnant. Her sister is a hunter like my Chichiue; Helga Jones escaped a Harpy through sheer stubbornness last I heard, sir. Sorts paperwork alphabetically, marks questionable wording with red tabs, uses green tabs for appropriate signing, H—" He rattled off and then stopped suddenly, feeling nauseated as he swallowed down bile. "Please don't do that again, sir." Sephiroth requested with a strained voice.

"I offer my sincerest apologies, Strife-Valentine, and the promise that I will never again do so." Major Tyris replied solemnly.

Would he never be rid of Hojo?

"Thank you, sir." He flexed his hands behind his back and shuddered faintly. "May I go, sir?"

"Yes." Major Tyris looked like he'd aged ten years in that moment. "You're free to go."
Sephiroth buried his face in his Chichiue's shoulder, his body relaxing at the heat from the cloak after the day he's had.

Chichiue hummed softly as he swayed in place and held Sephiroth close.

"He's been dead for an entire year." He hissed vehemently as he cuddled. "Still, his edicts and his orders and his... Why do I still see him in everything I do?"

"Dragon dung reeks long after it's passed through the digestive system. Only time petrifies it and makes it useful for lighting fires." Chichiue answered and Sephiroth snorted.

"So you're saying that it's still drying? That I need more time?" He asked wryly as Chichiue scooped him up and brought him to the couch. Cloud scrambled to be in the cuddle-pile, his head on Sephiroth's chest.

"Ms. Ifalna, your Mother and I all agree that this particular pile may take decades yet." Chichiue snorted before he started purring. "Best to talk it out and let it continue to dry."

"He... I was forced to report on those in ShinRa he held an interest in. I was told to report their names, their physical description and the suitability of 'disappearance'. Major Tyris just spoke of a favored target of his and I gave it up out of fear." Sephiroth whispered. "I remember everyone because it was either sink or swim and I chose the latter."

"Tyris, hmm?"

"He promised not to do it again but he looked... He looked like he aged, Chichiue, and not in a good way." Sephiroth defended and Chichiue purred louder.

Chichiue pressed a kiss to his forehead, wrapping all three of them in the cloak. "Rest, Sephiroth."

Sephiroth relaxed in the comfort of his Chichiue's arms with his little brother resting over his heart, not quite awake but not quite asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
He jerked awake with a snuffle, Chichiue's cloak sliding off of his shoulders as he sat up.

"Chichiue?"

"In the kitchen, son." The reassuring tone made him gather the cloak around his shoulders and drag it into the kitchen with him. "Your friends dropped by earlier. They want to 'Hang out and catch up,' when you woke." Sephiroth nodded and started to remove the cloak when Chichiue shook his head. "Keep it with you."

"Okay." Sephiroth shuffled over to 'Geal and Gen's place, the door opening before he raised his hand to knock. "Hi."

"That's a look," Gen teased as he waved Sephiroth into the apartment.

"Chichiue said I could keep it."

"Hey, Seph-" Angeal paused in watering his plants to set down the watering can and turn to see him fully. "I know why he let you keep it."

"You do?" He cocked his head to the side and Angeal cooed.

"You're practically drowning in it but you look adorable." 'Geal admitted honestly with a wide grin.

"Oh. I guess so."

Gen and 'Geal traded another one of those looks and Angeal pulled out his PHS.

"Can I take your picture, Seph?"

"Mmm, sure." Sephiroth looked outside the window to see it raining. He turned to ask for a cup of the dried dumb apple tea Genesis's parents sent him year round when Angeal snapped the picture. "Gen, can I have a cup of tea?"

"Yeah, yeah. 'Geal, you want one?" Genesis pulled down mugs as Sephiroth sat at the kitchen counter.

"I'll get it. Here, Seph. You can delete it if you want." Angeal left his PHS on the counter as he went into the kitchen and wove around Genesis like they'd known each other all their lives. "You
want a snack, Seph?"

"Yes." His stomach chose that moment to make an embarrassing gurgle. "I had a spar with Major Cleary."

"Testing out your Limit Breaks?" Gen hummed. "Osiria says I'm close."

"Osiria never praises people. He likes you," Sephiroth responded as he pulled out the letter from Zack Fair. He glanced at the picture Angeal had taken and blinked owlishly at the visual. His hair was spilling over the rich crimson and the grey lighting of the window made it pretty. "You can keep the picture."

"Thanks."'Geal collected his PHS and flicked it shut to tuck it into his pocket.

Sephiroth gently peeled off the tape and carefully opened the envelope. A whet stone clattered out onto the counter and only his quick reflexes kept it from crashing to the floor.

He set it down and peered into the envelope to see a Maiden's Kiss. Sephiroth pulled that out before he removed the letter.

Dear Sephiroth,

I'm writing you because Cloud said I could and Dad agreed that it was a good idea.

He said that you're a hero!

What's it like, saving people and hunting monsters?

Sephiroth chuckled at the stick figure with a sword facing off against what looked like a Touch-Me frog.

I wanna meet you and Cloud and Aerith. We can be heroes together, like in LOVELESS!

Do you go on adventures too? I sent the Maiden's Kiss for if you're ever in Gongaga. Getting turned into a frog is no fun and super scary... I got stuck for an hour and it was the worst hour of my life, swear to Typhoon.

Oh! Cloud wrote that you had a sword so I asked Dad if he could pick up a sharpening thingy for it.

I got a knife from Dad and I called it Frog Destroyer. What do you think?

Masamune and Frog Destroyer against Touch-Mes and, and... Oh yeah, a Harpy! Dad says they're scary enough.

He found himself smiling at the way Zack's thoughts wandered over the page, the tiny drawings that accompanied them somehow very effective at getting his point across.

Mom says it's time for dinner but I'll wait at our mailbox for your letter.

Zack

P. S. Your Dad is super cool. He rescued me from the Touch-Mes!

Sephiroth looked up to see a plate of vegetables neatly arranged with sauces and then cookies next to it.
"Sorry, you looked engrossed and I didn't want to bother you so I arranged it," Gen sat next to him and asked, "So, who sent you mail all the way from Gongaga? The mail rate's gotta be sky-high."

"Chichiue has a close friend from there. The friend's son, Zack, wants to be a hero. It's so Cloud can have more friends and he wrote me a letter too. Cloud's probably reading his right now." Sephiroth mentioned after he finished chewing the handful of carrots he'd grabbed from the plate. "He's eight."

Angeal stole a piece of celery and dunked it into peanut butter, a thoughtful expression on his face as he bracketed Sephiroth on his other side. "That would make sense; SOLDIERs are starting to be seen as heroes to regular folks."

"He sounds a lot like Cloud, only more confident. An extra little brother. Just what I need." He murmured as he put the Maiden's Kiss and his new whet stone away in his inventory pouch.

He wrote a reply to Zack in Materia Theory class, the Instuctors finally realizing that he was only in the class because the rest of the Thirds were there.

Dear Zack,

You can call me Seph. I know my name's a bit of a mouthful, even for people I live and work with.

Thank you for the Maiden's Kiss and the whet stone (sharpener thingy). Both were appreciated.

Being a hero is about more than going on adventures, though I have plenty of those too.

It's paperwork, supplies and learning when and where the adventure takes place.

I do like hunting monsters like my Chichiue (that's Wutainese for Dad), though. Saving people is easy when you know what to do with the monster.

I've been to Gongaga twice and yes, Touch-Mes are awful to fight. I'm sorry you had to spend time as a frog but I'm glad you're better and that Chichiue reached you in time.

I'd like to be friends and to fight monsters with you someday.

I'm sure you, Aerith and Cloud would make a great team of heroes.

Frog Destroyer is an excellent name for your knife.

Masamune had her name before she was given to me and she's been a trusted ally for a very long time.

If I'm in the area, I'd be more than happy to teach you how to throw Frog Destroyer or to use it in combat.

With Regard,

Seph

P.S. I enjoyed your drawings very much.
As luck would have it, the first mission Squad Lima was sent on without immediate supervision was a Grand and Dual Horn hunt near southern Corel.

It was close enough to Gongaga that they were told to resupply there if necessary and that their pick up point was at the edge of the forest.

The Dual Horns were easy, Angeal easily cutting through them with quick, merciful swings of his blade. Genesis took on the other Grand Horn as a challenge to finally achieve a Limit Break.

Sephiroth took on the enormous red Grand Horn, Masamune singing as she cut through solid horn and armored flesh like it was butter. He was knocked back with Angeal coming to his rescue, blocking the remaining horn from hurting Sephiroth with the flat of his blade.

"Go for the throat, Seph!" Angeal ordered.

Sephiroth feinted to the left and then skidded under the throat, swinging Masamune as he did so. Blood spilled where he'd been a moment before and the heavy beast collapsed under its own weight.

Genesis lit up as he hit his Limit Break, the flames that engulfed the other Grand Horn bright blue.

"Infernos!"

The Grand Horn disintegrated into ash when Genesis went to check the damage he'd done.

"That is one hell of a Limit Break, Gen!" Angeal praised as he hugged Genesis, their sweaty foreheads touching as they grinned in delight.

Sephiroth rolled his eyes and turned around to look at the Grand Horn he'd taken out as he heard the soft -snick- of his best friends kissing in the middle of a former field full of monsters.

He cleaned what he could and took the fallen horn to show Chichiue later. Sephiroth went hunting, collecting Cokatolis feathers and keeping himself occupied until his friends unwound from one another.

"We're done Seph. Time to resupply in Gongaga!" Genesis called out happily as Sephiroth made his way back to the drop point. "Don't you have a friend here?"

"Hold on," He dug out his PHS and dialed the number Zack swore was to his house phone. It rang through and then—

"This is Mr. Fair speaking, how may I help you?"

"Hello. My name's Sephiroth, I don't know if-"

"Ah, Vincent's kid! You're in the area? He said you had a hunt and to keep an eye out for you but I figured you could handle it." Mr. Fair cheerfully greeted. "Feel free to drop on by, we're at the end of Main Street. Zack is standing by the mail box so you're not gonna get lost. I'll see you soon."

"Wow. Your Chichiue's friend is, uhh..." Angeal trailed off, trying not to be rude.

"Enthusiastic?" Sephiroth asked. "Mr. Fair is always like that. He's been that way since before I met him."

He dug around in his item pouch for the towelettes Chichiue insisted on packing. Sephiroth wiped
blood and dust from his face and anywhere else it had splashed on his skin, folded them and put them into the section he'd labeled trash. He wiped down Masamune with a soft cloth and cleaned out her sheath with a mix of Blizzard, Fira and a strong Aero to dry it off before he slid her back in and pushed her away.

"Do you always do that?"

"Not until recently. Chichiue said that its better to get as much muck and grime off as you can. I have extras if you want them." He hummed as he gathered his hair to see if blood got on it. Blood never stuck to his hair but it did stain it and he could smell it for days afterwards. It was clean so he fish tailed it and tied it at the end.

Genesis rose a brow at the way he'd looked at his hair. "Sure you aren't trying to make a decent impression on the Fairs?"

"The first time I saw Mr. Fair I was covered in Behemoth blood*. I don't think it gets much worse than that." He snorted.

"Oh." Angeal muttered as he sheepishly asked, "...Can I get a towelette?"

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.

*The incident is detailed in Ch. 25 of Expedition of the series
Zack Fair, Hero-in-Training

Chapter Notes

Remember how I said Kunsel was my opening for Zack? Zack decided that he wanted to say hello now! Have some bby!Zack because he's very adorable and wouldn't leave me alone...

Enjoy~

Edit as of 03/16/18: There is art for the firefly scene!
http://waifujuju.tumblr.com/post/168926417605/my-part-of-the-ff7-secret-santa-for

It's also on AO3: https://archiveofourown.org/works/13108182

They made their way to the extraction point, somewhat cleaner than before, and found it lacking transport.

Sephiroth scanned the village of Gongaga looking for Main Street, his gaze skimming right past the awful ShinRa Reactor. At the very end, there was a tiny figure bouncing near a mailbox with paired and painted handprints. Angeal was writing a note in a careful hand of block letters.

DOWN AT END OF MAIN ST. CALL WHEN READY.

He pinned it to the post with an extra dagger of Sephiroth's as they set off for the Fair's house.

They made their way through Gongaga, the early evening heat less oppressive than it had been in the day. Crickets and frogs created a soft background noise as flashes of green bugs caught Sephiroth's attention.

"What are they?" He whispered, trying not to ruin the softness that hung in the air.

"Fireflies," Gen answered back just as softly.

"They're more common in the south." Angeal murmured warmly as he joined them on the path to Zack's house. "I'll take you to the field in Kalm full of them."

"Thank you." He held his breath as they landed on him, unable to keep the smile off his face as the fireflies meandered off to glow in the jungle. "That was..."

"Wonderful?" Angeal supplied and it fit perfectly.

"Yeah, wonderful." he hummed as they continued and were finally spotted by Zack.

"Seph?!" Zack ran up to him and looked up with eyes that were nearly Mako blue without a trace of enhancement. "I got your letter and I was gonna write back but you're here and wow, your hair really is that long and Cloud totally wasn't-"

"Zack, breathe." He interrupted gently, a quick smile letting Zack know that he could still talk.
"Hi, Seph-i-roth." Zack pronounced his name with three syllables and it was the most adorable thing he'd ever heard.

"Hello, Zack."

Mr. Fair chuckled as Zack hugged Sephiroth. "I'm sorry, he's really excited to meet you. All of his friends are in Corel right now."

"That's alright, Mr. Fair. I've got a little brother that's a lot like Zack. He's just a bit smaller and more reserved, is all." Sephiroth carefully pried Zack off of his waist and knelt so that Zack could hug him better. "Zack, that is a proper hero hug. Do you want to meet my friends?"

"You brought friends?! Cooool." Zack let go and was about to reach for Sephiroth's hand when he paused, gasped and said, "I hugged without asking! I'm really sorry."

"I accept your apology. I didn't mind the hug." Sephiroth replied, mindful of the lessons Zack was learning. "Can I hold your hand?"

"Yeah. C'n I hold yours?"

"Of course."

Zack, it turned out, was as full of energy as Mr. Fair, if not more so.

It took Mr. Fair, Mrs. Fair, Sephiroth, Angeal and a reluctantly involved Genesis to get him into a bath, out of the bath and into bed.

Zack passed out in ten minutes, his small chest rising and falling in a peaceful, familiar rhythm.

Sephiroth drew out a knife-using manual using Zack's crayons and a thick manila folder he was given by Mr. Fair.

"Listen... I want you to know that you an' your Dad are always welcome out here. I know that you two got the short end of the stick for a long part of your life and I want you to know that home is here if you ever need it." Mr. Fair offered quietly after Angeal and Genesis went to check the extraction point.

He nodded mutely, his tongue suddenly like a block of wood in his mouth.

"Y'know, at first glance, your Dad says you look a lot like your Ma but when you look again, his Father's there. I'm gonna be honest here and say that y'look more like Vincent than he wants to admit." Mr. Fair, for all his smiling, was a very wise man. "He's a good Dad, hmm?"

"... He's better than the scientist who claimed the title for too long." Sephiroth huffed. "He shows he loves me in actions instead of false promises and lies."

"Heh, yeah, that's Vincent alright. Measures his words like once he says 'em, he can't take 'em back." Mr. Fair hummed.

"That sounds like Chichiue."

BaseCom called in at nearly midnight, Sephiroth on first watch.

""You okay, Squad Lima?"" Capt. Milo's voice crackled.
"We're fine, Captain. We're holed up with one of my Father's hunting friends. What happened to our transport, sir?" He asked, tapping Angeal and Genesis awake with a quick pat of their thighs so they could listen in too.

"Transport was jumped by mercenaries who thought they were hunters. By the time it got sorted, the truck was a mess and had to be helo'd back to HQ over there. Squad Delta's Firsts are pissed but fine. Your Father's hunting pal got transport to get you to Corel?" Capt. Milo asked tiredly.

"I'll ask. Give me a moment, sir." Sephiroth was glad Mrs. Fair was still up, her fingers tangled up in yarn and a hook. "Mrs. Fair?"

"Hello, Sephiroth. Please, Ms. Fran for me; Mrs. Fair is my mother-in-law. What can I help you with?" She set down her work to pay attention to him.

"Umm, ShinRa can't provide transport due to a mishap. Do you think Mr. Fair or yourself can drive our squad in the morning to Corel?" He hated asking but it was better than running most of the distance and fighting monster spawns at the same time.

"Of course, Hun. We have to collect the Gongaga Trooplets from their water badge exercises. Zack wasn't old enough to go so he'll be excited to ride with us. You'll have to keep guard but you and my husband should do just fine as a deterent." Ms. Fran agreed as she pulled on yarn, folded the project and tucked the hook away. "Mmm. Bedtime, I think, for me. Good night."

He relayed that they had transport and Capt. Milo sighed in relief, "Your orders are to move in the morning, 0900 hrs sharp. I hope to see you soon. Over and out."

Sephiroth sighed as he flopped back onto his sleeping bag with the mat underneath it, the stars glimmering through the sky-light the Fairs had over their living room. "... Is this what a sleepover feels like?"

"I'm gonna Phoenix Down that jerk and set him on fire with my Limit Break, Seph, I swear to Ifrit..." Genesis growled from where he was laying.

Angeal sighed and admitted, "Though that isn't an honorable way to treat the dead, I find myself agreeing with Gen."

"Will everyone I meet be as protective of me as you are?" He whispered, his hands curled against the left side of his chest from the warmth that seemed to glow there.

"Nah," Genesis was quick to roll over and look at Sephiroth with a soft smile. "Just the people who're close or who know what happened to you, I think."

Angeal rolled over too and settled on his elbows. "We should have a sleepover. What's your favorite movie?"

"Ummm..."

"Is that an 'I don't have a favorite umm' or is it an 'I don't know what a movie is and therefore can't answer umm'?" Angeal asked gently.

"The former."

"Excellent." Genesis snickered and Angeal reached over to swat Gen's shoulder. "What? I get to show him my favorites without him judging my apparently terrible taste."
"Genesis does have an awful taste in movies but don't take my word for it. Clothes, he's great, food he's got down but movies? Uh-uh." 'Geal murmured with a smile tugging at his lips.

"Geaaaal...." Genesis whined, pouting at Angeal with a faux-innocent look.

"May I remind you of that truly terrible movie about the Blugunado?"

"...Okay, so maybe that wasn't the best movie but—don't even lie about not having a good time watching people run screaming from a stupid floppy tornado filled with really weak monsters." Genesis defended.

Sephiroth listened to them bicker about the movies they wanted to show him and he hummed softly as his eyes drooped and then closed.

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
ShinRa Policy

Chapter Notes

If you get the eggnog reference, please let me know, and don't be too worried if you can't figure out the Gongaga slang!

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Sephiroth shot up, shaking off a bad dream as he hugged his knees. When he glanced at the time on his PHS he groaned softly.

0400

At least he'd gotten more sleep than he normally did. Sephiroth looked up when he heard a rattle of a door knob and then the door opening. Zack drifted out, his Mako-blue-but-not eyes were open all the way and he shuffled over to the fridge.

He trailed Zack, his socked feet making absolutely no sound and yet Zack turned an unerring gaze on him.

"Can I get a glass of water?" Zack asked quietly.

"Of course." He was lucky Ms. Fran had pointed out the cupboard with Zack's plastic cups. A glass of water later, Zack yawned and hugged his leg and only his leg.

Sephiroth mentally swore in Bahamut's name and gently jiggled his leg.

"Bed. Gotta take me to bed, Mama."

"Right. How could I forget?" He answered quietly and was suddenly glad that his voice had done its cracking only in Midgar. Sephiroth picked his way around a peacefully sleeping 'Geal and Gen to put Zack back in his room. When he stepped into Zack's room, Zack let go of his leg and immediately latched onto his hand.

"Night night." Within moments, Zack was out again, happily cradling his entire right forearm as though it were a plush toy.

Sephiroth looked heavenward and shook his free hand at the ceiling while mouthing words that he'd heard but hadn't repeated.

Well, nothing for it but to settle behind Zack and hope he let go.

He maneuvered and spooned Zack, hoping that he'd be released soon.

The familiar rhythm of breathing had him nodding off right along with Zack.
He was woken up by a flailing elbow to his ribs and he grunted out, «Cloud, watch your elbow.»

"Cloud? I'm not Cloud, silly, I'm Zack!"

Right. Zack apparently sleepwalked.

"I'm sorry but—" Sephiroth yawned. "you sleepwalk, don't you?"

"Yep!— Nanna says that us Fairs gotta wander or snuggle up if we wanna sleep properly." Zack chirruped. "Usually, I get Mama but I caught you instead. What were those funny words after Cloud's name?"

"That's Nibel. It's another language from a place called Nibelheim here on the western continent. My Mom says that the only good things to come out of Nibelheim are me, Cloud and the hundred-year-old recipe for eggnog." He murmured in reply as he listened for any other activity and heard only sleep-patterned breathing. "What time is it?"

"Seven am 'cause Nanna collects chicken eggs and she'll be through the door in three, two..."

"Zack, baby, are you up yet?" The voice was strong but it dipped in odd places.

"Nanna!" Zack bounded out of bed and out of his room, the commotion waking everyone else.

Angeal groaned, his hair a complete mess on one side as Sephiroth padded over to his friends after a quick bathroom visit. Genesis blinked and then yawned, muttering something in Banoran that Angeal snorted at, the tinge of mirth telling Sephiroth it was about how loud Zack was in the morning.

"Okay, so, how are we doing this?" Genesis asked after he wiped his hand down his face.

"Rotating schedule, I think. Did you pack spare uniforms?"

"Yeah, Sgt. Hafir recommended it. He said something about how sweat and blood are a terrible combination and," here Angeal sniffed lightly, "ugh, was he right. I'm glad you packed those towelettes, Seph."

"Get in, wipe down as much as you can, change and get out. You and Gen go first. I have to take care of this," he lifted his hair and grimaced at the knots that had formed, "thanks to ShinRa policy. I'll need more space than the bathroom has."

"Got it," Gen and 'Geal nodded and grabbed their item pouches, one in deep red and one in deep blue but in nearly the same design as Sephiroth's black one.

Both disappeared into the bathroom as Sephiroth slowly unbraided his hair, removing the knots as gently as he could manage.

"Need some help there?" Mr. Fair asked sympathetically.

"Yes, yes I do." Sephiroth was frank and nudged his brush and the hair oil with his knee. "That'll help with the knots."

The second Mr. Fair got through the bottom knots nearly pain-free, Sephiroth turned to watch him.

"You start from the bottom and slowly move your way up," Mr. Fair offered softly as he continued to de-knot all of Sephiroth's hair. "Huh. Doesn't break?"
"No tangles, no breakages but it does still get knotted from time to time. It's worse after missions," he sighed as he flicked it into a quick bun to keep it out of the way but still be able to release it once they were near base. "Thank you, Mr. Fair."

"You're welcome, kid. D'you want breakfast?" A family breakfast, like the ones they had on his days off. It sounded nice but- "My Ma always makes way more than we can eat when she comes over, so don't think too hard."

Sephiroth nodded in agreement. "Breakfast sounds great."

Angeal and Genesis walked out of the bathroom much more presentable than before.

"It's your turn, Seph."

When he finished, Angeal was leaning on the wall with two plates in his hands. "This one's for you. Nanna Fair insisted on us eating breakfast."

"Mr. Fair invited us too," Sephiroth murmured as he dug into the warm plate. He hummed around the mouthful of food and gave a thumbs up when Zack looked over expectantly.

"He liked it, Nanna."

"Well, that's good. Make sure you eat plenty, boys, cause that's a long drive t' Corel with my little rooster." Nanna Fair was a small woman, her shoulders and back bowed with age but her face was kind and Sephiroth wondered, briefly, if he had any grandparents.

"Yes, ma'am." He answered after he cleared his plate and went back for seconds. Sephiroth felt her gaze land on his hair and the way his eyes glowed brighter than her grandson's.

"You'd be that SOLDIER my Zack's been talking to then? Th' one with the little brother."

"Yes, ma'am. Both of us have been sending letters." He replied.

"Marm, dinnae boother him. Th' blade shorn his lifesbranch 'n his lairs more'n once." Mr. Fair spoke in Gongagan slang and Sephiroth didn't understand it entirely but Nanna Fair softened after the words. "Es Ba'mut's brood."

"Aye, Ba'mut's brood 'e is, though somethin' tells me 'e ken a Faire One."

Mr. Fair rose a dark brow at that and asked, "Ye sure?"

"Sure 'nough."

Sephiroth listened but was completely lost so he went back to his breakfast.

Zack tugged on his shirt and asked, "Is this for Frog Destroyer?"

The manila folder still bore his writing but Zack had doodled around the words.

"It's so you can use it. Here, I'll show you with mine outside," he looked up to check on the Fairs and saw them having what seemed like a gesturing contest and shrugged.

Sephiroth was only taking him outside and he was more than sufficient protection.

"Okay!"
Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, etc.
Speculation and Strife

Chapter Notes

I had a fantastic Con cosplaying as Cloud, met an even more amazing AVALANCHE crew and made some new friends!

In celebration, you get a new chapter. :)

Enjoy~

ETA 10/18/17: Missing text filled in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bus was sturdy and covered in spikes large enough to deter most Corel-native monsters. Sephiroth did raise a brow at the barred windows before remembering that Harpies and Griffons were attracted to anything reflective.

The bus also had two chairs bolted to the sides, both of them meant for ranged combat like magic or guns.

"What's the maximum speed for this?"

"Enough to outrun a Grand Horn."

"So...?" Genesis questioned.

"Sixty if we stomp on the gas." Mr. Fair sighed when they insisted on knowing.

"Gen, up top. We'll switch when we get tired and you're the best magic user we've got. Masamune and Justice have more reach than your rapier right now." Sephiroth ordered. "We can keep up with you for a few miles before we have to switch out. I'll be on top less than the others."

"Why?" Mr. Fair frowned.

"My rank may be SOLDIER Third but my enhancements are past that of a SOLDIER First. My endurance and magic are better than my friends and will be for a while." Sephiroth pointed out. "I'll rest when I'm tired, Mr. Fair, and I'll rest as long as Gen and 'Geal."

Mr. Fair pulled out his PHS and typed rapidly. His phone meeped with a message notification and he sighed heavily. "Alright. The second you get tired though..."

"I promise I'll rest."

Sephiroth took rear guard, Masamune at the ready for the threat of any monsters, mercenaries and poaching hunters. The bus kept a steady pace of thirty miles an hour so Sephiroth took to running for a moment before launching himself across the distance to keep up.

It was an exhilarating experience and he timed his jump to get as high as he could while still
keeping up with the bus. They covered a lot of ground and then—

A Griffon screech rang out as they approached the bridge to Corel. Sephiroth ran alongside the bus, flicked out a hand-signal that had 'Geal launching off the bus to join him and for Gen's Materia bracer to light up with several spells at the ready.

The first Griffon lunged for the bus and Sephiroth's quick flash of Masamune impaled the heavy beast right in the heart. He removed the blade with a downward stroke that cut through the dying Griffon as he turned to see the remainder of the nest distracted by Genesis throwing fireballs in the form of Fira V.

Angeal was routing them out with wide swings of Justice, the clash and clang of sword and talons ear-splitting as Angeal managed to block or parry hits. 'Geal returned with his own strikes, powerful muscles working overtime to battle with the immense brown and white beasts.

Sephiroth used Masamune's length to his advantage and cut down the ones that were escaping, knowing that if he let one go—it'd come back for the bus with more Griffons when they weren't around to defend it.

He spun on the ball of his foot and threw his daggers into the flying Griffons, wincing as the majestic monsters fell with a terrible scream.

Sephiroth looked away from the death throes to retrieve his daggers, cleaned them with a pulse of Blizzard and Fira and sheathed his gift with a whispered prayer to Bahamut that the beasts flew free in his domain.

They all paused, the dust kicked up on the Gongagan side of the channel enough to attract the attention of a ShinRa helicopter patrol.

The 'copter hovered and Delta Squad jumped out to see that the battle was already done.

"Report!" Major Cleary ordered once the 'copter left.

"Sir, remained in Gongaga with a friend of my Chichiue's when transport failed, escorted new transport to Corel and were ambushed recently by a Griffon nest, sir." Sephiroth answered as Major Tyris and Colonel Urial checked the downed Griffons for any item drops.

"At ease," Cleary replied as he inspected the bus visually. "You did admirably for your first solo mission. I mucked mine up so bad that they had me scooping Mystery Meat for weeks, Strife-Valentine... Good job. Anything else?"

"SOLDIER Third Rhapsodos gained a Fire-based Limit Break, sir. SOLDIER Third Hewley tells me that his may be slower, sir, but there is one there." He offered as Zack bounced off the bus and straight into Sephiroth's knees. "Hi, Zack."

"Holy Typhoon, that was so cooooool! Can I do that with Frog Destroyer? How come you can jump that high? Wow, they're really big up close and they're brown and white and oooo, feathers... Hello." Zack rattled off at an alarming speed before looking up at Major Cleary. "You have the same eyes Seph does; are you a SOLDIER?"

Major Cleary blinked twice and then knelt down to look Zack in the eyes. The Mako-blue-but-not was fairly intriguing, Sephiroth admitted, but it was just a part of Zack. "I'm SOLDIER First Class Cleary. It's nice to meet you, young man."

"I'm Zack Fair. Seph says I can be a hero like the ones in LOVELESS someday." Zack proudly
announced as he stuck out his tiny hand.

Major Cleary shook it with an amused expression and stood up again. "Well, you're in good hands with 1st Lt. Strife-Valentine, I'll give you that. Escort your transport to its destination and we'll meet you at the Golden Hunter's Lodge at the edge of Corel."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll pull clean-up and get you the feathers if you want them."

"I do, sir."

Though all three of them were keyed up from the ambush, no more monsters appeared before they reached Corel's beachfront and a row of cottages just outside of the town.

"I'd get you to the Lodge but it's fairly visible and..." Mr. Fair murmured.

"Zack will be upset by our leaving." Sephiroth guessed shrewdly.

"Yes. Take a left, walk straight until you hit the square and then take two consecutive rights and you'll see the lodge. You'll smell it before you see it. Do you want to say goodbye now?" Mrs. Fair asked as Zack, a little off to the side, mimicked Sephiroth's moves with his sheathed knife.

"Yes." He wiped down Masamune, sheathed her and pushed her away as he approached Zack.

"Zack? I... I have to go home now."

Zack turned to face him, tears moments from being shed. "I-hic!-I know. You gotta go see Cloud an' tell him how awesome I am in person."

"I'll be a phone call or a letter away, Zack, and I do have missions near here." He murmured before he knelt and offers a hug. Zack's lip trembled and he threw himself into Sephiroth's embrace. "Shh, shh." Sephiroth starting humming lowly and realized with a start that it was at the same frequency as Chichiue's purr.

Zack relaxed with a sniffle and he pressed his cheek to Sephiroth's.

"C'n I do something?" Zack asked as he looked at Sephiroth with wide, wet eyes.

"Of course."

The soft press of lips against his cheek made warmth bloom in his chest. "May I return it?"

"Yeah," came the giggling reply.

Sephiroth pressed a kiss to his forehead and offered a packet of tissues to Zack, Chichiue's habit of always having them rubbing off on him. "How about a bargain, hmm? I want you to practice with Frog Destroyer and when I'm here again, I'll test your skills against mine."

"Would you really?" Zack's smile could've out-shone the sun for how bright it was; Sephiroth couldn't help but smile back.

"I keep my promises, Zack."

The Golden Hunter's Lodge was a large, sprawling building with a bronze roof and scrollwork
along the window shutters.

The hunters gave all three of them wary looks, which was fair enough, considering that Angeal's sword was absolutely coated in the dull sheen of Griffon blood and Sephiroth knew he had spatters of the oil-slick colored blood on his uniform. The only relatively clean one was Genesis and he still had soot clinging to his fingertips from casting Fira V so heavily.

"That kid... He looks a lot like Sharpshooter."

"Seriously? There's no way—Oh my Shiva. He really does look like him. Opposite colors though. He'd be adorable if he wasn't covered in—Blood?!"

"Griffon blood. Look at it. It looks like they took on a whole damn nest and came out none the worse for wear."

"No shit. They're SOLDIERs. Look at their eyes. Glowing like a damn nightlight. It's not right."

"By Odin's oath, shut up. Sharpshooter's glowed and he wasn't no SOLDIER. Maybe it runs in his family, you dick. Y'never know."

"Ah hate t' break it to ya but those kids 're SOLDIERs. They c'n hear every word you're sayin' 'n then some. Yeah, one of 'em's Sharpshooter's. Leave 'em alone an' shut th' hell up." The thick Northern drawl that came to their defense belonged to a blond man smoking as he leaned on the railing. A pair of thick flight goggles had a pack of cigarettes tucked into the strap as the man flashed a quick grin.

Blond, smoking... Ah. The man Chichiue texted when he was on break, the one that brought fond exasperation to his Chichiue's scent.

"Captain Highwind," Sephiroth acknowledged and half of the hunters are suddenly too busy to gossip.

"Hey, kid." Highwind stomped out the cigarette butt and flicked it expertly into the garbage. He pulled another one from his pack and slid it between his fingers but didn't light it. "Heard your Wutainese was gettin' better."

"The palace dialect is... difficult, even with two tutors and practice. I will master it." He replied as he absently sheathed and unsheathed one of his throwing daggers. «What is taking Delta so long?»

"Ah good, you're here, Squad Lima. Transport's been secured. Strife-Valentine, report." Urial asked as he stood next to the pillar of the Golden Hunter's Lodge.

"Did he say—"

"Strife?"

"Thought he died defending that shitty mountain town."

"Wasn't there a Mrs. in the mix?"

"The bus was left with the Gongagan Trooplets, sir. No other trouble has occurred since the Griffon ambush, sir." He relayed quietly.

Urial nodded in approval and turned to Captain Highwind. "Ready, Captain?"

"Awww, hell no! All of Lima's gotta change. No blood on mah baby 'Bronco—" Captain Highwind
protested. "Ah'll even offer mah room, jus' don't get on mah plane lahke that 'cause we'll all regret it."

Chapter End Notes

Comment, complain, ect.
The Tiny Bronco was cramped and Sephiroth was glad that 'Geal and Gen had placed their weapons into their item pouches.

Captain Highwind's protest also made much more sense now that they were all stuffed into the transport.

Sephiroth was tucked into Angeal's lap, for Bahamut's sake and Delta... Poor Delta was equally as cramped. Major Cleary was seated on Colonel Urial and an uncomfortable shade of never-fading pink.

At least Sephiroth got to sit on his friend. He couldn't imagine the horror of sitting on your superior.

"I'm suddenly realizing Captain Highwind's wisdom," Angeal rumbled as he braced Sephiroth against some minor shaking. "Griffon blood would be abominable in this space. ShinRa transport, you can move but here... Nowhere to go or even a window for breathing."

"Ah, shut up. Ya want off, then jump." came the Captain's reply.

"Chichiue won't tell me how the two of you met." Sephiroth interjected before it could devolve into bickering. "Will you tell me?"

"You're just lahke him, nipping fights in the bud b'fore they get outta hand." Captain Highwind chuckled as he glanced back using the rear-facing mirror, "Yeah, alright, Ah'll tell you how Ah met him. Ah was comin' off of a rotten deal for a part from one of the mechanics shops in Junon. Shitty place, if you're ever in Junon by th' way, and lackin' in personal service. Ah was right pissed an' then to top it off, someone had just about run me into the ground."

"Did you need the part for the Tiny Bronco?" He asked in concern.

"Ah did, matter of fact, but Ah'll get t' that in a minute. I was spitting mad an' Ah let that person have it until Ah looked up an' up an' Ah saw th' prettiest, scariest man Ah've ever met in mah life." The Captain got a dazed, dreamy look in his eye at the mention of Chichiue.

Oh. He **liked** Chichiue in the sort of way 'Geal got when Gen was assigned a solo monster
mission. Captain Highwind was pining. Sephiroth pushed the thoughts aside before they could get carried away. "What happened?"

"Ah offered him a drink at the local tavern an' made a right fool of mahself, of course. Helga broke th' ice. Your Chichiue spins a hell of a story," Highwind murmured as he held the plane steady. "He sidled up to the mechanic in the shop for me, did this kinda silent but terrifyin' routine that got me mah part and we fixed up th' Bronco in record time. Think Ah'm th' reason he's even got a PHS..."

Sephiroth snorted at that last bit of information. "You're likely correct."

He landed the Tiny Bronco in a field close to Kalm. "'S as far as Ah go, folks. Good luck makin' it back t' Midgar. Tell your Chichiue Ah said hello and t' text me more, the damn hermit."

"I will, Captain." He relayed solemnly.

"Aww hell, not you too... 'Sjust Cid. All Ah got is this dinky little thing." Cid grinned around his cigarette, adjusted his goggles and gave Sephiroth a two-fingered salute. "Good luck, kiddo."

-A Week After Cloud's Birthday; Strife Apartment; Floor 51-

Cloud tugged on Chichiue's cloak, waited until Chichiue was paying attention to him and then, "Can I call you Chichiue?"

Earnest blue met surprised crimson before Chichiue glanced at Mom.

Mom only muffled her laughter and pointed out, 'He wants you to take him to work for the ShinRa-mandated 'Bring Your Kid to Work Day'. I was hoping to take Storm Cloud but he insisted on you because he knows everyone I work with and therefore it's the dreaded... boring."

"Mama..." Cloud protested. "'S just Cloud."

"You'll always be my Storm Cloud and you know it, baby." Mom hugged Cloud close and his little brother snuggled in the hold, his baleful gaze daring Sephiroth to say something.

"Yes Mama."

Sephiroth merely snuggled close to Chichiue and hummed as Chichiue's left arm wrapped around him out of sheer habit.

He stuck his tongue out, something Genesis had taught him when Chichiue cleared his throat. "Do we need to put that tongue to better use? Some more palace dialect, perhaps, or a refresher in Mideelian?"

Sephiroth pulled it back in after he blew a raspberry at Cloud.

Chichiue reached for Sephiroth's ribs with his right hand and wiggled his fingers. Sephiroth squeaked and then helplessly giggled as Chichiue tickled him in just the right spot. "Eeek! Ahahaha, Chichiue, I'm sorry-" The fingers stopped and Chichiue rose a brow at him before giving him a fond look. Sephiroth only snuggled closer and hummed at the press of a kiss to his forehead.

"Cloud, you can accompany me if you wish. Sephiroth, are they allowing you time off?"

Chichiue's voice rumbled from where Sephiroth had pillowed his cheek.
Sephiroth absently checked his emails and spotted an official ShinRa one from Major Wolf.

To: Strife-ValentineS@ShinRa.net

FWD: HewleyA@ShinRa.net, RhapsodosG.@ShinRa.net

1st Lt. Strife-Valentine, Lt. Hewley, Lt. Rhapsodos,

Strife-Valentine, as you have two guardians, you're excused for the day.

Hewley, Rhapsodos, you're excused as well but it is highly suggested (i.e. prudent of you to pick) that you accompany one of Strife-Valentine's guardians in the spirit of the day.

Maj. Wolf

He tilted the screen so that Chichiue could read it and Chichiue hummed. "Well, that is entirely up to your friends, my son."

The warm feeling in Sephiroth's chest at the reminder that he was wanted and loved never ceased to be anything but amazing.

His PHS buzzed with two separate texts right after the email.

'Geal: Can I accompany your Mom?

Gen: Dude, no offense 2 Ur Dad but same.

Chichiue gave an amused snort. "None taken. Your Mom is a paragon of virtues and I would make the same choice if given the opportunity."

Mom flushed and her scent of hearth-snow-cinnamon spiked with pleased surprise.

Sephiroth: Chichiue says none taken.

Sephiroth: He’d make the same choice

-Bring Your Kid to Work Day-

The ShinRa staff member assigned to gather the children together hesitated at the sight of Cloud, Sephiroth, 'Geal and Gen all clustered together. The set of Chocobo nametapes shook and wobbled as the hand extended out.

Cloud took pity on the poor staff member, gently removed the four stickers from the shaking hand and chirruped sweetly, "Thank you~"

His little brother looked at him for a pen and Sephiroth produced a permanent marker with a wink. Cloud's tongue peeked out of the corner of his mouth as he carefully wrote his name in both Common and Nibel. He peeled off his sticker and slapped it on his chest, right over his heart.

Sephiroth shrugged, wrote his own name and treated his sticker in much the same manner before handing the marker and the remaining stickers off to his friends. Angeal tossed the paper into the recycling bin and stood waiting.

Chichiue glided up to their group in complete silence, his cloak floating in the wake of his stride.
"Who are you here to collect?" The staff member asked.

"Cloud Strife." Chichue answered quietly.

"Relation?"

"Adoptive guardian."

"Chichiue!" Cloud ran up to Chichiue and hugged him around his waist, looking up as Chichiue looked down with a tiny, fond smile. «C'n I see you firing Cerberus?»

«You can watch from behind bullet-proof glass but yes.» They walked off after Chichiue signed Cloud out.

Sephiroth and his friends were next to last, Mom and Head Nurse Kunsel chatting quietly as they showed signs and scents of their chosen professions.

He was teaching Kunsel fancy knife flips when Mom clucked her tongue, "You should try balisong if you're going to do flipping, Seph."

"Chichiue says that they're flashy but I can't seem to find any on the eastern continent." Sephiroth replied as he sheathed his throwing knife and grinned at his Mom.

"Umm, who are you here to pick up?"

"Strife-Valentine, Hewley and Rhapsodos." Mom hummed easily.

"Relation?"

"Mother and surrogate parent to those two." She signed the release forms for all three of them and then started walking, all three of them falling into the length of her stride. "I'm sorry I wasn't there sooner. The staff have been good and I wanted to rotate the less experienced members with some of my more experienced folks. Do you just want to watch or do you want to help?"

"I want to help," he mumured as she stopped just before the kitchen doors. "like with Nicky."

"That's fine. Boys?"

"Me too," Genesis, Sephiroth found, was incredibly competitive.

Angeal wasn't but he kept up with Genesis with an eyeroll and a long suffering look in a routine that was years old. "If you don't mind our help, then yes, I'd like to make myself useful."

"Excellent! Aprons on, gloves off, hands washed and go get a knife from Palomino at the sharpening station. I want you back over here in ten minutes." Mom ordered cheerfully.

They finished in just under ten minutes, Sephiroth examining the blade he'd gotten with a critical eye when the kitchen staff started staring at his hands.

The patchwork of rasied white scar tissue spoke of Hojo's ill use. They also highlighted the fact that his grip on his right side was weaker because Hojo had cut his palm open down to the bone once and waited for it for heal on its own.

Sephiroth didn't flinch from their horrified gazes and met them evenly as Mom carried in a container of vegetables and set them down with a heavy thump.
"Here you go—Don't you all have something to do?" Mom inquired lightly, her tone not one to be argued with. «Are you alright? I've got opaque gloves if you're uncomfortable, Seph.»

«I'm fine Mom. I forget I have them, sometimes, but I'm okay.» Maybe it was a sign of recovery that he could forget what had caused the scars or not flinch when people saw what Hojo had done to him.

Mom rose a blond brow and prodded gently, «You're sure?»

"Mmhmm. So how do you need the vegetables, Mom?"

Mom sighed, looked him over and then nodded to herself. "I need the carrots, celery, leeks and onions cut in halves, thirds and quarters and placed into the cheesecloth squares."

"You're making Mideelese soup," Genesis crowed as he lifted the container to sit square in the center above the three cutting boards. "aren't you?"

"Good eye, Genesis." Mom praised and Genesis flushed as he started chopping the bigger halves and placing them into the larger cloths. "Yup, Mideelese soup and brick oven bread is today's dinner."

Both Angeal and Genesis sighed softly at her words and quietly took to chopping before, "And Banoran apple pie?"

"Mmhmm. I might need some taste testers for the first pie though." Mom ribbed as she deftly cored and cut the large dumbapples, her knife flashing as she picked up speed. "Hmm. Peel or no peel, boys?"

"Peel," Angeal and Genesis muttered in unison, "it makes the apples tart." They locked eyes and then giggled, bumping shoulders and generally being affectionate.

Angeal brushed a kiss against Genesis's forehead before they settled back into cutting vegetables and tying them up in cloth.

Sephiroth shook himself and continued to cut vegetables before a kiss was pressed to his cheek by his Mom. He returned it, his heart warm as she blew his hair off of her shoulder with a soft laugh.

«Why the long face, liebling?»

«It's not... I've come so far from where I was almost two years ago. I've got you, Storm Cloud, Chichiue, Angeal, Genesis and the back up of most of my commanders. So much has changed and yet—I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be.» He hummed thoughtfully as he finished his task.

«To think that it started with me ruining my best pan...» Mom added wryly but she understood and that mattered more to Sephiroth than she would ever know.

Chapter End Notes

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